

Linguistic Activism and its Origin

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Abstract: Poetry, as a huge part of the artistic culture in the modern day, has had roles from records of stories and letters of flattery to a form of creative expression. Over the years, poetry gained a larger audience, with social media platforms promoting poets and their messages to society. Activist movements had the help of poems to deliver their voices for social justice, such as performance poetry used by black artists to advocate for their rights artistically. However, linguistic activism is not a newly emerging movement; instead, the idea of raising new ideas to society to cause political or social change existed far before our times. To further explore this connection, this paper will use cases from the past and relate concepts from different eras and will therefore propose a conclusion of the necessity of such a connection between art, innovation, social progression, and politics.

Keywords: Modern activism, Poiesis, Politics, Avant-garde

1. Introduction

Poetry has been part of the literary culture as a form of the record-keeping method to further evolve into a modern form of creative expression. From the Greeks, the concept “poiesis” was created, meaning “to make or to bring something into being that has not existed before.” This could be used to most accurately explain the reason why humans create art or literature, to introduce new things into existence. This concept is a continuity in all of poetry’s history and can be seen today with poets like Donna Kate Bushin, a black lesbian feminist and author of “The Bridge Poem”. She takes the idea of “poiesis” and incorporates it into her personal experiences and original poems, advocating for her rights as a part of society. Within a divided and polarized feminist culture, the poet uses ambiguity and flexibility of the poetic language to effectively deliver an emotional piece of work that speaks to the contemporary audience of today’s society. Along with Bushin, poets are increasingly taking part in a modernist movement of linguistic activism, combining poetry with politics and social change. This form of activism might be seen as something that is rising to the surface in modern society, but poetry has always served a political and social purpose from the beginning.

Taking a general social perspective on the history of poetry, this paper explores the origin and how poets from distinct eras exploit poetry to take their own stances under different historical circumstances. In order to use substantial background evidence, this paper uses literary reviews and books to support its arguments further, aiming to form a conclusion from analyzing past cases. Taking the feminist movement as an example that is often correlated with the works of female poets, the paper draws attention to poetry’s role today in a widely polarized political context. Connecting the dots from the 20th-century avant-garde to the feminist manifesto and to technology’s contribution to

linguistic activists, this paper focuses on a subject that attempts to explain the activist agenda of the “Social Media Era”.

Focusing on the Feminist movement, due to the common theme’s occurrences across the timeline, the continued exploration of the female gender is used to explore the continuity and changes of challenges that female poets experienced.

Along with the nature of poetry itself and the inevitability of constant political conflict, this paper attempts to explain the necessity of innovation of ideas fundamentally. Using examples from wide-stretched time periods with different historical and political contexts, this paper will prove how consistently politics remains a huge part of poetry and linguistic expression. Comparing this radical movement of poetry in activism which can be seen often on social media pages, to different eras of poetry in history, poems, no matter what era we are in, seems always to reflect social changes, like sonnets being used as flattery in courtship culture. Seeing history from the social perspective, this paper will prove that it is constantly progressing and ideas are always changing to inspire new crowds.

Taking the keyword of “activism” and breaking it down into deeper concepts used in past movements, this paper ultimately ties the dots together by stressing the nature of human society to introduce new radical ideas into existence to cause drastic change.

2. Modern Activism

Modern activism, while the original motive of rising up against injustice, has never changed; however, with Social media becoming the mode of propagation, being an activist has almost become a cultural norm. Part of the reason for this increase in participation would be how social media and modern technology make the transportation of messages so proficient. Instead of using merely print technology, which is another breaking point in activism, movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter rely highly on their online platform, whether to organize protests or to spread the stories of individual victims. Literature and poetry’s role in this movement is as an artistic form of expression amongst a premature political movement to provide different perspectives and arguments regarding a complex concept or issue. For example, the Bridge Poem tackles an issue within the feminist movement regarding the lack of inclusiveness and understanding between women of different races, ethnicity, and sexuality and shows how poetry can be appreciated while serving as an education. Another example is slam poetry used in the Black Lives Matter movement, which combines poetry with performance that sends a shiver down the audience’s spine.

3. Politics in Poetry: within the Historical Context

One of the earliest accounts that present the relationship between language and political change is Solon and his language of tyranny. More specifically, the continual contestation in the sense of political debates existed during the time of stasis with the Ancient Greeks. In Solon 4 lines 9-10, “For they do not know how to restrain their satiety, nor how to maintain with order the present festivities of the feast in peace” [1]. Solon argues that the rich are to blame for the stasis. The concept of satiety, or the state of being satisfied, is used to criticize the rich for economic difficulties, which is not an uncommon political argument today. While on the other hand, Thucydides, in his description of stasis in Corcyra, is explained by one author named Alexander Fuks as a political stance relating to concepts of “self-aggrandizement” and “lust for power”, disputing Solon’s argument [2]. This political contest in the linguistic form with concepts of “economic inequality” and “power” by their nature “defy perfect consensus” more easily put, political topics that can be evaluated in multiple ways is always at the center of contestations, especially in forms like literature [1].

Jumping to the Renaissance period in England, a similar repetition of events can be seen. According to Norbrook, the rhetoric George Puttenham “declared that poets had been the first

lawgivers and the first politicians [3].” However, during a time when religious tension and controversies surrounding the monarchy were rising due to the Reformation, the author interestingly argues that for poets like Milton, it was difficult for writers to be politically radical while breaking the Renaissance poetic tradition. Though an example of Renaissance poetry that could effectively show the political concerns of poets is Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The Protestant Reformation was in itself a revolution, and Spenser’s family were protestants and was also linked to the Puritans [4]. The literary device used in this poem, allegory, which could be explained as something that can be interpreted to uncover a hidden moral or political message, hints at the identification and compliments to Queen Elizabeth. As a heroic poem describing the deeds of medieval knights, the *Faerie Queene*’s usage of political allegory and religious themes reflects Spenser’s own participation in the movement of the Protestant church against the Catholics. Interpreted as Spenser’s way of incorporating political thought into his works, the active participation of religious conflicts during the time could be seen in the context, despite modern criticism often suggesting otherwise.

As for pre-modern, like from 1900 to 1910 in Germany, the revolt against the bourgeoisie and the contemporary art of Impression was the political issue of the time seen in literature and the talk of the society. According to Kurt Pinthus, a German author, “Never before were aesthetics and the principle of art for art’s sake as disdained as in this poetry, which is called the ‘newest’ or ‘expressionist’ because it is an eruption, explosion, intensity — has to be in order to burst that hostile cast [5].” With his “Dawn of Humanity”, he criticized the bourgeoisie for its lack of values, double standards, and hypocrisy. His description of expressionists and the era of new political ideas “erupting” is highly similar to the idea of not only poesis but also the way that the society progresses through political activism and introduction of new radical ideas. Additionally, the influence of a dysfunctional community after the founding of the empire in 1871 on Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism served as a reference for other thinkers and writers. This included ones that were famous for activism, like Georg Heym with his criticism of society and Franz Werfel with his affirmation of life and the fraternization of all mankind, which were displayed in the form of performance poetry. They brought poetry to the stage and incorporated immediate audience engagement in their processes of spreading their political stances, which is a repertoire seen today. Slam poetry, mentioned above, uses a similar mode of expression, especially in the black community, which with the support of social media, has become a trademark for the black lives matter movement.

Starting from the 18th century with industrialization, print technology allowed a new form of mass distribution of information. The author of the book, “Modern Print Activism in the United States” used the term “print activism” to describe how, throughout the twentieth century, print technology has been facilitating social and political activism through means like magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, and others ever since the invention of the Gutenberg Press. This escalated to the point that print culture had “become a mass culture”, spreading capitalist consumerism and evolving to literary culture, not only through books but also magazines with the avant-garde movement [6]. For instance, the printing of “Fighting Spirits” by Marianne Moore, which was published in magazines during the WWI period, allowed a wider audience to connect with the culture of women at the time.

Consequently, this led to a massive increase in the public’s attention and engagement in the formation of the public’s political opinions and the “identifications of individuals as members of collectives.” According to the author, German philosopher Rudolf Eucken was the first to coin the term “activism”, with it being “the theory or belief that truth is arrived at through action or active striving after the spiritual life.” Moreover, the term “activist” first appeared in *The New York Times* in 1915 through print in the context of Swedish pro-war “agitators” [6]. Despite the term originally being used in coherence with German militarism, by the 1920s, the word “activists” was largely used to describe left groups such as communists. Moreover, slowly by the 1960s, the word was associated with “civil rights, anti-war,” and other movements. However, consistently speaking, “activism” has

always been generalized as “actions of radicals, subversive, and other fringe groups” in American print culture. Fast forwarding to today’s society, while print has been replaced by social media, the same “activist” movement still continues, especially with literary culture.

So what has changed through the years? How is modern activism different from the past? With the continuity of the purpose and use of poetry within activism and introducing new ideas as a whole, poetry is increasingly being enjoyed by not only the informed audience but the general public. This is facilitated by easier access through printed book forms of poetry and on the internet, compared to the start of industrialization, when print technology was starting to be developed. Therefore, poetry is more recognized as a form of art that is slowly taking away the rules and restrictions of literature, reaching a larger audience.

Furthermore, the evolving political history and the unique historical contexts that each time period has put the poets in different positions and challenges in their works. Whether this challenge was in regard to religion, government, gender, or racial oppression, most radical writers were criticized for their opinions, and their voices were often overlooked in the mix of political debates. Nevertheless, one thing that is common throughout the ages is that Mina Loy and Bushin used poetry to enter the political discussion as a medium to express their complex understandings of human conditions. Just like Franz Werfel and modern black artists, poetry was their way of attempting to bring their ideas and engage in public discussions. Political debates were never outdated; in fact, it was largely in the elite society that popularized opinions spread. However, the nature of poetry is constant conflicts. People consistently need to raise revolutionary ideas to better society, and people do it through poems. The emotional and personal nature of poetic expressions allows individuals to contest collective public opinions.

4. Politics and Women’s Poetry

To look at the changes within poetry focusing on the topic of feminism, each period of time used a separate political background to make sense of women’s poetry. During the eighteenth century, from which the politics of monarchy in England was used by women to enter debates regarding literary and political authority. The shifting ideas regarding the monarchy and the court culture and the struggles against the largely patriarchal society could be seen through the poetry of women during the time. While during the time of feminist avant-garde in American poetry, with Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* as an example, more radical ideas surfaced, like opting for contemporary views of same-sex relations and a de-gendered world. However, the constant exploration of new ideas within the field of gender did not cease.

In the 17th-18th century in England, women’s poetry marked a political upheaval or, more specifically, “changing practices of monarchy...and sexual politics struggles over a model of gender that was made normative and therefore enforceable through a wide variety of legal and linguistic changes in the eighteenth century” [7]. With the public attention and debates on Charles I’s execution and disputes on the religious legitimacy of the monarchy as a whole in the late 17th century, women poets were a part of this debate. Although feminism did not rise from this event, women poets used “royalism” as a ticket into public debates regarding gender. Still, the monarchy was viewed as royal in the writings of many women. However, the emerging discussions on the effects of liberalism on feminism allowed many women to make the argument of “the rifts between different sources of male authority [7].” Barash, therefore, made the conclusion that after the civil war, amongst the political chaos, women poets strategically used the traditional idea of the monarchy to their advantage for the purposes of making their arguments in the women’s “political and linguistic community”.

Stretching away from the feminist picture, the agenda of poets in the exploration of the human relationship with the world still goes on. During the Romanticism era, writers explored the relationship between men and nature, with a different interpretation of how poetry fits into this idea.

The Romantics, therefore, “embodied the shift from the seventeenth-century scientific view of the universe as a mechanism which man was alien to, towards an organic conception of the cosmos which man was part of. (Matthiessen 614-15) [8].” Amongst the other Romanticist writers who engaged in public political events was Whitman, who used performance poetry, in which he would read his works aloud to an audience. Furthermore, in the words of Ortiz Barroso, his work prophesied democracy. The American poet had his works strongly rooted in the concepts of liberty and his views of democracy, clearly seen in his work, “For You O Democracy” from the poetry collection “Leaves of Grass” (1855). His sense of nationality and work as a performance poet stretches his influence to the modern world, where politics is also involved in expression through literature.

Among the avant-garde movement in America, there was the advocacy of feminism, especially by the famous artist Mina Loy. In her notorious Feminist Manifesto, she “ultimately demonstrates as much revolt against as indebtedness to Futurism and its rhetoric of revolution” [9]. To put it more simply, she adheres to what she believes is a positive aspect of the social movement, as not only a feminist but also a writer. Christina Walter of Yale University brings up an interesting point, and the relevance of “relative impersonality”, as Loy’s dilemma, debating between the feminist claim towards equality and her aesthetic modernist impersonality that was popular during the time. Therefore, it could be understood that Loy expresses her “female selfhood” while displaying the conflicting ideologies in her struggles to weigh the impacts of maintaining her aesthetic impersonality compared to female independence [10]. This type of struggle for feminist writers was not uncommon. To fit a narrative in a highly male-dominated society and maneuver through the sense of a women’s own identity through literature was often seen within the avant-garde movement.

Going back to the start of drafting this paper—the Bridge Poem by Donna Kate Bushin, the changes on the surface are clear. There are fewer restrictions on the meter and more emotional and flexible in the choice of diction. It was this power in the words, the indescribable pain and discontent that inspired the beginning of the investigation into the history of poetry’s involvement in starting social and political revolutions.

5. Conclusions

Feminism, as one of the most long-stretched movements in history, allowed the further exploration of how different era poets faced separate challenges and used different perspectives. Seeing the evolution of problems, from the lack of equal education to a sense of independence to inclusiveness within the feminist movement, and how poetry is used throughout those periods of time confirms the central argument of this paper.

In other words, poetry is politics, and it has been ever since the start. Activism is not new; in terms like “poiesis”, “expressionism” and “avant-garde”, the core purpose is the same: bringing about new ideas into existence under the given political or social circumstances. With this constant evolution of ideas and political debates seen in the form of poetry, there is progression and change.

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