

THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

by Michael Keren

ISBN 978-1-55238-669-9

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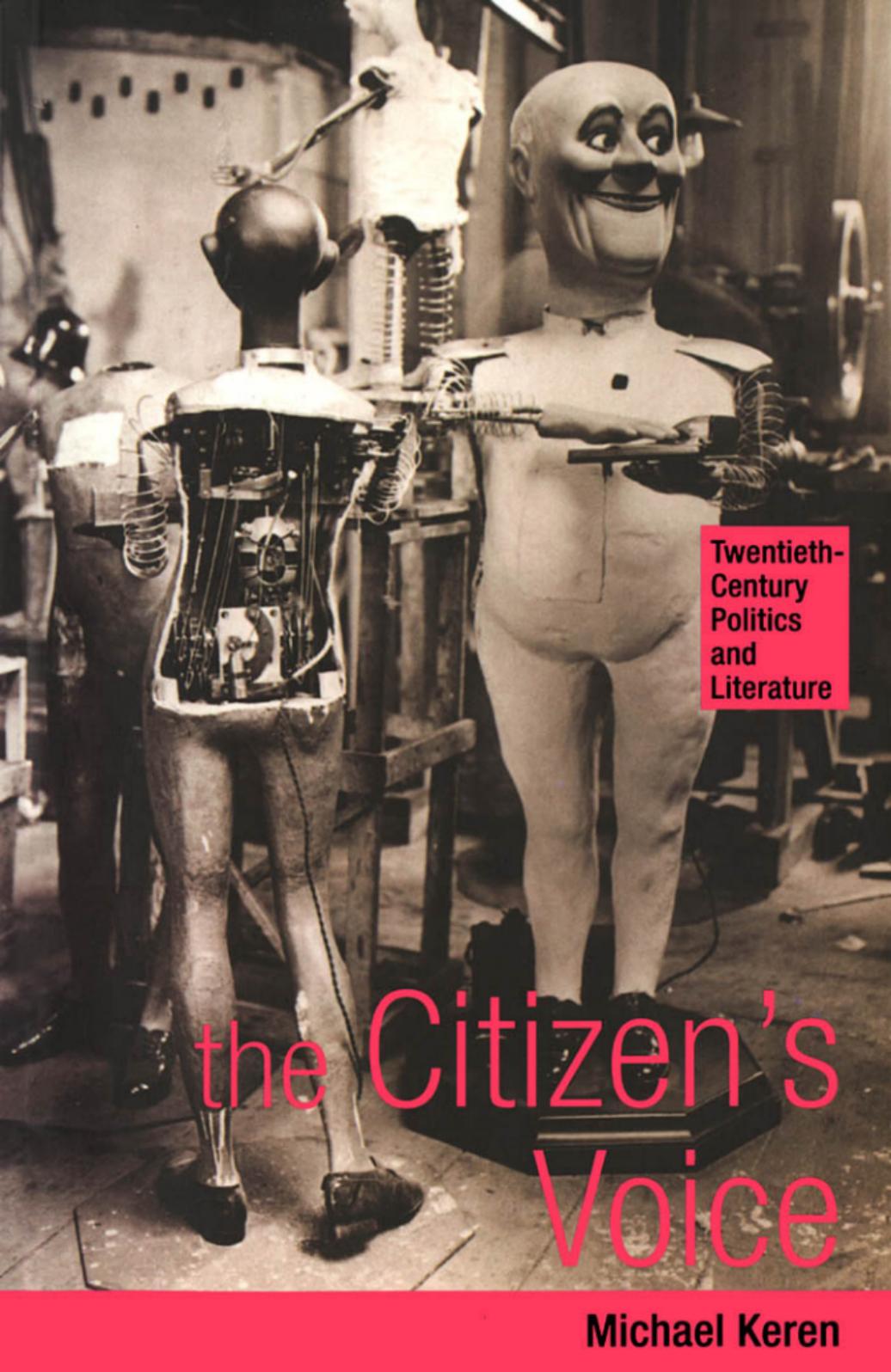
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Published by the University of Calgary Press
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4
www.uofcpress.com

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© 2003 Michael Keren
National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Keren, Michael
The citizen's voice : twentieth-century politics and literature / Michael
Keren.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55238-113-7

Also issued in electronic formats: ISBN 978-1-55238-669-9, ISBN 978-1-55238-310-0

1. Literature, Modern—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Politics
and literature. I. Title.

PN3411.K47 2003

809'.93358

C2003-905790-9

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP) for our publishing activities.

Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Printed and bound in Canada by AGMV Marquis

This book is printed on 100% post-consumer, acid-free paper

Cover design, page design and typesetting by Mieka West.

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Introduction

In today's world, it is no longer surprising to find that people we "know" may not exist in reality. We know family members, friends and neighbors whom we have met, we know television celebrities, radio announcers and chatters on the Internet whom we have never met, and we also know characters created by novelists who become part of our consciousness even though they exist only in virtual reality. We love or hate them, wish to know them better or are afraid of them; we relate to them in a variety of ways and consider the political messages they convey to us.

This book analyzes political messages conveyed by eight literary characters: Hans Castorp, Joseph K., John the Savage, Winston Smith, Ralph, Meursault, Ida Ramundo, and Chauncey Gardiner. These eight are familiar to millions of readers around the world who have read the novels in which they are the main characters: Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Elsa

Morante's *History*, and Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*. They are also familiar to many who have not read the novels but have heard about them, seen movies based on them, read the reviews or have become accustomed to hearing expressions related to them such as "big brother" or "brave new world."

Obviously, these literary figures convey different messages to different people. Novels may be interpreted in many ways, and so may the political messages derived from them. The legitimacy of deriving political messages from novels may itself be challenged. I would like, however, to suggest a political theme that cuts across the eight novels and to argue that, taken together, they prescribe a model of political life. All eight characters studied here participate in the ideological, technological, and organizational processes of the modern industrial state. As they do so, however, they also reflect on their experiences, and by the very nature of their self-reflection, advance the notion of civil society on a global scale.

This is not an obvious contention. While literary heroes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were assumed to convey positive political messages, twentieth-century characters were not. The heroes of the past were seen as engendering political organization and bureaucratization,¹ rationalizing specific social and political circumstances,² and providing the nation-state with a sense of direction by standing above its daily circumstances.³ In the twentieth-century novel, the image of the hero has been shattered; its characters were seen at best as conveying negative messages on the breakdown of political norms and institutions.⁴ An analysis of the eight novels from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, however, reveals a political message that has been largely overlooked, one promoting the notion of a global civil society and spelling out the features of the citizens comprising it.

"Civil society" refers to the plurality of individuals and associations operating within a state in relative autonomy from it. The autonomy is relative because as individuals and associations gain access to state resources they often bargain away some of their autonomy.⁵ The term "civil society" is used to highlight the existence of such semi-autonomous associations in a state as well as to characterize states in which it is prevalent. In both meanings, it refers to a sphere of activity in which citizens do not act only as subjects of the state but think, talk, assemble, and act in matters that are of public importance, yet go beyond its imperatives. A state in which civil society flourishes may be contrasted to one in which government guidelines

direct the entire sphere of human activity. This contrast is based on the age-old question of whether individuals are sinful, erring creatures in need of guidance or citizens capable of reasoned dialogue and action.⁶

The term “civil society,” coined by Aristotle, was mainly used to describe civilized constitutional regimes.⁷ It became a cornerstone in Hegel’s political philosophy, representing a dimension of the state in which legal, professional, and ethical codes are observed. Hegel believed that civil activity, necessary to restrain both the individual and the government, could be conducted only in the state, which assures the necessary freedom from family, tribe, or church. But when the term was revived during the revolutions in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, it was defined in partial opposition to the state. The aim of these revolutions, especially the struggle by the Solidarity movement in Poland, was to transform the state into a market economy. The intention, however, was not to replace one oppressive model by another, for the free market can also be oppressive, but to form a new notion of citizenship. In symposia held in the early nineties, the associations composing civil society were therefore conceived as balancing both the state and the free market. As Michael Walzer notes, civil society has no singularity of its own but complements other social forces; the members of civil society do not cease to be citizens of the state or producers and consumers in the free market. Once civil activity is assured, however, the state and market forces have greater difficulty in controlling the individual.⁸

This is where the power of “civil society” lies; the term reaffirms the long-neglected role of the citizen in public life: to retain self-consciousness and thus serve as a barrier against absolute control by hegemonic political and economic forces.

In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber calls for the introduction of civil society on a global scale. Global democracy, he writes, depends on a methodical internationalization of civil society. Viewing civil society as “a mediating third domain between the overgrown but increasingly ineffective state government and the metastasizing private market sectors,”⁹ he speaks of the hope it holds for a democratic world:

Civil society grounds democracy as a form of government in which not politicians and bureaucrats but an empowered people use legitimate force to put flesh on the bones of their liberties;

and in which liberty carries with it the obligations of social responsibility and citizenship as well as the rights of legal persons. Civil society offers us a single civic identity that, belonging neither to state bureaucrats nor private consumers but to citizens alone, recouples rights and responsibilities and allows us to take control of our governments and our markets. Civil society is the domain of citizens.¹⁰

In the international domain, where states are weak and markets dominant, civil society can offer an alternative identity to people who otherwise are only clients or consumers, or passive spectators of global trends they can do nothing to challenge. Barber offers a model of the citizen as an individual who has acquired a public voice. Although the model remains vague, Barber considers the character of the public voice as essential in defining the citizen and makes clear it is anything but the voice of “the divisive rant of talk radio or the staccato crossfire of pundit TV.”¹¹ The media, he claims, have abandoned civil society for the greater profits of the private sector, where their public responsibilities no longer hobble their taste for commercial success.

There is a major difference between the individual presented in the media and the citizen operating within voluntary associations and non-governmental organizations. The two spheres are of course interchangeable but the notion of the citizen must be differentiated from the image of the sovereign individual promoted in talk shows, investigative reports, confessional TV, and the like. As Mark Kingwell argues in *The World We Want*, the media appear to respect people’s identities in an absolute manner, a tendency that stands in contrast to their consideration as part of a larger community of human rights:

If an identity cannot be challenged by reference to some larger shared goals, then neither can the preferences and desires that proceed from it. Thus, in a twisted way, we arrive at the toxic forms of narcissism, complaint, and self-justification that pass for individualism today: not just the rock-’em, sock-’em talk shows, in which people act out of their pathetic conflicts under Jerry Springer’s cynically moralizing eye, but also the high-toned literary

memoirs and confessions that are the functional equivalents for people with more money and education.¹²

The mass media may have vulgarized the notion of the citizen but literature has kept it alive. Citizens whose self-consciousness is not shaped by entertainers and who combine a consideration for autonomy and community do not flourish on radio talk shows and pundit TV, but their voice has never been shut up entirely. The voice of citizens can be heard despite the presence of gigantic forces – including the mass media – mobilizing, overwhelming, suppressing, and despising them. When individuals were subjected to the structures and processes of the modern industrial state in the twentieth century, they confronted them in their private spheres, and a handful of novels made private concerns public. Thus, the “domain of citizens” was maintained even at times when the citizen did not seem to have a chance.

Ideology, technology, and organization played a central role in the history of the twentieth century: the world wars, the rise and fall of totalitarianism, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb, de-colonization, the Cold War, globalization, and so forth. National leaders, military commanders, corporation executives, managers, bureaucrats, scientists, and other makers of history spoke a language that showed admiration for the modern industrial state and helped advance it. However varied the visions of Max Weber, Vladimir Illich Lenin, Frederick Winslow Taylor, John Kenneth Galbraith, or Lee Iacocca, they all shared a belief in the capacity to mobilize people for the construction of a progressive future. But the people knew better. Not that the Bolshevik revolution, the fascist parades, the Allies’ victories, the Third World awakening, or the space program did not generate great enthusiasm, but as the social-industrial structures of the twentieth century were constructed, destroyed, and reconstructed, individuals, in their private sphere, knew they were both the beneficiaries and victims of these structures, and this knowledge was articulated in a handful of novels promoting a modified version of community.

True, many twentieth-century writers were “fellow travelers”¹³ of the century’s grand ideologies, especially communism, but civil society also had its advocates. The novelist who, from a private perspective, exposes the modern industrial state’s failure to fulfill its ambitious promises, and notes the price paid by the individuals comprising it, contributes to the development of

civil consciousness. A special role was played by novelists, poets, playwrights, and other persons of letters who contributed to the collapse of totalitarian regimes. These regimes' loud promise of a messianic future, that is, a glorious future devoid of the evils of history and the troubles of politics-as-usual, could not overcome individual skepticism, as expressed, for instance, in Alexander Solzhenitzyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, or in Milan Kundera's *The Joke*.

In a study titled *Civility and Subversion*, Jeffrey Goldfarb shows how writers, artists, and other intellectuals contributed to the breakdown of Eastern European totalitarianism by pursuing a free public life as an end in itself, within their own limited social circles. Intellectual activity constituted a limited free public domain within a totalitarian context, which was used to overthrow the communist powers. The author outlines the wider concerns this experience points to:

It points to the desirability of an aesthetic position that involves an appreciation of the distinctive contributions the art of the novel (and of the other arts) has to make in enriching our reflections on the human condition.¹⁴

This point has been elaborated on by Christopher Hitchens in discussing the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. The mighty occupation-regime installed by the full weight of *panzerkommunismus*, he writes, collapsed amid laughter and ignominy, without the loss of a single life, "as a consequence of a civil opposition led by satirical playwrights, ironic essayists, Bohemian jazz-players and rock musicians, and subversive poets."¹⁵ Hitchens does not overlook the power of Soviet tanks but has this to say about it:

The sword, as we have reason to know, is often mightier than the pen. However, there are things that pen can do, and swords cannot. And every tank, as Brecht said, has a crucial flaw. Its driver. Suppose that driver has read something good lately, or has a decent song or poem in his head....¹⁶

Milan Kundera, the Czech exile, articulated the role of the novel in enriching our reflections on the human condition. The spirit of an age, he said in a

speech, cannot be judged exclusively by its ideas, its theoretical concepts, without considering its art, and particularly the novel:

The nineteenth century invented the locomotive, and Hegel was convinced he had grasped the very spirit of universal history. But Flaubert discovered stupidity. I daresay that is the greatest discovery of a century so proud of its scientific thought.¹⁷

Kundera defines “stupidity” not as ignorance but as the failure of self-reflection – an inseparable dimension of human existence – upon the progress of science, technology, and modernity. Following this line of thought, it may be said that if the nineteenth-century novel discovered “stupidity,” the twentieth-century novel reveals the danger once it is institutionalized in all spheres of human life. The eight novels discussed here take us through the twentieth-century project while reflecting on some of its most profound features, and as they do so they promote a model of civil society.

The eight novels are not “representative”; no equity based on race, ethnicity, or gender has been aimed at. Some countries, mainly European ones, are represented while others are not, some of the novelists are Nobel prize laureates while others are not, some novels are not necessarily the best written by these writers, and other novels contributing to civil society theory could undoubtedly be added. But the choice of these novels is not arbitrary; they include some of the best-known “political novels” of the twentieth century. Irving Howe defines the political novel as one “in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant.”¹⁸ The eight novels are “political” in this narrow sense: they deal explicitly with political variables such as ideologies, political parties, state–society relations, election campaigns, etc.

This narrow definition of the political novels locates this study in a middle-of-the-road position between an approach to novels as multifaceted texts that cannot be reduced to a political dimension but should be handled within literary paradigms and an approach to novels as political texts in their entirety whose role in a larger political discourse ought to be reconstructed. This study is also located between those who view novelists as determined by political circumstances and those who view them as *free souls*. Paul Cantor characterizes contemporary literary criticism by a strong historicist trend

consisting of a devotion to showing how authors are formed by their social circumstances. "Study after study attempts to demonstrate how authors reflect and embody the prejudices of race, class, and gender they inherit from their society, only occasionally granting them a small role in helping in turn to shape their prejudices."¹⁹ He contrasts this historicism to the classical approach in political philosophy, according to which human thought and expression are free of all constraints, material or otherwise. Cantor proposes a middle-of-the-road approach in which one distinguishes between the majority of authors, who are in fact bound by the horizons of the regimes under which they live, and those exceptional few who can see beyond the limits of their communities.

This study focuses on novels by the exceptional few who, while living in the complex global regime formed by the ideologies, technologies, and organizational practices of the twentieth century, transcend them by the power of self-reflection. Each of the novels exposes the private sphere of individuals as they struggle with, or adjust to, the ideological, technological, and organizational processes constraining their environment. Mann's Hans Castorp, Kafka's Joseph K., Huxley's John the Savage, Orwell's Winston Smith, Golding's Ralph, Morante's Ida Ramundo, Camus's Meursault, and Kosinski's Chauncey Gardiner are all characters rooted in twentieth-century reality, yet they are neither heroes nor villains. Most of them are defeated, but it is not necessarily their defeat that distinguishes them; they are not even "anti-heroes." They do not represent an alternative to the systems they live in (they are mostly members in good standing in society, the state bureaucracy, and the production process), nor do they represent the sense of mission found in national literature, or the human purity found in romantic literature. They are part and parcel of twentieth-century history and thus allow us to learn about the private sphere of its makers and victims.

The political analysis of the novels leads us through some of the major changes the world went through in the twentieth century. In that century, the human race, as Thomas Mann shows, played God in the form of daring scientific ventures conducted in thousands of "witches' kitchens," in which the delicate balance between life and death was upset. Scientific discoveries were made which gave us powers we didn't know how to use and technological inventions transforming our habitat into what Huxley calls a "brave new world." We applied the rational methods guiding scientific

inquiry to human behavior without reaching prior agreement on who should be in control of the process. We tried to make the production process more rational and ended up with bureaucratic monsters turning life, as Kafka illustrates, into a nightmare.

Politics, the set of means by which we negotiate our existence with each other, was inspired by irresponsible ideologies. These ideologies, and the political parties representing them, became so strong that leaders, as Orwell demonstrates, believed they could overcome the laws of nature on the road to a new civilization based on fear, hatred, and cruelty. The great achievements in science, philosophy, and the arts were discarded by societies preferring the warmth of the organic community whose urge to hunt pigs, as Golding makes clear, is stronger than its survival instinct. Pragmatism and common sense were replaced by messianic yearnings propagated, as Elsa Morante states, by simple hooligans. Nazism took over, and terrible crimes against humanity were committed, but when Nazism was defeated we found ourselves, like Camus's characters, unable to allocate the responsibility for these crimes. We surrounded ourselves, and still do, with systems of communication sending millions of signals that threaten our mental health and change the way we live, relate to each other, and conduct our politics. Virtual politics, whose features were drawn by Jerzy Kosinski, becomes commonplace.

And yet individuals have not given up on self-reflection. The eight novels expose the private world of eight characters shaken by powerful forces and highlight the attributes of the citizen attempting to survive in some state of civility under these circumstances. "Civility" is the virtue associated with civil society, i.e., the assertion of one's autonomy as well as its willing restraint as a means to allow others to assert theirs. To quote Kingwell again:

Together, in a general conversation governed by civility and restraint, we make and hear the claims of which society is composed. Together, then, listening and responding, we forge a fragile social identity. We come to reflect one another as part of the general interpretive project we call social life, and in so doing attempt to create the political order that will serve to hear and answer the various claims we will wish to put in play.²⁰

The eight novels shed light on that political order and the virtues underlying it. Their main characters are analyzed as building blocks of a prescriptive model of civil society, whose incumbents possess the following qualities associated with each character:

1. The realization that humans are mortal, and that no scientific discovery can turn them into their own creators (Hans Castorp).
2. The understanding that interaction between individuals cannot be replaced by anonymous structures (Joseph K.).
3. The urge to maintain a sphere of authenticity within the surrounding systems (John the Savage).
4. The adherence to historical memory as a way to resist hegemonic controls (Winston Smith).
5. The reliance on reason as a means of surviving on the planet (Ralph).
6. The acceptance of responsibility despite the scant control one has over events (Meursault).
7. The acknowledgment that history cannot be transcended (Ida Ramundo).
8. The refusal to give up on the chance to change, develop, and fail (Chauncey Gardiner).

The citizens emerging from these novels are individuals aware of their weaknesses. They are mortal. They live in history and do not transcend it. Nor do they follow promises for easy redemption. They know they are doomed to fail frequently, but they are also possessed with an urge to survive and with the realization that survival depends on their capacity to interact rather than to destroy each other. That interaction takes place within social-industrial systems over which they have limited control. But as they take responsibility for the occurrences around them, and for their own survival, they engage in a search for real, not virtual, solutions to problems and construct a private space where their own autonomy and authenticity can be maintained as well as that of others.

The derivation of such a far-reaching prescriptive model from novels is not obvious, as political theorists have traditionally been ambivalent toward literary texts. Political theory is a field of study in which normative justifications of political life are formulated. Its origins can be traced to the claim, attributed in Plato's *Republic* of the fourth century BC to a restless sophist named Thrasymachus, that justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger. Political theorists have engaged ever since in a hard and desperate effort to respond to this challenge by formulating normative designs that would justify the state, and citizens' obligation to it, in terms exceeding the advantage of the stronger. The effort began with Plato, who proposed a model of the just state to be constructed by human reason. Reason had to remain free of the emotions sparked by mythological texts, which led Plato to demand that such texts be censored:

Indeed, if we want the guardians of our city to think that it's shameful to be easily provoked into hating one another, we mustn't allow any stories about gods warring, fighting, or plotting against one another, for they aren't true. The battles of gods and giants, and all the various stories of the gods hating their families or friends, should neither be told nor even woven in embroideries. If we're to persuade our people that no citizen has ever hated another and that it's impious to do so, then that's what should be told to children from the beginning by old men and women; and as these children grow older, poets should be compelled to tell them the same sort of thing. We won't admit stories into our city – whether allegorical or not – about Hera being chained by her son, nor about Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten, nor about the battle of the gods in Homer.²¹

While advocating the censorship of literature, Plato himself used literary forms such as dialogues and fables to advance his ideas. Such ambivalence toward literature has always characterized the search for the just state to the extent that political theorists, although enriched by literature, developed a specialized jargon that excluded it. This exclusion was consistent with the specialization of the humanities and social sciences in the twentieth century,

but has also been rejected by scholars, such as Paul Dolan, who realized the power of literature in generating political ideas:

A large segment of modern consciousness is embodied in political structures; these, in turn, shape and are shaped by that consciousness. So politics cannot be understood only as the political scientist, the historian, the economist, the sociologist, the psychologist, or even the philosopher understands it. The novel provides its special kind of knowledge because it deals with the conscious and unconscious experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological and aesthetic phenomenon.²²

In a symposium on literature and the political imagination held at York University, John Horton and Andrea Baumeister complained about “the abstract, decontextualised and ahistorical character of much contemporary political philosophy.”²³ They claim that problems discussed by political theorists are posed in a form that makes them look timeless, hence the solutions will also need to be timeless. Political issues, however, are in some significant part about a particular time and place, which gives an advantage to novels and plays over theories striving at universal validity:

It is in developing a richer, more nuanced and realistic understanding of political deliberation that imaginative literature may have an especially valuable role to play. Novels and plays, for example, seem much better at exhibiting the complexities of political experience and the open-textured and necessarily incomplete character of real political arguments.²⁴

There are, of course, limitations to the reading of novels as political theory. As Horton notes, fictional narratives typically employ a vast array of literary devices and techniques, such as metaphor, allegory, symbolism, imagery, allusion, ambiguity, irony, etc., which make novels resistant to straightforward incorporation within other discursive contexts.²⁵ Susan Mendus argues that literary narratives often close theoretical options that political theory is concerned with because the authority of the text imposes on the reader an understanding of what the moral or political problem is, and a largely shared

interpretation of examples that permit only those moral disagreements for which there is a textual warrant.²⁶

These limitations, however, should not preclude an exploration of novels for the political ideas they convey. Every novel analyzed here addresses major normative political questions, perhaps the most important ones raised in the twentieth century. The following analysis is a political theorist's exploration of these questions in an attempt to understand the virtues of the citizen emerging in the novels. It is by no means an attempt to compete with the vast, rich literary criticism of these novels, nor is it an attempt to compete with the insights derived from positivist approaches to politics.

In an article asking "Why Political Scientists Want to Study Literature," Catherine Zuckert mentions the prominence of positivism in contemporary political science. In an effort to make the study of politics scientific, she writes, researchers in the 1960s sought quantifiable data and did studies that could be replicated. Unfortunately for the behavioralists, however, the major political events of the decade, including the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam, could not be studied solely in quantitative or positivistic terms as the events were singular and the issues they raised obviously included questions of principle or value. Therefore, Zuckert maintains, a more democratic and pluralistic political science emerged allowing political scientists to look at works of art in order to study the aspects of human life that are most difficult, if not impossible, to study externally or objectively – the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people's political circumstances.²⁷

In what follows, I take advantage of this democratic pluralism and look at the political messages conveyed by eight literary characters in search of civility. I then argue that recent announcements of the death of the novel in the age of mass media may have been premature.

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