Bo, Carlo (1911-2001)

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At a time when scholars are rediscovering the neglected link between aesthetic modernism and Catholicism, we have everything to gain by focusing our attention on Carlo Bo (1911-2001). Bo modestly defined himself ‘an aspiring Catholic,’ and this self-portrait evokes his proximity to the experience of Anglophone modernists such as T. S. Eliot for whom the commitment to aesthetic innovation parallels a silent, personal spiritual journey that is the result of a persistent interrogation of the human condition and the meaning of action. For Bo literature was the name for a quest of a much wider significance: he witnessed to the urgency to ask who we are and how we should see ourselves against the background of the major historical traumas of the twentieth century from World War I to the concentration camps of World War II.

Publicly, he was an impressively accomplished man. As an academic he was one of the foremost authorities on French Literature, writing on Surrealism, [Mallarmé](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mallarm%C3%A9), [Jacques Rivière](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivi%C3%A8re), Sainte Beuve, among others, and Hispanic literature. He held office as the Dean of the University of Urbino uninterruptedly from 1947 to 2001. To add to his achievements, in 1984, the then-Italian President Sandro Pertini appointed him to the Italian Parliament, as a member of the Senate. But it is for his affiliation with hermeticism, an Italian variant of European modernism, that Carlo Bo is best known, and rightly so, since his work is a unique vantage point from which scholars of modernism might track the diasporic course of Anglophone modernism and its permutations in Southern Europe.

Bo felt very close to the experimental poetry of Dino Campana who, like fellow poets Mario Luzi and Salvatore Quasimodo, was associated with hermeticism because his aesthetic modernism was characterized by a novel language, it repositioned the reader with more authentic and intimate mode of address, and it used language to evoke phantoms of the collective imaginary. Thinking of Campana along with other international modernists such as André Gide and D. H Lawrence, Bo praised their revolution in poetic language which consisted in the avant-garde gesture of rejection and refusal. ‘What did they want,’ he asks, ‘with their curse and their idolatry?’, by which he means the rejection of tradition and the dogma of the autonomy of art. His answer is ‘to find Man’ and ‘save’ him from symbolic structures and concepts (*dal numero insostenibile delle carte e delle abitudini*) as well as from the conventions that immure the human subject. He sees Campana, Gide, and Lawrence as united in a line of modernist experimentation that reacts to violence and to literary complacency. They are writers who lean toward doubt, not centainty, and for this reason they *interrogano Dio*: they address God, handing Him questions.

His work and presence furnish an ongoing meditation on mortality and on the constricting force of philosophical and critical constructs which tend to negate life. The leimotif of his literary criticism is literature as life, also the title of a paper he first delivered at the 5th Conference of Catholic writers held in San Miniato, Florence, 11 September 1938. The paper had a controversial reception for the audacity of its thesis on literature. Bo refused literature understood as historical documentation, as mere illustration of social life or of the customs and conventions of a nation. Against this dominant view, he championed a literature of ideas conceived as the royal road to the knowledge of who we are and of ‘the life of our consciousness.’

Unsettling the opposition between life and literature, he encourages a wider understanding of literature grasped in its intimate nexus with philosophical reflection and within a horizon of writing which questions drastic divides between forms of expression. Literature for Bo is the name for a comprehensive instrument of investigation, a ‘means to strive for the absolute necessity to know something about ourselves, or, to put it in another way, to continue waiting with dignity and full awareness for the news of something that is better than us and satisfies us.’ His speech ‘Literature as Life’ became a manifesto for all those who sympathized with hermeticism. It articulated something new, rejecting both idealism because of its rigid aesthetic structures, and materialism because of its injunction to tie literature to reality only.

His view of criticism is close to that of T. S. Eliot. Like Eliot, Bo believed in a kinship between creative and critical acts. Criticism is a sort of affective hermeneutics; it grasps the ‘feelings and sensations’ of a text, that is to say, something like the text’s inner language, and transmutes it into another language, quite autonomous but legitimized by the literary text and, in a sense, its own recreation. One can hear in Bo’s conception of criticism his Anglophone colleague’s emphasis on craft. Like Eliot, moreover, he was especially drawn to the thinker as an incarnated being. He pondered the enigma and mystery of the man who suffers and the mind that creates, and was moved to erase the hiatus between the two.

The critic, of course, is first a reader. Following Valéry Larbaud, Bo called reading ‘an unpunished vice.’ He told an interviewer that reading was the only thing he could do and had ever done. He spoke of his immense library of 60,000 volumes as a ‘cemetery,’ a remark that makes clear how important it was for Bo to grasp the link between word and life. In the writers he loved to read, he admired their capacity for a ‘spiritual regard’ toward the text, a capacity he particularly admired in Charles Du Bos, reader of Baudelaire, Proust, Constant.

Because of his consistent interrogation of the subject Man, of the meaning of the word, Bo may have a lot to offer to the current critique the subject and its related questioning of the limits of the notion of person and of the boundaries of the human. His unique emphasis on literature as antidote to the negation of life in modernity, makes him a good candidate, next to Giacomo Leopardi and Francesco De Sanctis, in that genealogy of critical thought which Roberto Esposito has termed ‘pensiero vivente’—living thought.

Further Reading:

Claudio Altarocca. “Intervista a Carlo Bo.” *La Stampa*, 8 April 1995.

Carlo Bo, *La Letteratura Come Vita*. Ed. S Pautasso. Milan: Rizzoli, 1994.

Ferdinando Castelli, “Carlo Bo: La Letteratura Come Vita.” *La Civilta’ Cattolica* Anno 174, Volume Terzo, Quaderno 3510 (21 September 1996): 463-476.