

David M. Whalen

“A Little More than Kin and Less than Kind”: The Affinity of Literature and Politics

Among other disasters, Neville Chamberlain is famous for a particularly ill-chosen quotation from Shakespeare. In September 1938, he announced his Munich conference with Hitler, saying, “out of this nettle danger we pluck this flower safety.” He should have read better. These words are Hotspur’s, the battle-eager rebel of *Henry IV, Part 1*, spoken in defense of going to war. In titling my essay “A little more than kin and less than kind” I risk a similar gaffe. Hamlet here is speaking to his detested uncle Claudius, drawing attention to the uncle’s incestuous relation with Hamlet’s mother. Changing the meaning somewhat, I use the phrase to suggest that literature and politics are closely related, but *not*, as is fashionably held, identical. I hope this is a pardonable dislocation of the passage from its context; it sets us on the way to uncovering, beyond the obvious political elements of this or that text, the deeper principles that give politics and literature their peculiar affinity.

That politics is often a prominent component of literature, probably everyone agrees. Anyone who actually cracks a book soon discovers an array of political ideas, events, theories, presumptions, and follies

in every literary form. Shrouded in its religious, ceremonial garb, Greek drama shows itself immediately political in the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Much later, Shakespeare is, as always, colossal. Plays such as *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, or the sublime *Tempest* treat with unequaled penetration the nature of authority, the value of civil order, the so-called “natural man,” and public justice. Students of non-dramatic poetry moan that they must learn the details of thirteenth-century Florentine politics when studying Dante, and classes in English Restoration literature find themselves watching seventeenth-century political ideas and events played out in classical and biblical allegories. And as for that “mother of all prose fiction,” the novel, why, it is sometimes difficult to tell if novels are political, or whether politics is fictional. The works of Defoe, like *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders*, and the works of Richardson, like

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Pamela or *Clarissa*, are driven by meditations on man as a social animal or the constraints imposed by social privilege. Later, the Palliser novels of Anthony Trollope employ a political backdrop before which to play out their action, and a novel like Dickens' *Bleak House* is famous for its excruciating depiction of clogged and lethal legal systems. Melville can be dizzyingly political, and Twain himself would be bereft of much material were it not for politics. The political *danse macabre* of the twentieth century enjoys its own novelistic accompaniment. In all its forms, a prominent relation of literature to politics is the direct one of theme and subject matter. I hope to show that there are deeper relations as well, but this immediate relation is so prominent that it has led to a grave subversion of literature, at least in idea, today.

The political potency of literature is seductive. So seductive that an influential school of thought maintains that literature is, in essence, a political enterprise. All so-called literature is in fact ideologically driven propaganda, which seeks to maintain or to subvert an existing hegemony. Literature is therefore entirely rhetorical, as it both depicts negotiations of power relations and is, in itself, an article of such negotiations. An author may believe he is writing a "boy meets girl" narrative, but he is in fact engaged in a subtle, politically driven perpetuation of his culture's "boy subjugates girl" hegemony. Or, to put the rhetorical pen in the other ideological hand, marginalized voices may employ literature to carve out some autonomy, power, or liberation from traditional hegemonies. It is all, after all, ideological—all conflict and tension centered around appropriations of power and supremacy. Romeo did not fall in love with Juliet; he either liberated her patriarchally suppressed libido, or, if we

prefer, he re-marginalized her voice through his own dis-empowering appropriation of her person. In any event, the idea is simple enough: literature is primarily propaganda.

The difficulty here is that literature has been reduced to a tool; it has become a rhetorical means to an ideological end. While this is a deeply destructive error, it is understandable. Literature is so adept at handling ideas, and can make ideas so compellingly attractive, that it *has* often been used as a tool. But if we are to see the real affinity of literature and politics, we must see first that literature is not, in essence, political. This is no paradox. Socrates was right; we must first see what a thing is if we are to properly understand what it does, and in this case, literature is not a tool. It is an end. Properly speaking, the essence of literary art is the intentional experience of beauty through language. Literature aims, *qua* literature, as the philosophers say, at beauty, not persuasion. It is precisely in literature's orientation toward beauty that it enters into its genuine relation to politics.

Lest one think this some kind of romantic drivel, consider for a moment the medieval idea of the "transcendentals." The "good," the "true," and the "beautiful" are three terms that summarize in an ultimate way how anything desirable or self-justified may be described. Generally speaking, the good pertains to acts, the true pertains to knowledge, and the beautiful pertains to formal perfection. Now, these things obviously are distinct *ideas*, but not so distinct in particular things. The good, the true, and the beautiful are often different facets of the same thing. For example, when Portia pleads for mercy in the *Merchant of Venice*, the beauty of this masterful speech is inextricably bound to the virtue it pursues and the insights it reveals about justice and mercy. Ultimately, the good, the true, and the beautiful are inextricably interpenetrating. You can't really have one without the

other. Thus, mathematicians describe equations using aesthetic terms like “elegant” or even “charming.” A virtuous man is described as “true.” A beautiful painting will be called “noble” or “revealing.” Given the interrelation of the good, the true, and the beautiful, it is easy to see how literature, in pursuit of the beautiful, cannot help but be involved in those things pertaining to the good: specifically, ethics and politics.

Literary art captures beauty not in the abstract, but embedded in concrete particulars. “Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare,” said Edna St. Vincent Millay, and this is why Euclid was not a poet. Literary art takes human experience in all its splendid messiness and finds therein the beauty that reveals to us what that experience is for and why it is good. In seeking this beauty in particulars, literature does something rather remarkable. We recall that Aristotle (and subsequently most sane thinkers) pointed to the imitative or mimetic nature of art. Literature not only imitates human experience—represents it, as it were—but it often does so by imitating the way the human mind works. Our intelligence is discursive; it moves by steps, seeing things in relation to other things. We lack the intelligence of the angels, who apprehend things in their entirety, instantly. We move along more like the turtle than the gazelle. In literature, this discursive intellect is figured forth in narrative, or stories. It is no mere coincidence that we speak of “lines of thought” and “story lines.” Both are, metaphorically, linear. And in narrative we see an immense political affinity. Not only can we have narratives about politics, but politics and narratives both deal with contingency. That is, the entire science or art of politics, while driven by immutable principles rooted in human nature, is immersed in the contingent, the changeable, matters of likelihood and probability. That is why politics is a deliberative activity. Because

circumstances change, the means we select to pursue ends—no matter how permanent—will change. Narratives also deal with man immersed in contingent circumstances, a world of changes, surprises, the losing and finding of bearings. In pursuit of beauty, narrative, like politics, must work through probability. It may be tempting to view a world of contingency as a chaotic flux of incalculables, but such a view is false. Our experience reveals probabilities, patterns, likelihoods and unlikelyhoods, things that tend to happen together and things that are generally causes of other things. That is the way the world is. King Lear, in a moment of awful political and literary irony, says to the blinded Gloucester, “Yet you see how this world goes.” And Gloucester replies, “I see it feelingly.” This is the place and role of probability in literature and politics. In both, we aim to see how this world goes, and in both we do so better if we see it feelingly.

These patterns and probabilities signify more than we think; they reveal that, indeed, there is such a thing as a constant human nature before which contingencies play out. Both politics and literature presuppose a foundational constant in experience—human nature—and the patterns we discover in probabilities bear out the reality of this constant. This is why we can still learn from ancient Greek political thought or enter into the world of Odysseus, or Beowulf, or more foreign yet, Dickens’ Aunt Betsey Trotwood. This is what allows us to appreciate the wisdom in the ending of *Beowulf*, where Beowulf’s success as a warrior and king has produced a paradoxical result: an enervated people. A generation has flourished in peace but has also forgotten the valor necessary to preserve it. The lesson: there is a risk in success. The political relevance is obvious. To rest on one’s lau-

rels is to lose them. Thus, patterns and probabilities in human experience, vividly presented in literature, transcend time precisely because our common human nature does too.

It is a commonplace that literature can teach, as *Beowulf* does. This is what the ideologue mistakes for propaganda. In pursuing beauty embedded in concrete experience, literature provides a vicarious experience that Gloucester's "seeing feelingly" perfectly describes. We learn best by experience, which is why Aesop may more effectively, if less precisely, communicate the threat of collectivized political authority than does many a political treatise. Literature can tell us what is significant, meaningful, dreadful, valuable, tragic, and of course comical about life, and it does so by giving us this life to experience ourselves. Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi says "life means intensely, and it means good." The peculiar thing about people is that we apparently recognize this meaning best only vicariously or "second hand." If we don't see it in literature, we may well miss it in our own lives. This truth is what Oscar Wilde twisted when he said that life imitates art. Often we need to see what is real by first seeing it in art. Ever since Homer poets have said they draw attention to missed meaning. If Odysseus had to leave home to fully understand its value, we must leave our own lives (temporarily, at least) in order to see their significance. The *concreteness* of that secondhand experience is essential and gives to literature its didactic power. It is one thing to be told an abstraction: "Romantic passions can be exhilarating, yet dangerous." It is another to swoon with Dante upon hearing about Paolo and Francesca in the *Inferno*.

So literature as a didactic force is immensely needful and powerful, and one of the "political" things we learn from it is that man is morally charged. His actions and choices matter—sometimes, all too much.

King Lear wants to "crawl towards death," and indeed he does, though not in the manner he anticipates. Thinking that he can, in modern terms, retire, buy a Winnebago and spend the winters camping in Arizona, he divests himself of the "cares of state." His would-be administrative bivouac has disastrous consequences in part because he is trying to keep privilege while abandoning responsibility. This cannot be done. For us, as for Lear, the fact is that much of what we would like to think of as inconsequential is often hugely consequential. Just ask Oedipus. Politics and literature both agonize over and contemplate choices, for in our choices is our moral significance, not to mention untold consequences. It is no coincidence that Aristotle makes this point in both the *Poetics* and the *Ethics*.

The unity inherent in the good, the beautiful, and the true inevitably brings literature into contact with issues properly political: the pursuit of the good; man's social nature; the patterns apparent in our public life, including actions and their consequences; the moral significance of choices; the inescapability of responsibility; the wisdom and folly of our predilections, both private and public. The relationship of politics and literature, by virtue of their natural affinity and common suppositions, means that literature will have political relevance even when not being overtly political. This is a key point, for if literature is to yield up the depths of wisdom it is capable of embodying we must be prepared to look in the depths, so to speak. This is as true of political wisdom as of any other.

Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example, is a beautiful but sobering account of the sacrifice, sorrow, and implacable opposition one necessarily confronts in pursuit of the common good. It is uncannily alive to the mystery shrouding our experience of thwarted purposefulness. So alive, in fact, that it even

intimates how our joy is strangely fueled by our experience of sorrows borne and trials endured. Most readers today know the *Aeneid* through the tragic romance of Queen Dido and Aeneas in the first half of the poem. Here, a reluctant Aeneas turns his back on genuine romantic love and a peaceful, leisured life out of duty to a responsibility he would rather not have. Entrusted with the destiny and common good of Trojan refugees, he must leave Dido and journey to Italy, where Rome will be founded. Aeneas turns his back on personal happiness to bear what the Romans called the “public thing,” the *res-publica*. But the real heart of the poem is found in book six, when Aeneas journeys to the Underworld to receive instructions from his father Anchises. Anchises relates to Aeneas the destiny of the city his offspring will found and shows him a panoply of future heroes’ shadowy spirits. Summarizing the mission and excellence of Rome, especially as distinct from the excellence of Greece, Anchises rises to lyrical heights, the Latin dactylic hexameter lifting into song:

*Others, no doubt will better mould the bronze
To the semblance of soft breathing, draw, from
marble,
The living countenance; and others plead
With greater eloquence, or learn to measure,
Better than we, the pathways of the heaven,
The risings of the stars: remember, Roman,
To rule the people under law, to establish
The way of peace, to battle down the haughty,
To spare the meek. Our fine arts these, forever.*

That is from the Rolfe Humphries translation. Another translation by W. F. Jackson Knight renders the phrase “to establish the ways of peace” (*Pacisque imponere morem*) as “to graft tradition onto peace.” This is better, for the idea is not simply to impose peace, but to create an habitual, peaceful order that carries all the weight of a sacred tradition. This is created, of course, by the rule of law—a rule that the Romans

are famous both for making and for breaking. But law is the backbone of the civilized order—not will, or whim, or fancy. This is why he calls it an art. The law is a well-developed instrument for the common good. Most particularly, this rule of law is maintained by “sparing” the subjects—*subjectis*, those who *subject* or throw themselves “under” the law—and warring down the *superbos*, those who haughtily place themselves “above” the law. Here, then, is a perennial truth about the nature of peace and public order. Civilization will be based ultimately on a law that transcends individuals, and on the traditionary nature, not to mention hallowedness, of that law. To place oneself above the law is to deracinate oneself from tradition, to sink, in fact, to barbarism, and even to place oneself in line for “warring-down” by the guardians of the law.

This is an instance of fairly overt political reference in Virgil’s great poem, but notice the patterns or probabilities in experience underscored in the epic. A vocational commitment to the public good means foregoing profoundly desirable goods or conditions for oneself. The implication for what happens when one considers public life a personal gain is obvious. Another pattern is that immense good and happiness seem contingent upon suffering or sorrow. This is not merely to say that suffering is necessary for the common good. Rather, a precondition to our entering into any great good is that experience which winnows away the chaff of our mundane affairs, revealing to us the meaning of things. And as Aristotle notes, our highest happiness is to know such meaning. Finally, note the importance of tradition. Although Virgil’s story is one of change and development—a refugee flotilla finding a new home—all of this occurs in the context of continuity with a precious past. Aeneas takes the statues of the household gods with him out of burn-

ing Troy. Funeral games are held in honor of his deceased father. Latium is seen as a reincarnation of Troy. Even the poetic form itself, a Homeric epic, is a nod toward the significance of tradition and continuity. Tradition, like law and in tandem with law, supersedes us. We abandon it not only at our peril, but with an attendant loss of our very meaning. If Aeneas were to abandon his responsibility and remain with Dido, he would no longer be Aeneas.

In medieval Europe, religious pilgrimages are highly traditional, and this is the setting and frame for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer is one of a handful of authors who prove that being a minor government official does not necessarily mean forfeiting your humanity. One of the greatest writers in history—wise, piercingly observant, highly and lowly humorous—Chaucer has given us a poem less political in subject matter, but no less politically significant than Virgil's. Certainly the text highlights some immediately political themes and characters, such as the social hierarchy among the pilgrims, atop which is the Knight. As an icon of ideal chivalry, he loves "truth, honor, freedom, and courtesy." He represents the medieval ideal of chivalrous rule: the God-like combination of authority and love. He preserves order gently, even amusedly, his nobility of person exercising greater influence than his sword. There are other elements as well, such as the tension between old, landed wealth and new, trade-wealth, tensions between ecclesiastical privilege and ecclesiastical holiness, tensions between the power of money and the power of law, and perhaps most appealing to many contemporaries, there are hugely contentious gender wars.

But the most politically meaningful feature of this poem is often overlooked, despite being, paradoxically, right on the surface. The pilgrims comprise a microcosm of

society. The pilgrimage is a world in miniature, and although the pilgrims chafe and dispute, they cohere and even prosper. Why? What animates this society? It is not the Knight; rather, it is their common purpose, end, or destination. Like Virgil, their end is steeped in tradition, but most importantly, the pilgrimage graphically (even geographically) demonstrates that the controlling end is outside of the society itself. That is, the tangible social order is maintained primarily by having an orientation toward a principle outside that order. No social order can be sustained if it is primarily self-referential. In a sense, the common good of the pilgrims depends upon their having an objective that is beyond their common good. Chaucer sees quite clearly that if our welfare is our ultimate object, we will fail. The necessary (though not sufficient) precondition to securing our welfare is to direct ourselves to something beyond it. Of course, this "something" is not arbitrary. We are free to disagree if we wish, but for Chaucer, a supernatural good—the earnest adoration of God—is not merely convenient, but essential. *Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam*. "Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build it."

Chaucer's poem issues a kind of warning. In our day, religion is often appreciated in a utilitarian fashion. Many contemporary politicians smilingly approve of religion primarily because of its socially stabilizing effect. Chaucer would laugh at this and remind us that religion preserves social order because it is true, and that we risk inverting means and ends (thus losing the efficacy of this ordering principle) if we forget that order is preserved through proper principles, not accidentally salutary delusions. He reminds us that the journey motif is a figure for life, and the supernatural destination of the pilgrims is universal. Whether we are holy or almost wholly

vile, we are “on the road.” The pilgrims are in the enviable position—regardless of their virtue or vice—of being fully aware of this ultimate end. And this end as well as their knowledge of it maintains them in their miniature society.

Society grows even smaller, from a microcosm to a cosmos of merely two in the next example, a Renaissance parody of a decadent chivalry: Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. While there are passages and episodes that treat political ideas or situations, how could the text as a whole say much of interest about politics? How can anarchy, madness, and even boorish stupidity explore any political depths except negatively? In fact, Cervantes’s masterful text is deeply wise, though puzzling and notoriously difficult to understand in any comprehensive way. The multiple possible meanings of the text is now what most scholars consider the point itself: a kind of elevation of ambiguity. Be that as it may, certain unavoidable realities in the novel demand our notice. The mad, anarchical misfit Don Quixote is both repulsive and compellingly attractive. Readers first laugh at him, then sympathize with him, and just as they are about to elevate him to “hidden hero” status, Cervantes has him do something irremediably insane or foolish. As readers, we are neither allowed to write the Knight of the Mournful Countenance off as a complete fool, nor see him as identifiably heroic. He is both, he is neither.

Most stop here and say this ambiguity is the point. But if we expand our scope and take in the world around the dusty lunatic as well, we see the makings of an important political and philosophical observation. We come back to a matter of ends and means. Don Quixote is partly attractive because of his idealism. Unrealistic, absurdly practiced, misbegotten ideals they are, but Quixote’s ends or objectives are

usually admirable. True, they are inextricably interwoven with the desire for glory, but in the main the knight is in pursuit of genuine goods that transcend his own welfare. In fact, he as much as affirms that glory is the compensation knights have in return for their sacrifice of every other comfort, pleasure, or self-serving end. His ends are right, but his means are wrong. His madness is the complete loss of prudence. He tries to do what Virgil does—remind the world around him of the value inherent in its tradition—but he does it the wrong way. He tries to become Aeneas, or a distorted Aeneas. On the other hand, the world around him has all (or almost all) the right means, but it has lost sight of noble ends. It is a tired, make-do world where the common good is left to lunatics. Life in this world is not a pilgrimage, it is a grind. Even the clerics are either ineffectual or small-mindedly meddling. Tradition has become thoughtless habit, not the vigorous habit that does for a culture what the habit of justice or courage does for an individual. The world around the Don is colorless not just because he is so colorful; it lacks life-blood. It is a pale, stale, tedious world because it has lost sight of the common good and transcendent ends. The frightening thing Cervantes has to tell us is that, in such a world, even when one discovers true ends and the idea of a commonweal, he is likely to do so in a grotesque and distorted way.

Four hundred years later and across the Atlantic, the final text I would like to consider is also my closing observation. It is, in a sense, the most difficult or obscure observation. To this point the examples have been narratives or stories, whether prose or poetry; but this text is a lyric poem. While lyrics are perhaps the most purely literary form, they do not tell tales. A lyric holds something up to us for our reflection or

contemplation. It often simply sings its praises, or bemoans its fate. But lyrics are like narratives in that they, too, engage our participation in what is underway. While narratives provide a vicarious experience of the story itself, lyrics both meditate and inspire meditation about their subject. In other words, a lyric poem talks about doing something, and it does it at the same time. Robert Frost's poem "Take Something Like a Star" is a perfect example.

*O Star (the fairest one in sight)
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud—
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says, "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may take something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

This poem is about a kind of thinking quite different from the discursive thought described before. If discursive thought is active, then an oft forgotten, what I will call *contemplative*, thought is passive, quiet, still. It too sees things in relationships, but they are usually metaphorical relationships, not patterns of action or probability. The lyric is the literary form for this kind of thought. What has this to do with politics? Have we not left the world of contingency, probability, and "how the world goes" behind? Not really. For before the world goes, it *is*. That

is, lyric poetry looks primarily at what things *are* in and of themselves, not what they do or their tendencies.

The idea is, as Frost notes, quite simple: it is not enough to be expert and alive to the active world of change and planning, of pragmatics and polemics, of things about which we may write briefs, scientific treatises, or five year plans. The active presupposes the passive. Before we can think discursively about what is to be done, we first must comprehend what *is*. And this comprehension ultimately requires a kind of passive reception before the real. The dialogues of Plato and the epistemology of Aristotle are enough to show that this idea is not a form of trendy pseudo-mysticism. This poem reminds us that, even on a very practical, ordinary level, we are prone to ceaseless, relentless activity wherein we are easily dislodged from the steadying apprehension of what Russell Kirk and T. S. Eliot called "the permanent things." We must see what things are, and see them clearly, if we are to act cogently in a turbulent life.

One of the greatest dangers to the intellectual life, for instance, is the practical abolition of contemplation in endless rounds of activity. This means enervated, tepid thought. In politics, properly intellectual in character, we lose sight of the principles and ends that define and drive our public life. Or, if we continue to see them, they become two-dimensional. This results in the reduction of political philosophy to ideology, the reduction of statesmanship to electioneering, the reduction of law to regulation, the reduction of policy to pragmatics, and the reduction of rhetoric to polemics. Lyrical contemplation is no luxury, as Frost reminds us; it is a forgotten necessity. The very things we pursue or study actively—"Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade"—we must also be steadied by in contemplative admiration. If we do not, our activity itself becomes vitiated.

*So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may take something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

The twentieth century is not adept at being staid, though literature, especially lyric poetry, is. And this brings us full circle to the rhetorical ideologue with whom we began. Lyric poetry is a standing refutation to one who carries something too far and opines that all literature is propaganda. As related and performed by Frost's poem, the contemplative apprehension of things as they are precedes and directs our life of political activity and toil. Short of that, we are not properly political—we're just taking sides.

We find in literature not only a didactic capacity wherein we "see how the world goes" or discern both ends and means re-

garding the common good; we see also a potent reminder of our dependence on reality rather than on ideology. We are reminded that the comparatively passive, contemplative, lyrical apprehension (and admiration) of the world precedes our "up-and-doing" in it. Such "staying," as Frost calls it, remains necessary in the midst of our political activity. To put it another way, literature is politically important both for the wisdom it may provide about our political, social, and ethical experience, and for embodying a kind of contemplation conspicuously absent today. We are used to clarion calls to act in the face of our politically misguided times, and indeed so we should act. But here is a rather hushed beckoning from Robert Frost—to first consider how the heavens go, so to speak, before moving the earth.