Where Is the Political in Cacciato? Notes Toward Writing in the Political Arena

by
William D. Elliott

A political literary work has often been defined as "creative literature" which deals directly with significant aspects of political life. It also is limited to "creative literature" in which those political aspects are essential ingredients of the work. It asserts this "creative literature" must have not merely political background material or secondary concerns which are political; it must be its primary concern. Yet the best political literature is literary first; despite the best efforts of the world's writers, politics must and is only the backdrop for all that matters in literature. This paper will examine the evolution of political literature in England and America and point to one contemporary novel, *Going After Cacciato,* as it represents the direction of this literature. The paper will consider poetry and fiction as genres which best represent this literary type.

Dryden's political poetry, particularly the most popular, "Absalom and Achitophel," is occasional - the approaching trial of the first Earl of Shaftsbury on a charge of treason in November, 1681. But the larger issue is the art of satire - and as Samuel Johnson says in his *Lives of the Poets,* if a poem be considered as "political and controversial it will be found to comprise all the excellences of which the subject is susceptible - fine satire and invective, the art of ridicule, and the art of argumentative eloquence." Johnson goes on to say Dryden's poem fails in poetic structure. The art of political satire, if it ever could, would have reigned in 18th century England (Crane 465). Yet much of it, as Johnson continues, falls short. Granted, Johnson was never completely content with any literary work. Yet such satire as Dryden's personifying the Duke of Monmouth as Absalom and the First Earl of Shaftsbury as Achitophel shows the great strengths of such satire. Dryden's "A Poem on the Happy Restoration and Return of His Sacred Majesty Charles the Second" or "Astrea Redux," shows how celebration of a monarch's reign can match the writer's philosophy:

> "Oh Happy Age! Oh times like those alone,
> By Fate Reserv'd for Great August throne!
> When the joint growth of Arms and Arts foreshadow
> The World a Monarch, and that Monarch Yours" (Crane 52).

Politics, when it is primary to the work, sacrifices art for politics. Benjamin Disraeli's novels are summed up by Anthony Trollope, also a journeyman political novelist:

"A feeling of stage properties, a smell of hair-oil, an aspect of buhl, a remembrance of Tailors, and that pricking of the Conscience which must be the general accompaniment of paste diamonds" (Smith and Parks 605).

Disraeli, then, is seen as a social novelist of manners by Trollope, quite similiar in kind to the political novelist he became. Disraeli's Young England trilogy, *Conningsby, Sybil,* and *Tancred,* are novels that literally spring out of politics.

Conningsby, published when Disraeli was already a Tory power in Parliament, was a tract for the times and a political manifesto. The Young England trilogy chronicled the political adventures of four men from England's great aristocratic families. They expressed the Tory political reaction against the industrial revolution, utilitarianism and the ideas of the French Revolution; it was fundamentally an ideal conception of feudalism. Sidonia, the mentor to the Young England noblemen, is the advisor of kings and the maker of governments - in fact, the Prime Minister, Disraeli himself. As the ideal, Disraeli portrays the real, sordid, day-to-day intrigues of English Parlimentary politics. Rigby is the ultimate "yes" man as a cold-blooded underling of the political arena.

Disraeli describes him as:

". . .bold, acute. . .with no thought but a good deal of desultory information. . . blessed with a vigorous, mendacious fancy. . . .an audacious tongue, a ready and unscrupulous pen" (Smith and Parks 618).

Tadpole and Taper, Rigby's side-kicks, are political twins, crude "yes" men. Disraeli's ability to present backstage political scenes and witty political asides show his unique talents. We are told: "England is unrivalled for two things, sporting and politics."

His trilogy, as well, includes remarkably accurate pictures of politics at the time of the first reform bill *(Conningsby)* and the conditions of the working class during the industrial revolution *(Sybil).* Above all, Disraeli was a politician *par excellance* who could portray realities of his times in novel form (ironically, one of his political acts - making Queen Victoria Empress of India - inspired another trilogy - *The Jewel in the Crown*).

Anthony Trollope's political novels, unlike Disraeli's, concentrate on the social background of parliament. His novels, *Phineas Finn* and *The Prime Minister,* are indifferent to political theory. His study of the character of Mr. Kennedy, for example, in *Phineas Finn,* is more important to him than the political tribulations of Phineas himself. Ultimately, Trollope is seen as a political novelist to the same extent that he could be called a religious novelist in his best-known work - *Barchester Towers.* He is political only to the extent that his main characters are men and women actively engaged in politics. Trollope's own political leanings - as a Right Wing Liberal - reflect his feelings about novel writing. The novel, he felt, should be what the great majority of readers have always wanted it to be: "a picture of common life enlivened by humor and sweetened by pathos" (Smith and Parks 620).

H.G. Wells as a political novelist took one side-step further from politics than Trollope; instead of writing about its social background, he satirized it savagely and ideally. Never interested in day-to-day politics or politics as an end in itself, Wells hated its system and loathed its people. His *The New Machiavelli* is an idealistic conception. This political novel follows the pattern of the Victorial sociological novelist - a formlessness characterized by the use of plot and character as pegs to rest his political Utopia upon.

In America, *The Education of Henry Adams,* while not a political tract, defines the thinking of the time that influenced political and literary conceptions in three contexts: 1) man as a force measured by motion, from a fixed point; 2) two kinds of forces informing experience - an inner force which makes for unity and an outer force which makes for multiplicity; and 3) both forces traced to a common center, in opposition. His essays, including "Civil Service Reform" and "The Session," are closely reasoned arguments in the economics of literary politics. America, he says, confronted by the anarchy of the Reconstruction period, must direct itself to the centralization of authority, planned economic devlopment, and conservative fiscal policy. He suggests a political-literary pragmatism which centers upon the literature of political idea - away from the literature of art.

Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* continues America's political-literary arena from the promise of the "American Century" in 1900 to the "Crash" of 1929. His structural techniques - the "Newsreel" (a running account of actual events), the "Biographies" (a record of special personalities from Debs to Insull), the "Novels" (a record of the ordinary citizens), and the "Camera Eye" (the record of the novelist's shifting emotions of the passing national scene).

But America's best political literature rests with its founders - Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia* (1784), Hamilton's *Federalist Papers,* Adams' *Letters,* and Madison's *Letters.*

Notes on Virginia is a series of informal essays that range over disputed questions in philosophy, science, politics, and morals. He shows awareness, among other political isues, of the need for an informal, alert citizenry participating actively in government to combat entrenching evil men in public positions. Hamilton's *Federalist Papers* reveals his lack of confidence in the people, who he felt were by and large susceptible to the flatterers and manipulations of natural politicians. John Adams, by contrast, felt the main task of republican government to be the prevention of excessive power in the hands of any one group. He put his trust in first rate statesmanlike leaders who could possess wisdom to formulate just laws, and the discipline to abide by them. James Madison, further, felt that factions of special interest groups were a political fact, growing out of society's fundamental conflict between the wealthy and the poor. The advantage, then, of modern republicanism, over other governments, was to prevent factions from ruling the state, and from usurping the rights of the minorities. He wrote Jefferson:

"Where the real power in the government lies, there is the danger of oppression. In our Governments the real power lies in the majority of the community. The invasion of

private rights is chiefly to be apprehended from acts in which the Government is the mere instrument of the major number of its constituents" (Foerster 219).

Or in contemporary literature, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* reveals a literary political novel that focuses on character and theme and most especially point of view to fuse political history with art. Willie Stark's story is secondary to the first person narrator, Jack Burden, and the southern setting, Burden's Landing. We know Penn Warren first wrote a novel - a *novel* - and while political literature must have the political arena as its centerpoint, to be a novel it must have the ingredients of a work of art. If we went back further to Swift's *Guilliver's Travels*, we would discover Swift's political conceptualization of eighteenth-century English politics as important but secondary to his discovery of mankind's nature. Or if we whirl back to the twentieth century, even such a minor poem as Alan Ginsberg's *Howl* is clearly a political statement on America - its crushing military-industrial complex, the hippie-yippie alternative, and the generation leading toward anti-war demonstrations. A good example of political-military writing emerges, and is still emerging, about the Vietnam war. Tim O'Brien's National Book Award winning novel, *Going After Cacciato*, is both about and not about the political consequences of our involvement in Vietnam. First it is art - and by virtue of that label, employs South American-influenced "magic realism" to show that Cacciato's journey from Vietnam to Paris is a dream of the anguished Vietnam foot soldier on guard duty, trying to vaporize himself back home. By contrast, again, Michael Harrington's *Dispatches*, a nonfiction account, or even Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in the Combat Zone*, takes its base argument from the people involved in Vietnam, not the political issue itself. Its particular skill is the portrayal of human response, not political intrigue, even though, as nonfiction, it takes the job of Jefferson to "tell the truth," not the truth of fictions. It is a working out, as well, of Henry Adams' political constructs. Man in southeast Asia rests at a fixed point. Two varieties of forces are a part of his experience - the inner drive for escape and the outer force of the unmanageable, multiple war. Both forces result in a common center - confrontation and escape. By literary skill, it alerts man to combat the evils of a government involved in war by substituting the pitiful reality of warfare with a trip to Paris. It, as Hamilton suggests, artfully dodges those who feel the war as political necessity. It distributes power from leader to follower who in turn leads - Cacciato. And it asserts the rights of minorities - Madison's credo - in order to make the inhumane humane.

Political literature, then, is a mixture of writing in which political backgrounds, concerns, and themes are primary contexts of the work. The most skillful so-called "creative" political literature is best represented when it is forced to stress character and theme over a specifically political background. We have a contemporary novel - *Going After Cacciato* - as an example of how magical the literature of politics can and must be to represent a fusion of art and idea. And we have Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* as variations on that necessity. The others mentioned - Swift, Dryden, Trollope, Wells - and the theorists - America's founders - reveal the complex intermixture of art and idea that makes great political literature possible.

List of Works Cited

Crane, Ronald S. *A Collection of English Poems.* New York: Harper and Row, 1932.

Foerster, Norman, *American Poetry and Prose.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

Smith, James and Ed Winfield Parks. *The Great Critics.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1951.