

**POLITICS AND LITERATURE
IN MODERN BRITAIN**

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GEORGE WATSON

M

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FOR
PETER WILES
AND FRIENDS
IN THE CENTENNIAL YEAR
1977

Acknowledgements

A surprising number of editors and academic hosts encouraged me to deliver or publish these essays in more primitive and unreflected forms; and a good many outspoken friends, among others, have since helped me to embellish them. My gratitude to them all is wide and deep. 'The New Left' was delivered as the St John's College, Cambridge lecture at the University of Hull in March 1975; and 'Race and the Socialists' as the Elliott Dodds lecture at the University of Leeds in November 1975. Both have since appeared in *Encounter*, that mouthpiece of passionate moderation, as well as 'Did Stalin Dupe the Intellectuals?' and 'The Politics of D. H. Lawrence'. 'George Orwell' first saw the light of print in the *Journal of European Studies*, 'The Literature of Fascism' in the *Lugano Review*, 'The Myth of Catastrophe' in the *Yale Review*, and 'The Social Criticism of Matthew Arnold' in the *Review of English Literature*; but all are altered here, and many enlarged. Others are new.

My thanks are due to the Leverhulme Trust for help in working on the Acton manuscripts, and to the Rockefeller Foundation for time to write and rewrite in the Villa Serbelloni; to the Librarian of the House of Commons for sympathetic guidance; to the historical seminar on the Victorians and their successors conducted over the years by Dr Henry Pelling and the late George Kitson Clark at Cambridge, where my Arnold paper and 'Left and Right' were first exposed to the light and air of professional criticism; and to members of the Unservile State Group, to whom this book is irresistibly dedicated, for the stimulus of their advice over a quarter-century.

St John's College, Cambridge

G. W.

Introduction

These essays are arranged in chronological order from present to past, from the mid-twentieth century back into the mid-Victorian period, or from the more familiar towards the less. That is perhaps the best order in which to read them. On the other hand, they stand independently of each other. They are about political literature in Britain in the last hundred years, and the political views and influence of men of letters. Designed from the start as a book, they are unlikely to suffer from disunity of purpose, and I am concerned here to uphold the independence of each part; not to enforce a merger but to encourage each essay to stand on its feet and speak for itself.

The book represents a sequel to *The English Ideology* (1973), a study of Victorian political language. But the compass of the present book, which is similar in its assumptions, is much wider: political literature since the 1860s, when the Second Reform Act of 1867 and the first Liberal government in Britain, formed by Gladstone in the following year, plainly heralded a new era. Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) was to follow a year later: an anti-Gladstonian tract by an established poet and critic of the age; and Lord Acton began his 'History of Liberty' soon after as a Gladstonian manifesto. Since the 1860s Britain has richly experienced all the rewards and trials of an industrial-democratic state: trials and rewards by now familiar enough elsewhere, but played out in Britain in the remarkable context of an advanced literary culture.

Intellectual history is a risk-laden enterprise, especially since it often straddles more academic interests than one. I write here as a literary historian intruding on the open preserves of political and social history; but some early warnings may lessen the risks and set these essays in a clearer perspective. I offer the following obser-

vations to explain and justify my own interpretations of political thought. If they could be seen as axioms, so much the better; an ideal reader would probably see them as truisms, and wonder why they should need to be set out at all.

1. In the progress of political ideas, originality happens. The historian seeks out sources where they exist; but an analogue is not a source, however revealing, and I have tried to keep a mind hospitable to the notion that a poet, novelist or polemicist may have conceived of a political idea for himself.

2. Literature makes assertions – whether as poems, plays or novels, essays or treatises, – and about politics, among other things. And it matters what it asserts and whether it is true or false. That is not to imply that works of literature are good to the extent that they are true, or bad to the extent that they are false, and the one view does not entail the other. But it is one of the least impressive pea-and-thimble tricks of formalist critics to pretend that literature is always a way of seeing, never a thing seen; or that a poet or novelist always speaks in the voice of a dramatic narrator, never his own; or, for that matter, that the voice of a dramatic character in a play or novel cannot also be the author's own. Literature often has persuasive intent and persuasive force. It can even be propaganda. To deny that is to deny much in the ordinary experience of reading and writing, and to exchange some of the life-and-death anxieties of the human mind for a fribble.

3. Considered as a descriptive instrument, all language is in a state of dilapidation. T. S. Eliot once called it 'shabby equipment always deteriorating'. That is because it is inherited from situations unlike the present. Since political realities shift faster than most, this dilapidation is exceptionally damaging in the sphere of political description. Would any twentieth-century European, if he had not inherited from the nineteenth such terms as Left and Right, or working class and middle class, imagine for a moment that such terms describe the political and social realities in which he lives? 'The Isms are all Wasms', somebody wittily remarked at the Foreign Office in August 1939, when a pact of friendship was announced between Hitler and Stalin. But then, Isms usually are Wasms: it is just that it takes a jolt of history to make men see it. The socialist countries today operate a state capitalism more total than the Pharaohs, and far more total than Elizabeth I's state monopolies; and yet millions who do not have to live in them think them left-wing.

The alternative of devising a new political language, for all that, remains awesome. For one thing, it would mean looking harder – and much harder than the most alert among us are accustomed to – at the political realities that surround us. For another, it would mean enduring, and probably for no short period, the incomprehension of others. It is entirely understandable for both these reasons that much political language remains clumsily and misleadingly conservative, and at least as much so in the mouths of radicals as of conservatives. But political terms fortunately die, if all too slowly; and perhaps the sensible limits of intelligent ambition here would be to encourage them to die a little faster. We might choose to talk of rank rather than of class, for instance, since rank is a descriptively subtler tool for depicting social differences; and now that the political choices of Europe are more clearly about liberty than at any time since the French revolutionary wars, we might resolve to speak less often of Left and Right, and more of liberal and illiberal.

4. Language, for better or worse, can make reality; and what men believe can become true for no better reason than that they think in such terms as they do. No one, it has been said, would ever fall in love if the phrase did not exist. Dilapidated as our political language is, there is a continuous threat that reality might come to reflect it all too accurately by dint of imitating it. Political language keeps its terrible power for as long as it is thought to perform accurately as a descriptive instrument; and one can help it to die only by exposing its inaccuracies. But that contest, in the end, has something of the simplicity of a race between two teams: if its inaccuracy is not soon exposed, it can all too easily cease to be that and turn true. In the present century of mankind, and for the first time in human history, utopia can happen, and the books men wrote in the Reading-Room of the British Museum or in a Bavarian prison may become real. If all that is to be frustrated, it can only be by the unremitting arguments of clear-headed and fervent minds. 不行的

5. Old men forget, and so do the middle-aged. What is worse, they sometimes remember creatively, attributing to their youth views they later wished they had held when young. For that reason, only documentary evidence dating from youth itself is clear evidence of the convictions of youth. An author is often a poor and unreliable witness to his own early opinions.

6. Eye-witnesses too can give uncertain evidence. Proust's character Madame de Villeparisis, when famous writers were men-

tioned in company, was fond of saying: 'I know I can speak about that, because they used to visit my father; and as Mr Sainte-Beuve used to say (and he was very intelligent), one must believe those who have seen things at close hand. . . .' The best use for the eye-witness is to create in one's mind a sense of period. But the witness can easily suffer from the over-confidence of the man who was there; and he is often convinced, and rightly, that his own interpretations or misinterpretations will be held to count for more than those of the patient historian who has raked the periodicals and hunted out the manuscripts. Every historian of the contemporary and near-contemporary must be haunted by the thought of a Madame de Villeparisis.

7. Intellectual history is about what men have *said*, in speech or in writing. The verbs 'to think' and 'to believe' are too convenient to be avoided here, but they are not in this context to be regarded literally: what men have silently thought or believed is not the object of the enquiry. This is a history of public events, in the sense that speaking and writing are public. That is why the defence of insincerity, even when true, is beside the point. 'Yes, I suppose I did say or write that, but it wasn't what I really believed. . . .' But what men have 'really' believed, in that context, is not the game the historian is hunting. His retort is all too obvious: 'Then you shouldn't have said it.' And those who emphasise that there are many kinds of belief sometimes need to be reminded that no kind of belief can without *sophistry* be seen as a kind of disbelief.

Men are responsible for what they say or write, then, whether in full sincerity or not. Whatever political influence men of letters possess, for good or ill, this *daunting* conclusion may help to join it, if belatedly, to a sense of responsibility.

8. People often hold contradictory views. To suppose, then, that a man who believed X cannot also have believed Y, where X and Y are in contradiction, and solely on the ground that they are in contradiction, is to exceed the evidence. 'Inconsistencies cannot both be right,' as Johnson remarks in *Rasselas*, 'but imputed to man they may both be true'.

9. 'Rulers crumble, thinkers reign', Acton once observed. In the realm of politics, opinion governs behaviour, and this conviction is fundamental to anyone seriously concerned with the history of political thought. Two kinds of sceptic are inclined to deny it: those who understand 'opinion' in an excessively restricted sense; and determinists of one sort or another. But opinion represents

something wider here than idealism or ideology: it includes self-interest, for example – as a statesman who accepts a bribe might be said to have acted on an opinion about the importance of being rich. As for determinism, it has tended in the present century to be either psychological or social. But psychological determinism does little here except alter the rhetoric of debate, and rarely for the better: an explanation in psychological terms of why a man holds a view does not annul the fact that he holds it. And broadly similar objections apply to theories of social conditioning: it is profoundly irrelevant, even when it is true, to insist that an author believes what he does because he was socially conditioned into believing it. The same strictures apply to wilder and woollier versions of the sociology of thought, whether class-determination or structures of feeling. The real interest of an idea is forever intrinsic. It is not *why* a conviction was held that is of the first significance in this enquiry, but what that conviction was.

