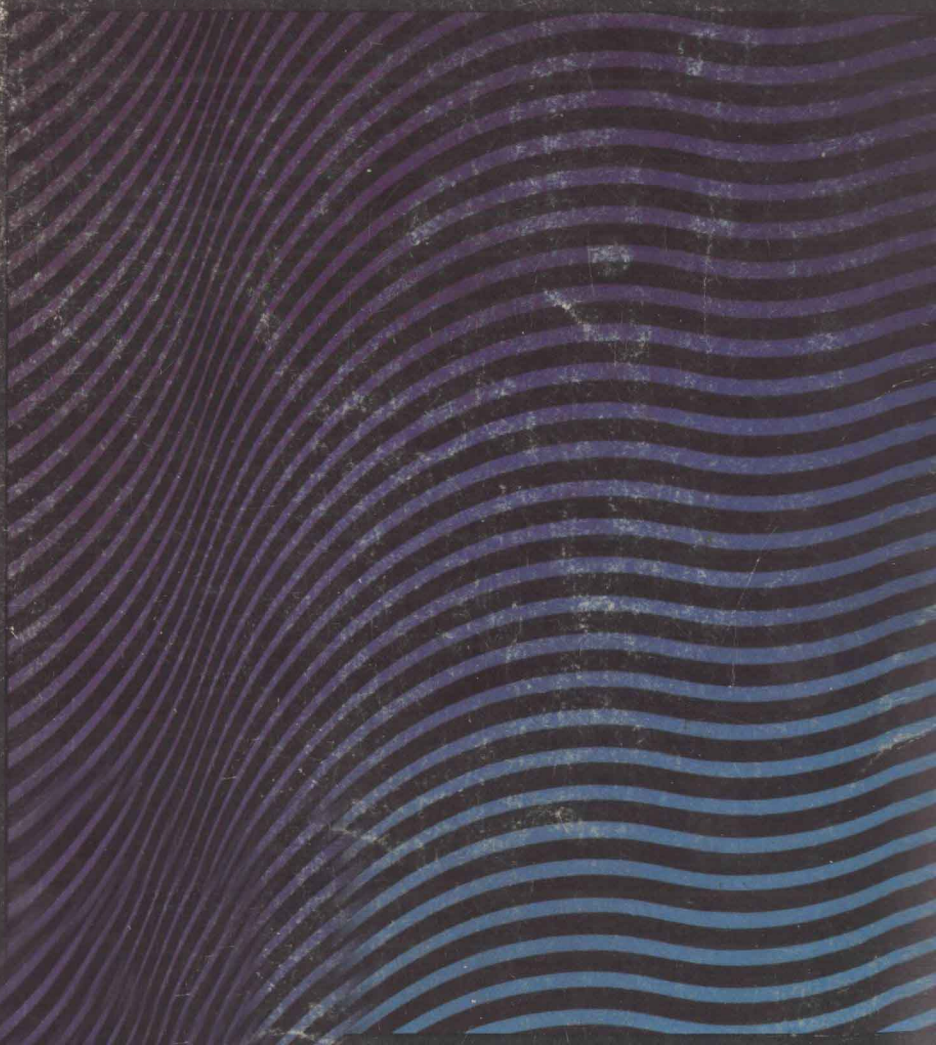


WRITERS & POLITICS IN MODERN BRITAIN

J.A. Morris



Writers and Politics in Modern Britain

(1880-1950)

J. A. Morris



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Foreword

The term 'political literature' like 'committed literature' with which it is frequently associated has become an accepted part of the language of literary history. Yet however convenient, it is, on examination, surprisingly imprecise and misleading. The whole area of the interaction between politics and literature is a vast and complex one which has yet, especially on a European scale, to be fully and comprehensively charted. Certainly invaluable contributions do already exist: Jean-Paul Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), George Woodcock's *The Writer and Politics* (1948), Jürgen Rühle's *Literatur und Revolution* (1960), Irving Howe's *Politics and the Novel* (1961), John Mander's *The Writer and Commitment* (1961) for example. There are, too, as the bibliographical information contained in the individual essays in this series will reveal, a number of equally important books which deal with the issue in purely national terms. With few exceptions, however, these, like many of the more general studies, suffer from the same defects resulting in the main from a failure to distinguish adequately between 'political literature' and what might be termed 'social literature', and from an incomplete assessment of changes both in political climates and in the writer's relationship to society as a whole. Yet, even when the area of investigation and terminology has been more carefully ascertained, we often find that these books are principally concerned either with an examination of the political ideas *per se* contained in various works of literature, or with an assessment of the ways in which parties and movements have controlled and used to best advantage writers and intellectuals who claim political allegiance. More recently Roland Barthes in *Le Degré Zéro de l'écriture* (1967), George Steiner in *Language and Silence* (1967) and David Caute in *Illusion* (1971) have suggested a wider perspective, outlining some of the problems of style and form which an imaginative writer has to face when he offers his pen to a political (or social) cause. On the whole, however, it is fair to say that the majority of critics have concentrated more on *what* ideas are expressed than on *how* they have been. In addition therefore to attempting to define the concept of political literature more precisely and to exploring such issues as the suitability of imaginative literature as a vehicle for political ideas or the effect such literature

FOREWORD

can have on the public for example, one of the principal concerns of these essays is to attempt to examine ways in which an author's political sympathy or affiliation can be seen to affect or even dictate the way in which he writes. In some countries—in Russia, France or Spain, for example—direct influence of this kind is more apparent than in others. Elsewhere, notably in Britain, where political directives concerning art and literature have not been the rule, the problem is in some ways more difficult to assess. Indeed national variation of this kind is one of the principal contributory factors to the complex nature of the whole question. Thus while the subject is best illustrated and examined in the literature of France and Germany during the interwar years, it is after the Second World War that it fully emerges in the works of Italian and Scandinavian writers. Furthermore literary experiment seen and approved in some countries as an expression of a progressive, even revolutionary, political position is considered in others to be characteristic of subversion and decadence.

Given such problems as these and given too the amount of space available, these seven small volumes can do little more than hope to encourage a new approach to political literature. While free to explore the subject in the way they believe to be most useful within the context of the literary history of their particular countries, contributors have been encouraged to balance general comment with examination of specific examples. Inevitably therefore the essays appear arbitrarily selective. But like the literature which they choose to examine it is hoped that they will be judged not only for what they contain but also for the ways in which they deal with it.

John Flower

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The following are a selection of those books which discuss some of the general problems associated with this subject. Suggestions for further reading are contained in the notes to individual essays.

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Introduction

Poetry was born from magic: it grew up with religion:
it lived through the age of reason: is it to die in the century of
propaganda?

C. Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry*

I. The Nature of Political Literature

Perhaps it would be a good idea to start with a fundamental question: are literature and politics incompatible? Do they make an oil-and-water mixture? When looked at more closely it soon appears that we are really asking whether literature may have the premise that it should deal with politics, make political points or even attempt to influence the political persuasions of the reader. As with religious literature or social literature, is there not a danger of the writing becoming didactic or propagandist? Was English poetry of the eighteenth century, for example, over-affected by the writers' concern with a neo-classical ideal which seemed to dictate the restrictions and controls found in verse-form, rhythm, imagery? But literature has to be about *something*—even if it is only about how to write literature. Surely very little has been written that is not about society, and if that is true, then such writing is inevitably close to politics. Indeed it could be argued that politics (or society, or economics, or whatever), by giving a writer a subject, also give him a purpose. That is to say that it avoids dangers inherent in the 'art for art's sake' kind of writing: the preciousness and self-indulgence which some critics have detected in literature at once aesthetic and esoteric. (The whole debate both stated and implied in Virginia Woolf's famous essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924) is relevant here.) Yet would it not be more sensible to suggest that these two views are not mutually exclusive? Didactic or satirical literature involving political discussion, even to the point of revealing or expounding commitment, need not necessarily exhibit a lesser kind of literary art, as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Absalom and Achitophel* or, to use a foreign example, *Fathers and Sons*

readily shows. On the other hand there is no reason to suppose that political literature is necessarily of greater purpose or less self-indulgence than any other kind of writing: Nazi Germany would be a landmark in any history of bad art, its 'literature' characterized by the rambling aimlessness and uncontrolled hysteria which Hitler patented in *Mein Kampf*.

Having said the above, we are no closer to being sure what we mean by 'political literature': a term of peculiar difficulty, as I shall be arguing, for the British people and the English language. For there are those who will claim that *all* literature is political, which, if true, would, apart from anything else, instantly invalidate any reason for writing this essay. If we start by assuming that literary writers who deal with politics, in the defined sense of 'affairs of state', are writers of 'political literature', we can also assume that their works will vary as to commitment and purpose just as they will also vary as to form and style. A greater difficulty could arise in telling where political literature ends and social literature begins. A comparison between two quite different works, a play by Galsworthy and a novel by Koestler, will illustrate what I mean:

HORNBLOWER. I must have those cottages for my workmen. I've got important works, ye know.

HILLCRIST. (*Getting heated*) The Jackmans have their importance too, sir. Their heart's in that cottage.

HORNBLOWER. Have a sense of proportion, man. My works supply thousands of people, and *my* heart's in *them*. What's more, they make my fortune. I've got ambitions—I'm a serious man. Suppose I were to consider this and that, and every little potty objection—where should I get to?—nowhere!

HILLCRIST. All the same, this sort of thing isn't done, you know.

HORNBLOWER. Not by you because ye've got no need to do it . . .

(*The Skin Game*, 1920)

Gletkin looked at Rubashov with his usual expressionless gaze, and asked him, in his usual expressionless voice:

'Were you given a watch as a boy?'

Rubashov looked at him in astonishment. The most conspicuous trait of the Neanderthal character was its absolute humourlessness or, more exactly, its lack of frivolity.

'Don't you want to answer my question?' asked Gletkin.

'Certainly,' said Rubashov, more and more astonished.

'How old were you when the watch was given you?'

'I don't quite know,' said Rubashov; 'eight or nine probably.'

'I,' said Gletkin in his usual correct voice, 'was sixteen years old when I learnt that the hour was divided into minutes. In my village, when the peasants had to travel to town, they would go to the waiting-room until the train came, which was usually about midday; sometimes it only came in the evening or next morning. These are the peasants who now work in our factories. For example, in my village is now the biggest steel-rail factory in the world. In the first year, the foremen would lie down to sleep between two emptyings of the blast furnace, until they were shot. In all other countries, the peasants had one or two hundred years to develop the habit of industrial precision and of the handling of machines. Here they only had ten years. If we didn't sack them and shoot them for every trifle, the whole country would come to a standstill, and the peasants would lie down to sleep in the factory yards until grass grew out of the chimneys and everything became as it was before.

(*Darkness at Noon*, 1940)¹

Both passages contain arguments for an expediency which is justified in terms of industrial and technological progress. Of course the social atmosphere of each differs greatly: in the first, an English gentleman is arguing with a *nouveau riche* industrialist who is planning to pull down a tied cottage which he had verbally agreed to leave standing. The whole question of English class prejudice lurks behind every word. In the second passage, Rubashov, an old Bolshevik, is being told why brutality is 'necessary' if the new Russia is to be realized. Yet it seems to me that what these passages share is more significant. For the justifications voiced by the new men, Hornblower and Gletkin, are the same justifications, albeit in a different environment (though Gletkin later refers to the Industrial Revolution in the North of England). In other words the crisis being dramatized or portrayed contains in each case the same forces, as well as its local elements. Yet one work is a socially realistic play and the other undoubtedly a political novel—also, incidentally, realistic.

Now certain facts emerge from this comparison. Clearly no special form is demanded to treat politics in distinction to society. Secondly, political literature and social literature can deal with the same subjects,

in the same way, only the direction of approach and the reason for the approach may differ. Thus *The Skin Game*, in portraying a society, might indicate why a certain kind of political activity has reason to occur, and *Darkness at Noon*, while showing political activists at work, creates a picture of a society which stands condemned or justified in terms which political theorists may or may not accept. A further problem arises when we think of a fable such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) or an allegorical novel like Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941). Both are political, or are generally regarded as political, since the authors were portraying indirectly the essence of political systems which they disliked. But how would a social fable or a social allegory differ from these? Each would seem to differ only in its applicability to political systems actual or imaginary. Indeed it is perfectly possible to think of a fable or an allegory which could be read as either political or social, or both, or neither. Aesop and La Fontaine wrote in this way, as did Swift in 'A Voyage to Lilliput'. The American publisher who rejected *Animal Farm* because there was no market for animal stories was not being entirely ludicrous: ambiguity in literature has its disadvantages.

Yet another difficulty in classing literature as political arises when a writer makes direct or overt political statements outside his literary publications and then produces poems or novels or plays which perhaps only in tone or implication reflect or suggest political affiliations. The writers whom John Harrison has called 'the reactionaries'² represent a good example of what I mean: Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Wyndham Lewis, D. H. Lawrence. For instance:

Let us have done with this foolish form of government, and this idea of democratic control. Let us submit to the knowledge that there are aristocrats and plebeians born, not made. Some amongst us are born fit to govern, and some are born only fit to be governed. Some are born to be artisans and labourers, some to be lords and governors.

Here D. H. Lawrence is writing a letter to Lady Cynthia Asquith, in August 1915, and some critics would certainly argue that the views expressed are not outside literature. Dickens and Pope have been much admired for their letters, partly because they aided an appreciation of their literary creations but mainly because they were often masterpieces in their own right. (Indeed Pope rewrote his for publication.) I imagine Lawrence did not have any thoughts that the letter quoted

above would be preserved for posterity—but there it is with many others of like sentiment collected in Aldous Huxley's edition. Now when we read a poem such as 'Mountain Lion' are we to detect overtones which can be described as political?

And I think in this empty world there was room for me and a
mountain lion,
And I think in the world beyond, how easily we might spare a
million or two of humans
And never miss them.
Yet what a gap in the world, the missing white frost face of that
slim yellow mountain lion!

Although the style may not differ notably from other animal poems by Lawrence, may it not be argued that the admiration of the lion (similar, of course, to the admiration in 'Snake' where the animal is called 'a King') has implications outside love of nature. The animal is idealized in contrast to a vision of mankind which for an elitist might be typified by the word '*canaille*'. Is there not a Nietzschean contempt of the masses here—that 'dread, almost a horror of democratic society, the mob', as Lawrence put it in his novel *Kangaroo* (1923)? Thus even an animal poem could be taken, and possibly already has been taken, as fuel by those who would argue that Lawrence had Fascist sympathies. And would such an argument make 'Mountain Lion' political literature? Indeed even *The Plumed Serpent* (1926), in which critics have found primitive religious organizations anticipatory of Nazi Germany, or *Kangaroo*, which contains for Harrison 'a consistent and powerful attack on democracy',³ might for other critics (F. R. Leavis for example) be almost totally apolitical novels which exhibit only the art of a great novelist.

T. S. Eliot is another writer who tended to express himself with direct reference to politics in essays, articles and in prose works like *After Strange Gods* (1934), where his pronouncements placed him very much on the political right: 'the struggle of our time [is] to renew our association with traditional wisdom; to re-establish a vital connection between the individual and the race; the struggle in a word against Liberalism'.⁴ For Eliot, of course, politics, if they are to mean anything, were inseparable from culture. Does, therefore, a poem such as 'A Cooking Egg' have political significance and, if so, is it a political poem in any meaningful sense?

But where is the penny world I bought
 To eat with Pipit behind the screen?
 The red-eyed scavengers are creeping
 From Kentish Town and Golder's Green;
 Where are the eagles and the trumpets?
 Buried beneath some snow-deep Alps.
 Over buttered scones and crumpets
 Weeping, weeping multitudes
 Droop in a hundred A.B.C.'s.

You could argue that these lines lament the passing of lost classical grandeur now superseded by an unspeakable liberal-democratic mediocrity. You could also argue that these lines provide a wittily ironical conclusion to a poem about the naïve illusions of youth and that what the poem as a whole most clearly illustrates is a clever epigrammatic juxtapositioning of ideas and images, taken from history and the arts, which the poet has brilliantly yoked together in a 'meta-physical' fashion. Much depends on what you are looking for. In fact, it could be argued that a writer's political views can be detected just by examining the style of his work—in the way that, more obviously, his psychology would show itself. George Orwell said, in his essay on Yeats, 'One knows . . . that a Socialist would not write like Chesterton or a Tory imperialist like Bernard Shaw, though *how* one knows it is not easy to say.' And he claimed that Yeats's political beliefs were reflected in his verse by the 'wayward, even tortured style of writing'.⁵

A way out of the problem of what constitutes political literature, and how to deal with it when you feel you have found it, is perhaps suggested by Harrison:

The question whether or not Yeats, Eliot and Lawrence, for example, were fascists seems to me unimportant. People who write letters to the *Times Literary Supplement* saying that Eliot said such and such a thing, *therefore* he is a bad man, are wasting their time. What is important is to find out why they held such views. This leads one to examine not only their social and political principles but their artistic principles. In the very close connection between those two sets of principles, and their very deep concern for the arts, lies the answer to this question.⁶

It is in ascertaining the connection, between apparently held political views and the ways they are expressed in literature, that we can find a

way forward. Thus T. S. Eliot's apparent antisemitism can be shown to be no more (nor less) indicative of a political or social attitude than it is of an artistic one: that the references to 'Jews' were not unfortunate lapses inseparable from his verse but, on the contrary, intimately bound up at the time with his creative process—as an analysis of his use of animal imagery can readily show.⁷

In fact any consideration of the shaping effect on literature of political attitudes in the 1920s and 1930s should stress not so much that Auden, Spender and Day Lewis revealed near-Communist sympathies in their verse (while Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Pound and Wyndham Lewis revealed strongly right-wing sympathies) but that, whatever their politics, writers solved similar technical and stylistic problems in similar ways. Because these writers had inevitably to try to communicate their reactions to unprecedented realities and problems of twentieth-century mass society they, equally inevitably, felt the need to involve themselves to suffer, to appreciate, the same social and thus political questions of the time, however much their political sympathies might vary. It therefore follows that the difficulty of distinguishing between 'political literature' and that which is not really political is, if you will excuse the colour, a red herring—at least in the period between the Wars. If we follow the development of literary forms from about 1910 we find a growing involvement in political ideas which by about 1935 had become almost universal, for, by then, the expression of political views, tacitly or implicitly, had become itself stylistic rather than ideological. What I am saying here may be illustrated by reference to the interesting discussion between C. Day Lewis and L. A. G. Strong which introduced *Modern Verse 1920-1940: A New Anthology*:

STRONG. . . . why do you think that the poets of today are likely to offer special difficulty to their contemporaries?

DAY LEWIS. It's a question of subject matter, and of tradition. Many of us believe that there is nothing in the world which is not potential subject matter for poetry. The world we live in has increased in complexity more rapidly than the world at any other time of history. As a result, both the sense data which are presented to us, and the scientific or philosophical theories which have been evolved to explain modern developments, have reached a bewildering profusion and variety.

Consider, for example, the rapid changes that have taken place during the last hundred years in what the eye sees. A landscape

which for centuries had been developing and changing gradually, almost imperceptibly, the contours of a countryside, the architecture of a village, showing so little alteration for centuries—have suddenly been changed out of all recognition. The village has become a town. Or there is a railway line or a line of pylons running through the field, there are aeroplanes flying overhead, there is a public telephone booth beside the village green. All this happened in what, compared with the rate of progress of previous centuries, is the twinkling of an eye. All this the poet must try to absorb into his work, if—as often happens—it appeals passionately to his imagination.⁸

Day Lewis is close to saying that in 1945 current events *should* be the stuff of poetry. In this situation how could politics escape the attention of the poet's eye, not as a separate specialized interest but as part of the total, fascinatingly changing phenomenon? And could not politics be seen as the most fascinating part since they tended, or were intended, to direct the change? By stating that the unprecedented contemporary scene had a profoundly influential effect upon the nature of poetry, Day Lewis is putting social and political phenomena in terms of literary form, style, technique, etc. Moreover, in the twentieth century the phenomena, which the creative artist has always used both as the material and the shaping power of his art form, were uniquely analysable—especially since *nothing* was sacred or prosaic. The following from the same 'interview' shows how, for a poet like Day Lewis, politics and poetics seemed scarcely separable, and the spectrum of revolution touch both:

DAY LEWIS. . . . I still think Eliot's influence on younger poets was a revolutionary one; it was through him chiefly that the technique of the French Symbolist poets was communicated to them.

STRONG. Certainly his influence was revolutionary—for he showed beyond all doubt that the tradition had collapsed, and they must break new ground for themselves.

DAY LEWIS. 'Break new ground'—is there any way in which the younger poets seem to you markedly different from the generation that preceded them, apart from the innovations in technique?

STRONG. Speaking broadly, they are much more politically minded: more specifically concerned with social problems. A greater proportion of their poems are addressed to some specific purpose. There is more of what their detractors would call propaganda.

DAY LEWIS. Any poetry which implies a passionate faith in anything *can* be called propaganda . . . (pp. xx-xxi)

We can see how in this discussion politics, as one of the primary ingredients that flavour modern verse, are felt to be possibly unacceptable to some readers, like added yeast that is liable to 'act wild' and give the brew dangerous qualities. Both Strong and Day Lewis are on their guard—the latter disliking the term 'propaganda', the former blaming its use on to others. Day Lewis sees politics as having a beneficial effect on literature, since it produces a variety of styles:

DAY LEWIS. . . . The satire [of modern political verse] had an anarchist irresponsible quality—(hence the attraction of surrealism carrying the modified anarchism of the earlier Auden-MacNeice work to its technical extreme). Where the poet had passed through this stage of dissatisfaction towards a positive political faith, we got a certain amount of 'prophetic' verse, prophetic in the sense that Isaiah's 'Mountain of God' is prophetic—poems which, often very naïvely, but always sincerely, look towards a promised land and which partly aim, by creating an imaginative picture of a better world, to inspire men to work for that world (e.g. Stephen Spender's poem, 'After they Have Tired of the Brilliance of Cities') (p. xxi).

And Day Lewis adds that, although some political verse was intended to be ephemeral and some political poets were 'admittedly propagandist', nevertheless 'any subject which appeals passionately to the poet's imagination is capable of producing a universal and permanent poem'.

We are not, therefore, to think of political literature as necessarily lesser or even necessarily different: it is a stage through which a group or groups of writers happened to pass—a period of literature rather as one would associate, say, the 'metaphysical' poets with a particular era. The special concerns and interests of the writers might introduce elements from outside the usual province of literary art—scientific terms, for instance—but this activity would be simultaneously a symptom and an ingredient.

Such, it appears, are the points being made in this discussion. By the time it was published in 1945 political poetry of either the committed or anarchist kind was becoming or had become, for the time being at least, a thing of the past. Yet although Dylan Thomas's personal, apolitical verse was by then characteristic of the way poetry