Catherine Zuckert on Politics and Literature

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Abstract: Catherine Zuckert’s earliest published work was in the area of Politics and Literature. From the start she saw this work as an important supplement to the dominant forms of political science and American political thought. Her work in this area, especially her manifesto-like journal articles and her first book, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, made the case that literature provides insight into both the internal and hidden lives of democratic citizens as well as into the elusive broader regime-character of the political community.

Catherine’s work in the area of politics and literature has deep personal connections for me. The first publication Catherine had in this area was also her very first publication and at the same time my very first publication. That was an essay on which we collaborated on Mark Twain’s novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*.

Catherine’s later work in the field has been much noted. Her book *Natural Right and the American Imagination* won a prize as The Outstanding Book in Philosophy and Religion for 1990 as awarded by the American Association of Publishers. Many of her essays on the point and method of the political study of literature have been among the foundation-laying statements for Politics and Literature as a subfield of Political Science. She was, accordingly, one of the founders of the APSA-organized section on Politics and Literature.

Although she has not worked very much in this field recently, it was one of the two centers of her early career—along with Nietzsche. In addition to her large *Natural Right* book, she has written a number of manifesto-like statements: “On Reading Classic American Novelists as Political Thinkers” in *Journal of Politics*, “Why Political Scientists Study Fiction” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and “Why Political Scientists Want to Study Literature” in the APSA publication *PS*. Her book discusses the classic American novelists many may have read (and some have hated) in high school—James F. Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. She has also written on Machiavelli’s plays, on Aristophanes, on Henry James, on *Tom Sawyer*, to name a few.

Many of us who dabble in Politics and Literature do so, I think, because we like literature and enjoy looking at it in light of our political or political-theoretic concerns. I would not deny that this was part of Catherine’s
reason for turning to literature in a political way—for she has always been a
great enthusiast for literature. But it would miss the real significance of her
work to leave it at that. She saw the turn to the political study of literature
as a supplement and corrective to American political thought on the one
hand, and to American political science on the other. That is, she was thinking
of Politics and Literature from the outset as a valuable and even necessary
addition to two of the most typical modes of thinking about politics in
twentieth-century America.

Catherine thought of American political thought, that is, the thought about
politics produced by American thinkers, to be rather on the narrow side. As
she said in the introduction to her book on novels, most American political
thought is concerned “primarily with the institutional responses to practical
problems, rather than with more fundamental questions about the basis
and ends of political life.” She attributes this primary character of
American political thought to the fact that the most representative works in
the genre, works like The Federalist, Notes on Virginia, or Congressional
Government, “were written by active statesmen,” who perforce faced immediate
political problems within an institutional setting. Since it was generally
agreed that America had not produced political philosophers of the stature
of Plato, Hobbes, or Hegel, it was the novelists, Catherine maintained, who
had gone beyond the thinking of the political actors to raise “more fundamen-
tal questions about the basis and ends of political life” in the American
context. So, instead of focusing on matters like the countermajoritarian
effects of the extended republic, or the liberty-serving (or not) qualities of
the separation of powers, the novelists she treated recurred to the image of
a return or retreat to nature in order to “raise questions about the natural
foundation of political orders,” or to raise the Platonic question of the relation
between nature and convention.¹

Catherine turned to the novel also to challenge the quite common view that
America was marked by an extraordinary “consensus” or agreement on polit-
cal fundamentals, a point of view expressed by such diverse authors as
Alexis de Tocqueville in the nineteenth century and Louis Hartz in the twen-
tieth. Writers who observed this kind of uniformity of opinion most often
decried it as standing in the way of a deeper and more searching kind of ques-
tioning about moral and political fundamentals. While she did not challenge
the general observation of large areas of agreement in American opinion, she
pointed to the novelists as major exceptions. In her JOP essay, she observes
that American fiction does “raise questions about the fundamental assump-
tions of [American] liberal democracy.” There she identifies Mark Twain,
perhaps surprisingly given his reputation as a democrat, as an author who

¹Catherine H. Zuckert, Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy
in Novel Form (Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1990), 2.
seriously “challenges the ‘self-evident truths’” about human equality as stated in the Declaration of Independence.²

Moreover, the writers not only challenged the otherwise dominant consensus, but they differed in significant and provocative ways from each other. As she says in the conclusion of her book: “the novelists divided on the question of the relation between nature and history, because neither an appeal to nature in abstraction from history [as some attempted] nor to history in abstraction from nature proved satisfactory.”³ Once the novelists raised such fundamental questions, they perforce deviated from both the consensus and from each other in how they answered the questions they probed. Thus in the literature Americans produced, one found the variety of thinking missing from the more superficial political culture.

It was no accident that Catherine took as a point of departure for her case for studying literature in a political manner the works and deeds of the political actors who comprised the mainstream tradition of American political thought. Just as the political actors were making obvious interventions in their political life, so, Catherine argued, were the novelists, albeit less obviously and surely more subtly. The novelists—especially the best of them—did not intervene on behalf of specific policies or ideologies. Indeed, as Catherine saw it, the mark of a truly fine political novelist and of a proper interpretation of such a work was how little it echoed or stood as mere support for some ideology or specific political agenda or other. Indeed, I was struck on rereading her relatively early JOP essay how she chided major predecessors who had written on politics and literature, men like Irving Howe and Georg Lukács, for failing to achieve an adequate response to the political dimension of literature. In both these and many other cases, the critic failed because he too readily viewed the literature through a prism of political ideology, seeing it as either reinforcing or falling short of the ideology. Such readings, even when conducted by outstanding thinkers like Lukács, contributed to the frequently held view that political studies of literature were gross vulgarizations, like a pistol shot at the opera, as Stendhal put it. In order to combat this sort of abuse, Catherine went to great lengths to articulate appropriately literary ways of reading novels politically.⁴

While she does not read novels as alternate forms of political ideologies, she does see them as political interventions, or political acts of a certain sort. The description she most often uses is that they are a form of political education, but a form of education that addresses readers in ways different from most of

³Zuckert, Natural Right and the American Imagination, 244.
⁴A thorough discussion of how one should combine both a political and a literary reading can be found in her essay in JOP.
what one thinks of as education. She sometimes quoted Mark Twain, who said in his *Autobiography*: “Humor must not professedly preach and it must not professedly teach, but it must do both if it would live forever.” Catherine applies this aphorism more broadly than Twain did, in her case to all of literature and not only to humor.

What particularly resonated for Catherine in Mark Twain’s important remark was his emphasis on “professedly.” Of course, there is literature that ignores Twain’s dictum—one thinks of the hundred-plus pages given over to a political manifesto in Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* or of works like Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*—but this is not the literature that Catherine looks to as the truly valuable kind of political teaching. No doubt it is the same side of her character that relates so positively to Twain rather than to Rand-type literature that also has led her to the subtle philosophers like Plato and Machiavelli, to whom she has devoted so much of her scholarly career. But it is not only personal taste that leads her to advocate a more literary approach to politics and literature. Fiction too, she argues, is a form of political action, but at the level of political education. There are of course many forms of political education. There is, for example, the education that Thomas Jefferson sought to be imparted at his University of Virginia—an education rooted in the grounding documents of the American regime, the Declaration of Independence, *The Federalist*, and so on. This education proceeds by expressly laying out cognitive principles of political life and political science. Political literature hardly does that, and does not do it well. Literature does not succeed when presenting and arguing for abstract thoughts and ideas but rather through the presentation of characters acting together, within a given concrete context or setting, the interaction of all of which constitutes a plot. Like Aristotle before her, Catherine sees the plot as the soul of the literary work. The emphasis in her treatment of literature is on the particularity it wallows in, for in this regard literature is at the opposite extreme from theory, which dwells in the universal and abstract. But like Aristotle, she too sees the literary as sharing much with theory in that its emphasis on the particular imparts knowledge or at least conduces to thoughts of the universal. How literature can be at once universal and utterly particular is one of the puzzles that always have attracted Catherine’s attention, as is very visible in the conclusion to her book on classic American novelists.

But literature acts politically not only through its paradoxical blending of particular and universal, but most especially through providing a particular kind of education, a sentimental education, an education of the sentiments and passions of its readers. For this, its special form and manner of presentation are very well suited, for character and plot engage and speak to the inner life of readers in a way that theory or political science per se never can. In educating the inner man and woman, literature provides a kind of political action that supplements and, Catherine argues, goes beyond what the standard components of American political thought do.
In her piece in the journal PS, Catherine began by describing briefly the history internal to political science as a discipline that led to the formation of the then-new Organized Section on Politics and Literature.

In the 1960s, political science was in the midst of the behavioral revolution. In an effort to make the study of politics scientific, researchers sought quantifiable data and did studies that could be replicated.

Unfortunately for the behavioralists, the major political events of that decade, including the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam, could not be studied solely in quantitative or positivistic terms. The events were singular, and the issues they raised obviously included questions of principle or value. There was a post-behavioral reaction, if not revolution. As a result, the discipline became more democratic in its internal organization and more pluralistic in its definition of subject matter.

The organization of a subfield in politics and literature does not, then, merely represent the extension of the study of politics into literary fiction, as well as works in visual media like film and painting. The questions that led political scientists to look to works of art for enlightenment concern the aspects of human life that are most difficult, if not impossible, to study and observe externally or objectively—the attitudes, emotions, and opinions that shape and are shaped by people’s circumstances, especially their political circumstances.5

In that brief statement, Catherine captures three of the chief ways in which the political study of literature supplements and to a degree corrects what was and largely still is the dominant way of study within the discipline of political science. The three I have in mind are her allusion to questions of principle or value; her comment about the limits of “external or objective” study of human phenomena, or, to put it more positively, the theme of internality as a necessary part of political understanding; and her reference to the shaping role of “circumstances, especially political circumstances.”

Let me begin with what I have called “internality.” Literature, especially novels and dramas, the two literary forms Catherine has most devoted herself to, proceeds via the presentation of characters and their actions. Since we do not normally read such works for information, or the formulation of scientific principles of explanation such as one might find in an American government textbook or in a study of congressional voting behavior, literature must appeal to something other than our hunger for information or for scientific knowledge. Literature appeals to us by inviting, luring, wheedling us into engaging with the characters whose actions and “insides” it presents to us. The emphasis on the particular, so essential to literature, is at the same time an emphasis on the internality of human action—on seeing human action from the inside and not simply as an outside observer and collector of “data” would do. This inside perspective allows literature to make its

distinctive contribution to the understanding of political and moral phenomena. As she put it in her *JOP* article: “In generalizing, theories tend to lose sight of the fact that human life is lived by individuals, particular human beings, who experience it largely internally.” Among other things, she continues, this “concrete or particular form of characterization in the novel makes it an especially apt means of critically examining political and other generalizations about the way people do and should live.” More than this, it provides a means of understanding the truth of human action that often if not always eludes the more theoretical or scientific approach.

Catherine liked to illustrate her point about the significance of internality by citing one of the stories in William Faulkner’s *Go Down Moses*. Faulkner sought to demonstrate this very point, for it is told in two parts. Part 1 is the story of a young black man in Mississippi in the 1930s who marries, and loses his wife six months later, suffering such anguish of loss—rivaling, perhaps surpassing, Job himself—unable to find an answer to why he suffers so, unable to accept the religious or other solace offered by his family and community, that he ultimately acts in extreme and unusual ways in his inability to deal adequately with his grief or to find solace of any sort.

In part 2 of the story, Faulkner presents us the reflections on this young man by a white deputy sheriff and his wife who, looking at the external “facts” about this young man, draw what to them is the obvious and logical—but perfectly erroneous—conclusion:

> Those damn niggers. ... They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them. ... But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a damn herd of wild buffaloes.

The role of race in hampering understanding is clearly part of Faulkner’s point here, but as Catherine brings out, the racial theme is part of this larger theme of internal engagement versus external observation. In his presentation of the story in part 1, Faulkner is perfectly capable of overcoming the racial divide—his readers, white as well as black, can understand what moves this young man and what the meaning of his actions is—and it is most definitely not the lack of “normal human feelings and sentiments.” Literature, and the habits of engaging human beings it fosters, supplies an understanding of political and other action less accessible to all the “objective” approaches to knowledge.

Strangely, perhaps, the novel also provides a splendid way to probe the broader political context of action. Within political philosophy, this broader context is often captured by the concept of “regime”—that is, the

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7Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination*, 207.
authoritative ordering of the community. Novelists may not have the conceptual tool of regime, as Catherine did in her studies of literature, but they tend to supply insight into regime and its effect nonetheless. Literature is the presentation of human action within a certain setting. Novelists are concerned to relate their characters’ actions to that context or regime and in so doing explore the question of the way in which regime affects and shapes character. Catherine finds this characteristic of literature to be especially useful in the American case, for as a liberal order, Americans in their self-understanding tend to deny or obscure the formative power of regime, to think of themselves merely as individuals. But the novelists typically see things quite differently. Thus Henry James, for example, regularly contrasts Americans with Europeans, to bring out how the American regime is indeed a regime—a character-forming moral order. In this regard, novels are a splendid corrective to many of the misunderstandings that theorists and citizens alike carry around in their heads about the “neutralism” of liberal orders.

Modern political science has aspired to be “value-free” since the mid-twentieth century. Catherine emphasizes how novels eschew and critique this aspiration. As an internal perspective on human life, novels first of all reveal how thoroughly “value-oriented” human life is. As Aristotle put it—and the novelists confirm—human beings seek the good, that is, some object of their action which they take to be a good human life. Novels, more firmly than theory, reveal the variety of goods that human beings seek. But these goods are not merely external ends slapped onto an otherwise whole human person—the goods are themselves person shaping. The novel is typically an exposition of the character, meaning, and quality of a human life shaped by the goods sought. It is necessarily an examination of the moral or value-determined life and of its successes and failures, merits and demerits. The novelist and the readers do not stand outside the value-ladenness of the characters’ lives but necessarily engage with it. The novel better puts its readers into the frame of human life as actually and necessarily lived than do the more “objective” human sciences. To paraphrase Leo Strauss, modern social science encourages or even requires its practitioners to become morally obtuse. Literature, Catherine has shown, stands as a necessary corrective to this obtuseness.

I have for the most part left out Catherine’s substantive interpretations of the literary works on which she has written, and I have especially had to omit the substance of her explanations of the return to nature theme in American literature. But perhaps I have said enough to tie her works on literature back to her works in political philosophy proper. As she commented to me recently, the papers on her work portray her as one who studies philosophic texts in a literary manner. I have shown that at the same time she has pursued literary texts in a philosophic manner. Or, perhaps better put, that the literary and philosophical, when understood and pursued aright, are not as separable as is sometimes believed.