

CRAIG NOVA

The Novelist in the Political Age

Where the novelist's work is concerned, politics corrupt, and an absolute concern with politics, corrupts absolutely. And while the desire to include a political aspect of one's beliefs in a novel is almost constant, there are good reasons to resist it, since if you give into this impulse, you will stop being a novelist and start being a propagandist. In the current age, when passions are so keen, and when distortions are so omnipresent, it is a good idea to remember that there is a profound difference between the two.

Political content fails in a novel for three reasons. The first is that the novelist is almost always concerned with those aspects of humanity that differ from what we expect people to be. Perhaps it is best to think of this inside out, or in its most extreme opposite form. Socialist Realism was a good example of the foolishness of writing novels that are concerned with "political truths" as opposed to actual ones. This, of course, was a reflection of the Soviet notion that a writer, just like any other worker, was there to do strictly utilitarian work, and that meant glorifying the state. In practice this meant accounts of Worker X in Shoe Plant T-24, who had met her quota for the month with an almost orgasmic satisfaction. Now, in this case a novelist (as opposed to the propagandist) would be more interested in her fury at being confined by rules and regulations, her secret temptations to commit sabotage, her meeting with her boyfriend in the glue room, or, perhaps, her lesbian affair that, if it came out, could get her sent to nut house. And, of course, these and other such activities are precisely what the Socialist Realist writer was forbidden to include.

CRAIG NOVA

The right wing version of this, I hasten to add, is not so much the production of works that glorify a state, but the suppression of works that are found politically unacceptable.

Now, Socialist Realism is an extreme example, but the inherent contradictions in it (that is, not writing about what it is really like to be human) plays into the next reason that political content fails in a novel. In most political visions, there are good guys and bad guys, and that is that. The political vision is not interested in doubt or complexity and the intricate workings of an interior life. One's political opponents are always cynical manipulators and one's political heroes are always driven by mystical purity. To say that this is dull is to put it mildly. The corrupting aspect of political content in a novel is this: sooner or later there will be a conflict between what the political belief demands and what the novelist knows about the human heart.

The next reason that such novels fail is that the political vision is not interested in humor. While it is true that political figures are funny now and then, they are rarely aware of it. Humor, by the way, almost always has to do with a delight in surprises, and this is another item that the political vision abhors: there are no surprises in political beliefs. If you have problem A, then the solution is to do B + C + D. Humor and unintended consequences are not even on the radar screen. And yet, if you are interested in what it is really like to be human, these items are absolutely essential.

In fact, a good novel investigates those aspects of being human that are filled with surprises, just as such a book explores tragic aspects of life, and there is no place in politics for the tragic: we can not say, politically, that there are some things we can do nothing about.

This sounds like a pretty thorough condemnation of the novel, and, as a novelist, I would be horrified if that is all there was to it. But

CRAIG NOVA

looking at “the lower layer,” as Melville called it, I think there is another aspect which compensates for all of this. A first rate novelist will explore the moral impulse that is at the heart of facing up to any issue. Albert Camus, for instance, was profoundly concerned with politics, but his books are investigations into the facts of the human condition. We live. We die. And we are all in the same boat. So what are our obligations to one another? It is this aspect of the novel that redeems, and, in a profound way, makes it critical to the modern age, since a novelist worth anything is interested in what it is like to be human and how we know right from wrong. It is this knowledge that drives not only our personal lives, but our political ones, too.