Book Reviews

Fernando Esposito, *Mythische Moderne: Aviatik, Faschismus und die Sehnsucht nach Ordnung in Deutschland und Italien* (Oldenbourg: Munich, 2011)

Fernando Esposito has written a powerful and compelling book that uses the figure of the pilot and the experience of flight to explore the ‘mythic modern’ that fascism conjured up in the generally unbearable conditions of chaos and disenchantment in the years after the First World War. He restates and strengthens the argument that insists on including fascism in the category of the modern. He does so by distinguishing a modern that willingly pays the price for its critical historicization of the world in the currency of alienation and homelessness from the violent, but thoroughly modern attempt to impose order by reanchoring the social world in the categories of nature and eternity. The transcendental figure of the pilot who embodied control and action had exposed a vast treasure chest of technological and existential possibility already before World War I, as Esposito’s investigation into the literary reception of the Brescia air meet in 1909 shows. But it was during the war that socially constructed images of the flier and the ace were deployed to undo the conclusions that the war in the trenches in the ground seemed to make so compelling; the pilot’s capacity to move, act, and see restored both the active and the future tense to collective entities such as the nation or people, to give meaning to suffering, dying, and killing, and generally to inaugurate a new age of abundance in which the individual moved about in new registers of freedom and subordination.

Esposito argues that it was especially German and Italian thinkers who grabbed at the figure of the flier as part of their desire for order and certainty and decisionism. A new order staffed by the pilots ‘who really know what it means to govern,’ in the words of Guido Mattioli, was imagined by those unable and unwilling to live in a world of contingency and who found the idea of the historical nature of values unacceptable. While the illiberal romance with myth flourished after the First World War, a sometimes grim liberal acceptance of contingency revived after the Second World War, a point that Esposito

makes very effectively with Nietzsche. In one of his last 'letters of insanity' written as he was going mad in Turin at the beginning of January 1889, Nietzsche warned his literary patron, the critic Georg Brandes, of the dangers of scholarly appraisal which amounted to demystification: 'After you discovered me, it was no great feat to find me. The problem now is how to lose me' (p. 426). (Nietzsche signed this letter 'The Crucified One.') Esposito adds that in the contemporary condition it is 'no feat' to find contingency, but an 'impossibility' to lose it and he concludes: 'the discovery of the impossibility of order is also a sign of endings. The feat will be not to lose this discovery' (pp. 429, 431). This is a noble thought, but Esposito changes his argumentative position, explaining the historically verifiable desire for order, with all its terrible consequences, in recent history, but actually reaching conclusions about the impossibility of order, although perhaps not the potential for the desire, in the present.

Esposito has an enormously learned argument drawn from philosophy, sociology, history, and literature. Readers will benefit a great deal from his clear, undistracted way of proceeding. Yet the whole notion of 'the mythic modern' ultimately rests on an impatience with chaos and meaninglessness so that we are left with the conventional binary of order versus chaos to explain one of the most dynamic and destructive ideologies in recent history. Moreover, the emphasis on order, even a "perfect" order, diminishes an understanding of the way fascism continuously manufactured the dangers that served as the premise for its unprecedented claims for social and political renovation (p. 12). If fascism produced the effect of 'eternity,' it also produced eternal danger. D'Annunzio's pilots, the folkloric images of the ace, and the trajectory of flight were themselves continuously shadowed by the long-range bomber, fear of which was politically instrumentalized not least by the fascists but which also sat deep in the collective imagination of Europeans in the interwar years. The state of emergency was the premise for dreams of order, but the dreams also prepared the emergency. And so, was it not the gasmask rather than the airplane that was the most 'conspicuous artifact' of the 'totalitarian version of the modern' after all (p. 35)?

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