

ANDREW S. GROSS, *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 262 pp.

This book on the reactions to Ezra Pound's Bollingen Award has itself won a prize, the Rob Kroes Publication Award by the European Association of American Studies. Since one of the effects of reading this book is a heightened sensibility to the politics involved in awards, I should begin by spelling out the implications of the Rob Kroes Award: it singles out an example of American Studies as a model for the way this "undisciplined discipline," as Boris Vejtdovsky puts it in the preface, is practiced in Europe. The expectations this might raise are completely fulfilled: the book is indeed a wonderful example of the kind of interdisciplinarity surrounding interpretations of literature and history that is one of the characteristics of American Studies: it brings together the study of poetry and its reception with what one might call a History of Ideas, intellectual history, or perhaps more narrowly, the history of "academic trends" (191) from 1949 to the end of the 1960s. It reads a number of literary and non-literary texts in the attempt to understand how well-known and lesser known writers negotiated the relation between the arts (in particular: poetry) and politics in the era of the Cold War.

The introduction lays out the events that are fraught with ironies and contradictions: Early in 1949, a committee at the Library of Congress announced that the Bollingen Award for the best volume of poetry published during the last year would go to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*, written outside Pisa while imprisoned and awaiting a trial for treason. In radio broadcasts, letters, and poems Pound had openly supported Mussolini and Hitler during the war and had escaped a harsh sentence only because his attorney had pleaded insanity. At the time of the announcement, Pound was an inmate of St Elizabeths, a federal mental hospital in Washington whose director had diagnosed him vaguely as mentally unsound.

That a man can be accused of treason and deterred by one arm of the government and be honored by another was one of the oddities that did not escape commentators in the ensuing controversy about the award. Why should a country that had just defeated fascist regimes in Europe honor a poet with fascist and anti-Semitic sympathies at home? The irony central

to Gross's book though is the fact that a poetry award that is so clearly political was subsequently defended largely by insisting on the autonomy of art and by declaring a separation of art from politics—to underline that the award was also moved from the Library of Congress to Yale. It helped that the art in question was poetry: building on a notion of the lyric as a form of private speech only "overheard" by the reader in John Stuart Mill's famous formulation, the argument was that "the more poetic the writing, the less propagandistic its meaning." (8) Contrary to Du Bois's dictum that all art is propaganda, the lyric, by definition cannot be propaganda, even when it contains propagandistic elements, such as defamation. In a somewhat contradictory twist of the argument, defenders of the award for Pound argued not only that his political ideas *are* marginal to his poetry and the decision to honor him, but also that they *should* be: in a democratic society, as opposed to a totalitarian one, political considerations should not interfere with matters internal to the literary field. Thus, "poetry is politically relevant to the degree that it is personal" (34) as it thus serves to demonstrate the superiority of American democracy vis-à-vis both fascism and communism as forms of totalitarianism. This assumption forms the central tenet of what Gross calls the "liberal aesthetic" which becomes both end and means in the professionalization of literature and its move into the universities. The expansion of English Departments institutionalized ideas of poetry and criticism that put a premium on form at the expense of content and context, especially political ones. A further irony then is that Pound is institutionalized at the time that poetry is, and that the institutionalized poet and his poetry come to symbolize the value of freedom.

The writers Gross subsequently studies are all deeply invested in the controversies surrounding the award and its troubling implications. In their attempts to come to terms with the establishment of a particular version of lyricism, they develop alternative notions that ultimately lead to a new paradigm, namely "identity" and the lyric as vehicle of a collective "we." An event that conveniently symbolizes this shift and helps to terminate the study is the National Book Award in Poetry for Robert Bly in 1968. Bly publicly signed over the money of the award to the peace movement, and critics portrayed this gesture as making an illegitimate claim to political representation. As Gross points out, however, the

overall terms of the debate had shifted: both parties no longer assumed that art was and should be autonomous. Rather, art was seen in relation to politics as part of ideology or its critique (32)—the difference between the opposing parties now lay in the values that they believed should be supported.

The first two responses to Pound are those of Ginsberg and Bishop. The first chapter also contains the most extensive reading of passages from Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. Gross argues that the passages the committee praised and used to support the "liberal aesthetic" are actually "failures" (36) by Pound's own standards. His poetry was meant to be epic and his voice a vehicle of tradition, but it ends up in an elegiac mode. Ginsberg, Gross argues, appropriates Pound by reading him as voicing personal experience—in this he misreads Pound in the same way the liberal aesthetic does. Elizabeth Bishop's poem "Visits to St. Elizabeths," on the other hand, is read as pushing against the limits of that aesthetic and thus foreshadowing the change towards a lyricism of identity.

Karl Shapiro, the poet examined in the second chapter, was one of the two members of the committee who voted against Pound. He is important to the story Gross wants to tell because he is presented as travelling its trajectory in reverse: when the liberal aesthetic insisted on the individual lyric voice "he argued that anti-Semitism was bad form, political and poetic; but when identity gained in critical and poetic significance he insisted his Jewishness was a matter of personal choice" (69). This sentence with its quasi-chiastic structure is quite typical of Gross who often summarizes his arguments concisely and memorably in such formulations, but the juxtapositions implied in the rhetorical figure are sometimes also puzzling: why is there a "but" as though we would never expect someone criticizing anti-Semitism in poetry to insist on Jewishness as a matter of self-identification? In a number of subchapters, Gross unpacks the changing meaning of individualism and identity and the rising importance of the latter for the confessional poets—a subject taken up in the last chapter on Berryman—who are instrumental in re-politicizing the lyrical voice by associating it with marginalized groups. Gross wraps up his argument through a detailed analysis of two poems, the latter one an elegy on Auden which provides a transition to the next chapter on this poet.

This carefully thought-out structure is present throughout the book and allows Gross to

delineate the histories of ideas and key terms in larger academia (the university and its surrounding institutions of publishing venues), and then to propose a trajectory of a poet's development which may run parallel or ahead of it (as in Berryman), or, as in Shapiro and Viereck, run counter to the larger trend. These parts of intellectual history are so insightful, stimulating, and rewarding to read that, in the end, it seems to matter little whether or not there was a decisive turn in Shapiro's struggle with his Jewishness, suggested by the "but," or whether there is no reversal, as suggested at the end of the chapter.

In reflecting on his role as a frequent outsider, the poet who came to stand for the age in Shapiro's and many others' views, was W.H. Auden whose treatment is followed by a study of "New Conservatism and Peter Viereck." The sequence is again important to the structure of the argument: Auden, whose position in the Pound controversy is typically ambiguous, stands between "the liberal position," here also exemplified by Shapiro (123), and a conservative position, insisting that art be evaluated in terms of moral content. As far as Auden's direct comments on the award are concerned he is hard to pin down: he voted for Pound but also conceded that Pound's poetry might be dangerous for some readers and he considered censorship. Gross argues convincingly that we might understand Auden's position better by looking at his poetry rather than his official statements. At the core of the chapter is the eponymous drama *The Age of Anxiety*, its misreadings, the appropriations of the term, and Gross's own interpretation. The emerging picture illustrates the dominant interest in individualism, be it by existentialists, New Critics, liberals, or anti-communists who all appropriated the term but were rather careful to enlist Auden himself in their respective camps. And with good reason: Gross argues that Auden is interested in "anxiety" not as an individual but as a social diagnosis and that his focus in the drama as an inherently public genre is on the possibilities for community and the potential this provides for individuation in the first place. The kind of community portrayed is one of alienated individuals who can yet come together through their common (and in large parts hardly distinguishable) language and their striving for distinction—this, Gross argues, is an ironized version of the academic establishment.

"Viereck was literary at a time when conservatism was defining itself as populist and

conservative at a time when literary studies aligned itself with a domesticated version of modernist revolt" (133) is another one of the quasi-chiastic formulations that captures the gist of a chapter. Peter Viereck, like Shapiro, objected to Pound as recipient of the award and also argued that lyricism suffers from dehumanizing sentiments. He argues for formal constraint as a means of self-control and poetic as well as political moderation and Gross shows how this leads, in Viereck's poetry, towards an interest in the body and "didacticism and domination" to the point where the poetry becomes "pornographic." The attention to poetry is complemented by a discussion on conservatism and its permutations in the 50s, when it changes from a rather elitist literary stance towards a populism fuelled by anti-communism. The chapter thus becomes a wonderful reminder of how "liberal" and "conservative" are highly contested labels, and how such contestations are indicators of larger power struggles in the political realm as well as in the world of arts and literature.

The pornographic poetry of Viereck provides a transition towards "A Prosaic Interlude" on Katherine Anne Porter, Leslie Fiedler and the "Pornographic Imagination." By that term, Gross means a representational strategy that focuses on passion as a major force, challenging assumptions about reason and the individual. Both Porter and Fiedler explore "unreason" and its manifestations in violence, social prejudice, and personal desires. The intellectual context integrated in Gross's argument includes Fiedler's take on the criticism of myths and symbols and ends with a conceptualization of ethnic identity that rejects cultural (national) myths "in order to embrace an experience at once personal and collective" (199).

With the last chapter on Berryman we have arrived at identity as the endpoint of the historical development pursued here. Gross defends Berryman against accusations of misappropriating Jewish identity—accusations that are also directed against Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell. In fact, part of the phenomenon Gross is interested in is the pervasiveness of the figure of the "Imaginary Jew" in midcentury American poetry and its subsequent disappearance, together with the discomfort the figure now produces. Gross's vindication consists in pointing to the explicit *imaginary* nature of Berryman's Jewishness; Berryman, he claims is not confes-

sional in the attempt to be personal, neither is he using masks and personae in order to be impersonal in a Modernist vein. Rather he is "*impersonating*" (204) a discordant identity that serves to highlight what both the confessionals and the Modernists frequently overlooked: the problematic implicit affirmation of the superiority of the white (male) poetic voice. By impersonating stereotypes and slanders, Gross argues, the *Dream Songs* reveal how much "othering" goes into the idea of a self.

Indicating the degree of coherence and continuity of the book, this last chapter is enriched by and reverberates with earlier arguments. In fact, in addition to Liberalism and Lyricism, mentioned in the title, Identity and Anti-Semitism emerge as key issues of the book. The arguments go far beyond the controversy of the Bollingen Award for Pound, which serves as a kind of crystallizing agent, organizing intellectual responses to the problematic relation between poetry and politics, art and morals after the second World War. In a curious way, the book also creates a kind of Pound era, but one seen not so much through the lens of poetry but rather by focusing on the conceptualizations of literature that accompanied the institutionalization of modernism in expanding English Departments during the Cold War. On the one hand, the de-politicization of literature and criticism thus seems a somewhat opportunistic strategy, geared towards gaining symbolic capital at the expense of intellectual integrity. On the other hand, it helps to understand Liberalism and the free speech argument by remembering that it is also a response to the anti-Liberalism (the nationalism, anti-Semitism, anti-Communism and homophobia) of McCarthyism as it entered the universities in the late 40s.

Even though we are a number of trends away from that time, the discussion of one of the intellectual foundations of English Departments, and the genealogy of "identity" as one of the current critical key terms is clearly relevant to us today and rewarding to think through. And surely, the question whether free speech should cover what has come to be called "hate speech" is indeed a tricky one—all the more so when it occurs in art. It is one of the continuing problems pushing the limits of liberalism and one of many discussion points that could be prompted by this book.

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