

CRISIS, POETRY AND POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The article discusses the political function of poetry in relation to the contemporary capitalist crisis. Hypotheses are presented on the specific way lyricism is able to capture the dynamics of History and create possibilities of resistance to the reified world.

KEYWORDS: Literary theory, Lyric Poetry, Crisis, Politics, Contemporary capitalism.

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## I

Since the year 2008, the world has profusely repeated the word *crisis*. Because of that, the word has become so ubiquitous it almost lost its explicative capacity, as usually happens in cases of conceptual vulgarization. Given how grave it is, the Crisis triggered in 2008 had the effect of making the concept surpass the domains of economy and finance and spread itself, as an irrefutable nodule of the discussion about the presente, for other areas of human knowledge, such as anthropology, sociology, politics, and, be amazed, art, culture, and literature. It is possible that the extent of the 2008 Crisis is due to the collapse, annotated by Yanis Varoufakis (2016), “of the global ‘arrangement’ that was dismantled in 2008, leaving our world in a state of stunning disenchantment” (VAROUFAKIS, 2016, p. 13). The global system of financial capitalism, with its theoretical, cultural, and ideological paraphernalia, received, during that fateful 2008, a stunning

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hit that mobilized human thought to reconsider dominant interpretative paradigms, which is not a small thing and does not happen often. The world was in awe with “the certainties that decades of conditioning had led us to acknowledge” (VAROUFAKIS, 2016, p. 31) being able to crumble so quickly. Since that moment, a demand for the real was imposed to the peoples: it was necessary to think again, to not be reaped by a crisis without precedent and to deliver the victory in a silver platter to the Capital.

For that Greek economist, the Crisis of 2008 was a moment at the same time typical and peculiar in the development of Western History. In that crisis, from which we still get grave reverberations and that haunted the world as much or more than that of 1929, late capitalism set mankind against *aporia*. I recover the words of Varoufakis (2016, p. 31):

Nothing humanizes us like *aporia* – that state of intense puzzlement in which we find ourselves when our certainties fall to pieces; when suddenly we get caught in an impasse, at a loss to explain what our eyes can see, our fingers can touch, our ears can hear. At those rare moments, as our reason valiantly struggles to fathom what the senses are reporting, our *aporia* humbles us and readies the prepared mind for previously unbearable truths. And when the *aporia* casts its net far and wide to ensnare the whole of humanity, we know we are at a very special moment in history.

It is worth to keep that idea that a crisis humanizes, even if by *aporia*, that puts us face to face with the limits of the paradigms that helped us to interpret the world, which, with the emergence of the crisis, seem outdated. To leave the paralyzing mud of *aporia*, it will be necessary to remember that, for historical materialism, the word crisis does not allude to abstractions. A crisis is always a concrete and systemic phenomenon; besides being always reiterative of itself.

Antonio Gramsci (2011), in a beautiful and irreproachable passage from the *Prison Notebooks* about the 1929 crisis, defines the development of capitalism as a “continuous crisis”. I textually remember his words:

the ‘crisis’ is but the quantitative intensification of certain phenomena, while others, that at first appeared and operated simultaneously

with the first, neutralizing them, have become inoperative or disappeared completely. (GRAMSCI, 2011, p. 330)

In another part, Gramsci alludes to a certain feature of hegemonic “disorder” in times of crisis, in which the old order does not have the means to sustain itself and the new order still has not developed the means to become the protagonist of the next step of history. Being structural, systemic, concrete, reiterative, therefore, the crisis intensifies in certain moments of History and causes disorientation in relation to the data of social dynamics. This disorientation, as we have seen, is called *aporia* by some. In this light, a time of crisis is that in which the typical fetishism of capitalism becomes acute and radically exhibits its self sense in the class struggle. As a result, the social antagonisms become stirred, at the same time the deficit of comprehension of social reality persists and intensifies.

Because of that, a time of crisis is a time in which appearance does not seem to give place to the expression of essence. In the moments of crisis, it seems that we know less who we are, that we understand less what place we occupy in society, that we have less capacity to see the sequence of History. But that apparent confusion interests only those who profit from the crisis. To those who do not profit from the crisis falls, more than standing it, resisting it.

A crisis is an “apex of historical frustration”<sup>2</sup>. In it the civilizatory limits of a certain moment appear utterly, constituting a narrative from which we apparently cannot see the end. Unsatisfied, because we do not profit from the crisis, we are impelled to comprehension and action. The time of crisis urges us to understand it, and that also means: it urges us to resist through knowledge.

It is under these limits that questioning lies, that the reader who favor isolationist literary criticism may have been too late: *can art in general and poetry in specific help us to locate in the historical totality of a time of crisis? Can they help us understand and imagine the outcome of its narrative?*

Lyrical poetry, in its structural peculiarity, gives place to an intimate gesture of awareness of reality; a gesture essentially critical of comprehension of the world. A time of crisis demands that we know

our place in events, in our “present matter”. And art, as a “feeling of the world”, is one of the best ways to map our place in history.

In relation to that, I remember a verse from the poem “America” from the book *A rosa do povo* by the Brazilian poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade (2003, p.199): “Therefore, it is possible to distribute my loneliness, to make a mean of knowledge”. If there is an active, political, and human place for poetry in an “outdated” time such as ours, this place is that of the de-fetishizing knowledge of oppressive reality. Lyric, being *poiesis* and *mimesis*, it records the elaboration of an act of understanding, affective and intellectual, of the relationship between an individual voice and the world that produced it. Knowing the world, feeling it from the inside and sharing such gesture intensively: there lies the fundamental political element of all great poetry. That gesture is in Dante, Drummond or Baudelaire, for example. It is something that we can qualify even better by alluding to the words of professor Alcir Pécora (2012): “An interior capacity, necessarily intellectual and affective, that receives imagination and pain to not surrender to cruelty and chaos.”

## II

The fundamental dialectic between autonomy and belonging (constituent of modern Western art) attests that poetry is a specific domain of human activity: a product of words that is autonomous in relation to the world of the creator. That same dialectic reminds of, however, that the autonomy of art, by itself and as a historical fact, claims the existence of a deep connection with reality.

Such dialectic gains a revealing dynamic (and of high critical yield) when we remember the concept of reflex, of great tradition in dialectic literary criticism, to state that literature is connected to reality exactly for being something different from it. Poetry is, therefore, in some measure, a reflex of reality; a reflex that is capable of, in the best of cases, sending us to the root of social life. And the root of social life is the human genus, that affirms itself as such in the material process of production of Man’s Humanity. A process that is, because real, material; and that, ultimately, political, because inescapably social.

As a specific form of human work, poetry is an architecture of mediations whose specificities need to be well understood. These specificities are something more intensive than the *techniques*, because they have to do with the wider and denser notion of *form*. I like a definition of poetry that, despite being constructed in a very simple way, contains a gravity that sends it to the more demanding land of literary criticism.

In his *How to read a poem?* the English critic Terry Eagleton (2010) thus defines the text we call poem: “A poem is a moral declaration/ statement, verbally inventive and fictional, in which the author, and not the printer or the text editor, who decides where the verses end.” So there, in the limits of truism, fundamental parameters for the *form* of poetry. The first of them is the “moral” one, that is, a poetic text is fundamentally an expression of values of collective matter, which is there mediated by an individualized poetic voice. The second parameter refers to the plane of form. The poem, so tells us Eagleton, is something fictional. That means there is in it, as indicated, a reflex of reality and not “the reality”. Besides, the demand of inventivity and the so-called liberty of choice by the author to choose how to understand the edition of the lines of a poem puts us, actually, face to face with the question of choice (conditioned by historical limitations) that the poet is impelled to do in relation to the aesthetic tradition he will join or refute. If we individually create a poem, we do so with means we have not invented and with tools we share socially.

What Eagleton wants to tell us is that a voice created in the poem is expressed in the poem revealing a “set of values, individuals or collective, considered universally as guides in the social relations and in the behavior of Man<sup>3</sup>.” From there we can extract at least one important element: even when the poem is advertising the intense particulars of a voice, that happens while expression of a set of values that attests the connection many times tense between that voice and the community it belongs to. There we find, therefore, a political environment for lyrical expression: the poetic voice, when being enunciated, is socially located, compromised, and resists the reifying dispersion that structures our daily look. The lyrical say is, because of that, also a gesture of social “mapping”, to allude to the concept of Fredric Jameson.

Eagleton talks about *poetry*, in general terms, but I believe we can make his definition operational for a particular type of poetry, the *lirismo* that, in this text, is more interesting for me to focus on. Because of that, when I refer to poetry, almost always, I mean *lyrical poetry*. Even though I do not want to characterize lyricism in detail, I remember a famous text by Lukács (2009), in which he sets out to delimit the “more general characteristic of the lyric reflex”. What Lukács (2009) wishes to do in that text is to articulate the Marxist-Leninist theory of the *reflex* to the study of generic specificity of the lyric. Uniting Eagleton’s anodyne and provocative definitive to the demanding and materialistic definition of Lukács (2009) can be useful for the discussion about the possible political function of poetry.

According to Lukács (2009), the lyrical poet is the “mirror of the world”, its leap into the “abyss” of subjectivity is the trigger of a productive contradiction that guarantees the validity of a “reflex of the world” for the lyricism. In the measure that subjectivity in a situation of solitude is the center of the poem, it fundamentals the constitution of the lyric form. I recover the words of the Hungarian philosopher:

The qualitative difference in relation to other artistic is constituted not by the open emergence of the constitutive subjectivity, but, on the contrary, by the specific and visible action of that subjectivity, by its specific way of existence, by its dynamic role in the shape of the oeuvre. (LUKÁCS, 2009, p. 246)

For Drummond, as we saw above, solitude is a “means of knowledge”. We could say that with that the poet was referring to the fact that being aware of the self and the real results in the understanding of a place, both for the I who enunciates and for the reader; a place of speech, a place of perspective, a place in the totality of human relations. Maybe that can illustrate, according to another perspective, what Lukács (LUKÁCS, 2009, p.247) defines as the active and passive function of the lyrical reflex: “the lyrical poetic behavior is, inseparably, active and passive, that is, it at the same time creates and reflects.”

A gesture of grave and deep understanding that produces an intimate “widening of consciousness”<sup>4</sup> with words extended to

perenniality: is this what poetry rescues from the world to (re) create in another plane? Is this a gesture crystallized through the poetic construction of a historically determined voice of place? Was this the peculiar lyric fiction? We are already, then, in the second scope of the purposely anodyne definition of Eagleton. It draws attention to the fictional character of the lyric. From this fictional, mimetic matrix, we will underline the fact that, although they are often linked to facts or experiences of a real individual, poems (or at least good poems) are a transfiguration of contingency. We can conclude, then, that the poem reaches aesthetic efficacy when it reaches a certain degree of overcoming (in the sense of generalization or universalization) of immediate experience, projecting itself through the coherent expression of an experience that is desired to be extended to permanence and poetically stressed in supra-individual terms. The political dimension would be present in a poem precisely by (and not despite) the intensification of its particular or individual strength. It is this force that launches the poem (its form, its technique, its subject) beyond the contingencies that motivated its creation. Its political matter is inextricable from its universal dimension, that is, from its human and humanizing dimension, which is patented by the lyrical construction.

Poetry is a specific form of human work. It is a form of objectification which respects “the laws of beauty,” as Marx teaches us in the *Economic-philosophical Manuscripts*. Through art, understood as work, man, at one and the same time, produces his genericity and reconciles with it. Generosity thus understood is, therefore, the capacity to belong and to extend the limits of the human race; In art we see this in a radical way. As Marx (2009, p. 85) says: “The object of labor is therefore *the objectification of the generic life of man*: when man is doubled not only in consciousness, intellectually, but operatively, effectively, contemplating, for Himself in a world created by him.” This man-made world can only be *an other world* (aesthetic) by the fact that it is another form, resulting from creative work. Poetry is, therefore, a new objectivity, already transformed by the creative and humanizing work of man. As Lukacs (2009, p. 248) would say: “The reality represented in the lyric is manifested in a certain way before us in *statu nascendi*”.

Lyrics is, therefore, reality “in a state of formation”. Thus, poetry happens when a poem is seriously constructed as an autonomous artifact of language that lives up to the demands of its time, and of what is the profound human genericity of its contemporaneity. When this happens, the poem has the power to put men in true and universalizing contact with the world to which they belong collectively. This process to which great art is devoted can be called “defetication”. Alluding to a well-known expression of Antonio Candido<sup>5</sup>, we could say that a poem is an “instrument of self-discovery and self-interpretation”. A poem is, therefore, a search for the intelligibility of the work that constituted it, and then, by extension, the very reality to which it integrates and reflects. Such an instrument is based on an undeniably subjective diction. In the feelings that emerge, through language, from the bottom of this Self that is made objective in the poem, one can read the formative contradictions of social life. Thus, when we read a poem, as we enjoy its aesthetic specificity, we are confronted with a form of knowledge of reality, constructed and determined by the laws of a harmony we have historically called “beautiful.”

In these terms, the basic fiction of the lyric form, that is, its specific mimesis, would be this: the poem represents to the reader the work of its construction and is configured as an awareness of the objective world by a subjectivity open to the outside. There are essential coordinates of the political root of the aesthetic reflex typical of lyricism. This is also what guarantees to this genre, in the best cases, a relevant degree of aesthetic reach, in the sense that one of the functions of art is to provide men with the intellectual and affective recognition of their humanity through the encounter with a Level of truth concerning their existence and their Community destiny. Poetry fulfills a disfetichizadora mission to become a reality lived unconsciously in conscious living for us. Outside art, in the immediacy of social life, we act in a pre-reflexive way, incorporating almost automatically the ideologies. As readers of poetry, when we cross it as a work of art, conceiving it as a second aesthetically valid immediacy, we make conscious the complex web of our relations with social life. Thus, for us, everyday life is meaningless, although it is the same as before reading the poem.



Here is human matter (which is also the political matter) of poetry: the poet seeks to be faithful to the specificity of his contingency, the particular dynamics of his structure of feelings, making possible, through the resources gathered in tradition, To transform it lyrically. The human and political nucleus of poetry is thus from the scope of a radical transcendence towards reality, a kind of transcendence of the Self to the world, in a gesture faithful to its contingencies, to its own individual and collective roots. Poetry becomes recognizable when the poet expresses only his own size in the world, not wanting to be different and not being seduced by the fetichismos that are inherent both to the literary form and to its transmission pacts, increasingly contaminated by Poisonous contracts of the cultural industry. When he pursues this truth, the author of a poem fulfills what we find in the good advice of the great Brazilian poet Antonio Carlos de Brito, *Cacaso*: never to be paralyzed by the “paralyzing schemes.”

### III

But a form of individualistic aspect, tending to the magical dispersion in subjectivism, would not in itself be the negation of politics, that is, of the dynamics in which one can discern the essence of the processes that constitute collective life? As we have hitherto shown, the whole elemental configuration of the lyrical genre is based on the dialectic between the self and the world: i) the fictional subjectivity that makes a moral statement; ii) the fictional transfiguration of contingency, the poem as a record / construction of a (iii) the poem as a verbal artifact that pays tribute to a set of historically and socially constituted poetic mechanisms. As we could conclude from Marx’s teaching, in producing and reading poetry (or art in general), we produce our own condition of humanity.

Thence derives at least one important political function of art in today’s world, plagued by insensitive crisis, ‘misery of reason’, emerging conservatism and radicalization of commodity fetishism. The reality of high capitalism imposes a new relationship with time, space and subjectivity. And the great mark of this new relation of the men with itself and with its environment is an even more violent type of thing.

Time is compressed between the inexorable walls of consumption or production. Space is increasingly reduced to the inconsistent “virtual” world. Subjectivity empties itself, rejecting anything that is not in itself the purest phantasmagoric rejoinder of the commodity. Nature agonizes and backfires more and more violently. The aesthetics of spectacle, which dehumanizes culture, and financial speculation, which dehumanizes the economy, are faces of the same totalitarian world. This is the dreary, dreamless, full-time world of contemporary capitalism: the world that has to work twenty-four hours a day seven days a week to restrain men from expanding beyond the horizons of the Capital of their humanity.

That is, thus, the 24/7 world, according to the definition formulated by Jonathan Crary (2014), in a brilliant work about the dehumanizing mission of contemporary capitalism:

A 24/7 world is a disenchanted one in its eradication of shadows and obscurity and of alternate temporalities. It is a world identical to itself, a world with the shallowest of pasts, and thus in principle without specters. But the homogeneity of the present is an effect of the fraudulent brightness that presumes to extend everywhere and to preempt any mystery or unknown-ability. A 24/7 world produces an apparent equivalence between what is immediately available, accessible, or utilizable and what exists.

Contemporary human experiences, marked by an empty life intensity, is the eternal routine of contemporary capitalism. That is the anthropological label, so to speak, of the current crisis. The psychoanalyst Maria Rita Khel (2009) characterizes as the evil of our time depression that, for her, is the social symptom of the “emptying of the individual”. In her words, this is a time of “lives empty of meaning, of creativity, and of valor”.

I now make, on purpose, a caricature of the present crisis observed from the point of view of subjectivity. We live in a time in which the individual has become a bunch of *pixels* dressed according to the rigor spread by the oppressive and inhuman dominant ideology. The body becomes a reduced mechanism of physicochemical interactions. The enormous malaise of the time is “treated” with the most modern drugs

with which the pharmaceutical industry profits and controls the social disintegration in the great urban agglomerations. The soul is reduced to a compound of allegedly “natural” reactions, controllable by all sorts of barbiturates, which regulate the movements of the “spirit”. The ego is just a happy appearance jammed into petty canvases where we propagate our misery, provisionally piled in masks of unhappy smiles. Social networks and their fair of horrors do not let us lie: we never talk so much, but we do not have interlocutors but “followers”. The dialogue was exhausted. We express ourselves a lot, but we feel very alone. Little do we reflect on our feelings. The loneliness of our day no longer becomes a means of knowledge – and this is a certificate of victory, at least temporary, of the logic of the commodity. The victory of aporia, which makes us renounce utopia.

In a world in which the great pathology of the I seems to be the denial of subjectivity richness, enunciating something in essential subjective tension is, to my mind, a strong political action. The I of a big problem does not affirm irrational egoism or egocentrism. The I of the poem affirms the shared humanity, and because of that it is defetishizing: it affirms differences; it affirms shadows, it affirms specters and dilemmas; it is against the totalitarianism of the goods that commands all processes of the “24/7” world, in which the spectacle and the speculation are a new, radical, and ubiquitous form of fascism.

Poetry, on the contrary, desires to reach our human core, because it is not satisfied with reproducing the shell. The insistence of the lyrical genre in the I that seeks to understand and name the world that surrounds it can, thus, be read as a demanding aesthetic answer to a human demand for freedom in relation to the world of *thingification*, which demotes our humanity instead of promoting it and transforming it.

As an anti-barbarism document, literature is an essential patrimony of humankind. It exists so that Men can find one another in a conscious and affective way with their own roots. Also because of that, poetry is radical. It is able to fuse humankind with its time and expressing, in another plane, more conscious, the impasses we live. Thus it can wave at the present with the “historically new”.

## CRISE, POESIA E POLÍTICA

### RESUMO

O artigo discute a função política da poesia em relação à crise do capitalismo contemporâneo. São apresentadas hipóteses sobre a forma específica como o lirismo é capaz de captar a dinâmica da História e de criar possibilidades de resistência ao mundo reificado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teoria literária, Poesia lírica, Crise, Política, Capitalismo contemporâneo.

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## CRISIS, POESIA Y POLÍTICA

### RESUMEN

El artículo aborda la función política de la poesía en relación con la crisis capitalista contemporánea. Se presentan hipótesis sobre la forma específica como el lirismo es capaz de capturar la dinámica del presente y de crear posibilidades de resistencia al mundo cosificado. El documento también propone una relación entre la forma poética y la utopía.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Teoría literaria, Poesía lírica, Crisis, Política, Utopía, Capitalismo contemporáneo.

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## NOTE

- 1 A smaller version of this text was presented at the round table “A poesia possível em tempos de crise”, during the *I Congresso Culture e Letterature in Dialogo: identità in movimento*, which happened on May 12 and 14, 2016, at the University of Perugia, Italy.
- 2 Here I recall the expression used by Roberto Schwarz in the commentary to the chapters around the character D. Plácida, in Machado de Assis’ novel *Memórias Póstumas de Brás Cubas*. In: SCHWARZ, R. *Um mestre na periferia do capitalismo – Machado de Assis*. São Paulo: Duas Cidades, 1990.
- 3 HOUAISS, A. *Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*. Ed. Objetiva, Digital edition.

- 4 Here I use Vera Lúcia de Oliveira's in the preface of the book *Incontri con la poesia del mondo*. Perugia: Urogallo, 2016.
- 5 Cf. "Um instrumento de descoberta e interpretação". In: *Formação da literatura brasileira*. Rio de Janeiro: Ouro sobre Azul, 2008. p. 429

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