

Culture

Political Poetry

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“Political” poetry. All human activity is political because it takes place in a context — the context of history. Sending someone a recipe for crab meat salad is one thing if you work food prep in a restaurant kitchen. It means something else if you’re Nancy Reagan.

Poets have been political, in some sense of the word, from the earliest beginnings to the present. Enheduanna, Sumerian poet, priestess of the moon goddess Inanna, the earliest poet whose name is known. The Chinese government compiled collections of popular folk songs — for example, the *Shih Ching*, the Book of Songs — as a way of learning something about what the people were thinking. (Did Nixon listen to Bob Dylan or Joan Baez or Pete Seeger? Does George Bush listen to Billy Bragg or Tracy Chapman or rap music?)

Homer was political. (George Bush on the walls of Troy.) The *Bhagavad Gita* (which J. Robert Oppenheimer quoted as he watched the first atomic bomb explode in the New Mexico desert) was and is political. The plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripedes were defining forces in Greek society. Dante and Shakespeare were all political. (If Dante were writing today, who would he consign to the ninth circle of Hell?) The great flowering of art and culture in medieval Spain grew originally from the founding of a new Umayyad dynasty in exile by survivors of the conquest of Damascus by the Abbasids. The *trouveres* and *troubadours* of medieval France lived in a time of constant upheaval and displacement and continuously shifting political alliances, in which most if not all of them were intimately involved. (Many died during the wholesale slaughter that took place during the Albigensian crusades, following which troubadour poetry essentially came to a halt.)

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Chaucer was political, Tu Fu (or Du Fu) was political, Murasaki Shikibu was political. Andrew Marvell, William Blake, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Whitman, Rubén Darío, José Martí, Yosano Akiko. Political, in at least some sense of the word.

What we're talking about here is something more specific. We're talking about poetry that expresses or reflects — either explicitly or at least by suggestion — politics that are left-wing, working-class, populist, or of a similar character.

How to combine politics with creative work remains an unsettled question on the political Left. This is not simply a question of Socialist or Communist Realism versus whatever else.

The widespread stereotype of Socialist Realism emphasizes the huge public portraits and statues of Lenin, Stalin, Mao, etc., and maybe allows for some murals and poster art of muscle-bound workers in factories and rosy-cheeked starry-eyed young men and women gazing off at the bright horizon of the future. This, again, is the stereotype.

But it should be patently obvious that public portraits and monument sculpture, poster art, and so on, comprise only a portion of (and not necessarily the best) of a culture's art. We cannot judge the effectiveness of Socialist Realism (or any other artistic movement or tendency of the political Left) based only on the more mediocre or homogenized examples.

Should we judge the art of capitalist societies based only on Norman Rockwell and Mount Rushmore? Should we judge American literature based on *McGuffey's Reader*? Are these the basis for the prevailing critical standards advocated by the literature and art departments at leading universities?

For every Norman Rockwell there's a Diego Rivera, a David Siqueiros, a Walter Crane, a Sue Coe; for every Edgar Guest and Joyce Kilmer there's a Thomas McGrath, a Muriel Rukeyser, a Hugh MacDiarmid.

Some people argue that there is much badly written political poetry — that much of it reads like a political pamphlet chopped into line breaks, or sing-song rhyming doggerel — and that this proves that political subject matter is not suited to poetry.

But there is also much badly written love poetry, badly written poetry about religion, nature, and every other subject. Do we then conclude that love, religion, nature, etc., are also unsuitable subjects for poetry? Do Hallmark greeting cards invalidate the work of Dante and Shakespeare and Shelley and Wordsworth?

Journalism reports facts; poetry tells the truth. In our time much political discourse in English — including discourse on the political Left — is weighted with high-sounding rhetoric, with the Greco-Roman vocabulary of philosophy, psychology, and the other social sciences. One of our tasks, when writing about political subject matter (or any other subjects) is to make decisions about the vocabulary we use.

There is nothing wrong with using, in a poem, words such as “capitalism,” “working class,” “imperialism,” “revolution,” etc. The challenge is to ground such language in the concrete physical texture and detail of the world we live in from day to day, to reclaim it from the bourgeois abuse and alienation it has suffered, to give it the life and meaning it can actually have.

We are not talking about merely taking a political speech or pamphlet, or a set of theoretical statements, and simplistically grafting them onto the skeleton of a poem — as if writing a poem were an act of taxidermy. It’s difficult to write a love poem if you’ve never been in love, or to write a poem about nature if you’ve never touched a tree.

Similarly, it can be difficult to write a good political poem if you’ve never marched in an anti-war demonstration, or faced a platoon of police in riot gear preparing to charge, or tried to pay rent or medicals when you’ve been unemployed for six months. The best examples of good left-wing political poetry are written out of an organic understanding of the politics, and out of a passionate involvement in the political movements of the time and place in which the poet lives.

Poetry of the political Left from the twentieth century has developed along several currents or tendencies. My intention here is not to define rigid categories but to give examples of some of the possibilities poets have explored. Though one or two of the poets I’ve named below might not strictly be considered politically Left, all have at least shown a general outlook in their work that is populist, working-class, anti-fascist, radically democratic, or of a similar character.

1. Poetry rich in metaphor and imagery, poetry that works mainly by evoking feeling and sensory experience (rather than by elaborating intellectual argument or rhetorical appeal). Example poets might be Pablo Neruda (usually), Paul Éluard, Lorca, Yosano Akiko, Mahmoud Darwish, Dale Jacobson, René Depestre. Sometimes verging on surrealism, as with Éluard and Lorca and Depestre.

2. Poetry that is agitational in tone, spare in imagery and metaphor, working by the kinetic energy of public speech. Examples are Bertolt Brecht, Mayakovsky, Sol Funaroff, Langston Hughes, César Vallejo in *Spain, Take This Cup from Me*.

3. Poetry similar to the second type above but with a quieter voice, more personal, direct face-to-face speech rather than public oratory. Examples are Nazim Hikmet, Otto René Castillo, Roque Dalton, Claribel Alegría, Maria Aliger, Anna Swir, Joy Harjo sometimes, Carl Sandburg, Luis J. Rodríguez often, Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

4. Poetry that derives from or consciously imitates folk song. Examples include Brecht (sometimes), Thomas McGrath (sometimes), José Martí, Hugh MacDiarmid occasionally, Langston Hughes, Naomi Replansky at times.

5. Poetry that is essentially traditional or classical lyric in tone (whether or not employing the external forms — sonnets, quatrains, etc.). Examples are Thomas

McGrath (most characteristically), Louis Aragon, Miguel Hernández, Rafael Alberti, Mao Tse-Tung [or Mao Zedong], William Blake (in the shorter lyric poems), Rubén Darío, Yannis Ritsos, Nancy Morejón, Don Gordon, Olga Cabral, Nelly Sachs.

6. Poetry that communicates by its rhetorical strength, poetry of ecstatic utterance. Similar to type 2 above but with more elevated language. Examples are William Blake (in the “prophetic” poems), Léopold Senghor, Walt Whitman, Kenneth Fearing, Yannis Ritsos in some of his longer poems, Anuradha Mahapatra, Joy Harjo sometimes, Dennis Brutus, Janice Mirikitani, Muriel Rukeyser.

7. Poetry that communicates mainly by intellectual argument or statement. Examples are W. H. Auden, Edwin Rolfe, Jack Beeching.

8. Poetry that is documentary or journalistic in tone and method. Examples are Agostinho Neto, Javier Heraud, Leonel Rugama, Zöe Anglesey (often), Yannis Ritsos (sometimes), Anna Swir (sometimes), Nazim Hikmet especially in his book-length poem *Human Landscapes from My Country*.

9. Poetry that works by humor or satire, or by an overall humorous or satirical tone. Examples include Kenneth Patchen (often), Thomas McGrath now and then, Kenneth Fearing from time to time, Mayakovsky often.

Obviously none of the poets named above wrote purely in the manners or styles outlined here. All have written poetry that fluidly combines the various approaches described above, and are certainly not limited to the possibilities given here. The above list is, again, intended to suggest some of the existing possibilities, not to limit or define rigidly.

Let us state here for the record that political correctness, understood properly, is a good thing. The expression “politically correct” originally meant “politically (and/or ethically/morally) the right thing to do.” It became a little confusing, sometimes, to talk about what was “politically right” because it sounded a little bit like “*the* political right” (who are, of course, politically wrong). So people got into the habit of saying “politically correct” instead, which sounded a little pompous sometimes but tended to be less confusing. To write poetry with political content that is left-wing, working-class, populist, or of a similar nature, is the right thing to do.

The examples above make it clear that it is thoroughly possible to write poetry that has progressive political content and that is well-written. The fact is that left-wing political poetry, taken as a whole, is *better poetry* than poetry in which the poet has tried to leave politics out of it, or in which the poet has deliberately written from a right-wing perspective (I suppose a few examples of the latter do exist).

We should have no hesitation about saying this — not, obviously, as absolute decrees from Olympus, but as acts of affirmative belief: Carl Sandburg wrote better poetry than Ezra Pound. Muriel Rukeyser wrote better poetry than T. S. Eliot. Thomas McGrath wrote better poetry than Robert Lowell. Langston Hughes

wrote better poetry than Wallace Stevens. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote better poetry than Marianne Moore. Mayakovsky wrote better poetry than Akhmatova or Mandelstam. Brecht wrote better poetry than Rilke. Otto René Castillo and Leonel Rugama wrote better poetry than Octavio Paz. Etheridge Knight wrote better poetry than John Berryman. Sharon Doubiago and Joy Harjo and Dale Jacobson and Luis Rodríguez and Nellie Wong write better poetry than Jorie Graham or Marvin Bell or C. K. Williams or Billy Collins or Sharon Olds.

We don't need the ruling class (or its representatives in arts and letters) to tell us whether or not we're good poets. The record of our poetry, and the history from which it arises, speaks for itself. We reject "literary" standards that preclude politics as acceptable or essential subject matter. We belong in the real world of the living — breathing, changing, revolutionary — and the real world (and the poetry that grows from it) is the only answer we need to give.

