

The silence of our writers

In 1935, the first Congress of American Writers was held at the Carnegie Hall in New York, followed by another two years later. By one account, 3,500 crammed into the auditorium and a thousand more were turned away. They were electric events, with writers discussing how they could confront ominous events in Abyssinia, China and Spain. Telegrams from Thomas Mann, C Day Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Albert Einstein were read out, reflecting the fear that great power was now rampant and that it had become impossible to discuss art and literature without politics.

“A writer,” Martha Gellhorn told the second congress, “must be a man of action now . . . A man who has given a year of his life to steel strikes, or to the unemployed, or to the problems of racial prejudice, has not lost or wasted time. He is a man who has known where he belonged. If you should survive such action, what you have to say about it afterwards is the truth, is necessary and real, and it will last.”

Her words echo across the silence today. That the menace of great and violent power in our own times is apparently accepted by celebrated writers, and by many of those who guard the gates of literary criticism, is uncontroversial. Not for them the impossibility of writing and promoting literature bereft of politics. Not for them the responsibility to speak out - a responsibility felt by even the unpolitical Ernest Hemingway. Today, realism is declared obsolete; an ironic hauteur is affected; false symbolism is all. As for the readers, their political imagination is to be pacified, not primed; after all, what do they care? Martin Amis expressed this well in *Visiting Mrs Nabokov*: “The dominance of the self is not a flaw, it is an evolutionary characteristic; it is just how things are.”

So it is “evolution”. We have evolved to the apolitical self; to the introspection and squabbles of individuals divorced from any notion that their self-obsession is less important and less interesting than an engagement with how things really

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are for the rest of us. Some years ago, the then budding literary critic D J Taylor wrote a rare piece called “When the pen sleeps”. He expanded this into a book, *A Vain Conceit*, in which he wondered why the English novel so often degenerated into “drawing room twitter” and why the urgent issues of the day were shunned by writers, unlike their counterparts in, say, Latin America who felt an obligation to take up the political essence in all our lives and which shapes our lives. Where, he asked, were the George Orwells, the Upton Sinclairs, the John Steinbecks? (Taylor recently seemed to be repudiating this; let’s hope he has recovered his nerve.)

The main literature prize shortlists bear out his original thesis. Yet according to Claire Armistead, literary editor of the *Guardian*, “writers are challenging any sort of parochialism”. But what else do they challenge? She describes “a real generic inventiveness” in the three non-fiction nominations of the *Guardian Book Award*. One is about a neurologist who plays with words in a “totally eccentric” way; another is about mountains; another is about the former East Germany which, she says, “makes you understand a little better what a funny old world we live in”.

But where are the contemporary works that go to the heart of this funny old world, as the books of Steinbeck and Joseph Heller did? Where is the equivalent of Eduardo Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America*, Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve-Up!* and Timothy Mo’s *The Redundancy of Courage*? There are, of course, honourable exceptions. You can buy James Kelman’s collection *And the Judges Said . . .* in W H Smith, which proves that books that rescue true politics from the Westminster media village’s “bantering inconsequence” (to borrow from F Scott Fitzgerald) are wanted very much by the public.

Indeed, there are countless books by little-known authors, produced by ever-struggling publishers such as Pluto and Zed, which illuminate, sometimes brilliantly, the shadows of rapacious power and which are ignored in the so-called mainstream. No doubt, they are deemed “political”; and unless politics can be diminished to its stereotypes and, better still, turned into a TV drama, no thank you. After all, as one critic who dominates the reviews of paperback non-fiction, wrote: the suggestion that social democracy is threatened by the insane march of George Bush and his attendant McCarthyism is, well, “silly”. No matter that when you fly to the United States you lose the basic civil liberty of your privacy; that your name alone can lead to body searches, as Edward Said frequently experienced; that the FBI now routinely inspects the reading lists of public libraries.

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These are dangerous times, and surreal. Column after column is devoted to the Martin Amis cult: he who describes politics as having “withered away in this country, and that’s a great tribute to its highly evolved character”, and who sneers at the great anti-capitalist and anti-war demonstrations as “really [about] anti-politics; they’re protesting about politics itself”.

While the Guardian rejoices in the new-found humanity of the former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright as she promotes her autobiography, *Madam Secretary*, there is not a single reference to the fact that this same woman, when asked if the deaths of 500,000 children in Iraq as a result of American-driven sanctions were a price worth paying, replied: “We think the price is worth it.” The headline over her smiling face read: “I loved what I did.”

“When truth is replaced by silence,” the Soviet dissident Yevgeny Yevtushenko said, “the silence is a lie.” No writers’ congress today worries about the lies and crimes of George Bush and Tony Blair. It is gratifying that the playwright David Hare has broken his silence (“America provides the firepower; we provide the bullshit”) and joined the courageous dissident Harold Pinter. There is an urgency now. A Downing Street document, circulated among “progressive” European governments, wants a world order in which western powers have the authority to attack any other sovereign country. In six years, Blair has sent British troops to take part in five conflicts, and he wants yet more bloodletting. The document echoes his views on “rights and responsibilities” - to kill and devastate people in faraway places, thereby endangering and diminishing all of us.

What would George Orwell make of this? There is a series of Orwell events planned to mark the centenary of his birth. Most of those participating are politically safe or accredited liberal warriors. What if Orwell had turned *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into parables about thought control in relatively free societies, in which he identified the disciplined minds of the corporate state and the invisible boundaries of liberal control and the latest fashions in emperor’s clothes? Would they still celebrate him?

“They won’t say . . .” wrote Bertolt Brecht in “In Dark Times”, “. . . when the great wars were being prepared for . . . they won’t say: the times were dark. Rather: why were their poets silent?” **JP**