

Poet's Politics

Poets, as Percy Shelley memorably said, are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. For W. H. Auden, poetry 'makes nothing happen'. What role does the poet have on the political scene? Have poets engaged memorably with their own political moment?

Below, we introduce ten classic political poems – poems which are 'political' on a range of ways, whether because they have become associated with political causes or moments or because they engage with the socio-political times the poet was writing in.

1. William Wordsworth, 'London, 1802'.

'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour'. With this opening line, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) begins one of his most famous sonnets.

Although he's best-known in the popular consciousness as the poet who praised daffodils and wandered lonely as a cloud, 'London, 1802' shows a Wordsworth who is very critical of England and its people, and looking back nostalgically to a happier time in English history:

O raise us up, return to us again,
And give us manners, virtue, freedom,
power!
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt
apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was
like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic,
free ...

2. Percy Shelley, 'England in 1819'.

Much like Wordsworth's sonnet above, Shelley, who was a second-rather than first-generation Romantic poet, offers in this sonnet (of sorts) an angry portrayal of a nation torn by civil unrest and brutality: Shelley wrote the poem shortly after the Peterloo Massacre. But he also sees the dying George III and his son, the rotund womaniser the Prince Regent, as symptoms of all that is corrupt and wrong with the social fabric of England:

An old, mad, blind, despised, and
dying King;
Princes, the dregs of their dull race,
who flow
Through public scorn,—mud from a
muddy spring;
Rulers who neither see nor feel nor
know,
But leechlike to their fainting country

cling
Till they drop, blind in blood, without
a blow.
A people starved and stabbed in th'
untilled field;
An army, whom liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all
who wield ...

3. Ambrose Bierce, 'A Political Apostate'.

Good friend, it is with deep regret I
note
The latest, strangest turning of your
coat;
Though any way you wear that mental
clout
The seamy side seems always to be
out ...

Bierce (1842-C. 1914) is perhaps best-known for his Devil's Dictionary, although he also wrote ghost stories and poetry. In this light poem, Bierce addresses a 'friend' who has changed his political allegiances.

4. Emma Lazarus, 'The New Colossus'.

'Keep, ancient lands, your storied
pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired,
your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming
shore ...'

Written in 1883 for the newly constructed Statue of Liberty, this sonnet is now inscribed on the base of the statue in New York. The poem is a celebration of the United States as a welcoming, maternal figure, a home for immigrants fleeing Europe for a better life in the New World.

5. Rudyard Kipling, 'Recessional'.

The now-famous phrase 'lest we forget', associated with those who gave their lives in the two World Wars, derives from this 1897 poem which Kipling wrote on the occasion of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. Although Kipling is often viewed as a racist and a flag-waver for imperialism, his views were more complex than such a view suggests, and this political poem goes against the celebratory mood of the Jubilee, reminding readers that the British Empire is trivial and transient in the face of the permanence of God.

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding calls not Thee to guard,

For frantic boast and foolish word—
Thy Mercy on Thy People, Lord!

6. W. B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, no night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born ...

One of the most famous political poems of the twentieth century, 'Easter 1916' responds ambivalently to the events of the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, which saw political rebels attempt to oust the British and establish independent rule in Ireland. As Yeats's refrain has it, 'A terrible beauty is born.'

'A terrible beauty is born': the words that end three of the four long stanzas that make up 'Easter 1916', with each new repetition of them changing them slightly. 'All changed, changed utterly'. For among other things, 'Easter 1916' is about the tension between change and permanence, steadfastness and flexibility – and nowhere is this seen more clearly, perhaps, than in Yeats's use of the stone in the third and fourth stanzas of 'Easter 1916'.

This bears closer analysis: in the third stanza, Yeats presents the stone as something dependable and solid in the midst of a 'living stream': the waters may flow over it, but the stone remains.

One of Cummings' most political poems, it's also deceptive in that it seems to be patriotically pro-American, until we realise that the lectern-thumping orator is probably some half-crazed politician who is trying to manipulate his audience. Throughout, Cummings mocks or makes light of many of the slogans and features associated with the United States of America, such as

when he follows the phrase 'land of the pilgrims' with the offhand words 'and so forth.'

8. W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939'.

its metre and stanza from loosely recalling Yeats's political poem above, this powerful poem about the outbreak of the Second World War was written shortly after Auden had emigrated to New York from England.

Although the poem is about the Nazi invasion of Poland and the global conflict that Auden knows this invasion will make inevitable, the poem has had a curious afterlife when it was taken up by a number of New York newspapers in the wake of 9/11. (Curiously, Auden's poem has nine stanzas comprising eleven lines each, which those fond of weird coincidences might find intriguing.)

9. Audre Lorde, 'Coal'.

This is the title poem from Lorde's 1976 collection of the same name, which was her first collection published by a major publisher. Lorde (1934-92) was a self-described 'Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet.' The 'warrior' is as important as the other words. Her poem 'Coal' is one of her most frequently anthologised, and sees Lorde harnessing the rage she feels when, for instance, she sees white people's attitudes to black Americans. 'Coal' is black, of course, but if you put it under enough pressure, it can produce diamonds.

10. Nikki Giovanni, 'Rosa Parks'.

Giovanni (b. 1943) is a well-known African-American poet and political activist, who has written about one of the most significant Civil Rights activists, Rosa Parks, on several occasions (including writing a book for younger readers, Rosa, all about her). Parks, of course, came to widespread attention in December 1955 thanks to her pivotal role in the Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama, when she resisted racial segregation on a local bus and refused to give up her seat for a white passenger.

Mr. Shyam Jha
(PGT - English)