

PhD Thesis Review

Pompiliu Ștefănescu, *Representations of Cultural Identities in the Poetic Discourse of Ezra Pound: a Study into the Imagery of the Other* (unpublished PhD thesis, Galați, 2011)

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Dealing with the cultural images of the foreign (or the Other) and with his imaginary/ imagined projections, imagology was crystallised in the latter half of the twentieth century as an interdisciplinary approach which combines history of mentalities, ethnology, anthropology and sociology, in its investigation of the questions of alterity, identity, acculturation, deculturation, cultural alienation or the social imaginary. In what literature is concerned, literary image is also a carrier of a collection of ideas about the foreign Other, which, in time, goes through a socialising and literaturising process. Especially targeted by imagology are: travelogues, essays, drama and literary prose, and less, if at all, poetry.

Pompiliu Ștefănescu’s doctoral thesis, *Representations of Cultural Identities in the Poetic Discourse of Ezra Pound: a Study into the Imagery of the Other*, elaborated under the supervision of Professor Michaela Praisler, and defended in 2011 at “Dunarea de Jos” University of Galati, Faculty of Letters, is a pleasant surprise, precisely because it sets out (starting with the title) to refute this latter aspect: poetic discourse cannot be either omitted or underestimated as a source or as an archive of representations of some cultural realities, of the images which translate a social, cultural, ideological and imaginary space in which the Self may perceive itself in relation to the Other.

The case study proposed is that of the American poet Ezra Pound, whose overwhelming role in defining and promoting a modernist aesthetics in poetry is considered as being double-articulated: on the one hand, Pompiliu Ștefănescu refers to “his innovations in poetic art”, as a promoter of Imagism (in which language is distilled down to its essence by an acerbic suppression of lexical ballast, and in which visual image becomes fundamental for the poetic expression), but, on the other hand, underlines the fact that Pound “would have created a poetics of imagist representation at more levels of signification” by which the apparent referentiality of the actual image is concentrically overlapped with imagological meanings and, last but not least, with cultural symbols. This also justifies the complementary resort to cultural anthropology, which, in turn, may reveal the engagement of the poetic persona in an operational scheme

originating from the cultural history of mankind, a mechanism by which the poetic discourse resemanticises, rewrites and recontextualises a diverse cultural memory, exploding in “multitudes of significant selected from a wide range of cultural contexts”. At this level, the image, as a symbolic language within a literary system, becomes not an exercise in mirroring the self in alterity but a reconfiguration or, better said, an annihilation of that *écart* (in Daniel-Henri Pageaux’s terms) or tempo-spatial distance which separates various cultural realities, owed to the use of poetic masks, by which Pound “places his *persona* somewhere between the position of the perceiving self and the reflection of the self”, anticipating the ambivalence of what Homi Bhabha would term “the hybrid condition”. In the author’s view, it is precisely this hybridisation – which has a dual character, being at the same time “aesthetic and cultural” – that explains the heterogeneous and de-territorialised writing, able to assimilate cultural diversity through its inoculation in the matrix of Pound’s modernism.

Therefore, aside from the second chapter (*Imagology, Cultural Anthropology and the Discourse of Ezra Pound*), which is mostly theoretical, aiming at explaining the directions, methods and concepts of imagology - as defined in the programmes of the French (Jean-Marie Carré, Marius-François Guyard, Gilbert Durand, in Grenoble, or Daniel-Henri Pageaux, in Paris) and the German comparatists (Hugo Dyserinck, in Aachen and Joep Leerssen, in Amsterdam) -, of cultural anthropology, in the footsteps of Leo Frobenius and Claude Lévi Strauss, and also of postcolonial studies (primarily dealing with Said’s *Orientalism*), another direction of image studies necessary to the proposed approach, the undertaking advances a configurative, iconic and, last but not least, polyphonic analysis of the modernist discourse of the poet considered to have set out “from the centre of an American reality marked by cultural provincialism towards the margins of the European continent, always in search for the roots of cultural tradition, farther and farther to the East”.

Thus, the first chapter (*Ezra Pound Between Wor(l)ds. A Multiple Perspective*) redesigns the biographic trajectory of an extravagant and diversified life, as Pound’s life seems to be through its melting of cultural self-exile with the visionary spirit, of self-erudition with fascist collaborationism, or of genius with madness or the violent depressive crises which darken his last years. It follows that Pound may be read as an exemplary modern subject, fragmented between two worlds, between centre and periphery, between tradition and novelty, prosaic and sacred, history and dream. This is what determines both duality and the obsession for searching for a past able to absorb the present, for a centre able to embed the margin, or for an identity able either to integrate or to multiply in the diversity of the Other. In this configuration, this hypothesis (and leitmotif of the thesis) is contextualised by reference to a consistent and carefully selected corpus of critical studies which reflect the present state of the art of Pound’s exegesis. Then, it is tested through the decoding of Pound’s poetics (combining the perspectives of relational semantics, semiology and pragmatics) as both “(inter)cultural discourse” and “representation form of some structures of

authority”, owed to the intertextuality specific to Pound’s poetry, which combines literary collage and complex allusions with minute juxtaposition techniques and multiple points of view in the fragmentary and fragmented image flow, with an impact that is almost physical and aggressive to the reader.

Although Pompiliu Ștefănescu wishes his research to be supported by various Poundian texts, “including his poetry and prose, his literary guides, his contributions to periodical and even his radio speeches”, the two large chapters which apply the imagological and anthropological perspectives in the textual analysis (*Textual Representations of Self vs. Otherness in the Discourse of Ezra Pound* and *The Masks and the Mirrors*) mainly focus on the ample poem designed along the lines of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, i.e. *The Cantos*.

On the one hand, reference is made to the artist’s exile experience, essentially defined as a state of mind whose values inherently correlate with separation and rupture. Thus, exile becomes an important catalyst of poetic imagination, which strives to retransform the image of rupture into an image of connection, often recollecting or projecting the reality of another place (be it distant in time and space) on the land of exile. This explains the co-existence of “the auto-images of identity and American cultural space” and “the hetero-images of the European and Asian spaces” as a recurrent topos of *The Cantos*, read by Pompiliu Ștefănescu as an imagotypical text which subverts its spatial and temporal landmarks through the poet’s “two-directional perspective” (viz. dichotomies such as America-Europe, East-West) and through the use “of time as double, past and present, thanks to frequent temporal leaps which engage a transfer of meaning between different historical episodes and cultural realities”.

On the other hand, the thesis tackles the question of the seduction of the poet’s duality through mirrors (faithful to the subject, the projection is real and, at the same time, it is a phantasm, a metaphor for the ambiguity of the relation between spectant and spected), as well as that of his transfiguration through the use of masks (which ensure the metamorphosis of the subject into a new identity, having, at the same time, protecting and transcendental valences). Inspired from the Japanese *Noh* theatre and the poetry of Provençal troubadours, from the Latin classical or Oriental poetry, these poetic masks/ voices are as many hypostases of the diversity interiorised as theatre of the self, inasmuch as, in the author’s opinion, they call forth “episodes accumulated in cultural memory” of mankind, in view of “expanding the frame of reference” of Pound’s texts into the universal. A writing permanently rejecting its framing, its rooting in a single national cultural tradition is symptomatic, as Pompiliu Ștefănescu rightfully remarks, for the internationalism promoted by the aesthetics of Pound’s modernism. However, the polyphony of *The Cantos*, which suggests an identity that speaks itself through the multiple voices of the Other, also leads to the depersonalisation of the poetic discourse, which appears “divided between the various voices present in his texts and the author’s role to permanently (re)interpret and (re)read his texts”. It is also what triggers “the alienation sentiment” which “penetrates Pound’s lines”, as well as the programmatic sealing of the poet into language, which turns him into “the

prisoner of his own techniques, being no longer able to control the unleashed meanings presented by the *images* of his texts." An invitation to reconsider the antonymic relations between Self and Other, subject and object, interpret-text and reality, dominated and dominant as reversible, with interchangeable terms.

To conclude, the thesis (re)presents itself as an intellectual, captivating study based on a solid and complex bibliography, synthetized but also "speculated" in the logical and coherent argument of the proposed case study. Perhaps it might be opportune, in the palimpsest of images identified and analysed by Pompiliu Ștefănescu, to identify a (better represented) exercise in recovering the history of the reception of an already canonical writer, and a possible excursion into the extra-literary semiosis, to discuss the negotiation of Pound's image at the level of the public discourse. This is just a suggestion for the published version of this thesis which is, nevertheless, an original and valuable contribution to the exegesis of Ezra Pound's works.