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An encounter between Virginia Woolf and some Poets

*"Communism in the truer sense is an effort
to think, and think into action, human
society as an organism (not a machine
which is too static a metaphor)."*

Louis MacNeice

I shall argue that a dialectical tension existed between Woolf's understanding of the aesthetic nature of poetry which as she articulated it in *The Leaning Tower* (1940) was essentially a *Victorian poetic* which I argue is flawed as it was an *Aestheticist* view and was contradicted by the complexified literary method presented by many writers of W. H. Auden's generation as illustrated in Christopher Caudwell *Illusion and Reality* (1937), which I favour, and Auden *Introduction to The Oxford Book of*

Light Verse (1938) who developed to a greater and lesser degree respectively a dialectical materialist view of British poetry. I shall show that in Skelton's anthology *Poetry of The Thirties* (2000) Auden *Spain* (c. 1937) wrote a complexified poetics consistent with this literary methodology. However this cannot as Woolf argues be separated from the work of T.S.Eliot. Indeed it is contextualized by the Modernist poetry of Eliot (1919) *Prufrock and Other Observations* and also in his masterpiece *The Wasteland* in 1922. However I also maintain that because of the material contradictions of Modernity and the 'reflection' of this in literature created in the iconic writer of modernist poetry, T.S. Eliot, a contradictory consciousness in his literary output. This can be perceived in the tensions between his revolutionary stylistic innovations and his 'conservative' literary criticism even before his shift to Anglo-Catholicism. These can be comprehended in the context of contradictory and contending Modernisms reflected by the material contradictions into the ideological 'superstructure'. This contestation between the old and new productive forces in a period of social transformation can be manifested as fragmentation of the consciousness which can be seen in Eliot which mirrored the crisis of post WW1 European capitalism. The revolutionary and the reactionary forces which emanated from the material conditions contented for hegemonic cultural dominance.

The methodology I employ in this analysis was encapsulated initially by Marx in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859):

"In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces... The mode of production conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general."

Marx

The creation of a new mode of production which developed into finance capitalism unleashing yet more competing social and economic classes but also contending models of literary production. This upheaval was characterized in Lenin (1916)

Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism as 'moribund capitalism'. It is the crisis of modern in which he also described as 'late capitalism'. Ernst Fischer in *The Necessity of Art: a Marxist Approach* (1978) applies this pertinently to art:

"In a decaying society, art, if it is to be truthful, must also reflect decay. And unless it wants to break faith with its social function, art must show the world as changeable."

Fischer

The European 'Mind' was not the homogenised entity claimed by Eliot in *Tradition and Individual Talent* (1919) with its individual traditions, it was a system torn by war and crisis:

"The whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous order. This historical sense which is timeless as well as temporal."

Eliot

The revolutionary nature of *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) which in there form and content challenged the hegemony of the bourgeoisie which he was paradoxically defending in his conservative criticism. T.S.Eliot was the personification of the contradiction of literature in 'late-capitalism': both avant-garde yet reactionary. The writers of the 1930's were caught between these opposing forces. However many did not sit on or lean against an ivory tower as Woolf had argued, but volunteered with the International Brigades or the more independent P.O.U.M. to fight Fascism in the Spanish Civil War as Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) illustrates vividly . Some of the writers Woolf critiques in *The Leaning Tower* (1940) did as she points out:

"They feel compelled to preach, if not by their living, at least by their writing, the creation of a society in which everyone is equal and everyone is free. It explains the pedagogic, the didactic, the loud-speaker

strain of their poetry."

Woolf.

Auden had articulated in these words the milieu which many of these writers inhabited included a belief that it was necessary to transform the 'means of production' in order to solve the malady of the estrangement of literary production, in particular that of the poet:

"In such a society it, and, in such alone, will it be possible for the poet, without sacrificing any of the subtleties or his integrity, to write poetry which is simple, clear and gay. For poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free"

Auden.

Eliot had maintained in *The Perfect Critic* (1920) that:

"The creative writer and critic should frequently be the same person."

Eliot.

Here Eliot is undermining the very position he articulated as the theory of the 'depersonalized poet', the poet cannot, I would maintain, be both an anonymous 'poet persona' and then self-consciously create a body of criticism about this work. These inconsistencies in Eliot are at the heart of his project for creating a *modern classicist poetics*. The conflicts, contestation and ambiguities are thus evident in Woolf's essay *The Leaning Tower* for three reasons, firstly Woolf's understanding of Romanticism is flawed in that she does not comprehend the revolutionary nature of *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* written by Wordsworth in 1802 which rather than positing the solitary aesthete of Woolf's essay he wrote:

"The principal object, then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from

*common life, and to relate or describe
them, throughout, as far as was possible, in
a selection of language really used by
men."*

Wordsworth.

In its context at a time of revolutionary tumult by contesting Classicism as the dominant verse form is was radical as opposed to conservative. Secondly when she wrote *The Leaning Tower* the USSR were not supporting Britain at the beginning of WW11, they only did so later in 1941. In that context I would argue some of the comments about Leftist poet 'winning' and 'bleating' against the system that educated them is unbecoming of a great woman of letters and finally she does not anticipate David Hume's philosophical critique of her version of the why do you stay argument, 'a society which would like to kick them off its back' Virginia Woolf where Hume likened dissenters to captives on a ship who were unable to get off (Hume 1748). In opposition to Auden who in *Memory of W.B. Yeats* (1939) wrote 'poetry makes nothing happen'. I would argue following Bertolt Brecht:

*"Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, Rather
it is a hammer to shape it"*

Brecht.

I shall use a 'close reading' of Auden, *Spain* to make my argument. I agree with Caudwell in his exposition of the essential feature regarding the social nature of Art:

*"Art has social functions. This is not a
Marxist demand but arises from the very
way art forms are defined. Only those
things that are recognized as art forms
which have a conscious social function."*

Caudwell.

My 'close-reading' which illustrates my thesis is Auden, *Spain* (c. 1937), I adhere to Caudwell's insight regarding the general writing of poetry, Auden and the Audenesque in in the 1930's when he wrote:

*"But a prerequisite is to attain a world-view
that will become general... This Auden,
Spender and Lewis have so far failed to
do."*

Caudwell.

That is they didn't embrace and understand the methodology of dialectical materialism and hence their later Rightward turn. Auden *Spain* (c, 1937) of which he Auden would in 1965 refer to this poem 'as a bad influence' thus retrospectively editing his work, at least in ideological term. But Auden is not here writing a simplistic didactic poem. The 'force' of his 'foregrounding' of the signifiers 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow' for the 'signified' 'History'. He uses these refrains in a particular synaptic pattern throughout the poem to create a sense both the immediacy of the Spanish Civil War and the larger overarching context of human history. He juxtaposes the old 'Yesterday' in which Medieval and Romantic are represented by two troupes as follows and contrasted with the urgency of Spain during the Spanish Civil War and revolution:

*"Yesterday the prayer at sunset And the
adoration of the madman. But today the
struggle"*

Auden.

We can also see his use of assonance to stress both the contrast but also paradoxically the continuity of paradigmatic model: with the 'ya' of 'Yesterday' and ay of 'prayer' and the 'ae' of 'Sunset'.

The controversial nature of phrases like:

"...the young poets exploding like bombs"

Auden.

Is to an extent overemphasised as it is a simile used as a poetic device and therefore means 'exploding with ideas' as well as an encouragement to join the International Brigades and:

*"The conscious acceptance of guilt in the
necessary murder"*

Auden.

Here Auden is writing as much the Freudian psychoanalytical poet as the recruiting sergeant. So here he makes 'conscious' the 'necessary' Oedipus or Elektra Complex as a poetic Bildungsroman or 'coming of age'. Orwell is missing the point in regard of poetry here, I would suggest:

*"so much of this sort of left-wing thought
of playing with fire by people who don't
even know the fire is hot."*

Orwell.

It is apparent from this couplet which forms the end of a quatrain and his use of alliteration and metaphor

*"History the operator, the Organizer, Time
the refreshing river."*

Auden.

The 'o's reinforce the agency and 'world-historic mission' to coin Fredrick Engels phrase of the proletariat with the poetic mode of the post-revolutionary 'refreshing river.' However the enjambment: the/Organizer is a little dissonant and suggests a wariness of the 'Party organizer.' We can understand Auden's poem not as a crude piece of didactic writing, but a complicated and well-constructed piece of verse. Obviously he was in favour of the International Brigades, but this is poetry not sloganizing. Indeed it is only by with the proletariat acting as the agent of social transformation that we have a 'new' poetry:

*"The social revolution... cannot draw poetry
from the past, only the future."*

Marx.

By Illich.