POLITICS VS AESTHETICS

Judging a novel by its author’s own formidable standards

THOMAS MEANEY

Politics is a vast, multi-dimensional field that encompasses a wide range of economic, social, and cultural dynamics. It is often seen as a never-ending struggle for power and influence, with those in control using their position to shape society in ways that benefit themselves and those with similar interests. While it is a complex topic, one aspect of politics that is often overlooked is its relationship with literature. Many authors use their work to comment on the state of the world, and some even create fictional characters that embody certain political ideologies.

One such example is the novel "Politics in a Literary Work" by John Updike. In this work, Updike explores the relationship between literature and politics, and how authors can use their writing to comment on the world around them. He argues that literature is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion and that authors have a responsibility to use this power responsibly.

Updike begins by discussing the idea that literature can be a form of protest against the status quo. He cites the example of the novel "The Great Gatsby" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which he argues is a critique of the social and economic inequalities of the Jazz Age. Updike goes on to discuss the role of the novelist in society, and how their work can be used to create change.

Updike also explores the idea that literature can be a form of escapism, and how authors can use their work to create a world that is different from the one they live in. He cites the example of the novel "1984" by George Orwell, which he argues is a commentary on the dangers of totalitarianism.

Updike concludes by arguing that literature is a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, and that authors have a responsibility to use this power responsibly. He argues that literature should be used to promote social justice and to challenge the status quo, and that authors should not be content to simply entertain their readers, but should strive to create work that has a larger impact.

In conclusion, Updike’s work "Politics in a Literary Work" is a thoughtful and engaging exploration of the relationship between literature and politics. It is a call to action for authors to use their work to comment on the world around them, and to promote social justice and equality.

JAMES WOOD

Politics vs aesthetics

In 1995, when James Wood first arrived in Washington to take up the post as the de facto lead book critic at the New Republic, American literary criticism was in a mess. Gentile, mandarin presences, whose names have disappeared along with the memory of their pieces, still presided over the major magazines and reviews. Who now scours the archive to see what Robert Adams or Robert Towers—or, for that matter, John Updike—had to say about any novel of the period? Several of the original New York Intellectuals—Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, Elizabeth Hardwick, Susan Sontag—were still in operation but they no longer touched much new fiction, and their vigilance of the social reality around them had precipitately diminished. The most promising critics of the younger generation had moved away forever to the politics on preoccupations of their predecessors into almost exclusively moral terrain.

What was an acceptable way to fictionalize the experience of the Holocaust? How would the internet ruin reading? What happened when you wrote an incest novel without irony? What difference did it make if you wrote an insurance novel without irony? Did the internet ruin reading? What happened when you wrote an incest novel without irony? What difference did it make if you wrote an insurance novel without irony?

Politics immediately registered as a different fact. Leading book critic at the Washington Post as the de facto lead book critic at the New Republic, Wood stepped into a new world. What was the difference? What difference did it make if you wrote an incest novel without irony? Did the internet ruin reading? What happened when you wrote an insurance novel without irony? What difference did it make if you wrote an insurance novel without irony?

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like, say, Steiner or Sontag, he is more relia-
tant on translations into English. Ten years ago
many of the leading critics and novelists in
America held Wood in the highest esteem,
and several tried to sound like him. But for the
new critics and novelists now emerging, does
Wood matter as much as he once did?

There is something uncomfortable in
Wood’s pieces these days, as if he
knows he must somehow account for
the political turn of novels, but is unsure how to
integrate these concerns into his deep aesthetic
commitments. Here is a recent piece on Jenny
Erenpeck’s novel Go, Went, Gone – about
refugees in Europe – which begins with Wood
telling of a recent family vacation in Italy:

We saw the young men everywhere in that Ital-
ian hinterland – usually in groups of two or three,
walking along the road, climbing the hills, sit-
ting on a wall. They were tall, dark-skinned, con-
spicious because they were wearing too many
clothes for the warm Riviera weather. We
learned that they had made their way to Italy
from various African countries and were now
desperate to get into France, either to stay there
or to push on farther, to Britain and Germany.
This reads as if the critic were learning of such
depredations for the very first time. But then
Wood continues, stressing that he does, after
all, read the news:

I had read many articles and essays about the
plight of people like these – I had read several of
those pieces out loud to my children; I had
watched terrible reports from the BBC, and the
almost unbearable Italian documentary “Fire at
Sea.” And so what? What good are the right feel-
ings if they are not echoed by right feelings? I was just a
moral flaneur. From inside my speeding car, I
regarded those men with compassion, shame,
indignation, curiosity, profound ignorance, all
of it united in a conveniently vague conviction
that, as Edward VIII famously said of mass
unemployment in the nineteen-thirties, “some-
thing must be done.” But not so that it would dis-
turb my week of vacation. I am like some “flat”
character in a comic novel, who sits every night
at the dinner table and repetitively, despicably
oblivious of this. But when he praises the
powers of free indirect discourse as a literary
technique – one that, correctly employed,
allows characters autonomy that blurrily over-
laps with the authority of the novelist – he
wants to avoid any question of the liberal poli-
tics built into that style. The risk with free indi-
rect discourse in today’s atmosphere of the “par-
non–political–political divide. Wood is hardly
doubtful, but the rise of this sort of fiction
now crop up everywhere. There is the peripa-
tetic Nigerian-American narrator of Teju
Cole’s Open City, who is ambivalent about
being claimed by any group, or any political
cause that sounds too shrill; the exhausted ase-
thetic alter ego of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s My
Struggle, who is occasionally exhausted by the
bien-pensant feminist politics of Stockholm’s
bourgeoisie; and the protagonist of Ben Ler-
ner’s 10/04, who has a similar – though funnier
– circling pattern as Wood when confronted
with radical politics.

The point is not that we need more criticism
in league with some great political pro-
gramme, nor, as Wood once wrote mockingly
of Jonathan Franzen, that there should be “a
kind of competition between the novel and soci-
ety”. “The artist who wrote a novel called
Vive the Dowel would, most probably find, that
his work died with the death of the specific sit-
uation for which it was written”, Kenneth
Burke wrote in 1931. Novels need not make
amends to the savagely named Miss Kilnman in
Mrs Dalloway. But as Burke sensed in his own
time, “a system of aesthetics subsumes a system
of politics”, and a novel can show the
way impersonal claims of politics submit to
the pressures of private emotions and vice
versa. There can, in other words, be some
fertile doubting about the existence of the aesthetic–political divide.

What is happening here? Wood seems to be
indicting the participants in “liberalism’s dance
of survival” and, at the same time, with mus-
tered honesty, including himself among those
guilty of negligence and collusion. But the cri-
tique ends right as it begins: with a palpitation
of survival” and, at the same time, with mus-
tral moral question of our time.” And, of course,
whether Wood matter as much as he once did?

Whether Wood was a prime mover behind the
new wave of first-person “auto-fiction” is
doubtful, but the rise of this sort of fiction
clearly pleases him. His vaunted “relatively unre-
liable” and “unnecessarily unreliable” narrators
now crop up everywhere. There is the peripa-
tetic Nigerian-American narrator of Teju
Cole’s Open City, who is ambivalent about
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Wood seems somewhat unprepared. Even when he
responds, at times acutely, to overtly political
fiction – such as that by Zia Haider Rahman,
Hari Kunzru, Joshua Cohen, or his beloved
Norman Rush – his attention tends to be drawn
to the politics of the self (or to the limits poli-
tics imposes on the self) rather than the larger
political and historical canvas on which these
authors work. And in his rapturous responses
to, for example, W. G. Sebald’s haunted
chronicles, we might even say that he likes his
politics served well done, with questions no
longer live, the passion already spent. The rea-
sons for this may have something to do with the
fact that he has devoted so much time to pursu-
ing another, older question: the problem of
belief in God, as opposed to the belief in poli-
U
pstate is a family drama, modest in scope and written, you sense, fully aware that any novel which appeared to hew too closely to the instructions of his own starter-kit How Fiction Works would break the territory of self-parody. The protagonist is Alan Querry, a real estate mogul of the second tier, who works in Durham, has a big old house, a new Agey wife; an estranged, dead one; and two daughters. The older daughter Vanessa is a philosophy professor at Skid
more and more of the kind of mental breakdown Vanessa’s younger boyfriend, Josh, has contacted Alan and Helen, the younger, London-based music executive boyfriend, has a big old house; a room novel. She is the metaphysical complainer who has some antipodean concern. In his first novel, its undeniable beating heart.

Wood has stacked some of the environment and its characters’ minds have been flattened and standardised omniscience. Here, for instance, is a metaphysical complainer who has some antipodean concern. In his first novel, its undeniable beating heart.

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