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The American Political Novel



Gordon Milne

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THE AMERICAN POLITICAL NOVEL

By Gordon Milne

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS
NORMAN

BY GORDON MILNE

George William Curtis and the Genteel Tradition
(Bloomington, Indiana, 1956)
The American Political Novel
(Norman, 1966)

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BOOK NUMBERS:

0-8061-0691-3 (cloth); 0-8061-1050-3 (paper)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 66-13417

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Publishing Division of the University. Composed and
printed at Norman, Oklahoma, U.S.A., by the Uni-
versity of Oklahoma Press. First edition, 1966; second
printing, 1972.



*This book is affectionately dedicated
to the Arneson family*



Preface

ATTRACTED to the subject of politics in literature by my reading of some Gilded Age anticorruption novels, most notably George William Curtis's *Trumps* and John De Forest's *Honest John Vane* and *Playing the Mischief*, I quickly came to agree with the astute Stendhalian comment that "politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar, and yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one's attention." Quite willing to grant my attention, I went on to delve more deeply into the topic, becoming intrigued by the diverse political points of view of the writers of this type of fiction, astonished by their emotion-laden tones, and interested in their bringing into focus such political types as the "boss."

Questions began to arise in my mind. Did the novelists achieve their almost universally shared objective of reform? Did they avoid the exaggeration and distortion that so often mar the purpose novel? What form did they choose, satire, allegory, romance, the *roman à clef*? Were they successful in relieving the common American image of politics as sordid and venal? Did they make rational assessments of political movements like Populism or socialism?

As I decided to write an account of the American politi-

cal novel, still other questions came to the fore. To what degree could a political study offer comment on the larger problems of mankind? Did political fiction give further evidence of the disappearance of the American dream? Could the career of a politician shed light on the psychology of power?

To some of the questions, at least, the answers came—and they seemed worth sharing with others. Knowing that politics has always aroused the American people (indeed, in these days of mass communication media, it seems to absorb them more than ever), I assumed that my answers—even the unanswered questions—might persuade a number of individuals not to “refuse attention.” I therefore proceeded with the book, hoping to draw to the subject not just the political scientist, the historian, and the student of literature, but the general reader as well.

Critics have examined the form before, of course, Morris Speare having written the pioneer work, *The Political Novel, Its Development in England and America*, in 1924. However, Speare’s book lays much more stress on the development of the English version than on that of the American, simply nodding in the direction of writers such as Henry Adams and Winston Churchill, and leaving much room for expansion. His successors have been few, and they, too, have left gaps. Joseph Blotner’s essay *The Political Novel*, though very stimulating, functions primarily, as the author himself says, as a teaching aid for the political science instructor. Irving Howe’s *Politics and the Novel* is a most intelligent book, as one might expect, but highly selective and thus not a “study” of the genre. Certain unpublished doctoral dissertations have

Preface

dealt with the topic—Jean Johnson's *The American Political Novel in the Nineteenth Century* the most satisfactorily—but have not attempted to be inclusive, nor especially critical.

Thus, the way appears open for another examination of the type. I have tried to lend thoroughness to mine by establishing a sufficiently comprehensive chronological pattern, but I have also tried to pursue a constantly analytical course. If my treatment has proved successful, it should adequately suggest the nature and the merits of this lively fictional form and should also serve as another indication of the inevitable link between literature and "society," in this case, the "body politic."

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Contents

	Preface	vii
i	Introduction	3
ii	The Attack Is Mounted (1774-1865)	9
iii	The Spirit of Protest (1865-1900)	24
iv	<i>Expertise</i> : Twain, De Forest, and Adams	40
v	The Heyday (1900-1920)	65
vi	In the Vanguard: Churchill and Phillips	87
vii	The Campaign Continued (1920-1964)	104
viii	The Doctrinal Barrage (1920-1964)	127
ix	Professionals: Warren, O'Connor, and Drury	153
x	Conclusion	180
	Bibliography	186
	Index	201

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

WHEN one focuses his attention on that intriguing but rather rarely discussed topic the American political novel, one quickly discovers that the old axiom "nothing new under the sun" applies. The form has a history, and indeed quite a long one. It was not new when Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* recently caught the public fancy; it was not new in the 1900's when muckraking was in style, nor even in the post-Civil War "exposure" era.

The genre seems to go back to the early nineteenth century, when the political allegories and political satires of these and of preceding years began turning into a form truly resembling the novel. At almost the same moment the type caught on in England, and it spread to the Continent as well.¹ In this country it could not be called a thriving genre until the 1870's, but thereafter an increasing number of such pieces of fiction appeared, culminating in the 1900-10 "progressive period" boom, when countless novels came tumbling forth.² Its popularity, world-wide, has continued in the

¹ One thinks of Disraeli, Trollope, Eliot, Meredith, Conrad, Dostoevski, and Stendhal. Irving Howe calls Dostoevski's *The Possessed* the greatest of all political novels. See Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, 22.

² Forty-seven novels in that decade alone, according to William B. Dickens. See William B. Dickens, "A Guide to the American Political Novel, 1865-1910," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1953, i.

twentieth century, the work of Silone, Koestler, Malraux, Orwell, and of, for the most part, "lesser" Americans having attracted many readers in these more recent times.

The genre has been variously defined. Morris Speare, the first to offer a substantial discussion of the subject, calls it:

. . . a work of prose fiction which leans rather to 'ideas' than to 'emotions'; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. In this exposition the drawing-room is frequently used as a medium for presenting the inside life of politics.³

H. A. L. Fisher confines himself to saying that the political novel concerns itself with men and women engaged in contemporary political life and discussing contemporary political ideas,⁴ and William B. Dickens accepts this definition, with the elimination of the word "contemporary."⁵ Joseph Blotner designates the type as "a book which directly describes, interprets or analyzes political phenomena,"⁶ whereas Irving Howe declares it to be one in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting.⁷ Mrs. Jean O. Johnson seems to prefer

³ Morris E. Speare, *The Political Novel, Its Development in England and America*, ix.

⁴ H. A. L. Fisher, "The Political Novel," *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s., vol. 64 (January, 1928), 27.

⁵ Dickens, *op. cit.*, 3.

⁶ Joseph L. Blotner, *The Political Novel*, 2.

⁷ Howe, *op. cit.*, 17.

Introduction

another description by Howe: the political novelist's subject "is the relation between politics and literature, and . . . the term 'political novel' is used . . . as a convenient shorthand to suggest the kind of novel in which this relation is interesting enough to warrant investigation."⁸

According to these interpretations, the essentials of political fiction would seem to be the presence of political ideas and of the political milieu. One might include in the genre, let us say, novels illustrating a conflict between two ideologies such as Communism and democracy, or novels examining the connection between the political figure and the body politic, indicating the degree to which he is independent of and yet a part of this body. One may also demonstrably include fiction with the political scene as background and books which offer accounts of politicians and political careers.

The problem of definition is somewhat compounded by the close relationship among political, economic, and social novels, and between the political novel and such a specialized form as "utopian" fiction. Mrs. Johnson's warning—"Efforts to create rigid classifications to distinguish the political novel from the economic, the social, the proletarian, and other related types are likely not only to be unsuccessful but to detract from an understanding of the development of the novel rather than to add to it"⁹—is sensible, and I have chosen to follow her pattern of avoiding very inflexible stratification. Therefore, my discussion would not necessarily eschew a primarily economic work like *The Jungle* or a pri-

⁸ *Ibid.* Quoted in Jean O. Johnson, "The American Political Novel in the Nineteenth Century," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1958, p. 1.

⁹ Johnson, *op. cit.*, 4.

marily utopian piece like *Looking Backward*; at the same time it generally steers clear of the economic, social protest, proletarian, and utopian areas, areas which have already received the careful attention of such scholars as Walter Taylor, Vernon Parrington, Jr., and Walter Rideout.

In the course of our study we shall make suggestions as to the impact of the political novel upon society (though this intricate question is not easily resolved), and as to the purely "literary" worth of this type of fiction. Since "exposure literature" obviously tends toward the didactic and polemical, it runs the severe risk of being inartistic. Many political novels *are* inartistic, structurally discursive, rhetorical in tone, too manipulative of plot and character to fit the thesis, and stylistically pedestrian ("long passages of didactic exposition often alternate with sticky sentiment").¹⁰ But the best fiction of this type does possess aesthetic worth. It offers a significant theme and one which is worked out to a denouement resulting from a logical development of characters and plot, it presents lifelike and in some cases memorable characters, and it is couched in a competent style.

Whether aesthetically pleasing or not, political novels usually make fascinating reading—probably for the simple reason that "politics rakes our passions as nothing else."¹¹ Although most Americans no longer hang around the cracker barrel in the village store, they go on discussing political issues and political candidates with considerable avidity. They talk, they watch the national conventions on TV, and they read; witness the tremendous success of *Advise and Consent*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹¹ Howe, *op. cit.*, 24.

Introduction

Just as a political discussion is apt to be heated, so is a political novel. The best ones, well, even the worst, generate considerable passion, bringing their ideas to life, stirring the reader's emotions,¹² and provoking controversy. If, for example, one reads Ruth Chatterton's attack on McCarthyism (*The Betrayers*, 1953), he feels the flames of passion rising within him over the issue, an issue supposedly quite moribund at the present time. Or, if one reads Edwin O'Connor's essentially sympathetic portrayal of the boss system (*The Last Hurrah*, 1956), he finds himself endorsing it heartily or else disapproving enthusiastically. In either case, he gets excited!

Our account of the American political novel tradition will follow a chronological pattern, with the historical background of the successive periods sketched in lightly, as the pattern unfolds.¹³ Instead of attempting to deal with each or even most of the vast horde of political novels which have been produced, we shall discuss generally the ingredients of this fiction, the targets attacked, the stand of the author, the strengths and weaknesses of the form, and thus its essential value. A handful of the better novels will be singled out for

¹² I cannot agree with Morris Speare's statement, quoted on page 2, that political fiction leans rather to ideas than to emotions. In the political novel they tend to be inseparable. As Louis Rubin reminds us, if the political scientist abstracts, the political novelist concretizes, that is, dramatizes the ideas as he puts them in terms of personal experience. See Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "Politics and the Novel," address before the American Political Science Association, September 8, 1961.

¹³ The historical framework must, to some degree, be supplied since the majority of political novels, based as they are on current affairs, demand some knowledge of the history of their time. As neither an historian nor a political scientist, I do not pretend to extensive knowledge of this framework but trust that the background material supplied is accurate in outline.

special attention, with the conviction planted in the reader's mind, we trust, that these, at least, deserve a permanent place in American literature. The *good* "opinion novels" contain drama as well as propaganda, and their treatise is subtly presented. Even if the reader refuses to accept the thesis, he feels his own commitments complicated and is altered and even "enriched" by the work—perhaps to the point of moving into the political arena himself. The political novelist would like that.



CHAPTER II

The Attack Is Mounted (1774-1865)

JUST as political concerns occupied many Americans in the era from the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, so political affairs engaged the attention of American writers in that period. Some of the first attempts at fiction glanced at man as a political animal, and their successors (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) reflected the political debates of the times. A surprising number of novelists were bent on approaching "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet."¹

In making this approach, writers invariably chose to present the political scene of their own era, thus discussing first the problems of governmental organization which beset the founding fathers, then such early nineteenth century issues as the juridical system, the national bank, Indian affairs, and the African slave trade. Their treatment of these questions was, from the beginning, perfectly forthright, and as a consequence the literature-politics crossroads were truly to seem at times "dark and bloody."

Even in the earliest days of its existence our new democracy did not escape unscathed, the question of States' rights coming immediately into the picture, and controversy springing up directly about such combustible matters as the whisky

¹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, 11.