

The Political Novel

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Editor's Foreword

From time to time in the Doubleday Short Studies in Political Science series, guest analysts from outside the formal boundaries of the discipline will be invited to help fill certain gaps in existing materials. In the present instance a young professional student of literature, Dr. Joseph Blotner, has contributed a much-needed and highly useful introduction to the political novel. Thanks largely to the care and skill with which this analysis has been prepared, students of English and political science, as well as general readers, should find new and stimulating pathways open to them.

So far as the editor and author know, this is the first essay of its kind in the English language. The fact is worth noting because, despite the large number of political novels in all languages and despite the obvious importance of this particular species of the novel generally, scholars in the field of literature have not devoted systematic attention to it. Until Dr. Blotner decided to undertake a full-scale investigation of the political novel—of which the present essay is one of the beginning steps—the teacher of political science could search the modern language journals and literary periodicals in vain for help in canvassing the possibly valuable contributions of the novelist in describing and explaining political behavior.

The Political Novel is to be welcomed on still other grounds. It is interdisciplinary in scope and intent and it demonstrates anew the fruitful results which can be achieved when a scholar merges his technical competence in one branch of learning with his informed and enthusiastic interest in another. Moreover, crude and scattered though the bridges between pairs of the social sciences (e.g.,

political psychology) are, the bridges between the social sciences and the humanities are even more so. Collaboration—in this case between literature and political science—should certainly take more than one form, but whatever the form, the great need is to light up the shadowy twilight zones which lie between major disciplines. Not only are these unexplored areas of subject matter to be charted, there are common purposes and joint efforts to be considered. Among others, Dr. Blotner has raised the question: what can the experts in literature and in politics give to each other?

The analysis of the political novel set forth in these pages makes a variety of contributions to learning. Novels can be read two ways: for pleasure and for profit. The latter object—as in all academic subjects—is sometimes pursued under conditions which deny the former. Nonetheless, the reader is reminded by Dr. Blotner that to be alerted beforehand to the nature and significance of this type of novel is to combine pleasure with an awareness that the content may be very revealing of data concerning political life. Thus the words of a writer are at once pleasure-giving and instructive—*if* the reader is looking out for the proper clues. Second, there is made available an original classification of political novels and politically relevant summaries to serve as a guide to political scientists. The bibliography, though selected, is especially useful in this respect. Third, the headings and substance of Chapters Two to Six actually provide a set of analytical functions which the author believes the novel may serve in illuminating major aspects of politics and government. This study is so cast that the transition from thinking about novels to thinking about politics is painless and without distortion. No one having any familiarity with the traditional categories of political science will find Dr. Blotner's own presentation strange or unsophisticated.

In addition, this essay represents an attempt to establish durable intellectual bases for probing the nature of the political novel. The tentative definitions and criteria of identification, classification of functions, and annotations are a substantial move in this direction. Finally, among the data revealed in the contents of political novels is evidence of the way a given society reacts to its own political institutions and practices. To the extent that such novels partially yet accurately reflect social reality, the student of politics can draw valid inferences concerning the political beliefs—including beliefs about the nature of politics—held by a sizeable portion of the society's membership at any one time. One can detect at least the broad outlines of periodic shifts in the political concerns of a people or any segment thereof in their literature.

Chapter One discusses some problems arising from a study of the political novel. This is an important chapter and contains some homely wisdom on the different approaches respectively of the novelist and the political scientist. It should be stressed that certain crucial points with respect to the analysis of human behavior in general can be raised by comparing the techniques of the two kinds of observers and reporters. The well-known remark about pictures being worth thousands of words has occasionally been transposed to the effect that one good story is worth a whole (and dry) textbook. This, of course, is an attractive argument. But it does raise the fundamental question of what analytical operations are performed by the novelist on the one hand and the political scientist on the other. Offhand it would seem as though there were important differences carrying beyond those of purposes discussed by the author. Generally speaking, the novelist is primarily concerned with a coherent story, with a whole fabric of description, and with specific details while the political scientist is concerned

with events, processes, and factors, with abstractions from wholes and with classes of general phenomena. The latter builds upon numerous instances, upon gross data, and upon repeated patterns of behavior. The former builds upon an amassing of individualized data fashioned into a unique chronicle. The one gains richness and sacrifices capacity to generalize, the other sacrifices detail for broad generalization. For the novelist, Uncle Tom becomes a microcosm, a device for revealing the tragedy of the whole Negro race in America through a portrait of a single character. For the political scientist, Uncle Tom is lost in what can be said of the entire group of which he is a member. Both are limited and both pay a price accordingly. Clearly more is involved in the different analytic techniques but it suffices to indicate one type of issue raised in this study of the political novel.

Other issues are equally noteworthy. The main character in a novel may be likened to a dummy—or a model—created by the author for the purposes of expressing the author's observations and, in effect, for "playing out" his ideas. Though the character is pure fiction—i.e., any similarities to known real persons are coincidental—an effective novel must have believable characters, recognizable through behavior traits identified by readers from their own everyday experience. So too the social scientist uses models—analytic dummies—to further his purposes. Dissecting the anatomy of a political model and putting its characters under close examination can teach something about the most fruitful relationships between real persons and fictional characters for purposes of describing and explaining behavior. Often the fact that the novelist is actually building models is obscured by the amount of detail he pours into his molds which then makes his models seem remarkably lifelike. While the models of the social scientist

are usually much further removed from correspondence to real persons, the properties built into them must be “believable” too.

Another area of inquiry can be opened up if one accepts the cues offered by Dr. Blotner’s selections and analyses. Political novels seem to reflect mostly the seamy side of political life, emphasizing conflict as the sole theme meriting attention. Through their characters, authors seem to place great blame for social ills on political institutions as detached from other institutions or on individual devils. Is this a reliable and full revelation of politics? As a matter of fact, novels too seem caught in two opposite kinds of explanations: the great man and the great historical force. Each has significant limitations and accompanying fallacies yet each assumes great plausibility at the hands of a skillful storyteller. Inevitably the novelist dramatizes, and in real life the political actor dramatizes too. Unfortunately, the tendency to dramatize reinforces the neglect of the mundane factors which often influence crucial political action and choice.

This line of thought suggests certain concrete exercises which might be profitable for the student of politics to undertake. Since the search for fruitful hypotheses is a backbone of any systematic discipline, it might be useful to search these novels to see if any have been missed. A corollary effort would be to check the knowledge of politics exhibited in political novels against the latest agreements among political scientists. Still another effort might be directed toward a content analysis (in the technical sense) of the novel as medium of communication in order to throw light on the value structure of the society or individuals which are depicted. Finally, what aspects of politics have been ignored by novelists and why? For example, a novel might be an excellent way to

illuminate the world of the decision-maker, the governor, the leader. Thus far, none has really done so.

Dr. Blotner is to be congratulated for aiding an important cause: the use of novels as a teaching device in political science courses. Those who have tried have been rewarded but have lacked an introductory essay and bibliographical guidance. Novels make points which can be made in no other way and in interesting fashion. The student's idea of the political realm and of approaches to its understanding will be enlarged by following the thoughtful guide presented below.

One considerable merit of this monograph is a lighter style than is normally characteristic of political science literature. Nonetheless, its intellectual quality will make the reader anticipate Dr. Blotner's larger study.

RICHARD C. SNYDER

chapter one

The Study of the Political Novel

The Importance of the Political Novel

In an age in which progressively more men have engaged in politics while the politics themselves have become increasingly complex, any means for understanding these interrelated phenomena becomes correspondingly more valuable. The techniques of science are constantly being brought to bear upon this problem of understanding. But one of the best means of enlightenment has been available for more than a hundred years. Since its beginning the political novel has fulfilled the ancient function of art. It has described and interpreted human experience, selectively taking the facts of existence and imposing order and form upon them in an aesthetic pattern to make them meaningful. The political novel is important to the student of literature as one aspect of the art of fiction, just as is the psychological novel or the economic novel. But it is important in a larger context, too. The reader who wants a vivid record of past events, an insight into the nature of political beings, or a prediction of what lies ahead can find it in the political novel. As an art form and an analytical instrument, the political novel, now as ever before, offers the reader a means for understanding important aspects of the complex society in which he lives, as well as a record of how it evolved.

The Nature of the Political Novel: Problems of Definition and Selection

The political novel is hard to define. To confine it to activity in the houses of Congress or Parliament is to look at the top floor of the political structure and to ignore the main floor and basement which support it. One has to follow the novelist's characters, on the stump and into committee rooms—sometimes even farther. But the line is drawn where the political element is forced into the background by the sociological or economic. The political milieu develops in part out of the conditions described in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although these books are proletarian novels, to include them would be to open the door to a flood of books that would spread far beyond the space limitations of this study. Of course, proletarian novels which are also political novels are included. Two such books are André Malraux's *Man's Fate* and Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*. But for the purposes of this study, a cast of characters drawn from the proletariat is not enough, even if they are oppressed economically and socially. They must carry out political acts or move in a political environment. Also excluded are novels such as Herman Melville's *Mardi* which treat politics allegorically or symbolically. Here a political novel is taken to mean a book which directly describes, interprets, or analyzes political phenomena.

Our prime material is the politician at work: legislating, campaigning, mending political fences, building his career. Also relevant are the people who influence him: his parents, his wife, his mistress, the girl who jilted him, the lobbyist who courted his favor. The primary criterion for admission of a novel to this group was the portrayal of political acts, so many of them that they formed the novel's main theme or, in some cases, a major theme. These acts are not always obvious ones like legislating. In Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* a mine owner contributes financial support to

political movements which will provide a more favorable climate for his business. *In Dubious Battle* presents labor organizers who manipulate a strike to serve the political ends of the Communist Party. The terminology of the theater can be helpful in bridging the gap between the world of actual events and the world of fiction. It helps to show how various aspects of the actual political process are translated into the forms of fiction. The author may concentrate his attention upon the actors—the public officials who make decisions and wield authority on behalf of the community or the whole society. A good many of the actors may not be public officials, but rather private citizens whose acts are political: voicing opinions, helping to select candidates, voting, attempting to influence the political process, revolting. These actors, and those who are public officials, may demonstrate factors in the overall drama which are predominantly political in their consequences: attitudes, social power, social stratification. The novelist will be concerned with the roles the actors play and the lines they speak, the purposes they have and the strategies they employ. He may concentrate upon the interaction between these actors or between them and the audience—the public. An author may choose to emphasize the drama as a whole rather than the individual actors, highlighting the stage upon which it is played out—the country or area of national life in which the scenes are laid. This emphasis upon the drama will throw into sharp relief the events and decisions in which the actors participate, and the framework of rules or custom against which they take place.

The novels considered here deal with political activity at all levels—local, state, national, and international. If, as von Clausewitz said, “War is merely the continuation of Politics by other means,” one may find politics in war, too. This study,

therefore, includes works on revolutionary as well as parliamentary politics. On the international level especially one encounters group attitudes which are politically relevant. The groups may be the conventional social, economic, or political strata of British and American society, or they may be those of the rigid Marxist state. Other relevant attitudes spring from national characteristics, and many political novels identify some of them. This definition is wide and inclusive, but so is political activity.

The primary sources of this study are eighty-one political novels. Over half of them are by Americans. The next largest group is the work of English writers. Other novels are taken from Italian, French, German, Russian, and South African literature. These eighty-one novels are the minimum necessary to give an understanding of the political novel. At the same time, this is the maximum number that could be included in the study. Only in the case of the English and American political novel has an attempt been made to trace the development of literary genre. Some of these novels are used because they show artistic excellence, others because they show how the form developed historically. More American than English novels are used because they are more readily available, many of them in inexpensive, paper-bound editions. It was not possible to attempt the same outline with the other literatures because of the brevity of this study. For some of them, too, a sufficiently representative group of political novels was not available.

Most often the authors deal with their own countries, although they sometimes write about a foreign land. Some of them are hard to pigeonhole: Henry James, an American expatriate writing about London terrorists in *The Princess Casamassima*; Joseph Conrad, an Anglicized Pole analyzing Russian revolutionaries in *Under*

Western Eyes; Arthur Koestler, an Austrian-educated Hungarian living in France, describing the Moscow trials in *Darkness at Noon*. This is one reason why it is more fruitful for present purposes to avoid strict concentration on national literatures and to accept valid insights into national characteristics and behavior patterns no matter what the language of their source.

Characteristics of the Political Novel

In *The Charterhouse of Parma* the witty and urbane Stendhal says, "Politics in a work of literature are like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one's attention." His own work contradicts the great French novelist, yet his comment is perfectly accurate for many other novelists. Politics in some modern novels of political corruption, such as Charles F. Coe's *Ashes*, do seem loud and vulgar, and in books like Upton Sinclair's the reader may hear not one pistol shot but a cannonade. But this is not to say that the use of political material must disrupt a work of literature. The trick, of course, is all in knowing how. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote an artistically weak, politically successful work in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, while Fyodor Dostoyevsky produced a politically unsuccessful, artistically enduring classic in *The Possessed*.

The quality of these novels varies widely, just as would that of a group dealing with religion, sex, or any other complex, controversial theme. In general, the European novels considered here attain a higher level than the American books. This is partly because only the better European novels are treated. But they are also superior to the best American works, except for a few comparatively recent ones, because of the wider variety of political experience presented, the greater concern with ideology and theory,

and the deeper insight into individual motivation and behavior. This in turn is probably due to several factors. From the time when the United States attained its independence until the end of the first quarter of this century, it possessed a relatively stable set of doctrines and frames of reference (compared to those existing in Europe) within which the individual led his political life. Although American parties rose and declined, although the Union was preserved, its borders expanded, and international responsibility accepted, this evolution was orderly and limited compared to that which occurred in Europe. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights provided a stable yet sufficiently flexible political framework. Europe during the same period reverberated with the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the unification of Germany and Italy, and the Russian Revolution. These were violent changes not only in theory but in the actual form of government. It is not unnatural then that American political novels range over a relatively narrower area, with their main emphasis on local or national subjects, while those of European authors delineate changing, conflicting, and radically different ideologies and resultant events. It is only since the 1930s, with the increase in centralized government, the impact of international Communism, and the recent appearance on both the Right and the Left of what seem to be threats to traditional American freedoms, that the American political novel has begun to approach the European in breadth of theme, concern with political theory, and interpretation of varying political behavior patterns.

The larger number of bad novels in the American group is also due to the fact that more American novels are treated. Because of their greater availability both for research and teaching, it is possible to show the evolution of this genre in the United States. In doing this

one is able to examine the good ones, old and new, such as Henry Adams' *Democracy*, John Dos Passos' *District of Columbia* trilogy, and Irwin Shaw's *The Troubled Air*. One pays, however, by suffering through period pieces such as F. Marion Crawford's *An American Politician*. Less obtuse politically but nearly as abysmal artistically, is Paul Leicester Ford's *The Honorable Peter Stirling*. One is compensated, however, not only by the view of a developing genre, but also by the recording of significant periods in American national life and of the people who helped shape it, as in the Dos Passos work, and by the sensitive and penetrating analysis of central problems in contemporary life, as in Shaw's novel.

The English political novel is also uneven. That its depths are not so low as those in the American novel is due in part to the political heritage which its authors share with their colleagues on the continent. Its authors work from a long and rich political history in which the evolution has been less violent but no less steady.

The Novelist and the Political Scientist

The differences between the methods of the political novelist and the political scientist are worth studying. Their intentions are often at variance. Whereas the scientist is dedicated to objectivity and statistical accuracy, the novelist is often consciously subjective; if his work is intended as a political instrument, as were *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Possessed*, scrupulous attention to the claims of the other side will invariably lessen the emotional impact and political worth of the novel. If a scholar sets out to examine the rise of Nazism, he will have to treat not only the Beer Hall Putsch and the Reichstag fire, but German history and the German national character as well. He will chronicle the effects of Versailles, the

staggering of the Weimar Republic, and the growing strength of the Brown Shirts. He will be concerned with national attitudes, with the relative strength of the parties that vied with the National Socialists. His study will gauge the effects of the aging Hindenburg and the demoniac Hitler on a people smarting from defeat, searching for a scapegoat, and longing for a resurgence. And all this will be backed with statistics where possible. It will be a cogently reasoned analysis with documented references to available sources. Also, the study will be aimed at a fairly homogeneous and well-defined audience. The appeal will be intellectual. If emotion creeps in, the work is probably bad.

The novelist who is to examine these same events will present them quite differently, even apart from the techniques of fiction. If he is a rather dispassionate chronicler of human foibles and frailties such as, say, Somerset Maugham, he will probably portray a group of people through whose actions the rise and significance of Nazism will become meaningful. The reader will probably observe the drifting war veteran, the hard-pressed workman, the anxious demagogue. Out of these lives and their interactions will emerge an objective study of the sources of a political movement and of the shape it took. If the novelist is an enthusiastic Nazi, the book will reflect his particular bias. The storm troopers will become heroic Horst Wessels, the young women stalwart Valkyries, the Führer an inspired prophet and leader. Out of the novel will come a plea for understanding or a justification of violence and a perverted view of German national destiny. The book will be emotionally charged, a calculated effort to produce a specific desired response. If this series of historical events is used by a Frenchman, they will undergo another change. There will probably be an evocation of the Junker mentality, of Prussian

militarism, of hordes of gray-green figures under coal-scuttle helmets. If this novel is not a call to arms, it will be a warning cry to signal a growing danger. These three fictional books will use the same staples of the novelist's art, yet each will differ from the others in motivation and attitude. They will portray aspects of the same complex of events treated by the political scientist, but this will be virtually their only similarity.

A disadvantage for the novelist is his need to make his book appealing enough to sell and to make his reader want to buy his next novel. Although the scientist too must make his work as polished and interesting as he can, the novelist does not, like him, find his readers among subscribers to the learned journals. He cannot rely upon sales prompted by the need to keep abreast of research in a specialized field. If a novelist is to stay in print, political savoir-faire and intellectual capacity are not enough. He has to sell copies. Perhaps this is one reason why all but a few of these novels have a love story accompanying the political theme. Sometimes the love story inundates it, as in *An American Politician*; in other novels, such as Sinclair's *Presidential Agent*, it is peripheral and pieced out with flirtations. It may be that these novelists include this element because love is as much a part of life as politics. Its nearly universal presence is a reminder, however, of one aspect of the novelist's task and one way in which his work differs considerably from that of the political scientist.

The advantages of the novelist's method over the political scientist's compensate for the drawbacks. These advantages do not necessarily produce a better work, one which gives more insight into a problem or explains it better. They do, however, offer more latitude and fewer restrictions. The novelist may use all the techniques of the political scientist. Sinclair's Boston is studded

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