



# The Dictator's Dictation: The Politics of Novels and Novelists

*Robert Boyers*

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In these elegant essays, many of them originally written for *The New Republic* and *Harper's*, Robert Boyers examines the role of the political imagination in shaping the works of such important contemporary writers as W. G. Sebald and Philip Roth, Nadine Gordimer and Mario Vargas Llosa, Natalia Ginzburg and Pat Barker, J. M. Coetzee and John Updike, V. S. Naipaul and Anita Desai. Occasionally he finds that politics actually figures very little in works that only pretend to be interested in politics. Elsewhere he discovers that certain writers are not equal to the political issues they take on or that their work is fatally compromised by complacency or wishful thinking.

In the main, though, Boyers writes as a lover of great literature who wishes to understand how the best writers do justice to their own political obsessions without suggesting that everything is reducible to politics. Resisting the notion that novels can be effectively translated into ideas or positions, he resists as well the notion that art and politics must be held apart, lest works of fiction somehow be contaminated by their association with "real life" or public issues. The essays offer a combination of close reading, argument, and assessment.

What, Boyers asks, is the relationship between form and substance in a work whose formal properties are particularly striking? Is it reasonable to think of a particular writer as "reactionary" merely because he presents an unflattering portrait of revolutionary activists or because he is less than optimistic about the future of newly independent societies? What is the status of private life in works set in politically tumultuous times? Can the novelist be "responsible" if he consistently refuses to engage the conditions that affect even the intimate lives of his characters?

Such questions inform these essays, which strive to be true to the essential spirit of the works they discuss and to interrogate, as sympathetically as possible, the imagination of writers who negotiate the unstable relationships between society and the individual, art and ideas.

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