

# Pamphlets and Purple Passages

Examining the usefulness of the value systems of George Orwell and Oscar Wilde  
through the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky.

## **Reflection Statement**

My interest in ‘value systems’ of aesthetics and politics in the novel stems from my intrinsic passion both for literature and political affairs. Having seen the connection between the two in my preliminary course on Utopian and Dystopian literature in Extension English, and the study of Powerplay in Advanced English, I was both fascinated and apprehensive about the potential political utility of literature. While studying Orwell, my literary and political icon, I came to admire his determined, if polemical, stand against totalitarianism through his art. Yet, reading Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novels at the same time – with its perturbing and reactionary ‘Slavophile’ ideology – heightened my sense of the questionable uses of literature. Important for my purpose was the lack of clarity or consensus on this element of the novel, which could be contrasted with other realms of art such as the visual arts and theatre.

My critical response was originally conceived as an inquiry only into the role of politics in the novel. Yet, in researching the critical literature on this issue, for instance French philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s book *Politics of Literature*<sup>1</sup>, I began to see an implied dichotomy between politically-driven literature and the traditional ‘art for art’s sake’ mode of thought. Irving Howe’s *Politics and the Novel*<sup>2</sup> and George Orwell’s *Why I Write*<sup>3</sup> also provided ample evidence of these two ‘value systems’, for lack of a better term. In the latter’s words it is the dichotomy between the “aesthetic enthusiasm” and the “political purpose”.<sup>4</sup> Rather than explore a critical theory, which applies more to interpretation, I found studying the values that comprise what is considered ‘worthy literature’ proved a more fulfilling and interesting enquiry for my critical response.

The choice of this more obscure aspect of literary debate for my critical response necessitated a sizable introduction to the background for my subject. In the section ‘The Debate Introduced’ I included an outline of how views on the dichotomy between ‘aesthetics’ and ‘politics’ have changed over time, ranging from Sophocles

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ranciere, *the Politics of Literature*, (2004) extract viewed at <https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/substance/v033/33.1ranciere01.htm> (accessed 7/11/2013)

<sup>2</sup> I. Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, Ivan R Dee Publisher, Chicago (1957)

<sup>3</sup> G. Orwell, *Why I write*, Penguin books, London (2004)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p4

to Donald Kagan. Whilst I had done supporting research into the philosophical perspectives on aesthetics, for example Immanuel Kant<sup>5</sup>, and politics, namely Ranciere, I nevertheless chose to avoid subjects I could not do justice to within the framework of my critical response. Instead I focused my attention on authors and critics; in part a reflection of my studies in English Advanced and Extension. Aestheticist critic Harold Bloom, proved highly beneficial for my critical response in other ways than this, as he elaborated a set of specific principles by which aesthetic value could be judged; “mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction”.<sup>6</sup>

Writing about broad and vague value systems such as ‘aestheticism’ and ‘political art’, it became clear that each would have to be centred on a single theorist. My essay required two icons that articulated strong positions on this aspect of literature. This was also to reinforce the dichotomy I intended to display in the first section of my critical response and make the debate appear more personalised. George Orwell, especially in his essay “Why I Write” (1946), emerged in my mind as the epitome of the political artist, and provides the most clear elucidation of such a position. Rereading *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948) and reading critic Mary McCarthy’s 1969 review of his essays provided a useful background to his ‘Politician’ value system. The title of the critical response was a reference to his own terminology in *Why I Write*.

Likewise, Oscar Wilde, the quintessential aesthete, was utilized in my critical response as the central theorist of the ‘art for art’s sake’ value system. Research on his essays, lectures and novels – in particular *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)<sup>7</sup> delivered the evidence to support this view of him. Gene H. Bell-Villada’s 1986 essay “The Idea of Art for Art’s Sake”<sup>8</sup> introduced me to much of the thought and influence of literary Aestheticism and Wilde’s place within it.

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<sup>5</sup> B. H Slater, “Aesthetics”, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, viewed at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/aestheti/#H3> (accessed 10/04/2014)

<sup>6</sup> H. Bloom, *the Western Canon*, New York Pan Macmillan, (1994) p56

<sup>7</sup> O. Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, London, Penguin Books (2008) p20

<sup>8</sup> G. H. Bell-Villada, “the Idea of Art for Art’s Sake”, *Science & Society* Vol.50, No. 4 (1986), p416

Exploring the contrast between these two value systems, I decided upon applying them to a third selection of novels to test their usefulness in the appreciation of literature. For this I chose Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) and *Demons*, also known as *the Possessed* (1872). Dostoevsky was in many ways the perfect choice for such an investigation, as the multivalence and literary ambiguity of his widely renowned and influential oeuvre allowed arguments for both value systems. These two novels are the epitome of political literature, Howe having called *Demons* "the greatest of all political novels",<sup>9</sup> yet my readings also led to my appreciation of Dostoevsky's adroit use of language and aesthetics. My eventual argument; that rather than one value system having an advantage – or a simple duality of the two – there is in fact a 'symbiosis' between aesthetics and politics. The inspiration for this was a quote I found from author and critic Marguerite Young "I don't believe there can be a poetic novel without political consciousness".<sup>10</sup> In order to make this case I applied the methods used in William E Cain's essay "Orwell's essays as a literary experience". Cain reflections on the aesthetic value of Orwell's ostensibly political essays in the way we "feel the truth"<sup>11</sup>, were not only ironic for my critical response but became useful in the analysis of the aesthetic value of Dostoevsky's political dialogue. For example, I applied his method in *Notes from the Underground* "Here, Dostoevsky employs his fragmented narration most effectively, frequently with ellipsis and open engagement with the reader."<sup>12</sup>

In order to guarantee that my analysis fully grasped political meaning of Dostoevsky's work I gathered extensive research on the author's context and background. This included researching his membership of the progressive Petrashevsky circle of writers and thinkers, his consequent jailing in Siberia for four years, and the development of his 'Slavophile' and anti-enlightenment thought (the nature and influence of which is explained in my response). Readings of

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<sup>9</sup> I. Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, Ivan R Dee Publisher, Chicago (1957) p71

<sup>10</sup> "A Conversation With Marguerite Young." Interview with Miriam Fuchs, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, V.9 (fall 1989): 147-54, viewed at <http://shc.stanford.edu/news/research/novels-political-punch> (05/03/2014)

<sup>11</sup> W.E. Cain, "Orwell's Essays as a literary experience", Cambridge Companions online, Cambridge University Press accessed 1/12/2013

<sup>12</sup> 25639448, *Pamphlets and Purple Passages*, p12

Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer"<sup>13</sup> (a collection of his letters and non-fiction), Robert A. Maguire's introduction in the Penguin Classics edition of *Demons*,<sup>14</sup> R.P. Blackmur's 1948 essay "In the Birdcage: Notes on The Possessed of Dostoevsky"<sup>15</sup> and Irving Howe's criticism were particularly useful for this. For instance, the strong connection between Dostoevsky's abhorrence of murder of Ivan Ivanov by Sergey Nechaev's "People's Vengeance" group and the plot and character development of *Demons* proved a clear example of the political content of Dostoevsky's works and as such was included in my critical response.

Undergoing extensive research into the literary criticism of Dostoevsky was crucial to the substance of my arguments and understanding on the role of these value systems in his novel. A unique example was critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963)<sup>16</sup>, which influenced my understanding of perspective and narration. Bakhtin's concept of literary 'polyphony' informed my analysis of the multiplicity and dynamism of perspectives in *Demons*. Additionally, critic Michael Dirda's writings on the horror of key moments in *Demons* informed my aesthetic analysis to include pace, drama, and graphic imagery.<sup>17</sup>

My research also exposed to me to the continuing impact of this debate within the literary world and beyond, contributing to my sense of the purpose of my work. Critic Jed Perl's recent essay for *the New Republic*, titled "Liberals are Killing Art: how the Left became obsessed with ideology over beauty", demonstrated to me how much disagreement remains between different value systems.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, discovering an article in the *Guardian* in describing the controversy surrounding a literary festival in Kashmir, India over its branding as an "apolitical", perhaps even aesthetically

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<sup>13</sup> J Frank "Inflamed: review of 'A Writer's Diary'", *London Review of Books* Vol. 15, No.23, 2 (December 1993) p18

<sup>14</sup> F. Dostoevsky, *Demons*, Penguin Classics, London (2013)

<sup>15</sup> R.P Blackmur, "In the Birdcage: Notes on 'The Possessed' of Dostoevsky", *Hudson Review* Spring (1948), p 20

<sup>16</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, University of Minneapolis press, Minneapolis (1963) p225

<sup>17</sup> Dirda M "Mystic Terror Revisited", *Wall Street Journal* 19 December 2009, viewed at <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703442904574595130313483584> accessed (03/05/14)

<sup>18</sup> J. Perl "Liberals are Killing Art", *New Republic*, 4 August viewed at <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118958/liberals-are-killing-art-insisting-its-always-political> accessed (5/08/14)

minded, event – according to one local playwright "A festival just for the sake of literature is always welcome but if it is done to show that everything is OK these days then it is a problem".<sup>19</sup> The festival was eventually cancelled.

Rather than structure my response strictly by text, I fluctuated between each text according to the literary elements I was exploring, which I learnt from Bakhtin. This allowed me to transition organically from the more discernable of Dostoevsky's techniques, such as plot and structure, to more complicated and subtle elements, such as symbolism, characters and their dialogically conveyed perspectives. This 'organic flow' is common in magazine articles; for example David Denby's essay "Can Dostoevsky Still Kick You in the Gut?" contains paragraphs that seamlessly stream from one to the next, and my critical response often does flow in this way. This lent itself to a more discursive and interactive tone that, to a certain extent, I was seeking to apply; for instance "The effect is that we are forced to draw our own conclusions".<sup>20</sup> This was an emulation of Irving Howe's tone in *Politics and the Novel*, who makes use of phrases such as "if we ask ourselves" and "the question becomes"<sup>21</sup>. Howe's use of repeated rhetorical questioning was also influential for my form:

Why else would Dostoevsky go to such effort to create a powerful and rapid pace which, rather chaotically, leads into Kirillov's suicide? Why describe with such detail the "shattering of the skull...?"<sup>22</sup>

The audience for this critical response would be suited for a readership of critics and writers, as well as those who are interested in the conflicting values on the purpose of literature. Therefore its ideal place of publication would include magazines that frequently attempt to synthesize cultural and political commentary, the best example being the *New Statesman* or *Dissent*. This affected my style in some ways for example

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<sup>19</sup> J Burke "Kashmir's first literary festival hit by controversy" *the Guardian*, 12 August 2011 viewed at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/12/kashmir-literary-festival-controversy> accessed (20/12/13)

<sup>20</sup> 25639448, *Pamphlets and Purple Passages*, p15

<sup>21</sup> I. Howe, *Politics and the Novel*, Ivan R Dee Publisher, Chicago (1957) p72

<sup>22</sup> 25639448, *Pamphlets and Purple Passages*, p22

a short, pungent opening like “What makes a good novel?”<sup>23</sup> is common in articles from the magazines mentioned above.

The main purpose of my critical response, to clarify but ultimately impugn the dichotomy between aesthetic and political value systems, suits adequately to these publications. It is to attempt to bridge the gap in contemporary discourse that has been widened by doctrinaire critics of our age like Harold Bloom. Moreover, the implications of this critical response for the creation, as well as the evaluation, of literature were always contemplated. For writers to be unhesitant to include a well-considered political message in their novels, whilst at the same time, unite and embellish it in with a mastery of prose and figurative language.

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<sup>23</sup> 25639448, *Pamphlets and Purple Passages*, p3