



Language, Politics and Writing: Stolentelling in Western Europe

Patrick McCarthy

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McCarthy sets out his claims and intentions clearly enough: he is interested in politics and writing, as in the links between a novel and a political trend or between the language of literature and the language of politics; and in how a knowledge of the 20th century may be enhanced by looking at literature and politics together — how language shapes politics, and how political structures and systems construct languages of politics. As they stand, such claims are unexceptional (though not uncontentious, particularly from the literary point of view.) What is ostensibly new, and potentially more interesting, is his notion of *stolentelling*. Derived from a (part) reading of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, this is the conjecture that all language is spawned by other language and is thus second-hand or stolen (sometimes many times over). So readers can join in the practice, liberating themselves from the everyday speech that shapes their banal existence. Specific themes are then followed through in the substantive chapters of the book — language itself and political power and the shaping of language, class politics and language, commitment, feminism, national identity. McCarthy's conclusion then repeats the strongly stated introductory theme, that inasmuch as language shapes politics, and politics creates its own language, the task of the writer is to criticize that language, to show that there are other kinds of discourse, and to reveal what is special about the literary language.

While his concerns are stated clearly enough, the working-out of these ideas is less so. Chapters on specific topics — Italian political language, the poet Seamus Heaney, 'A tale of two Margarets' (Drabble and Thatcher), for instance — are distractingly diverse, a mixture of summary of contents of various illustrative texts together with retelling of episodes of twentieth-century political history, personal asides, digressions into political comment, and conclusions derived from that mix. Taken at a run, as it were, this book is entertaining enough in that combination — not least for its introductions to unfamiliar writers across a spectrum of European literature, or the occasions it provides to support or challenge the strongly stated opinions of the author. However, recommendation — or not — in respect of its interest for and contribution to thinking about politics is more problematical. The claim that the role of the writer is to act as watchdog over the language of politics,



reiterated as conclusion to the book, is central in this respect, but is not defended in any detail. While it is conceded, somewhat casually, that writers should, of course, be read for themselves, any autonomy of the literary text, its specific nature as a literary work, is not recognized. Nor is the possibility that *as* literature the political function, if any, of a literary text might be oblique rather than direct, let alone intentional. A further problem is that 'literature' is nowhere defined: McCarthy moves between major and minor poets and novelists together with journalism and film, with no apparent differentiation between those types of expression. However content and forms of expression inter-relate, so that the distinctive form of imaginative writing — poetry or fiction — has some relevance of its own as that work is imported into political thinking; and film is different again, and needs specific justification for inclusion in a discussion focused on language and writing.

As a presentation of connections between language, politics and writing, this book is then limited by its failure to address such basic questions. There is an increasing amount of work that attempts to explore just the links between forms of expression within a given culture, which McCarthy asserts. The question then is just what this book adds beyond illustration and example for various matters of recent political history or contemporary concern. If all that the key idea of *stolentelling* offers is the contention that people should 'borrow' new language from literary sources, that is hardly a new idea? And the idea that stories are related to other stories is already familiar to political theorists working with narrative, especially in respect of narrative identity, taking in the concepts of inter-textuality, embedded stories, influence, all available from literary studies. In any case, again his usage involves difficulties in itself. His final re-iterated plea for *stolentelling* suggests that even though *Finnegans Wake* 'may be impossible to read from cover to cover', a 'fifteen-minute dip' may be enough to free one from the language and hence the practice of bureaucracy. This is a startling claim — and hardly an invitation to good practice in trying to extract political meaning from an imaginative work — which needed working out, and justifying, in some more detail in the substantive chapters of the book.

This book is packed full, with information, literary and political, and with assertions and contentions leading from the juxtapositions of the different kinds of evidence; but that value is offset by the frustration of never quite getting to the point, in the sense of linking the 'evidence' with the propositions that introduce this study. Those familiar with the practice of bringing literature or film into politics will probably find this, as I have already suggested, an entertaining but not particularly instructive read, apart from introduction to some unfamiliar titles and ideas for further reading from literary sources.



Anyone not acquainted with this kind of work may find the introduction thought provoking, but then need to look elsewhere for elucidation of the ideas presented. And that is a pity, for this is a lively book — but ultimately a puzzling one, full of enthusiasm but somehow incomplete.

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