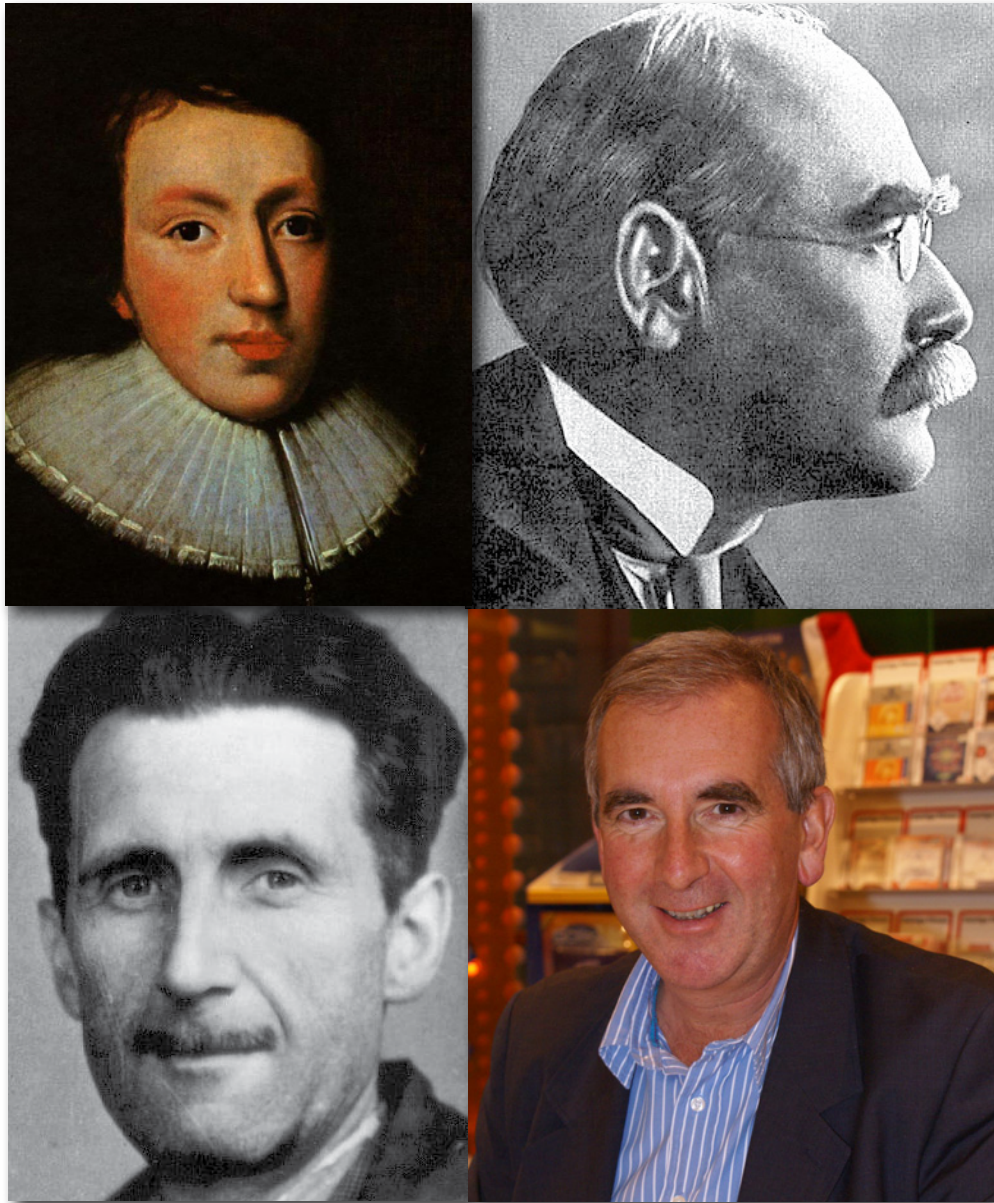




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Politics and British literature Excursions in political fiction

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Four authors portrayed in the current issue of *British Politics Review* (clockwise, from upper right): Rudyard Kipling, Robert Harris, George Orwell and John Milton. [Published under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic Licence].

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Editorial Politics. Fiction.

What are the dynamics between political processes and fictional representations? If this question was posed to, respectively, an Arts scholar and a social scientist, chances are one would get radically different responses. Students of literature routinely situate fiction within a political context, tracing and analysing the political in the fictional text. Social scientists, however, have traditionally been less concerned with fiction, except, perhaps, when it can be analysed as a direct cause or consequence of a political process or event (Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) is an obvious case in point).

There are, however, additional ways to conceive of the relationship between fiction and politics. In their 2006 volume *Harry Potter and International Relations*, Dan Nexon and Iver Neumann argue that popular culture also may serve as a *mirror*, *empirical evidence* or as *constitutive* of the political.

All these three dimensions are arguably attended to in the present issue of *British Politics Review*.

The majority of articles fall into the first category, approaching fiction as *mirrors* of political processes and events. *Alexander Beaumont* traces how political developments in Britain over the last thirty years, including the decline of the Left, are reflected in contemporary fiction. *Kaja Schjerven Mollerin's* article on George Orwell touches on, alongside Orwell's continuous reflection on current affairs, how his celebrated novel *Animal Farm* (1945) can be seen as an analogy of totalitarian regimes of his own era. And *Steven Powell* looks into how the borders between fiction and reality are blurred in Robert Harris' political novel *The Ghost* (2007), where the main character bears striking resemblance with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Fiction can, however, also be seen as *evidence* in the study of past and present political processes. That is, fiction can be approached as an empirical field, one that can tell us something about dominant political norms, ideas, and identities in a given society at a given point in time. This aspect of the relationship between fiction and politics is present in *Charles Ferrall's* article on how British writers conceived of the General Strike in 1926.

Finally and more fundamentally, fiction can at times even be *constitutive* of politics. Fiction forms an important part of the popular culture that shapes national identities. In addition, political narratives tend to be both inspired by and informative of fictional narratives. For example, *Juan Christian Pellicer* argues that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) had a subtle yet distinct political purpose, one that was «designed to transcend the paradigm of any national culture, or even of any Christian denomination». Is anyone still claiming that literature and politics are worlds apart?

Merry Christmas to our readers,

Øivind Bratberg and Kristin M. Haugevik, editors

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One for all, all for one

By Kaja Schjerve Mollerin

On a bleak winter day last year I crossed the University square in Oslo – hastily, as I was already late for the metro, yet before reaching the end of the square I had slowed down, then halted completely in front of a set of photographs on display. They were new to me, but a note explained that they were taken from Harald Medbøe's book on the Romani. One picture showed a child digging in a rubbish heap. A young girl, perhaps, or a boy, I cannot say for sure. She has turned to look up at the photographer. Her face is sordid. She looks scared.



Kaja Schjerve Mollerin is an author and literary critic based in Oslo. In 2012, she has been awarded the prize of the Norwegian literary critic of the year as well as the Anders Jahre culture award for her work. The essay below appears in the recently published collection Sammen, hver dag. Om fellesskap i litteraturen (Gyldendal, 2012). It has been translated exclusively for British Politics Review.

It is funny how links are drawn, how things that you have read return to the fore of your mind.

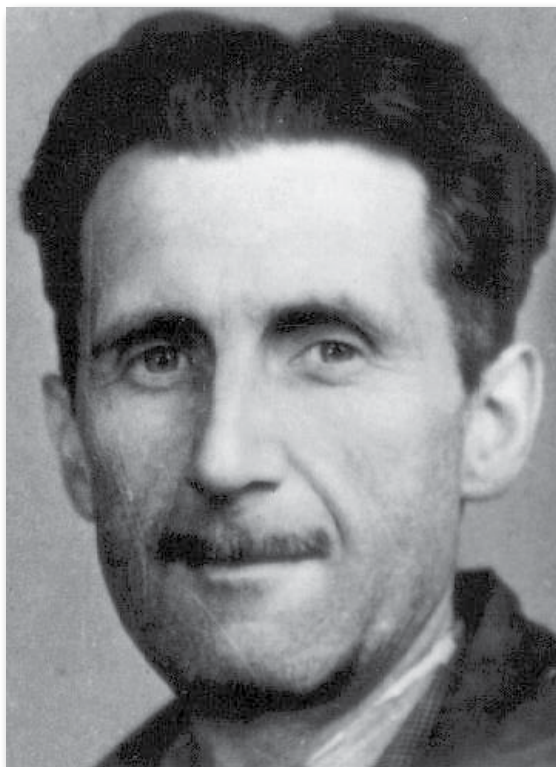
I became attuned to George Orwell's authorship a couple of years ago and have harboured the ambition to write about it. Obstructing the loose plan, however, was a lingering doubt as to how the case for reading Orwell should be made. In Britain, they do not need commemorative occasions to keep canonised authors alive: Orwell's books are published anew, in different formats, and read again. Even more peripheral part of his production – books, diaries, notes – are collected and published, and then there are the literary analyses; Philip Bound's *Orwell and Marxism. The Political and Cultural Thinking of George Orwell* (2009) is a recent example which has added to our understanding of him.

But what is contemporary relevance, when you look at it? Sometimes it is argued that Orwell is an author whom every generation must rediscover. I think that is correct, and also that the reasoning for that discovery is rarely found in a book but more often in one's own immediate surroundings. Thus it was the girl in the photograph that made me think about Orwell. I think he would have taken an interest in that photograph, her face.

In order to capture the gist of George Orwell, or Eric Arthur Blair which was his real name, one should talk about his

warmth, wit and curiosity, but also about his rage, his willingness to fly in the face of conventional wisdom, his courage to distinguish between right and wrong. For myself, I would first of all emphasise his humanity, his eternal interest in people he would meet on his way. Read his essays, his journalism and his novels, and you will quickly discover that Orwell's eye always seeks other people's eye. He stops to ask what it is that he observes; who they are, these people he meets, and what their faces can tell him.

I think of the opening sequence of his book on the Spanish Civil War, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Orwell is in Barcelona, where he has travelled to enrol in the Republican army, but before saying anything of substance about the situation in Spain, about the complex political picture, about his own reasoning behind putting his life at risk, yes before all this, he describes the face of a young stranger, an Italian: "Something in his face deeply moved me. It was the face of a man who would commit murder and throw away his life for a friend." I also think about a small passage from *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Orwell's austere account from travelling through the mining communities of Yorkshire and Lancashire. Some way into the book he recounts the impressions from a train ride. The train passes a derelict residential area. It is winter and bitterly cold, and from his warm compartment Orwell observes a young woman:



The sharpest pen in Britain. The press card portrait of George Orwell - Eric Arthur Blair - taken in 1933.

She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever-seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say that "It isn't the same for them as it would be for us," and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her--understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.

How does a social conscience emerge? Where does it come from, the propensity to look for injustice, for human frailty? Orwell's personal history starts in the Empire. He was born in India in 1903. His father was a civil servant. When Orwell was about three years old his family moved back to England. Here, he came of age in an environment which he would later, with typical precision, refer to as "lower upper middle class". In 1922 he travelled to Burma to serve in the British police force there. He was nineteen. Five years later, on leave in England, he decided not to return. The Burmese stay seems to have been a turning point in young Orwell's life. "I was not going back to be a part of that evil despotism", he says somewhere in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "[b]ut I wanted much more than merely to escape from my job... I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man."

"[W]hile perceiving himself as a socialist throughout his life, he did not shy away from criticising the left, in particular its intellectual adherents."

This is not a tale of a hero returning home. Embarking on his journey through the mining communities in the North of England, he can still see the faces of people he has treated unjustly. He can see the captives locked in condemned cells, the elderly peasants he bullied, the servants he hit in fits of rage. The colonial population was doubly oppressed, according to Orwell; not only did they have to suffer the unrestrained violence of the police, they had to take it from an imperial master. The Burmese did not acknowledge the law of the Empire, he argues. The thief did not consider himself a criminal subject to the due process of law, but as the victim of a cruel and corrupt system. Orwell approaches these issues directly in his first novel *Burmese Days* (1934). But what might the reasons be for including them in a book about the English working class? I think Orwell wants us to consider the question of right and wrong against a broader canvas. He did not break the law as part of the Burmese police force, but morally he failed almost every day. The sharp observation made is that people in Burma and the English working class are oppressed in ways that are not altogether different. They are locked into an inferior relationship from which someone else can reap the benefit. We do not break the law in closing our eyes when faced with misery and destitution, but we choose side. Orwell returned to England in embarrassment and dismay. His deep sympathy for the outcast of society was initially infused with self-deprecation. To me, some of his own statements express a desire to disappear. "I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants".

The English literary critic Richard Hoggart writes somewhere that Orwell was good at hating. That is an appropriate summary of Orwell's many furious

exclamations. His critique is uncompromising, addressed to the reader and raising the question again and again: What kind of community, of shared life, is worth striving for? Orwell never tires from correcting the view that class division in Britain is dissolving. His tales of hopeless poverty in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier* are unscrupulous. Interestingly, while perceiving himself as a socialist throughout his life, he did not shy away from criticising the left, in particular its intellectual adherents. The combination of apathy, dismay and inability to offer effective policies frustrated him. And having seen a united popular front collapse in Spain and the Civil War turn into terror, he feared the totalitarian impulse of communism as well. *Animal Farm. A Fairy Story* (1945) is a biting attack on an ideology which, as exemplified by Stalinism, may be turned on its head to become its own frightening contradiction. Thus is the paradox of the totalitarian, as Orwell so neatly formulates it: "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others".

The diaries left by Orwell testify to an increasingly bleak outlook on life. The developments in Spain as well as those in the Soviet Union caused him great dismay. During the Spanish Civil War he was shot in the throat, and in *Homage to Catalonia* he makes an ironical reference to his height. No uniforms could fit him. He was taller than most. Of course he was bound to be hit by a bullet. Never fully recovered from the injury, Orwell was considerably weakened by it towards the end of his life. Darkness descends more heavily on his writings. Nonetheless, I cannot agree that what we see in Orwell is a misanthrope. He is what he is in response to the misery exposed to him, but also because he is convinced that things can be so much better. Orwell has made a decision early on: to live in and work to amend the world we inhabit rather than stepping aside from it.

Orwell is in a way a classic intellectual of the sort that takes an interest in anything. He approaches a wide range of topics and shows a profound respect for knowledge. But he despised airy speculation and academic jargon. His criticism of convoluted language, vague and implicit arguments is a recurring feature of his writings. Orwell's point is a simple one: If you mean something, you must say so openly, dare to be wrong, dare to cause disagreement. In his essay "Politics and the English Language" this is the key argument. Orwell leans on satire in providing inscrutable formulations from contemporary journalism and literary critics. He calls it a catalogue of swindles and perversions. The essay is joyful reading yet is also deeply serious. What Orwell shows is that language can conceal the thought as much as being a tool to reveal it. The problem with inscrutable jargon is not only that it is deceptive – it may also be misleading and seductive both to speaker and listener.

“Politics and the English Language” appeared in print in the journal *Horizon* during the spring of 1946. Note the year; Orwell’s call for clear speech followed in the wake of the Second World, in a period characterised by lies, propaganda and twisted information. Orwell is by no means alone in highlighting the significance of transparent language in the post-war years. “We are living in the age of mystifications”, Jean-Paul Sartre argues in *What is Literature?* (1947). In the same book he also writes: “I distrust the incommunicable; it is the source of all violence.” In the dystopian *1984* (1949) Orwell portrays the totalitarian society, a world in which language controls what can be thought. The official language of this society, newspeak, is a language with a minimal vocabulary, removed from the real world and transformed to science. All words related to liberty and equality are integrated in the concept of crimethink. It is a language which bars certain thoughts and which is not intended to carry meaning. To obscure the meaning is part of the intention with *newspeak*.

The historical context is clearly fundamental to these considerations. Yet we fool ourselves if we think that Orwell and Sartre’s views from the 1940s are irrelevant today. We live in an era of specialisation, where the media allow experts to define the form and content of public debate. Today, there is little real difference between the bureaucratic language of the politician, the diagnostic jargon of the psychiatrist, or the tabloid language of the press. On the contrary, the specialist and the tabloid are interrelated in an embrace which constrains public debate from operating freely – despite the fact that the media are also, to an increasing degree, affected by readers’ prose.

There is no need to maintain that the writing rules that Orwell establishes in “Politics and the English Language” must always be prioritised. Luckily, there is also the prose where clarity is not always the primordial goal, its poignancy instead resting on the liberty to break with the real world. The literary language belongs there. But what a bliss it would have been if those who speak out on our social and political issues would honour Orwell’s rules:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.

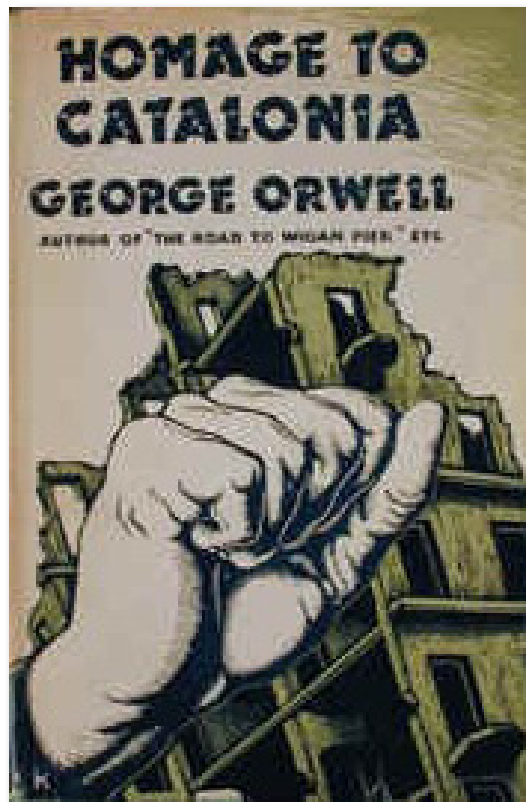
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Orwell’s own style is clear as water. To him it is a political choice: he has something he wants to say, and he wants as many people as possible to understand. Before reading his book on the Spanish Civil War, I knew preciously little about the distinctions between the various trade unions and political parties: P.S.U.C., P.O.U.M., F.A.I., C.N.T., U.G.T., J.C.I., J.S.U., A.I.T.. I am never going to remember this, was my first thought, when the acronyms popped up one after another. “If you are not interested in the horrors of party politics”, Orwell writes in deep sympathy with the reader, “please skip”. I admit that it was only out of the old habit – a sense of duty – that I did not skip that chapter, but carried on. But Orwell has this capacity to bring life to dead letters. You read, and you find behind those acronyms a swathe of political strategies, carried by people, with different stories, different dreams and tempers. Orwell is one of those observers who never forget that politics, statistics, economics and literature are ultimately about people, about the life that we live and the life that we aspire to live.

It is sometimes said that the terrible thing about searching for the truth is that you will end up finding it. When you have found it, it can no longer be neglected. The consciousness about this affects everything that Orwell writes. His pursuit of factual knowledge is eager, but not relentless: when he feels that enough facts have been established he does not hesitate in drawing conclusions.

“I do not pretend to understand the mysteries of local government,” he states in *The Road to Wigan Pier*; “I merely record the fact that houses are desperately needed and are being built, on the whole, with paralytic slowness.” I think that it is statements like this that make the American critic Lionel Trilling claim that Orwell liberates the reader’s mind. In a way, his manner of approaching everything he does *not* know is what makes Orwell so important. Yes, of course he has a voice which is talented and unique, but he is also an ordinary guy with force of mind and warmth of heart. *That* is liberating. At least to those of us who do not know everything but who still feel we recognise cruelty when we see it, out in the wider world or at home, on a snow-covered university square in the richest country of the world.



Original book cover, *Homage to Catalonia* (Secker and Warburg, 1938).

Rudyard Kipling, imperialism and the craft of writing

By Howard J. Booth

What saves Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) from being pigeonholed as a hard-line imperialist is simply the quality of the writing. Loyal to his material, Kipling's writing captures more than his political creed, where the young 'laureate of Empire' became an increasingly marginal figure politically as the twentieth century progressed.



Howard J. Booth is Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Manchester. He has published extensively on topics ranging from D.H. Lawrence, via Empire and Englishness to male homosexuality and writing. Dr Booth is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Rudyard Kipling* (2011).

The 'turn' in Rudyard Kipling's reputation can be approached through a particularly unfortunate trip to Sweden. In his late memoir, *Something of Myself*, Kipling records in conventional terms how pleased he was in 1907 to learn that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. (He remains the youngest winner of the literature prize.) What follows, though, represents his trip to Stockholm for the ceremony in decidedly phantasmagorical terms. It was December, the old King had just died, and amid a city and palace in mourning and darkness, Kipling was presented with his award by the new monarch in a brief audience. The way Kipling writes suggests that he himself saw his receipt of the award as auguring 'darker' times to come.

Kipling was among the first global celebrities, and it is possible to say that no writer before him had been more widely known. When he was critically ill with pneumonia in New York in 1899 – his daughter Josephine, for whom he was writing the *Just So Stories*, also succumbed, dying – the world's press carried the latest reports of his condition on their front pages. That Anglo-India – that is, Britons in India – should produce a writer who both established a serious literary reputation and gained global sales can surprise. Yes, he had new subject matter, bringing news of India – or, better, a certain view of a part of it – to an audience eager to hear about life in Britain's colonies. And there was the good fortune to begin his career just at the point when international copyright law was taking hold, so he could manage a career in many different jurisdictions. But sheer talent was surely the primary cause of his popularity. The tales about Mowgli in the *Jungle Books*, among other texts, will always be read, interpreted and reworked.

Such a "reach" into the minds and the imaginations

of a generation had a wide impact. Kipling's writing can be interpreted in different ways, but some sought to mould that impact so that it took a specific form. Robert Baden-Powell drew heavily on Kipling's writing in his *Scouting for Boys* as he tried to make the next generation of Anglo-Saxon men into good builders and stewards of Empire. Kipling was by no means averse to playing a direct role himself. Two of Kipling's close friends were Theodore Roosevelt and Cecil Rhodes. While Kipling's vision of the United States rejoining an Anglo-Saxon empire was never going to take off, his contention that the US should look outwards and take up "The White Man's Burden" – it was in this context that Kipling wrote the poem – played its part in the slow decline of American isolationism. Close to Rhodes, Kipling fully supported his efforts to secure British hegemony in Africa, though again the hoped-for results did not come.

From his time in India – very readably addressed by Charles Allen in his *Kipling Sahib: India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1900* – Kipling opposed imperial reform in favour of an uncompromising colonial politics, warning of the dangers of weakness at home and competition from other powers, first particularly Russia, then Germany. Such views moved further and further from the mainstream in the twentieth century. This is caught in the title David Gilmour chose for his political biography of Kipling – *The Long Recessional: the Imperial Life of Rudyard Kipling* (Gilmour adapts the title of Kipling's anxious poem "Recessional" of 1897, published at the time of Victoria's Diamond Jubilee).

"Kipling was to the right of most Conservatives; to friends he would even refer to his cousin the long-time Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, as a socialist."

Kipling was to the right of most Conservatives; to friends he would even refer to his cousin the long-time Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, as a socialist. His belief that Britain had to respond to the rise of Germany became, during the First World War, an almost unhinged hatred of

all Germans – a loss of balance that can in part be attributed to the death of his only son, John, at the Battle of Loos in 1915. At the end of his life, Kipling was quick to warn of the rise of Hitler, and he was always a strong opponent of what came to be called "appeasement". ("And that is called paying the Dane-geld;/ But we've proved it again and again,/ That if once you have paid him the Dane-geld/ You never get rid of the Dane.") However, by the 1930s Kipling's long history of hyperbolic statements about Germany meant that many discounted his warnings.

One can respond to this account of Kipling's politics by saying that his energies did at times have positive outcomes, from the way he helped to raise the status of the ordinary British soldier, the "Tommy", down to his work on how the British dead of the First World War were commemorated.

A founding member of the Imperial War Graves Commission (since 1960 the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) he argued for things that are now simply taken for granted – including that those whose bodies were not found (like John's) should be named on memorials. He wrote the Commission's pamphlet, *The Graves of the Fallen*, which set out the interim conclusions of the Commission around war cemeteries to the relatives of the dead. It is an unsurpassed example of how such a public body can communicate directly with a mass audience on a fraught issue. Not only was he responsible for choosing the inscription on the altar found in every cemetery – "Their Name Liveth for Evermore" from Ecclesiasticus – until his death Kipling wrote or approved the inscriptions at all the Commission's cemeteries around the world.

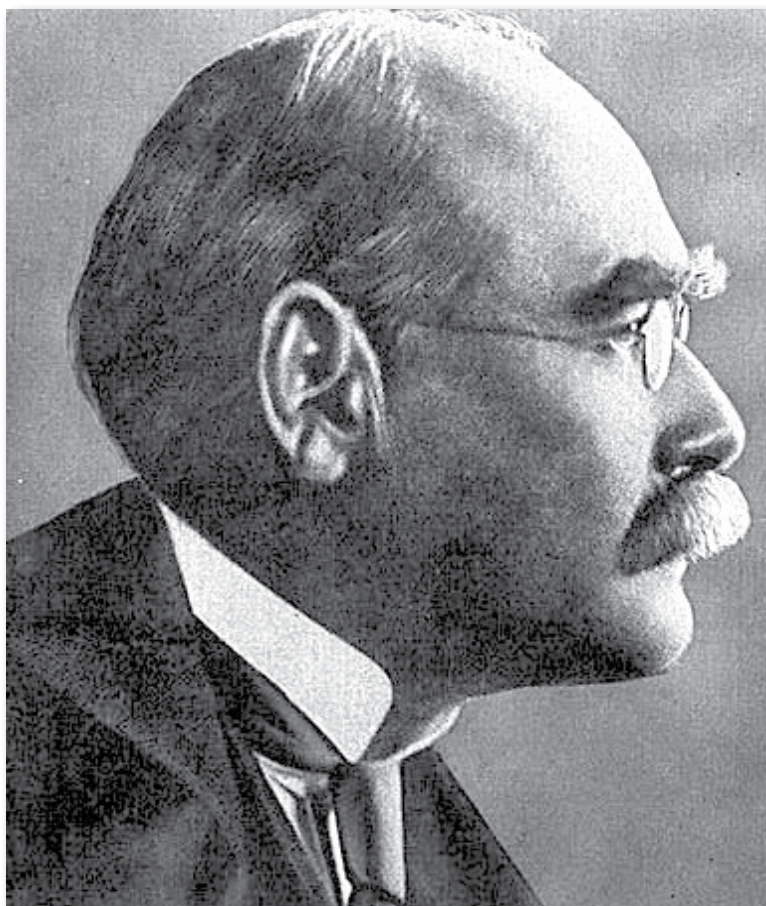
All that said, these social concerns do not displace his core belief in the Empire. There is no misunderstanding possible on that front, which is not to say that there are not more localised misconceptions about Kipling. For example, few who quote the opening line of "The Ballad of East and West", "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet", go on to quote the last ones: "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,/ When two strong men stand face to face though they come from the ends of the earth!".

There is writing that was solely intended to convince Kipling's readers to adopt his views, something that damages the later verse in particular. However, what prevents Kipling

"A recurring plot structure in Kipling, for example, sees the young outsider make his way in adverse conditions, remaining true to certain core tenets."

being seen only as a late Victorian imperialist is his strong belief that his material had to be allowed to come out in its own form, whatever that might be. Kipling was deeply committed not to art for its own sake but to the work and the craft involved in artistic production. His family connections to nineteenth-century British artists are important here – Edward Poynter and Edward Burne-Jones were uncles – but the main influence was his father, Lockwood Kipling, an expert on Indian arts and crafts. Kipling's stories reveal his political views, but they also exhibit the complexity and ambivalence that comes with a serious and sustained engagement with human experience.

The imaginative spaces opened up by Kipling's writing have appealed strongly, as one might expect, to artists of the right, including T.S. Eliot and Jorge Luis Borges. But Kipling has also influenced liberals, and even inspired works by such communist artists as the French composer Charles Koechlin and Bertolt Brecht. In recent decades writers and critics, including Edward Said and Salman Rushdie, have tried to work through the appeal that Kipling's work has for them while acknowledging his pro-Empire beliefs. Kipling's *Kim*, for example, restates British superiority whilst also, in its scenes on the Grand Trunk Road, that "wonderful spectacle", celebrating the invigorating co-existence of different communities and cultures. One of the best-known Empire novels created a powerful image of a plural and democratic India.



Much more than the arch imperialist. Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936).

Art worthy of the name allows in different voices and the possibility of multiple interpretations. It cannot serve one single end. A recurring plot structure in Kipling, for example, sees the young outsider make his way in adverse conditions, remaining true to certain core tenets. In recent times that narrative has appealed to those campaigning for human rights under authoritarian regimes, including the Burmese pro-democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi. Among those watching her finally receive her Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 2012 – a happier occasion by far than Kipling's literature ceremony – was one of her sons, Kim.

British writers and the 1926 General Strike

By Charles Ferrall

Britain's only "general" strike lasted just nine days from the 4th – 13th May, 1926 and involved only 2.6 million workers. But its effect was out of all proportion to these numbers: the industrial backbone of the nation, the coalminers, were locked out on the 1st May after refusing wage cuts and longer hours and then supported by the other two members of the Triple Alliance, the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers' Federation. Transport ground to a halt and the printers' unions also shut down all but a few skeleton newspapers.



Charles Ferrall is a Senior Lecturer at the School of English, Film, Theatre and Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. He and Dougal McNeill are currently writing a book about literary responses to the 1926 General Strike.

The government had been preparing for a showdown since a coal subsidy designed to last only nine months had been instituted on 31 July 1925 with the result that middle and upper class "blacklegs" or "specials" flocked in droves to replace the strikers. Workers remained "firm" until the very end and reacted with shock and incredulity when their leaders in the Trade Union Congress caved in and called the workers back. For years afterwards it would be remembered, on the one side, as a revival of the war-time spirit and a grand adventure or "lark" and, on the other, as the Great Betrayal.

Most of Britain's writers had something to say about the conflict either at the time or later. In his diary Evelyn Waugh predicted that "perhaps April 1926 may not in time rank with July 1914 for the staging of house parties in sociological novels". A decade later Wyndham Lewis argued that the postwar period in which he was writing began with the General Strike. A few years later in 1939 T.S. Eliot remembered that "[o]nly from about the year 1926 did the features of the post-war world begin clearly to emerge" while much later again Leonard Woolf claimed that

When one comes to the practice of politics, anyone writing about his life in the years 1924-1939 must answer the crucial question:

'What did you do in the General Strike?' Of all public events in home politics during my lifetime, the General Strike was the most painful, the most horrifying.

Some writers were moved to action. Leonard Woolf circulated a petition in support of the workers, Osbert Sitwell organised a private meeting of prominent individuals from both side of the conflict, and Rudyard Kipling made a number of recommendations to his friend and the editor of the *Daily Mail*, H.A Gwynne, including the publication of "all the heads of the Unions on the T.U.C. and the extent to which each of them were affiliated with Moscow". In Scotland Hugh MacDiarmid, an activist for the Independent Labour Party, covered the Strike as a journalist and was a speaker for and organiser of the unions in the town in which he was living, Montrose. In Wales Idris Davies, a miner, and Lewis Jones, a pit checkweightman, were involved in union activities, the latter even receiving a three month prison sentence. The Strike more or less divided writers, though probably a majority of the most prominent favoured the strikers.

But the Strike's effect upon the literary canon is difficult to gauge. George Orwell largely dismissed the literary significance of the "proletarian" writing of the 1930s in his 1940s BBC broadcast but did not mention those

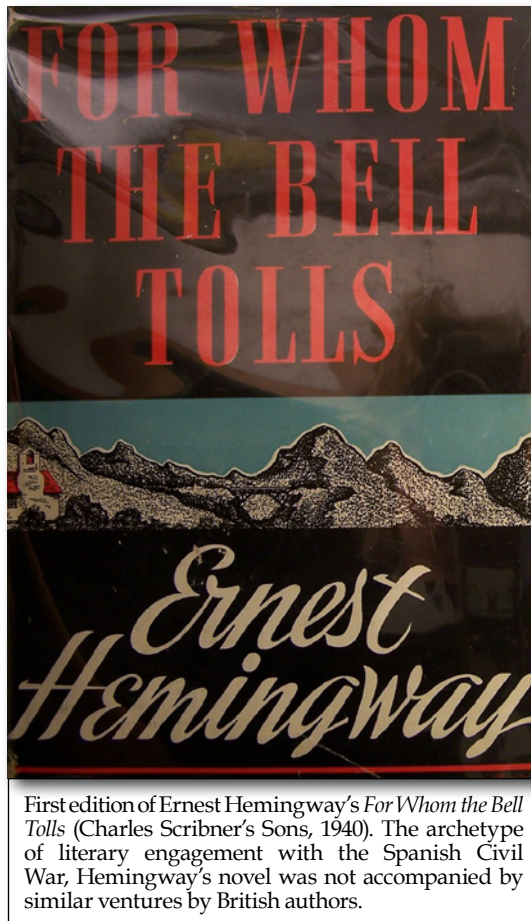
such as Jones and Davies who wrote about the Strike. There were a number of "middle brow" writers who did write novels dealing with the Strike but they are either unknown today or like Horace Walpole have suffered a severe decline in reputation. Galsworthy's *Swan Song*, which begins with the Strike, was in more than one sense the *Forsyte Saga's* swan song. H.G. Wells' novel about the Strike, *Meanwhile*, is one of the weaker novels of his post-War decline into propaganda for a World State.

As for the canonical texts, Henry Green's novel about the lives of workers in a Birmingham factory, *Living*, is rather opaque. Although partly written while he was labouring at his father's factory following a bout of Oxford undergraduate class guilt during the Strike, it does not deal with any kind of class or industrial conflict.



"Of all public events in home politics... the most painful, the most horrifying", was Leonard Woolf's description of the General Strike. Bust of Leonard Woolf at Monk's House, by Stephen Tomlin. Photo: Oliver Mallinson Lewis.

The action of Arnold Bennett's *Accident*, which is about the son of a Northern industrialist and husband of an independently rich woman precipitating a family crisis when he decides to stand for the Independent Labour Party, takes place just before May 1926. The section of MacDiarmid's great poem *A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle* called "The Ballad of the Crucified Christ" was originally called "The Ballad of the General Strike" and only a footnote in the final version alerts the reader to its political subject matter. D.H. Lawrence rewrote *Lady Chatterley's Lover* after witnessing the lockout of the miners (which lasted until November 1926) intensifying both its politics but also its mythologisation and therefore depoliticisation of sex. Similarly Virginia Woolf revised *To the Lighthouse* so that the pivotal character of Charles Tansley, the grandson of a fisherman, becomes more sympathetic and yet also less politically challenging to the other, upper-middle class characters.



First edition of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940). The archetype of literary engagement with the Spanish Civil War, Hemingway's novel was not accompanied by similar ventures by British authors.

What these responses indicate is that most of the texts directly about the Strike did not make it into the twentieth literary canon whereas those that did registered its effects only in a tangential fashion and did not significantly affect the popular understanding of the conflict. As such the literary response to the General Strike exemplifies the relationship between the "literary" and the "political" in the twentieth century. Even in the 1930s, the decade when writers supposedly turned to politics, there is only one uncontested canonical text in English which engaged with that political litmus test of the decade, the Spanish Civil War, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* - and its politics are limited to antifascism rather than any positive ideology. Twentieth century writers are no less "political" than those of other centuries, only less likely to successfully advocate direct party-political and ideological causes. The sections of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* that glorify the "boss", Mussolini, are amongst its worst.

"[M]ost of the texts directly about the Strike did not make it into the twentieth literary canon whereas those that did registered its effects in a tangential fashion. As such the literary response to the General Strike exemplifies the relationship between the 'literary' and the 'political' in the twentieth century."

One possible exception is Lewis Grassie Gibbon's great anti-capitalist trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, whose first novel *Sunset Song* is about the Strike. But then Gibbon claimed that all his texts were "socialist propaganda" while at the same time dismissing "bolshevik blah". Indeed one of the most affecting aspects of *A Scots Quair* is not just its passionate socialism but also its imagery of clouds signifying religious and political belief floating away.

Like *A Scots Quair* many of the texts about the Strike were written during the 1930s, amongst them those by members of the so-called "Auden Generation". These writers approached the Strike aslant, and with curiously deflecting manoeuvres displaced its political significance later in their own personal and literary formation. Autobiographical and offering highly personalised mythologies, the novels and

poems of Auden, Isherwood, Spender, MacNeice and Day Lewis represented the Strike as both epoch-changing and irrelevant. "The thirties was the decade", Stephen Spender claimed later in his career, "in which young writers became involved in politics." To sustain this claim - echoed in Auden's suggestion that he had never read a newspaper as an undergraduate, and in Isherwood's fictional character "Christopher Isherwood" drifting as a naïf through "Lions and Shadows" - the "Auden Generation" works representing the General Strike deploy a strangely conservative rhetoric, figuring it as a 'lark', an irrelevance compared to the '30s commitments to come. Two works from that period - Day Lewis's justly neglected *Starting Point* and MacNeice's radio play *He Had a Date* - offer retrospective reflection on the Strike as the starting point for later political conviction, in the process stressing the 'beginnings' of politics in a later decade.

Other writers would also imply that their 1930s began in 1926. Storm Jameson, for example, dated her own politicisation from the Strike and wrote a novel about it, *None Turn Back*. But the 1930s could only have begun in 1926 if the 1920s had been, contrary to what many writers of the later decade would later claim, political all along. The currently received notion that it was only during the 1930s that writers turned to politics needs to be revised.

The Universal Epic: Milton's *Paradise Lost*

By Juan Christian Pellicer

What can an epic poem that deliberately looks beyond secular politics and national history tell us about the relationship between literature and society? I want to consider the case of the seventeenth-century poet John Milton—the supporter of Parliament and English republican government, the promoter of free speech and political liberty, the defender of the execution of Charles I in 1649, and specifically the author of the greatest epic written in English, *Paradise Lost* (1667). But first—who is this *other* poet, sounding so very much like Milton as he announces himself as ‘his country’s poet’ in distinctly Miltonic blank verse?



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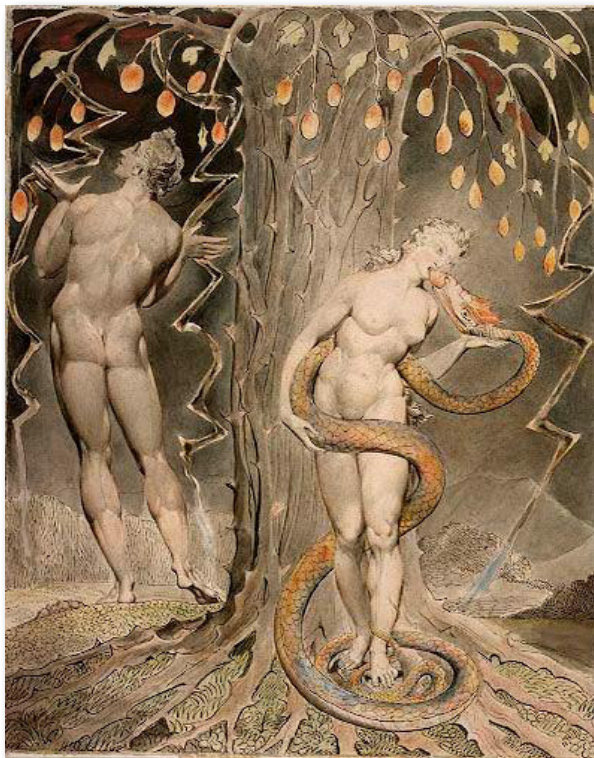
*The Patient Chief, who lab’ring long, arriv’d
On Britains Shore and brought with fav’ring Gods
Arts Arms and Honour to her Ancient Sons:
Daughter of Memory! from elder Time
Recall; and me, with Britains Glory fir’d,
Me, far from meaner Care or meaner Song,
Snatch to thy Holy Hill of Spotless Bay,
My Countrys Poet, to record her Fame.*

Is this a young poet hitching his wagon to Milton’s star as he attempts to ascend the brightest heaven of invention and write a patriotic epic? Not at all. It is Alexander Pope, writing at the very end of his career, a year before his death in 1745. Peerless in his own century, the wizard of rhyme whose *oeuvre* enshrined the heroic couplet as the standard form of his age: behold him near his close, suddenly writing like Milton. It is not just that the pentameters are unrhymed: in every detail the Miltonic style is unmistakable.

And that very style is also quite appropriate. For Pope is in fact writing the opening lines of the foundation epic Milton did *not* write but *could have* written, the epic about the origins of Britain. Milton did not write that epic because he wrote instead the epic of the origin of the world.

Now Pope had planned to write an epic since childhood. His entire career was designed to culminate in an epic work. That work actually exists: it is Pope’s satirical *anti-epic*, *The Dunciad*—a poem, or series of poems, that developed to a four-book monster in the course of a complex gestation from 1728 to 1743. It’s in heroic couplets, it goes without saying—or so one would have thought. Then sometime in 1744, the ageing invalid penned the first eight lines of ‘*Brutus, an Epic*’—the only fragment that survives. He had worked out a prose outline for the story, but we can easily draw the main contours of the project from the surviving lines alone. (Pope not only invites us to imagine the result, but by announcing his literary models, tells us how.) Pope’s hero Brutus, the mythical founder of Britain, is a medieval invention. The Brutus figure is modelled on his supposed ancestor Aeneas, Virgil’s Trojan refugee who landed in Italy to found the civilization destined to be Rome. Pope’s fragment announces, then, that he will equip Great Britain with its own equivalent of the Roman epic, that the *Aeneid* will serve as blueprint for story and plot, and that the poetic style best suited to this particular aim is Milton’s. If Pope had lived to complete his late epic, literary history would have had to be rewritten.

Pope’s fragment of *Brutus* seems to me the best way of showing what Milton deliberately chose *not* to do in writing *Paradise Lost* (1667). In this article I should like to consider some implications of Milton’s decision not to write a national epic. He could have written an Arthurian poem, drawing (as Pope later intended) on the whole Matter of Britain—indeed Milton had planned to, in his youth. Yes, he too modelled his career on Virgil’s, and had begun preparing for his own epic virtually from the start. But by the time he wrote *Paradise Lost* in late middle age, Milton could only scoff at the puerilities of chivalrous romance (*PL* IX.29—41). His whole conception of epic dignity had changed. This was partly because he came to prefer the unglamorous Christian values left ‘unsung’ in martial epic: ‘the better fortitude | Of patience and heroic martyrdom’ (IX.31—3).



William Blake: *The Temptation and Fall of Eve* - illustration to *Paradise Lost* (1808, pen and watercolour on paper).

But that is not the whole story, for the traditions of medieval and Renaissance epic, romance and chronicle showed a great variety of ways in which classical materials could be assimilated into Christian epic. After all, the *patience* of Pope's 'Chief' (*lab'ring long*) reveals that his prototype is Virgil's long-suffering hero, whose pagan Roman piety could demonstrably be reconfigured as chivalric Christian piety—and conceivably eighteenth-century Christian piety too. No, Milton jettisoned the Matter of Britain mainly because he finally chose a subject that would forever make every national epic, including Virgil's, seem positively parochial by comparison.

It was, of course, Virgil who showed him the way. The *Aeneid* achieves a similar universality within its own culture. Virgil drew on every aspect of his own vast learning to project an everlasting Rome proleptically from the vantage-point of its prehistorical and mythic origins. For Virgil, Rome is the world—or rather the centre that gives it coherence. Dante shows several ways, mainly allegorical, in which this conception of universality can be Christianised. But as a radical Protestant, Milton does not value location in this symbolic way. The location of Eden is quite irrelevant, the archangel Michael tells Adam, who nostalgically recalls the times he met with God in the garden. God's omnipresence fills 'not this rock only', Michael reminds Adam (XI.336): the paradise that matters is 'within thee, happier far' (XII.587). Milton recognizes no temple but 'the upright heart and pure' (I.18). This is a universality that knows no geographical centre, no geopolitical bounds but those of Christ, who 'shall ascend | The throne hereditary, and bound his reign | With earth's large bounds, his glory with the heavens' (XII.369—71; cf. *Aeneid* I.278—96.). Dante's Virgilian sense of universality accommodates the sublime parochialism of his own vision in which Florentine politics are discussed in Heaven—though not by God Himself, who is not represented as a character.

"[I]n tracing humanity to its point of origin before the Fall Milton wrote an epic designed to transcend the paradigm of any national culture, or even of any Christian denomination, including that of Rome."

Daringly, Milton does represent the Father and the Son as epic characters, but he preserving their dignity by the fact that they do not discuss worldly affairs. When the archangel Michael offers Adam a prospect of postlapsarian history, he takes the story up to the Crucifixion—and no further. True, Michael does foretell the whole history of Christianity until the Second Coming as one long trial of individualists like Milton himself (XII.485—551). But Milton's vindication of the principle of Protestant individualism at the Apocalypse is presented as a purely redemptive event, imagined in the broadest possible terms. More than cosmopolitan or international, Milton's vision is pentecostal.

This is not to say that Milton is not political: for Milton, religion is politics. And yet Milton did not write about a struggle at the dawn of historical time in order to counterpoint it against its implicitly fulfilling end, its *telos*, in the political struggles of his own century or country. That is what Virgil did (though his Jupiter stretches out Augustus' *imperium* to infinity), and what Pope evidently aimed to copy. By contrast, in tracing humanity to its point of origin before the Fall Milton wrote an epic designed to transcend the paradigm of any national culture, or even of any Christian denomination, including that of Rome. T. S. Eliot once described Virgil as 'The Classic of All Europe'. Milton aspired even beyond that.

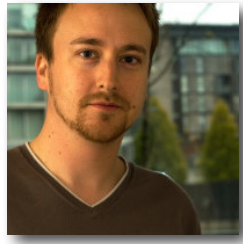
How perennially modern this makes Milton, one is tempted to say. How enduring. How...*global*. But of course the people who read Milton today are not mainly Christians, except perhaps residually. How many readers of *Paradise Lost* would be recognized by Milton as the 'fit audience' he sought? Today they will be very 'few' (VII.31). Yet what is it that impels students not otherwise much concerned with theology to respond with alacrity to Milton's theological arguments? There are many answers: for one thing, Milton encourages such discussion by making the education of Adam and Eve integral to his plot. But one negative answer, and not the less valuable for that, is that Milton refused the obvious invitation that Pope later accepted but failed to fulfil, namely to copy Virgil and write the epic of a nation or even of a linguistic culture. In writing the epic of a religion distinctive precisely for its claims to universality, Milton raised the stakes and *outdid* Virgil (*with* Virgil, one should add).

What would a 'global' epic look like today? A political epic that aimed to transcend political divides? No doubt it would seek to trace to its origins our own sense of having gone astray—a lapse the West now largely conceives in environmentalist terms. What you would be most likely to get today would be an environmentalist epic. It could be something very rich indeed. But if it were to aspire to the universality of Milton, it would have to go to the very root of our conception of being human individuals rather than global citizens. It would have to find some way to outdo Milton (*with* Milton). That is a very tall order. Since Milton's day, many literary works have engaged with his epic by rewriting its fable: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an obvious example. But up to now, readers of Milton find the global epic they seek, and discover the environmentalist epic they need, mainly in the poem they read partly though its rewritings, *Paradise Lost*.

From subculture to urban pastoral: mapping British fiction, mapping the British Left

By Alexander Beaumont

Towards the beginning of Zadie Smith's latest novel, *NW* (2012), two characters embark on a journey through the tawdry sprawl of north-west London in search of a church. Leah and Natalie have lived in Willesden their entire lives, yet neither has set eyes on the one building—the parish church of St Mary's, founded in the tenth century—which serves as the suburb's most abiding symbol of community. As one leads the other past the gaudy local shops ("Kennedy Fried Chicken", "Euphoric Massage") there is little sense that an epiphany might be just around the corner. As Natalie complains, "it's like walking the hard shoulder on a motorway". And yet, at last, they find it: "A little country church, a medieval country church, stranded in this half-acre, in the middle of a roundabout. Out of time, out of place".



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This strange encounter with the pastoral in an insalubrious corner of the British capital is one of the most mournful passages in Smith's altogether elegiac novel. As Leah and Natalie explore the church, the prose palpates with a sense of loss—but loss of what? Of a more "human", more "organic" way of living? Though *NW* might be shot through with a sense of urban ennui, it seems hard to believe that as sharp a novelist as Smith would conspire with the delusional pastoralism that is so characteristic of the English middle brow. Certainly, the exuberance of *White Teeth* (2000) was in part a consequence of its author's youth, but surely the twelve years of creative maturation separating that novel and *NW* can't have inspired in her a need to fetishise past models of sociality in such an apparently un-ironic fashion?

In fact, the journey from a celebration of urban culture to a more guarded or even hostile engagement with the city has been a persistent feature of British fiction over the last thirty years. Hanif Kureishi's career is perhaps the paradigmatic example of such a trend: from the early ebullience of *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), his enthusiasm for the urban experience took a knock in *The Black Album* (1995) which resulted in two deeply disenchanting collections of short fiction; this was followed by an attempt to reclaim the dynamism of *Buddha* which resulted in the cheerful but rather facile *Gabriel's Gift* (2001), after which he appears to have sublimated his despair into the resignation that haunts his most recent novel, *Something to Tell You* (2008). Now a similar trajectory is apparently being effected by younger writers: just like *Something to Tell You*, Smith's latest novel

also features a protagonist who, while apparently adept at dealing with the challenges of contemporary urban life, strikes the reader as fundamentally ensnared and curiously futureless. While Kureishi centres his narrative on Jamal, a complacent, middle-class psychoanalyst thrown back on his own ego by a crime committed during his hedonistic youth, the early chapters of *NW* are focalised through Leah, similarly sybaritic in her teens but now a rudderless thirty-something terrified by the prospect of parenthood.

Of course, it might be argued that this likeness indicates nothing more than a universal preoccupation with lost youth; however, I would suggest that it speaks more potently of a cultural pathology quite specific to recent British fiction which has much to do with the political experience of the UK over the last thirty years. Such a pathology finds its clearest expression in representations of urban ennui and nostalgia for a lost sense of community. However, these familiar forms of pessimism often serve to obscure a deeper, more geographically particular and more intractable logic that concerns the legacy of Thatcherism, the decline of the British Left, and the foreclosure of political space by Right and Left alike.

As geographers such as David Harvey and Edward Soja and political theorists such as Bonnie Honig and Chantal Mouffe have repeatedly emphasised, the period of neoliberalism has been marked by the persistent shutting down of spaces in which political expression might occur. Since about 1974, we have witnessed not just the privatisation of public utilities, but something resembling the desuetude of public life itself, as share- and homeowner models of democracy have gradually displaced politics from the most mundane spaces of everyday experience right up to the most elevated arenas of state governance. The phenomenon of professionalisation, for instance, has been concomitant with both the rise of the employment tribunal in the workplace and the emergence of a political class whose fitness to rule depends to a greater degree than at any other point since World War II on domestic circumstances—the most important being where they were schooled. One's attitude towards such developments depends to a great extent on one's own politics, of course, and—speaking as a leftist—I would warn against any straightforwardly apocalyptic interpretation, since to fetishise "traditional" models of left-wing political agency is always to run the risk of falling prey to what Wendy Brown has termed "Left melancholia". Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that, at least in the UK, political space has suffered a dramatic foreclosure in the last few decades, and I think this has had a great bearing on the pejoration of attitudes towards the city in contemporary British fiction.

That the city functions—or, perhaps, should function—as a kind of commons is now virtually axiomatic on the Left. Since Henri Lefebvre coined the concept of a “right to the city”, innumerable leftists have insisted upon treating urban space as the most ostentatious expression of—and likeliest source of resistance to—capitalist relations of production (David Harvey’s recently published *Rebel Cities* (2012) is only the latest iteration of this tendency). This is perhaps why, since Thatcher, the British Right has strategically sought to disband or marginalise the political institutions that govern urban life while expanding opportunities for the latter’s penetration by capital. The most dramatic examples of the latter are represented by the Housing Act of 1980, which permitted council tenants to buy their homes at two-thirds of the market value; the Local Government, Planning and Land Act of the same year, which enabled the introduction of development corporations and, subsequently, enterprise zones; and the Local Government Act of 1985, which abolished the London and Metropolitan County Councils widely perceived by the government as both a brake on investment and incubators of the Left which it would be politically advantageous to do away with.

At the same time, key figures on the Left—having become disenchanted with the institutions of mass mobilisation bequeathed by the post-war settlement—were looking for alternative models of political organisation that might accommodate a greater plurality of subjectivities than had previously been the case. Central to this movement were figures connected to the emerging field of British cultural studies such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, who alighted on the urban subculture as a more inclusive model of collective agency than, say, unionism. The subculture, as Dick Hebdige argues in his classic study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), functions as an expression of both collective identity and discontinuity with earlier generations in a way that is inherently political. Moreover, the tendency of these social formations to proliferate in a fashion that was more sensitive to the ceaselessly shifting nature of identity-formation in the late twentieth century spoke of their potential for undermining the chauvinistic project of cultural normativity mobilised by Thatcherism as a smokescreen for its disaggregating impact on British public life. Given that such proliferation occurred primarily in urban areas—where, in Gilroy’s words, “the intersection of territoriality and

identity” was most visible—the city itself thus became a space for the expression of a collective, if motley, political will.

Such an attitude towards the city is very much in evidence in *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The novel is clearly a satire of the circumstances that led to the emergence of Thatcherism in Britain in the late 1970s, and it is certainly not insensitive to the modishness of subcultural identities, nor their tendency to sell out for the right price (the protagonist’s best friend, Charlie, makes a great deal of money flogging a brand of phony British punk in the American marketplace). However, there is a sense throughout of London as a site that can contain all this, and the novel ends on a touching flourish of optimism, with the protagonist, his friends and family committed to an uncertain life “in the centre of this old city that I love”.

The difference between this passage and the one that opened this article could not be starker, and implies that that the subcultural model of political agency developed by the Left as a means of doing battle with Thatcherism has failed. To understand the shift between Kureishi’s representation of London in *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Smith’s in *NW* is thus to account for the “cultural” Left’s failure—even as it sought to open up new political spaces—to prevent the diminution of the space of politics itself under neoliberalism. It would be impossible to explain this process fully here; however, I would argue that the journey from subculture to urban pastoral is one that hinges on that moment of repudiation in the early 1980s, when the historic vehicles of working-class enfranchisement were rejected in an attempt to forge newer, more inclusive kinds of political space. To rake over the mistakes made by the British Left at that particular moment might be to risk preserving traditional leftist strategies in aspic; to treat the latter as if they could be as effective today as they were in the post-war period; in other words, to hazard engaging in Left melancholia. But it would also help us to understand precisely why the British Left has failed where in other countries—Norway, for example—it has succeeded, at least to some extent. This is knowledge with which close attention to representations of the city in contemporary British fiction might equip us, and is not, I would suggest, to be passed up lightly.



Left astray or left renewed? Zadie Smith announcing the five 2010 National Book Critics Circle finalists in fiction. Photographer: David Shankbone.

Tony Blair, Robert Harris and the ghost of a literary feud

By Steven Powell

One of the great ironies of the British party political system is that although the Conservative Party has been guilty of regicide on numerous occasions, the Tories still tend to be more reverential to their greatest leaders (even retrospectively to those they topple, as with Margaret Thatcher) than the Labour Party. There have been six Labour leaders who have become Prime Minister, and only one of them is looked back on with much deference by Labour supporters. In a poll compiled by *the Guardian* of Labour's political heroes, Clement Attlee was the only Prime Minister to make the final shortlist.



Steven Powell is an independent scholar currently writing a PhD at the University of Liverpool on the work of American crime novelist James Ellroy. He has edited the books *Conversations with James Ellroy* (University Press of Mississippi, 2012) and *100 American Crime Writers* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). He blogs about crime fiction at <http://venetianvase.co.uk/>.

Political reputations rise and fall in and out of office; however, no Labour leader has achieved the level of indignation presently directed at Tony Blair. One of his most creative critics is the millionaire author Robert Harris, who originally was a devoted supporter of both Blair and the "New" Labour project. As a *Sunday Times* columnist, Harris met Blair in 1992 and was greatly impressed with his personality and style: "[Blair] was fantastic. He talked like a member of the human race, he was sensible."¹ Blair was undoubtedly an exceptional political leader, modernising his party where previous leaders had failed and winning three successive general elections. But his brilliance at playing the political game, through his "triangulation" of policies, was partly to blame for his downfall as it masked an absence of vision for the country.

Even moral values seemed to be sacrificed in the name of media spin. The sitcoms *Yes Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* were Margaret Thatcher's favourite television programs in office, as they satirised how power in Britain lay in the hands of the Civil Service who were always resistant to reform and whom Thatcher detested. The cultural depictions of politics in the Blair years by contrast

reflected the political shift in power away from civil servants and towards media spin-doctors, whom Blair was heavily reliant upon and who were mercilessly lampooned in the dark political comedy *The Thick of It*.

Like many Labour supporters, Harris' disillusionment with Blair grew gradually. The final straw came when Blair committed British forces to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Britain was to enter the war on terror on the (false) grounds that Saddam Hussein possessed and was developing weapons of mass destruction. It did not take long for Saddam's regime to fall after the invasion, but British and American forces soon found themselves in quagmire as the country descended into sectarian violence and anarchy. Blair clung to power, but the honeymoon was over. He was finally forced out under pressure from the Parliamentary Labour Party in 2007. Seeing the potential for a political novel, and perhaps a chance at revenge, Robert Harris dropped his other work and began *The Ghost* in January 2007. He finished the novel seven months later, only a few months after Blair stood down.

The Ghost is not so much a novel of the Blair years as a novel of the man himself, here renamed Adam Lang. The novel is written in the form of a memoir of a memoir, the first-person narrator is the unnamed ghost writer of Lang's autobiography, who describes the process of how he was hired by Lang's publisher to take over the project and bring the sprawling, unreadable manuscript into a publishable form one month after the previous ghost writer was found dead in an apparent suicide. The new ghost writer travels to Martha's Vineyard in New England, where Lang is holed up in luxurious exile. The reader is left in no doubt as to Lang's magnetic charm, as the narrator remarks, "Everybody voted for him. He wasn't a politician; he was a craze."² The parallels between fiction and reality in the novel are striking. Lang's outspoken wife is clearly based on Cherie Blair; his beautiful assistant Amelia Bly is modelled on Anji Hunter; the late Robin Cook was the basis for Lang's nemesis, the bitter former Foreign Secretary Richard Rycart.



Novelist, journalist - and Blair's ghost. Robert Harris, whose novel *The Ghost* (Hutchinson, 2007) represents a scathing critique of Tony Blair's spell as prime minister, and its aftermath. Photograph: Jost Hindersmann.

However, it is the prophetic element to the writing which shows Harris at his strongest. Lang is revered in the US but hated in his own country and stalked by anti-war protestors everywhere he goes. Harris takes some dramatic licence on how the war on terror affected the UK, for instance, bombs exploding in London are portrayed as a regular occurrence. The final twist in the tale, which purports to explain why Lang's government was so unreservedly pro-American, is wildly over the top, but his description of Lang's virtual exile once he has left office is remarkably prescient. Since he stepped down as Prime Minister, it has been rumoured by political blogger Guido Fawkes and others that Blair is a non-dom, which means he can only spend 90 days a year in the country he used to govern for tax purposes. His travels have become almost as dangerous as Lang's: after being pelted with eggs at a Dublin bookstore during a book signing to promote his memoirs, a London book signing was cancelled. An anti-war protestor tried to make a citizen's arrest of Blair in Hong Kong citing breaches of the Geneva Convention. Blair is alleged to have described Harris as a "cheeky fuck" for writing *The Ghost*.

"The most interesting legacy of the novel is that Blair refused to hire a ghost writer to help him draft his own memoirs, *The Journey*, and the subsequent critical reaction was uniformly hostile."

The most interesting legacy of the novel is that Blair refused to hire a ghost writer to help him draft his own memoirs, *The Journey*, and the subsequent critical reaction was uniformly hostile. In his review for *The Observer*, Andrew Rawnsley describes Blair's prose as "execrable," and the chapters "are as badly planned as the invasion of Iraq."³

When Phyllida Lloyd's *The Iron Lady* was released in 2011, it was heavily criticised for its disrespectful portrayal of the aging Lady Thatcher's struggle with dementia. Blair, by contrast, had few defenders with *The Ghost*. The Labour Party both in government and latterly in opposition has tried to distance itself from his record. His much vaunted "re-entry" into British politics has been largely ignored. The only role he has thus far secured is the rather underwhelming post of Olympics legacy advisor for Labour.

Some of the criticism of *The Journey* was overly harsh as journalists gleefully took revenge on the

Prime Minister who once accused the media as being a "feral beast", but it is hardly inappropriate to argue that Blair truly could have benefitted from (at least) some editorial oversight on his memoirs. *The Journey* is a difficult read even for political junkies. It is full

of mixed metaphors and clunky turns of phrase: on Princess Diana's effect on the monarchy Blair writes, "Suddenly, an unpredictable meteor had come into this predictable and highly regulated ecosystem."⁴ There are even plagiarisms from fictional depictions of his premiership: according to Blair, during his first official meeting with Queen Elizabeth II, she told him, "You are my tenth prime minister. The first was Winston. That was before you

were born." (AJ, p.14) This line was an invention of screenwriter Peter Morgan who wrote a remarkably similar piece of dialogue for Stephen Frears' *The Queen* (2006) which Blair claims never to have watched. Perhaps most heretically of all in the eyes of Labour supporters, Blair confesses in his memoir that he voted Labour in the 1983 general election despite thinking it was not in the nation's best interests. The high point of Labour's lurch to the left of the early 1980s, it was also the election which saw Blair become an MP.

Political memoirs have long been used to settle scores and air grudges. In Churchill's *The Gathering Storm*, the index entry on his political rival Stanley Baldwin contains the line "confesses putting party before country"⁵ with regards to Baldwin's policy of appeasement. By contrast, Robert Harris is not mentioned in *The Journey*. Perhaps Blair thought a better act of revenge would be to exclude him from the index. The irony here is that it may well have been the success of *The Ghost* that made Blair decide not to hire a professional ghost writer. If so, it was Harris' last act of revenge on the political leader he once revered. Truly, Robert Harris is the ghost of *The Journey*.



Power corrupts. Pierce Brosnan as Adam Lang, the recently unseated British prime minister at the centre of *The Ghost Writer* (2010), directed by Roman Polanski and based on Robert Harris' novel. Photograph © StudioCanal UK.

Notes

1. Aida Edemarian, "I think Tony Blair would see the joke", *the Guardian*, 27 Sep 2007.
2. Robert Harris, *The Ghost*, (London: Arrow, 2008), p. 6.
3. Andrew Rawnsley, "Tony Blair's *The Journey*: Andrew Rawnsley's verdict", *The Observer*, 5 Sep 2010.
4. Tony Blair, *The Journey*, (London: Hutchinson, 2010), p.134 Hereafter referred to as AJ.
5. Cf. Robin Harris: *The Conservatives: A History* (London: Bantam Press, 2011), pp.294-5.

A strategic crossroads: Dr Liam Fox MP addressed British Politics Society seminar on 29 October

On 29 October, the British Politics Society invited its members and friends to an exclusive seminar with the Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox, Conservative MP for North Somerset and former Defence Secretary serving under David Cameron from 2010 to 2011.

Under the heading "Norway and Britain: Opportunities and Challenges in Europe and the High North", Dr Fox identified key challenges to British and Norwegian foreign policy today, paying particular notice to the bilateral relationship and the two countries' relations with the EU.

In his speech, Dr Fox argued that it was time for Britain to form "a new, looser relationship" with the EU. This new relationship should be grounded in Britain's national interest as well as a general assessment of what institutions are positioned to support growth and security in Europe over the coming decades.



Moreover, it should be based on a proper consultation of the British voters, who were asked to accept membership in 1975 at a time when the European Community was primarily conceived as only a common market.

Dr Fox also warned against political fringe movements that are nurtured by the failure of politics to harness development in tune with people's needs. The strengthening of the populist radical right in countries as different as Finland and Greece show the precariousness of the situation. "The stakes are too high to play fast and loose with the economics and politics of the European continent," he warned.

One of the key elements in sustaining stability and security in Europe is NATO, an institutional cooperation which therefore requires solid support. "All its members need to remember that an alliance based on warm words but without the necessary military hardware and spending cannot continue indefinitely", was one of Dr Fox's concluding arguments.



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Forthcoming edition of *British Politics Review*

In the next edition of *British Politics Review* we will look closer at the presence of military and defence issues in British society.

The extent to which Britain's self-conception as a great power has depended on its military strength overarches the different angles to be presented. On the political side, what role have military interests played in shaping

British foreign policy at strategic crossroads of the country's history? How important have military interests been, and how has the relationship between its leaders and those of the government been construed?

We will also approach the role of the military within literature and the popular imagination. What role did military might

play in understandings of imperialism, of the two World Wars, and of Britain's dwindling international strength in the postwar era? And, finally under the current budget cuts, to what extent are political, popular and literary views of the military in transition?

The winter edition of *British Politics Review* is due to arrive in February 2013.