

"McCarthy writes...with [a great] accumulation of detailed and persuasive evidence."

—DENIS MACK SMITH, *The New York Review of Books*

LANGUAGE POLITICS, AND WRITING

Stolentelling in Western Europe

PATRICK MCCARTHY

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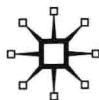


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PATRICK MCCARTHY

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LANGUAGE, POLITICS, AND WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of politics and writing has interested me for a long time: I wrote my first two books on French writers, and the aspects that I studied most were Céline's role in the Occupation and Camus's ties to Algeria. As I began lecturing more on politics and contemporary history, my old interest returned in a new form and I began thinking about the language of Italian and British politics.

It seems obvious to state that the bits and pieces of a period—the political trends, the leading works of literature and painting, and the manifestations of popular culture—all fit together. There is, of course, no reason why they should. Poetry is a specialized form of language that has its own rules and, increasingly, its own readers. People who read short stories and essays do not read modern poetry.¹ Language itself is the first and greatest problem: closely linked with culture, a word that requires precise definition, it underlies the other “bits and pieces.” There are various kinds of language, each competing with the others as well as overlapping with them.

The notion of period is also far from simple: can we say that our period began when the Beatles changed style and made the album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, or when the young Mohammed Ali, then called Cassius Marcellus Clay, took the world heavyweight championship from Sonny Liston with much “stolentelling” of rhymes and doggerel poetry? Anyway, periods, whether political or cultural, do not have nice tidy endings and beginnings: when did the “period of de Gaulle” or the “age of Sartre” start and finish? More important, why should a novel like *Wuthering Heights*, written on the remote Yorkshire moors, have anything in common with the parliamentary debates taking place in an 1840s London interested mostly in itself?

Then, too, if a period has an orthodoxy, it is very likely that it will spawn a group of heretics. Jean Paulhan defended non-political, avant-garde writing after the Second World War when left-wing commitment was the dominant view.

Answers to these questions and explanations of these contradictions exist, even if most of us no longer believe in one grand Hegelian answer.

History is the storm we blunder around in, incapable of turning our lives into destinies, as Sartre advised us to.

The questions that most interest me—the link between a novel and a political trend or between the language of literature and the language of politics—can be broken down into different relationships that dominate at certain times and for specific reasons. One category is committed writing, where politics reigns almost supreme and producers of literature are—for a while—content to let their work serve a political goal. Commitment usually takes place in times of political crises when the social group one favors is fighting to stay alive. The Depression of the 1930s was such a phenomenon. The unemployment in Northeast England helped produce the Jarrow marches on London as well as a change in the literary avant-garde: the politicized poets, Auden and Spender, replaced Bloomsbury.

Very different is the category that might be called *anti-politique*, where politics starts off as an impulse to reform but is unable to bring about change and leaves literature to depict society in all its varied antagonisms. The working-class is not marching confidently toward hegemony, but it occasionally shows that strain of anarchy that Ken Loach catches so well in his films, but that Tony Blair does not appear to relish.

The first chapter of this book provides an overview of language that has our own concrete, familiar experience as a starting-point and then gets into some not too arduous theory. All the problems discussed come back in later chapters, hopefully not to haunt us: graffiti, names and the unsaid are treated again later. Chapter two deals with commitment, more on the left but also on the right. Chapter three looks back to the France of the early 1900s and to the almost Edwardian England of Harold MacMillan in the 1950s. We rediscovered a working-class that denies Hegel, Gramsci and politics itself, but not class.

There are other kinds of language discussed in the book. In chapter seven the ostentatiously literary language of *Féerie pour une autre fois* almost severs the link with reality as it defends the artist Céline, denounced by Sartre as a “collabo.” By contrast chapter six depicts three discourses that seem unpolitical but that spin off a right-wing worldview.

Running through several chapters is the theme of feminism, which is in search of its own language that it will then impose on literature and politics alike. Boldly it carves out space for itself next to what is no longer a universal but a male discourse. Feminism is also lived as a painful absence in the period before the women’s movement breaks through in the 1960s. Orwell and Sartre are capable of creating strong female characters but not of maintaining and developing them throughout a work. For that we must await Crista Wolf in chapter twelve.

Certain works of literature may help create an identity, which is usually but not always national. Such was the case in Ireland, where Yeats’s in-

terpretation of the 1916 rebellion was at least as important as the rebellion itself. Drifting through some of the authors I discuss—James Joyce and Valéry Larbaud—is an elusive European identity that was too weak to challenge communist and fascist identities in the inter-war period and may today be too weak to overcome the national identities. This does not protect the Europeans or the European Union from the sin of arrogance. The EU's reaction to the Irish referendum of June 2001 was appalling in its dismissal of the Irish voter, who must simply be set aside while the EU moves on to Enlargement. Language frequently works against the European identity, which, conversely, attaches more importance to translation. In chapter nine I provide one early example from the 1920s. Political power plays a major role in shaping many kinds of language, but there is nothing necessary or inevitable about its uses, at least in Western Europe. The Soviet Communist Party wanted to block the publication in the West of Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr. Zhivago* and it appealed to the PCI to bring pressure on the publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. The PCI (Italian Communist Party) succeeded in delaying publication but Feltrinelli went ahead despite the party's opposition.

The economic study of a period should be accompanied by study of its culture. A history of painting may throw light on the education, the taste and the worldview of the dominant economic group. Caravaggio was not "merely" a great painter!

The aims of this book are firstly to show how our knowledge of the twentieth century may be enhanced by looking at political and literary history together. There is a narrative thread in the work that runs roughly from the Dreyfus case to the present, although it concentrates on the period from the Second World War to the Maastricht Treaty and the Gulf War. It is interrupted by flashbacks to the turn-of-the-century and to the Paris of the 1920s.

This is also a narrative that crosses national barriers. The comparative dimension involved fresh difficulties because traditions of political and literary language vary from country to country. The superiority that the Germans accorded to the French—Friedrich of Prussia invited Voltaire to his court and kept him there as long as he could—produced a reaction, of which the most famous example is the remark attributed to Heidegger—"Nur auf deutsch kann man denken" ("One can only think in German."). It also seems arbitrary to omit Spain and much more so Eastern Europe. How can one leave out the Polish writers who supported the Solidarity movement? The shameful answer is that I have limited myself to languages in which I can read texts in the original, and I know no Polish except the word for "beer." A slightly more respectable answer is that I agree with Tony Judt that Eastern and Western Europe are very different and the East (whose inhabitants hate the word) requires a book of its own.²

Most—but not all—translations are my own. Italy seems to me to give less space than it merits in books on modern Europe and here I have tried to redress the balance. As for the choice of authors, no attempt has been made to include all of the best. Salmon Rushdie has been omitted because to read him well seems to me to demand a knowledge of India, which I do not possess.

The second aim of the book—pursued in chapter four—is to see how language helps shape politics and how a politician, a party and a political system construct a language—or languages—of politics. The task of writers is to criticize that language, to show that there are many other kinds of discourse and to reveal what is special about the literary language.

There are various ways of analyzing political language, but the one that suits this book is storytelling or stolentelling. The politician and his/her party guide the voter/reader along a road where there are already signposts. Political language is concerned less with itself than with the outside world. It wishes to guide the listener from point A to point B and it tries not to let him stray to point C, which is the headquarters of another party. The existing signposts are the tradition of the party. Special words explain to the voter the party's ideology. But if these are too numerous the listener feels trapped and s/he may turn to another party. Good stories often foretell the future utopia that the party will construct. Great political language, such as Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere*, succeeds in injecting into its content a freedom that belongs usually to the literary language. An example of bad political writing, where there is too much ideology, is "My son the six-year-old trotsky-ite." This is absurd but the Stalinist listener knows that a trotsky-ite is not a follower of Trotsky or a believer in the primacy of world revolution over socialism in one state. To Stalinists, Trotskyism is a generalized form of evil. It is thus perfectly natural to talk about a six-year-old Trotsky-ite. Knowingly or not the speaker has absorbed Trotskyism.

The role of the writer is to act as the watchdog and guardian of the political language. He can do this not because s/he is a literary genius but because s/he knows language well. Leonardo Sciascia goes further when he claims that the literary language is truth and will allow him to lay bare the mysteries of the Moro kidnapping. But *L'affaire Moro* is not convincing.

Heinrich Böll does a better job, but the most arduous task is left to Seamus Heaney. In Northern Ireland political language has broken down into two solipsistic monologues, so Heaney tries, not to lay bare the truth of the "Irish Question," but more humbly to sketch out forms of dialogue (chapter five).

Chapter nine is our example of the rare European identity: it is an account of the marketing of *Ulysses*. Chapter ten is a continuation of the

politico-cultural history of the Left, taking up where the early chapters stopped and introducing the very good Italian novelist Nanni Balestrini.

Culture—hopefully defined more precisely—gets a long chapter of its own because it is probably the greatest problem that young Europeans will have to face. European culture is becoming one of many and has to confront “others.” In particular it must confront “the other,” namely, Islam. Europe’s record is not encouraging (nor is Islam’s), but we have the resources in our culture to create a dialogue rather than a war. Whatever President Bush may say, September 11 was not just an act of terrorism; it was the fruit of a breakdown of communications that has deep historical roots. Catching Osama Bin Laden may be an excellent undertaking, but the real goal is to learn to live with and talk to, not about, Islam.

Chapter twelve concentrates on the long march of women. They have still some way to travel but the impact they have already made is great. They have succeeded in penetrating much of this book, including chapter eight, which depicts the clash between a woman-novelist and a woman-politician famous for her direct language. In chapter twelve Crista Wolf shows the values of women rising phoenix-like from a moribund Marxism.

A short conclusion tries to pull these themes together. Scattered through the book are pessimistic comments on our society because I believe that Europe has paid a high price for monetary union. A class of “exclus” has been created, composed of immigrants, the young unemployed, women living on their own and other groups.

If I were asked to sum up the book’s theme in a sentence, I would refer to Primo Levi’s statement that a man who gives up trying to be understood by those around him is headed only for the gas chamber. (And what of Auschwitz? Is it not good that the last half-century has not produced another set of death camps in Western Europe? Yes of course, even if that is a low target to set oneself. Moreover the ex-Yugoslavia has witnessed forms of cruelty almost equal to the crimes of the Nazis.) When he arrives at the center of Auschwitz, beyond the “salvati” and among the “sommersi,” those who are certain to die, Levi finds a silence. Language too is being destroyed, which means that our task is to keep language alive, hence the subtitle of this book, which is taken from James Joyce.

He is playing with the world “storytelling” and he wishes to indicate not merely that Shaun the Post has been plagiarized by his twin, Shem the Penman, but that all language is spawned by other language and is thus second-hand or stolen. Shem is “the last world of stolentelling”³ so he is using language that has been used-stolen many times over. If this be a crime, then life itself is a crime. But these repeated words are our substitute for the authentic language of which Anna Livia Plurabelle’s monologue is a hint, but that we can never know.

Such at least is the starting-point of my interpretation of a book, *Finnegans Wake*, which I have never read from beginning to end but have "dipped into" many times. The notion of a language game is the closest I can come to stating my own opinion on these problems. But is it not conceited to fill valuable space talking about my own political or cultural stance? On the other hand it would be absurd for me to lay claim to a Flaubertian kind of objectivity and to hide, like God behind his creation. So let me try to explain where I stand as author.

Despite all my interest in commitment, I do not believe in history sufficiently to allow it the hegemonic role it plays in much post-Second World War writing. History is an object of study as well as something we live through but it is not a force of redemption. Anyway it is much easier for me to believe in original sin than in redemption whether via history in the shape of revolution or via divine grace. André Gide and the whole body of pre-1914 writing are closer to me than Sartre because they are less extreme and doctrinaire but more playful. Gide's *Paludes* is an example of what I mean.

Where does the author stand politically? I drifted in or near the Labour Party (how could I do anything else after growing up in Aberavon, South Wales?) but I went over to de Gaulle because it seemed to me that only he could end the Algerian War, in which French friends of mine were being killed. It took me rather longer to appreciate that young Algerians were being tortured and killed in far greater numbers. After de Gaulle left office I drifted back to the British Labour Party and the French Socialists. In Italy, however, I supported the Communist Party as long as it was led by Enrico Berlinguer. I did not expect great changes in my own life from my political stands, at most a tiny improvement in society.

But it would be foolish to admit solely to a pragmatism that makes little or no difference in my own existence. To return to Joyce it seems to me that *Finnegans Wake* is a work of great freedom that liberates the word from its role as sign. The reader is invited to join in this "stolentelling," which enables him too to liberate himself from the everyday speech that shapes his banal existence. One might draw a semi-serious parallel with the Thai language, where there are accents that are put "near" the letter that they modify. They have no precise place but can be put wherever the writer wishes. One cannot imagine the circumflex or the umlaut enjoying such freedom. But Joyce's pleasure is much greater. If he tried in this novel to continue the attempt at the "summa," which is present in *Ulysses*, his object here is to draw everyone into a huge game.

The reader plays with or against Joyce but always as an individual. I believe that, barring famines, nuclear wars or ecological disasters, the individual will remain at the center of our culture. Solidarity will continue to

be a "keeping-guard" word and a reaction to crises like September 11. The daily struggle against the mass media and governments that intervene too much or too little but always badly will be fought by the individual. S/he will need the qualities of courage, silence and irony. Like Leonardo Sciascia, s/he will have as watchword "I do not believe, therefore I am." The Europe in which she lives will be plagued by wars on its boundaries and by terrorism from within. The terrorists will come from the excluded, many of whom will be immigrants. Yet the world will be, if not good, then beautiful. There will be excellent writing, dancing and painting.

This brief—but perhaps excessively long—statement of the author's worldview will now give way to the worldviews of more interesting people. But first we must say a word about the necessary figure of the reader. The material discussed in this book is too important to be left to the jargon of political science or of literary criticism. The writing has been kept as simple as possible. Moreover no special knowledge is required of the reader. An interest in politics and writing will suffice.

As the book begins, a convention of writing intervenes and demands to take precedence. Fortunately it is a pleasant task: the acknowledgments.

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Patrick McCarthy
Bologna, October 15, 2001

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CHAPTER ONE



A WORD ABOUT WORDS

The words that concern us most are political and literary words. But, while one cannot conduct politics without language, not all language is, in our opinion, political. In Italy the post-1992 reformers—an almost extinct breed—have tried to reduce the space conquered by politics and to allot some of it to civil society. This is an appeal for other kinds of discourse: for a Sardinia that is indeed the home of Antonio Gramsci and Enrico Berlinguer but also of the nuraghi, of sheep-herding communities, of the novelist Salvatore Satta and of the singer, Maria Carta, all of whom may speak in the island's name and who are tainted but not taken over by politics.

As for the language of literature, it is marked by its freedom. Its aim is not to represent anything outside itself but rather to exhaust the possibilities of language. Supreme examples of the freedom of literature might be James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Féerie pour une autre fois*. Not only do they bring new words into English and French but they add fresh meanings, change the order of words and undermine the unity of the sentence—Céline uses three dots, which launch his narrative headlong forward without the relaxing pause of the full stop. Such writing seems light years distant from the language of politics. The latter makes up a story about the world and tries to convince people that it is true. If it succeeds, then a party or a regime may be formed around the worldview present in the story. Political language deals with what it is not, with what is in the world and outside of itself. It is a means to an end.

Precisely because of this contrast, however, the two seek each other out, each recognizing the power of the other. Political language perceives that the freedom of literary language gives it an ability to convince that the

politician must envy. Literary language sees how political language is at ease among people and things. On closer inspection the two share certain traits: both perceive the world as incomplete and people as subject to change. Both tell stories designed to change them. Political language is more jealous than literary language: it knows precisely where it wishes to lead people and it tries not to let them stray. One word leads to the next and key words contain a special meaning, which one might call ideology and which guide the reader to the next signpost. But political language cannot avoid being language and become information instead. In turn literary language cannot avoid telling us something about the world in which language exists. Pietro Ingrao, the communist leader, recounts that John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* did more to win him over to socialism than any political writing.¹

The language of literature may have monopolized, as Roland Barthes claims, the French language for nearly three hundred years.² But today it is a specialized form of writing, that presents itself as literature by a series of signs that begin on the cover and continue throughout the text, such as the use of the past historic tense in French novels. Clearly these signs place limits on its freedom. Literature may reflect the problems of society as a whole, but it has to defend its linguistic space against popular culture, against the flood of images from TV and cinema and against the e-instruments such as fax, internet, and so on.

These raise the problems of the too many words, of anonymous words and of other people's words, which may well, I shall claim in the conclusion, become the leading politico-linguistic battle of the new century if not of the new millennium. First, however, we must glance at a theme that is virtually inseparable from language, silence.

SILENCE AND PRIVACY

Silence can be a defiance as well as a defeat. It is a defeat when it is imposed, not chosen. Usually this involves refusing to allow a group of people to speak freely. The ultimate form of silence was the gas chambers at Auschwitz. But many dictators sought to maintain their power by robbing a people of its language. Mussolini banned the teaching of German in the province of Alto-Adige-Sud-Tirol, which Italy took from Austria in 1918. To confuse the German-speaking population's sense of place, he renamed the villages in Italian. The imposition of a new calendar, in which 1926 was Year Four of the Fascist Era, was designed to disrupt the population's sense of time. The German-speakers fought back by teaching German in the aptly named "Katakombenschulen." Their children resisted by siding

with Italy's enemies in their history classes. They were taught that the Ethiopian king, Menelik, won the battle of Adwa, because of treachery against a gallant Italy, but they applauded him as a superior warrior.³

In this way the Sud Tirolesi found words to resist the various forms of silence that Italian Fascism tried to impose on them. But silence becomes a weapon of resistance when a prisoner refuses to speak under torture. A model of silence as stubborn resistance was the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), Enrico Berlinguer. He was famous for the unflinching silence with which he opposed the bullying and insults of the Soviets.

The value of silence depends on the value of the words to which it is opposed. At the other extreme from Berlinguer's resistance is the traditional Mafia practice of "omertà." A rejection of justice and reason in favor of force, it holds that reality means the domination of the many by the few. Words are superfluous and even the powerful do not speak. Things live on as they have supposedly always done and the term "society" has no meaning.

By contrast, the Trappist monastery is a fortress of active, positive silence. The non-speech of the monks drives back the words of the world and creates space for the upsurge of prayer, which, in the eyes of a believer, is the most revolutionary of discourses. Here silence is allied with one form of language—the Word of God—against another. Cardinal Martini explains what kind of silence and what kind of words: "Every genuine communication is born of silence. In fact all human speech involves saying something to someone: something which must be born inside one. This presupposes a sense of one's own identity, a self-understanding, a gathering of one's own inner richness. Every true communication demands silence and reflection."⁴ Rilke understood this and stated at the outset of the *Sonette an Orpheus* that when Orpheus sang, every living thing was silent but in this silence "a new beginning was present."⁵

In general silence cannot be analyzed in its own right. A philosopher, attacking the complicity between his discipline and theology, argues that there is a contradiction between an all-knowing God and a caring, accessible God. An omniscient, omnipotent God who permits the evil of Auschwitz must be beyond human comprehension. The insights of mystics and of poets deal with human emotion and can offer no special dialogue with this God, who remains profoundly unhuman. Logically religion must view such a God in silence, while philosophy can have no reason for believing in His existence.⁶ This is a very different silence from Martini's and Rilke's and it inevitably evokes Wittgenstein's famous comment: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one be silent."

Literature, however, which is haunted by not-writing—by Mallarmé's tenaciously white sheet of paper—occasionally adopts another view of

silence, different from both religious forms and from the poet's insights. Silence becomes a source of words or else a reward for words written. To Louis-Ferdinand Céline the night was a great fountain of silence from which an army of sounds emerged, more authentic than the sounds of the day, which were now stilled, and almost always hostile to humans. They included the thunder of bombing as the Allied airforce arrives to destroy Montmartre in *Féerie pour une autre fois*. To travel through the sounds of the night, of which words are only one form, means listening to prisoners crying out in their cells or to soldiers, wounded and shell-shocked in the trenches. One's reward is silence: the "let's say no more about it," which terminates *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. The imperative verb follows the barman's appeal that Ferdinand should tell him everything. This is an ironic reference to the novel, which sets out to provide a "summa" of human misery. When it is written and read, then one may be silent. Such silence is liberation but Céline quickly becomes discontented and attempts fresh "summas" in *Mort à crédit* and *Féerie*. This kind of silence may be an image rather than a "real" absence of words. But then "omertà" is not just an absence of "real" words.

In Céline's novels words are only one form of communication. There are many others such as the "brrts" of the cat Bébert, the companion to the dancer, Lili, who communicates via the beauty of her movements.⁷ Some observers think that people cannot avoid communicating and that all things communicate. On the first assertion Primo Levi holds that loss of the ability or desire to communicate is the mark of a man who has given up and is resigned to the gas chamber. The second assertion implies a universe full of messages, which is a happy view. Yet the same observer maintains that a common culture (Kultur) is needed before the message can be understood and communication can take place.⁸ We shall return to the theme of culture in a later chapter as well as to the theme of the historical moment. In the present perspective political and literary language would be no more than two of the many forms of communication and gesture or body language would be just as important. An example of a "thing" wishing to communicate in several different ways would be the later works of Paul Klee.⁹

The nature of the communication would vary in accordance with the means deployed. Non-verbal methods are more likely to convey implicit knowledge than precise information. Ballet must surely be one of the most expressive forms of communication. The French critic Charles du Bos quotes from another admirer of dance, Paul Valéry, a phrase about dancers: "their hands speak and their feet seem to write." But Du Bos recounts that Isadora Duncan's movements were a "liberation without a monologue."¹⁰ Dance does not need words and, although it is usually ac-

accompanied by music, contemporary groups like Merce Cunningham's have experimented with not using music. Here silence is allied with a non-verbal form of communication.

In the context of the new technology silence is a form of resistance and it is linked with privacy. Both are threatened, privacy more gravely. Strict rules have been advocated by a magazine devoid of luddite sympathies: use cash where possible, keep your phone number unlisted, check your medical records regularly. The list goes on: assume your e-mail and voice-mail are monitored, remember that your every internet entry is recorded somewhere by somebody. When one comes to the suggestion that one should try to use a computer that belongs to a friend, one wonders what sort of world lies in wait for unwary contemporaries.¹¹ Even with such elaborate defenses, the *Economist* thinks the battle is lost. Privacy will have been a short-lived virtue, peaking among the rich classes of the pre-1914 era and centered in the London clubs. It cannot be maintained in an age of mass high technology. Yet one cannot quite agree that the outcome is so pre-determined.

SPOKEN, WRITTEN AND RECORDED WORDS

Political language hides a great historic divide, between the written and the spoken language. The literary language is almost always written although such writers as Céline and Pasolini talk much about introducing into it the slang of the socially excluded groups. The slang is changed when it is put between the covers of a book and it is no longer the same slang as when it is used by a tramp. This is also true of dialect. Pasolini's early poems are written in the Friulan dialect but he innovated within what he regarded as the organic boundaries of Friulan. His poetry is not the same language as was spoken in his home village of Casarsa.

A distinguished example of written political language is de Gaulle's three-volume *Mémoires de Guerre*. De Gaulle begins with an "I" but, as his historic mission to continue the struggle against Nazism unfolds, he emulates the Caesar of *De bello gallico* and invents a protagonist called de Gaulle. This hero engages in constant dialogue with "la France," which is a living entity, separate from "les Français" and incarnated in historical figures like Joan of Arc. The language of the *Mémoires* is old-fashioned and literary. Indeed without the conventions and structure of literature de Gaulle could not have told the tale of the Free French.¹² By contrast Gerhard Schröder's message to the SPD faithful was delivered as a speech at their assembly or "Parteitag" 1999. Schröder uses the spoken language to give structure to his report: as he spots a minister in the crowd, so he talks