

1995

# Michael North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*

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## Recommended Citation

Paideuma, Vol. 24 (1995): 251-54 (book review).

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## ROBERT SPOO

The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound,  
by Michael North. Cambridge University Press, 1991.  
viii + 241 pages. \$49.95 cloth.

The temptation to erect straw modernisms is rarely resisted in the academy at the present time. It has become almost a reflex of criticism to trick modernism out in villain's garb, to point to its vaulting ambitions and its resounding failure to achieve political and artistic ends. Sometimes modernism is scolded for being the last embodiment of a benighted aestheticism, covetous of false unities and never-never autonomies, trying to stay *au dessus de la mêlée* and becoming an unwitting collaborator of the bourgeois attitudes it hated. Or it is seen as too passionately engaged, too mired in the ideological muck of our century. Even the politically aloof James Joyce is routinely rescued from the taint of "modernism" by a critical stratagem that posits two tendencies in his fiction, one presided over by a hopelessly effete aestheticism (often associated with Stephen Dedalus and his jejune theories) and another that undermines these pretensions in the dissonances of a thickly described modernity. In this reading, Joyce's jocoserious openness to modernity delivers him from evil, framing and ironizing any vestigial Dedalian modernism that may cling to his texts. It has proven harder to salvage Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, however. To many critics, their art has seemed too closed, their political stances too overt, and their grasp of modernity too self-serving to mitigate their "modernism."

Michael North avoids such simplifications, in part because he sees no clear line of demarcation between modernism and modernity. His study of "political aesthetics" probes the seeming oxymoron of that phrase until it becomes clear that the modernisms of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound are far too complex for caricature. North finds in all three writers an ongoing struggle with the contradictions of modern liberalism, which exalts the rights of the individual while creating by that gesture a tyranny of the masses that threatens the very concept of individ-

ualism. Modernist appeals to history have been similarly doomed to contradiction's loop. In their different ways, Pound, Yeats, and Eliot embraced historicism and its privileging of discrete societies and customs, yet in so doing they encountered the relativism implicit in such a position, a relativism that began to resemble the colorless, pluralistic liberalism they had fled. Caught in a web spun by Enlightenment theories, modern writers struggled to reconcile individual and community, particularized history and abstract natural right, fact and value, part and whole, artist and world; but the struggle, whether carried out in poems or essays, resulted in a resurfacing of contradictions. At least since Schiller, the realm of the aesthetic has been credited with the power to harmonize oppositions, but modernist poetry succeeded only in mirroring the anguished lineaments of twentieth-century politics. It is this "failure," North contends, that makes the art of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound "more faithful to the real conflicts of our century than many writers whose politics we now find easier to accept" (vii).

North draws richly on the poetry and prose of the three authors to show that their involvement in politics made aesthetic autonomy impossible and forced latent ideological contradictions to the surface of their writings. In his excellent chapter on Yeats, North discovers that poet's complex attitudes toward Irish cultural nationalism, aristocracy, and the rights of the individual in the idealized figure of Robert Gregory, who embodies the "contradiction between the individual irresponsibility of the aristocrat . . . and responsibility to the family as a historical constant" (46). Similarly, Eliot's Tiresias plays a doubly doubled role in *The Waste Land*, offering, as Eliot's annotations suggest, an "image of reconciliation" of genders and identities, yet representing within the poem itself "the necessary but still contradictory connection of individual and community, particular and universal, under modern conditions" (97). Eliot's growing conservatism, which pulled him between regionalism and class authoritarianism, made him "a kind of Tiresias, both in and out of society" (112). Fascism never wholly appealed to Eliot because the modern centralized state could not satisfy the diverse requirements of his Anglo-Catholic royalism.

North reserves the final chapter for Ezra Pound, setting him in the context of liberalism and its discontents. In Pound's case, contradictions emerge as part of his historicist sympathy with past cultures and manifest themselves in an array of commitments: ethically, in a Confucian belief in community

which he cherished alongside a faith in the heroic individual; historiographically, in the evil of usury as it slipped insensibly in his thought from symptom to supreme cause; poetically, in his alternating of dogmatic generalization with the method of luminous detail. North locates Pound's hero worship of Mussolini in his long-simmering anti-liberalism; "the Boss" incarnated for him the concrete intuitions and instincts, the unerring factive personality, that transcended modern political systems and their pallid abstractions. Of the three writers treated by North, Pound was the one most attracted to fascism's promise to heal the liberal split between individual and community. In a subtle reading of *The Pisan Cantos*, North argues that the sequence is "various and contradictory, so open, in a way, precisely because Pound does not repent, because he attempts to keep in play the fascist balance of contraries" (178). By the spring of 1945, the forces of history had overtaken Pound and his hope of living and writing the sociopolitical paradiso; the ashes of Europe and the accidents of life in the DTC vie with the just city, perdurable now only in the imagination.

North's dedicated pursuit of the contradictions inhering in liberalism and recrudescing in the writers who spurned it occasionally becomes predictable; one can see him giving the wheel of logic another half turn toward polarity and paradox. Yet his method captures the permutations of liberal philosophy as they unfolded in this century and in the careers of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. He usefully reminds us that fascism and socialism had a common origin in opposition to liberal democracy, so that Pound's occasionally sympathetic allusions to Marxism and Leninism were not mere personal inconsistencies but rather the products of history. Without apology or evasion, North discusses Pound's anti-Semitism and his radio talks in terms of the broad appeal exerted by fascism: "allowing men like Pound to avoid contradiction was the source of its power" (165). Pound was less rooted in a particular society, more restless, more self-consciously modern than either Yeats or Eliot, both of whom leaned toward forms of conservatism despite their interest in fascism. The "very extremity of Pound's individualism," North suggests, may have drawn him to a charismatic figure like Mussolini. Pound was "the ultimate freebooter, personally wilder and politically more eclectic than his friends" (167). These distinctions among the three men seem valid and valuable.

*The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot* is an important book, a worthy successor to William M. Chace's *The Political Identities of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot*. Michael North has achieved an impressive balance of historical detail and philosophical rigor, and his persuasive close readings show that the art of formalism has survived the New Criticism and need not be despised by a politically alert intelligence. Eschewing unnecessary theoretical abstraction yet remaining firmly conceptual in his own discourse, North demonstrates that the aesthetic becomes fissured by oppositions whenever art is called upon to resolve contradictions in the realms of politics and economics. By itself this thesis would surprise no one, but North has taken a truism of the current academy and given it all the weight and density of historical truth.