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POETRY, IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY

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Review of Ramona Hosu, *Poetry, Identity and Ideology – Early Twentieth-Century America* (Cluj: Accent, 2010).

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Our approach on Ramona Hosu's book is to emphasize her approach on some aspects of American society at the beginning of the twentieth century built by tradition, norms, myth and shaped by the means of communication. Contemporary scholarly works on this issue were used in order to explain multiple representations concerning cultural attitudes and social practices. We also focused on the directions and principles of modernism and postmodernism that caused changes in the definition of art and had an enormous impact on society. It is shown from the very beginning that it produced a crisis of identity for the human being, be it ethnic, sexual, social and cultural, and consequences of this situation are reflected in poetry, which remains a discursive construct with meanings that depend on its relations to all other cultural discourses and social institutions of that period and of nowadays.

This book presents the class, racial and gender conflicts of the United States in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s as they were ideologically inscribed in the poetry of the period. This is possible because literature is connected to social issues like tradition, convention, norms, forms, symbols, myths. It is linked to a certain social, economic and political system. The discourses of literature speak about currents of political and cultural, and social meanings that shaped the American society of those times. The diverse facets of difference, such as class, race, and gender, are reflected in multiple representations of clash and conflict, of power, of anxiety and uncertainty concerning the problem of individual and national identity.

The book deals with the patterns of change, as they were recorded in society and the arts. The author shows how the emergence of the multicultural society and of the industrial economy at the beginning of the twentieth century contributed to changing social and cultural attitudes and everyday social practices. Certain mutations of social change can be easily perceived with respect to the American society of the times and the literature of the period. Regarding this, Ramona Hosu brings into reader's attention that modernization is about change in terms of values, attitudes, expectations and ideals. It was hard for some categories of society to accept and adapt to these changes. There were cultural contributors who experienced change dramatically, refusing to adapt to the new image of man and rejecting the new values promoted by modernization; they were always in search for the old, yet solid values of the past, to be found in the production of previous decades. Consequently, all new experiences of the decades before 1910 did not transmute easily into art. The culture of the Twenties was the reflection of the divided and transforming American society. In fact, Jacqueline Fear and Helen McNeil offer a catalogue of the most important social and cultural contributions to change, all embodying the "symbolic illusion and fragmentation" of the 20s. What dominated the culture of the Twenties was the exploding set of mass values of the consumer middle-class, due to Hollywood, radio, film and popular magazines. These induced dreams which would never come

true, as this type of 'reality' embodied Hollywood myths and youth, glamour, success, creating an 'ideology' meant to destabilize the individual. The problem with the 20s is that change could not equate process anymore; modernization and shallowness of values, decadence and superficiality insulted the intelligence of the older generation. The alienated cultural contributors of the Twenties were displeased with the decay characterizing not only the social and political strata but also the cultural ones, and they attacked the "common man", the average American, or mediocrity. Ramona Hosu mentions a few texts which might serve as a tool in discovering some cultural, social and even political 'makers' of change: Scot Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, John Dos Pasos, *Manhattan Transfer*, Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street*, Irvin Babbitt, *Democracy and leadership*, Theodor Dreiser, *America and the Artist*, Sherwood Anderson, *Living in America*.

Whichever ideological direction they followed, Americans experienced deep change, elusive and contradictory state of affairs, radicalism and conservatism, euphoria and stagnation in the 30s. Despite the 'realities' of the Thirties, by means of radio and cinema, the Americans began believing in a powerful ideology that promoted the myth of a classless and accomplished society for all its members. People believed that individuals or groups could change history and they manifested a kind of "liberal idealism".

It is well known that one of the thinkers who influenced Modern Era and Modern Literature was Karl Marx. I must make the point that this is not to say that Modern authors were Marxists, rather this thinker fuelled and framed the perspectives and debates that formulated Modern Art and literature. People believed that individuals are capable of mutual aid and collaboration based on reason and ethically inspired education. Being concerned for the other's welfare, they make progress possible. It means that reforms must be inspired by the concern for the welfare and security of all people and war requires collective efforts to control it. They believe that international society must reform political systems which facilitate self-determination and democratic governance within and between states. The decade demanded change in all the art-form, and a demand for literary relevance. Consequently, a set of newspapers and magazines turned to publish literature and art invested with political attitude. Also, an objectively and politically charged type of literature was published (Hart Crane, *The Bridge*, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, *The Fugitive*). Photography and painting turned into the populist expression such as poster art and cartoons that became politicized. Cinema remained the most comfortable and cheap form of entertainment. The rapid increase of radio, cinema and records led to the massive dissemination and promotion of the popular culture of the thirties.

Further, the author focuses especially on what '*the social*' of early-twentieth-century America was, and sees the social in John Fiske's

perspective¹ as the unity of the significant producers of *social difference* in its process of constructing (new) identities, uniting *all components of division, clash, conflict*, such as class, gender, race, nation, religion, age. *Change* is not only a social component but it is also perceived in cultural terms. Any crisis, any change, like the ones that America registered in the 10s, 20s, and 30s, appears first at the level of the social, and it is evident in the social imaginary, in everyday practices and activities. The first years of the twentieth century in America experienced '*the new*' in art and society as a result of the rejection of tradition.

Ramona Hosu noticed that such revolutionary moments, which called for radical interpretations of the word democracy in its endeavor to adapt to modernist styles, and a literature engaged with social and political issues like class, race relations, gender challenges, war, depression, wealth and poverty are all as relevant today as they were a century ago. This is true not only for America but also for any other country that undergoes social, political, economic and cultural massive *change*. Today, the most visible *social change* has emerged with the increasing activity of those once seemed as marginal. There are diverse social groups that expressed, and still some express, political demands and these resulted in a 'new form' of politics, labeled as the *politics of identity*.

Another section of the book tries to see *change in the arts* in order to explain how *art and ideology* and concepts like tradition, artistic value, form, artistic conventions and innovations, intermingled with the *social-political ideologies* as asserted by Sara Blair in *Modernism and the politics of culture*. "Art reflects relations of power and actively contributes to the consolidation and/or construction of ideologies within its discourses turning into a medium in and through which the construction of identities at individual, but especially at group and national level become possible and perpetual. Artistic discourses go beyond their text and interfere with the politics outside them because of sharing, like in a matrix, all the ideological components of the social – all encompassed within a type of culture".²

Also she brings to our attention a 'political reading' of Modernism: on the one hand, as an aesthetic activity, Modernism consisted in formal experimentation; on the other hand, as a cultural trend contributing to the change in the social, political and economic dimensions of life, Modernism generated political activism and most modernist formalist techniques and their defining idioms reflected their political or social commitment.

Scientific, technological, philosophical and political energies of difference pervaded arts and artistic form. Modernity and modernization spread everywhere, in houses, factories, governments, in the whole world. Crisis – real or manufactured, physical and metaphysical, material and symbolic, with such terms like war, strike, women, race, nihilism, and relativism, fakery – remains the central element of art. Alienation refers to

all those Americans who left their country in search for real culture, value, power, meaning, a norm, therefore choosing dislocation isolation and self-estrangement. Roland Barthes explained that values promoted by the modern movement proposes an escape from the alienated society of the present times; consequently, the aims of such an escape are rather social than aesthetic. Nevertheless, Ramona Hosu insists on the fact that, in the 20th century, the definition of art changed considerably due to the direction and principles of modernism and post-modernism, and it became anything that would cause an aesthetic experience.

Modern art coincides with progressivism; modernist art promotes permanent innovation by means of intentional mutation of forms, discovery of primitive art, of non-aesthetic art, of waste and industrial objects as art; the decades that followed Modernism (the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s) used all resources and possibilities; moreover, contemporary progressivism coincides with consumerism in stating that everything that is 'modern' is profitable; art is a commodity or merchandise or else it is not art today.

The author reminds the Francois Chatelet and Evelyne Pisier's³ definition of *the arts* in relation to the *socio-political* – as activities that try to enmesh the contradictions of their epoch because art is the domain of newness and originality for which contradictions are rules. It is known that between 1890 and 1910, art becomes autonomous as an activity that makes objects for aesthetic pleasure and for the imaginary. Further on, "literature and theatre, music, painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry and recently cinematography present, through the imaginary that they construct, conceptions about the world and society, which constitute themselves as *criticism* of their present reality".⁴

What Chatelet and Pisier bring forward is the term *contradiction* and *criticism*, which is less the subject of art but rather its purpose for the work of art acts and reacts for/against the *context*. It is the instrument of the political/social/cultural. For instance, Cubism emphasizes a conception about feelings, about the relations that the subject has with 'objects' and beings, and, at the same time, it destroys the balance of ethics. The search for 'beauty', in the Kantian sense of the word – as relating the material to the spiritual – is not abandoned but reintegrated in the movement, in Modernism, that reacted violently against tradition. Therefore, the hate of Cubists or Fauvists was of political orientation: "if the world and people do not appear as academism represents them, if there is no category of 'objects' to paint and no well delimited technique to make them represented, then the whole system crashes, including individual and collective behavioral attitudes".⁵ At the beginning of the 20th century, as if they had foreseen the world crisis that was to follow, artists seemed to be collectors of signals that the great *change*, generated by the Great Depression, was imminent. Thus, any crisis, any change, whatever its nature, is first evident in the *social imaginary*.

Further, Ramona Hosu tried to find out what is the conceptual relation between art and culture. Today's perspectives on art (Jean Caune, *Culture and Communication*) see it as a form of genuine *cultural communication* by forming, registering and sharing authentic and unique experiences. Artistic activity is therefore one of the most significant *cultural forms* as it represents the way in which space and time are perceived. Henry Chombart De Lauwe in *Culture and Power* is helpful in this matter. There are two perspectives in Chombart de Lauwe's approach: from the point of view of the group and its society, culture expresses the tension between practices and representation; it is a product of society that comprises knowledge, language, activities, the system of representation and values, symbols, myths imposed to individuals; then, within the group, it corresponds to a creative movement of all the domains of social life; it is part of work, social relations, entertainment, family life, action and so on; it is present in all forms of social life, as a product and stimulus of transformation; it is here that the interplay of *culture* and *ideology* is possible. From the point of view of the subject, the individual or the group, culture is a set of processes that make both the enlargement of the horizon of activities and a better communication with the *others* possible; in other words, it presupposes a constant interaction of 'personal culture' with 'group culture.' It is helpful to bring in attention Fiske's opinion expressed in *Culture, Ideology and Interpellation*.⁶

According to Fiske, we must take into account that societies are divided into class, gender, race, nation, age, religion, education, political orientation; all these components are related to one another "in terms of their power relationship with the dominant classes". Therefore, *the social* is seen as the unity of these significant producers of *social difference* in its process of *making meanings of experience and meanings of the self*. Correlatively, the social structure is held in place by the meanings that *culture produces*. Social struggle is the field of contestation of the dominant power, by the dominated ones. In the domain of culture, one speaks about the struggle for meaning from two perspectives: the dominants try to naturalize those meanings to serve their interests into the whole society, and the dominated try to resist and to make meanings to serve their interests.

The author tries to present the different facets of identity and of the relation with others, as an expression of the relationship between center and marginal; on a large scale she sees the *center* as the mainstream culture that is constantly penetrated by new elements, new products, new styles in a system based on consumption, growth, progress and change.

This balance between center and marginal was explained later by Stuart Hall, cultural theorist, as a negotiation between dominant culture and subculture or marginal cultural, which can accept a part of representations proposed by the dominant culture and reject other aspects, but proposing specific representation of its cultural model.⁷

What this book manages to make obvious is that the literary text (the poem) constructed at the beginning of the 20th century in America can be analyzed or re-interpreted by means of *the politics of both past and present-day discourses and institutions*. Such politics is the result of an intersection of theories that debate on *literature/poetry, culture and the social* viewed as the coterminous *text and context*, and their interference at the level of *discourses* that construct *identity* because they carry meaning representationally, being *ideologically loaded*.

This novelty is similar to the avant-garde art; seen as a marginalized activity, being in a process of continuous efforts to enter the center, to conquer the first plays between fine arts. Referring to marginal culture, the author emphasizes that it was not only the effort to conquer the art market, but the larger field of everyday life.

At this point we must restate the importance of the relationship between culture and commerce by making the point that a robust culture is a prerequisite to economic development, not a beneficiary of it. Jeremy Rifkin⁸ shows that social capital is produced exclusively by the culture, which serves as the lubricant for commercial operations. Social trust is built from empathy, a feeling that requires the capacity for thinking and feeling the individual's way into the minds of others. "To empathize, one needs to reach beyond the confines of the self, to take up emotional residence in the being of another, and to feel another's feelings as if they were one's own. When we empathize with another we are experiencing our shared hopes and sufferings. It is the feeling by which we come to learn about and care for one another".⁹

Culture is maintained in the field where people relax, play, make friendships and experience the joy of life in nature, creating and practicing the shared values by which they choose to live.

Ramona Hosu reminds us what dominated the *American culture of the twenties*: the exploding set of *mass values of the consumer middle-class*, due to Hollywood, radio, film and popular magazines, including dreams that would never come true, as this type of 'reality' embodied Hollywood myths of youth, glamour, success. Consequently, a modernist poet like T S Eliot tried to escape from the present, to construct an impersonal work of art; the poet had to escape from emotion, from personality, in the present awareness of the past; the *awareness of the past* induces a responsibility in the poet, and in modernist poetry. Eliot constructed in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* a "poetics of the counter-current" as he designed continuity between past and present, between tradition and innovation, tradition and modernism, constituting a "theory of the mythic poem" as a product of a certain over-determination in the sensibility of its originator, and those for whom he speaks. Ramona Hosu noticed that they can be very different because of the poly-ethnicity of the American people. In the United States, poly-ethnicity, as the very source of diversity, shaped what is currently labeled as *characteristically American*; when stating that

diversity contributes to unity, this induces the idea that art ceases being elitist due to entering the domain of diversity and, consequently, of mass culture. One has to have in view issues like immigration, race, regionalism, ethnicity as constructing the uniquely American cultural idiom. The twentieth-century insistence on accepting ethnic difference in America contributed to shaping mental formations in cultural and artistic constructions coinciding with a new democratic arts policy, which made high art and high culture that coexist with forms of low art and low culture in a continuous balance between dominant culture and the marginal one.

The *Early Twentieth-Century American Poetry and the culturally "Other"* section examines *poems* that engaged with socio-political activity, both on the right and on the left. The author proposes a *reconsideration* of some modernist poems that have been canonized as hermetic constructs that have nothing to do with their contemporary social experience, being only the personal, subjective utterance of the poet as an individual; in addition, this subchapter also discusses some poems that expressed only the social and cultural practices of their time. Therefore we deal with an approach of the modern American poetry as being not only an expression of the poet's subjectivity, but also an expression of socio-cultural changes and tensions in society.

What the present work does to reiterate is that the poem just as any other literary form can be re-interpreted by means of the politics of diverse discourses and institutions that make the cultural body of a nation. Therefore, some American poems of the 1910s, 20s and 30s are to be interpreted through the politics of class, politics of gender, and the politics of race, as three important constructs of the social. Terms like women, feminine and man, masculine are culturally constructed. Gender, according to gender critics, is a social construct, a learned behavior, a product of culture and its institution. Politically formulated ideology did influence literary discourses and the other way around.

Ramona Hosu doesn't hesitate to show us the fake ideologies of the past presented in American literature. She means the double standard of morality under the influence of Freud and the intellectuals of his age; the middle classes promoted religious bigotry and sexual prudishness. Nevertheless she gives us examples of American Christ-like figures which are black, as an identity politics, as an aesthetic construct and a source of spiritual and moral integration, anticipating the 1960s Black Art Movement. The conclusion is that we can't read the modernist poetry by distinguishing aesthetics from politics or by transposing its precision and anti-sentimentality, as well as its repulsion for the exacerbated modern world as discourses of the conservative ideologies of the right wing. It is understandable how early twentieth century literature, poetry and modernist formal experimentation especially did political and, therefore, 'social' work. The case of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound shows that the

Americans' dispute with their society – experimenting deep social, economic and political crisis and change between 1910 and 1945 – could have come not only from their adjustment to their social and political environment but also from their estrangement and alienation.

Ezra Pound is a controversial figure of American literature and he gained political notoriety for being the only author of the American literary canon to have been indicted for treason. An interesting view on Pound's hatred of his time and his admiration of the past, as well as on his early anti-Semitic attitudes, is offered by Cary Nelson in *Repression and Recovery. Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory*.¹⁰ In Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, his aesthetic method could be considered as an instrument for representing his belief in racial purity and cultural authenticity. Pound is known to have sympathized with Italian Fascism and he was found guilty of treason and confined in Pisa. Eliot became preoccupied with the Christian society after his conversion to Anglicanism when he was invested by the church as a source of political and social authority. The case of *T. S. Eliot* is not declaratively political, but his poetry and poetics during the 1920s turn into some of the least apologetic, most virulently anti-Semitic images in all of the Western tradition.¹¹ His insistence on the deprecation of excessive tolerance is one of the values that the extreme-political right wing ideology formulates, and it is opposed to any democratic and consequently non-discriminatory discourse. After the war and the revelations about the Holocaust, the critic adds, T.S. Eliot regretted his pronouncements and refused to publish *After Strange Gods* again, but pleaded for religious unity in a Christian society. Ramona Hosu shares Scot's opinion that Eliot's lack of tolerance is discriminatory, and is evidently directed against one of the most unifying feature of American culture: its multiculturalism.¹²

In our opinion it is an explicit illustration of a world populated by parallel discourses. Despite the ethnic and racial diversity of American society, and their multiple political, religious and artistic forms of representation, the two modernist poets cultivated, to a point, a discourse which put in parentheses all subcultures that did not fit into the right wing ideology values. Of course, there wasn't a point of intersection or a form of dialog between the two opposite concepts of democracy and intolerance. There was a lack of understanding the need to accept diversity as a representation of multiple voices constituting the American society as a whole.

In the next decades the situation changed, but the multiplication of the voices and of the means of expression and communication lead to a paradoxical situation where the public was confronted with a large offer of news, scientific, artistic, entertainment events and their representation in the media. Now it is necessary to pay attention if one wants to be heard or to get access to cultural products¹³. We can recognize this situation as the beginning of what contemporary theorists of communication identify

as a certain impossibility to change meanings, and disappearance of communication in the era of new technologies¹⁴. Even if we do not share all the points made on the issue, we must admit at the beginning of the Third Millennium that the numerous discourses, voices, performances mediated by the means of new technologies, have no chance to be heard. There is a challenge to bring into the public's attention the cultural production fragmented in autonomous pieces that allow for the existence of copies and multiplied facets. It is the individual's right to choose the product that he or she prefers from numerous information and products surrounding him. Recognition of valuable cultural products depends on educational level, personal experience and taste, which is one of postmodern features.

It is time to make the point that first signs of the postmodernist aesthetics started to begin and to manifest itself in the frames of modernist aesthetics, and have a specific way to depict postmodern life and culture. It shows from the very beginning a crisis of identity of human being, be it ethnic, sexual, social and cultural. The postmodernists suggest that around 1960 there was a huge cultural swing from modernist thought which valued metanarratives and authenticity, to postmodern thought, which mixes styles and adopts pastiche as a cultural dominant. Also the metaphysical systems that they used to believe in and that were once used to order our lives are no longer consider important. Postmodernism dissolves the boundaries between elite culture and popular culture and between original works of art and reproductions and imitations. "In fact, there is much to identify in present-day cultural discourses that resemble the rhythms, counterpoint, diction, obscurity or relevance, diversity in form and in subject, tonality, courage, pluri/multi- discursivity of the poems written when modernism began. And there is one characteristic that these marginals of the 20s and 30s and those of today have in common: that they are not or make not the subject of cultures that celebrate non-value. They were and still are a part of what makes the corpus of a 'culture' in an epoch – a cultural corpus, as a counterpoint, that is necessary for the validity of the naturally balanced status of the contemporary cultural and political ideology serving democracies".¹⁵

We appreciate that the issue addressed in this book manages to clarify the mechanisms functioning within the American Modernism at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The author used analyses of modern American poetry that are really helpful in understanding the challenges of the contemporary society. She emphasized ideological mutations in art and society, in order to explain how art and ideology and concepts like tradition, artistic value, form, artistic conventions and innovations, intermingled with the social-political ideologies of culture and modernization. Last but not least, Ramona Hosu managed to discuss problems that concern our society even at the beginning of the Third Millennium.

Notes:

¹ John Fiske, „Culture, Ideology, Interpellation” in *Literary Theory. An anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 305-311.

² Sara Blair, "Modernism and the politics of culture" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 157; Ramona Hosu, *Poetry, Identity and Ideology – Early Twentieth-Century America* (Cluj: Accent, 2010), 160.

³ Francois Chatelet and Evelyne Pisier, *Conceptiile politice ale secolului XX* (București: Humanitas, 1994).

⁴ Francois Chatelet and Evelyne Pisier, 60; Ramona Hosu, 31.

⁵ Francois Chatelet and Evelyne Pisier, 60-61; Ramona Hosu, 32.

⁶ Fiske, *Culture, Ideology and Interpellation*, 305; Ramona Hosu, 37.

⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997).

⁸ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Age of Access* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 235-245.

⁹ Jeremy Rifkin, 245.

¹⁰ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery. Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* in Ramona Hosu, 37.

¹¹ Sara Blair, *Modernism and the Politics of Culture*, 159-160; Ramona Hosu, 262.

¹² Peter Dale Scott, "The social critic and his discontents" in A. David Moody, *The Cambridge Companion to T.S. Eliot* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press), 60-76; Ramona Hosu, 262-265.

¹³ Jeremy Rifkin, 235-245.

¹⁴ Sandu Frunză, „The Relational Individual in a Communication Built Society. Towards a New Philosophy of Communication”, *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XX, nr. 3 (Autumn, 2011), 140-152; Charlie Gere, *Community without Community in Digital Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁵ Ramona Hosu, 252.