The novel at work: Reflections on art and politics in selected counter-totalitarian novels, 1920-70


Abstract

The novel's ability to portray and protest the political is generally well recognized. More controversial is how, and with what effects, the assertive nature of political critique combines with the open-ended qualities of artistic expression. Such is the problem confronting this thesis. My inquiry is based on a selection of early to mid-twentieth century counter-totalitarian novels, drawn from across Western Europe and Russia, and representing a variety of different literary styles and political commitments. In the case of Western Europe, my selected authors are Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler and George Orwell; for Russia, they are Yevgeny Zamyatin, Andrei Platonov, Mikhail Bulgakov, Vasily Grossman and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

How we 'read' the artistic/political relationship is important as it influences how we approach texts, the kinds of questions we ask, and the nature of the conclusions we reach. These issues find a theoretical home in the debate on politically committed art, where theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière oppose the overt commitments of authors such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht. My contention is that the abstractions of this debate obscure the density of the relationship, both as it is experienced by authors and as it may strike us as readers. Hence I argue for a grounded approach to the issue: that is, one that is attentive to the detail of texts situated in all the specificity of their political, historical circumstances.

For my guide to the literary practices of the novel, I turn to Mikhail Bakhtin, focusing on the dialogic and polyphonic, the parodic and subversive, and the time/space settings of chronotope. These elements show how the political can be expressed in an evocative and/or subversive way. At the same time, Bakhtin's binary distinctions—the monological and dialogical; the centripetal and centrifugal qualities of language; and the notions of finalizability and unfinalizability—invite further reflection, for they promote an oppositional reading of the artistic/political relationship, and thus form part of the problem with which I am critically engaged. In concluding, I expand on the intricate intersections between finalizability and unfinalizability; the carrying power of the texts' imaginative calls; and the force of their emotional narratives.

The inquiry is broad-ranging and interdisciplinary, drawing variously on the insights of literary theory, philosophy and political analysis. It aims to be of interest to all those broadly concerned with fiction's powers to speak to the political in its distinctive and controversial fashion.

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Traditional Marxism considers the working class the agent of human salvation and the historical process a secular, scientific matter. But in a theological manner, Marxism also expects the working class to overcome class conflict and establish a classless society (see New Reflections 76–78 and Emancipation(s) 9–15). Laclau and Mouffe, in particular, the totalitarian theorist’s belief that Marx’s scientific view of history. By the middle 1920s, the civil war decimated the working class, the middle-class professionals, and the industrial plants. Reflections on Social and Moral Imbalances in Selected Indian English Novels. Analysis of Herman Melville’s Novels. University of Calicut I. B.A./B.Sc./B.Com English Common Notes Ways with Words. 38 Grigol Robakidze and His Novel ‘Die Gemordete Seele’ as a Hermeneutical Clue to the Mythic Demonic Nature of a Totalitarian State Konstantine Bregadze: Chapter Six. 50 Creation of Lithuanian Poet Sigitas Geda: Between the ArcheText and Old World Literature Rūta Brūzgienė. The collection “Totalitarianism and Literary Discourse” represents selected proceedings from the conference, “Totalitarianism and Literary Discourse: 20th Century Experience,” held in Tbilisi (Georgia) in October 2009.