

Contemporary American Poetry:

A Poetics of Politics

A Dissertation

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Letter of Recommendation

We certify that this dissertation entitled “**Contemporary American Poetry: A Poetics of Politics**” was prepared by Mr. Saroj Koirala under our guidance and supervision. We hereby recommend this dissertation for international examinations by the Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines poetry that explores the interconnected relationship among art, life, and society. Therefore, socially critical verse is taken as political poetry. This work examines contemporary American poetry in connection with a long tradition and body of earlier poetry of this type. As such, postmodern as well as the counter poetic traditions in the US are highlighted. Furthermore, the selected political poetry is approached using the insights of various cultural theorists who connect art with society and ideology.

A leading political poet, Ezra Pound presents in his poetry criticism of various forms of social degeneration. He is chiefly interested in economics and he identifies usury as the cancer of society and pleads for its elimination. Perceiving order as the prime necessity of society his poetry meditates on hero-worship. His stance against the then civilization leads him to think of an ideal state which is an ordered society ruled by good leaders in the economic system of Social Credit. To impart such message he employs the techniques of grand collage and allusive writing.

Charles Olson, in the steps of Pound, creates a public, intellectual, and interdisciplinary poetry. Engaged with a politics of principles, he repudiates subjectivity and focuses on objectivism. His poetry criticizes the modern American materialist culture by displaying its loss of center, and expresses a desire for change. It dramatizes the death of order and knowledge due to widespread commercialization. Like Pound's usury, he projects pejerocracy as the fatal disease of civilization. As an alternative, Olson models a community-based ideal state—polis—in his hometown of Gloucester that shelters lost knowledge and social order. His poetry uses an elitist language and a mosaic of fragments. The poems resemble the structure of the terminal moraine in terms of their derivations and fragments. They focus on the poetic process and the intensity of reader's participation.

The poets associated with the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E School have remarkably borrowed from the Pound-Olson tradition of political poetry and poetics. But, they have also experimented with newer methods and matters that deviate from the tradition. Ron Silliman, for instance, propounds the proposition of the new sentence parataxis. The core of his new sentence, above all, offers a social criticism. He is engaged with a politics of form—new forms are sought because the old forms are unable to accommodate socio-political contents and thereby fail to activate the reader. His poetry contains cultural commentaries like the horror of war and the problems of the working class people. He actively criticizes the market dominated American society and ridicules the abuses of capitalism like a Marxist. In the manner of his precursors his poetry embraces an interdisciplinary method and a grand collage structure. It also pleads for empowered readership.

Poetry, history, and politics go simultaneously in Barrett Watten's writing. His poetry is engaged with a general negativity. The principle of "disagreement" governs his poetic quest. Negativity and disagreement ultimately lead him to envision a utopian state. Likewise, it censures the prevalent horror of war and keeps a watchful gaze on foreign politics. It also highlights the class issues and contains social commentary. As a rule, his poems exploit collage and interdisciplinary methods. Charles Bernstein, on the other hand, reveals the relationship between aesthetics and politics. His poetry is always sympathetic to the lower strata people and critical of capitalism. Utilizing writing as an engine for social change, it excoriates the mechanical life style. Advocating an anti-absorptive poetic language, he uses poetry as theory. Rejection of voice is heightened in his collage poems.

Analysis reveals that the socio-political poems of all these writers are filled with ideological convictions. This corpus of poetry is progressive writing and also the quintessence of politically correct literature. In its form and content contemporary American

poetry largely resists the logic of postmodern consumerism, and these poets are the dreamers of a better future. This contemporary political poetry escapes elitist and totalitarian thoughts through the careful use of language to prosper a new-fashioned utopian society.