

Politics Needs Literature

[to coin a phrase]

Just before we leave the topic of education and politics . . . does anybody still read Michael Foot's life *Aneurin Bevan*? There is one educated man writing about another! Bevan was without the advantages and disadvantages of Eton-and-Oxford: he began working in a butcher's shop at age eleven and went down the pit three years later. (A quoted account of the unpleasantness of pit life is excellently vivid: paperback vol. I, 1966, p. 19.) Aneurin Bevan educated himself in the same way as, though with less help than, his Oxford contemporaries: by reading, thinking and discussion. This included learning how to read. "His [Rodo's] 'message' could certainly not be compressed into a few paragraphs; if the flavour, the relish, the compassion and the loveliness are lost, all is lost . . . further . . . he never surrendered his own judgement to his new prophet." (I, p. 167) I suppose I am trying to "come from" the position of the educated, but I envy Bevan his reading and his *seriousness* of reading! Rodo is a case in point. I only know him from Foot's quotations. (Not that from them I can quite agree with Bevan's admiration—Rodo sounds too close to the George Eliot of the "May I join the choir invisible" strain.)

Bevan's speeches are excellent. He is addressing the educated, whether they are working-class educated at a pithead meeting or the still-surviving gentry of the House of Commons. Foot's readers are expected to know who Cobbett was, and Fox, and Junius. And Bevan feels no need to guard against argument or wit. He was a *very* witty speaker. There is a lovely, lightly mocking variation of Eden's *nolo episcopari* complaint that "high office was a burdensome, badly-rewarded occupation." (I, pp. 363–4) Bevan has a flow of good metaphors and dare even use epic simile. (I, p. 355) His retort to Churchill's image during the long-drawn-out conquest of Italy: "Is that the 'soft underbelly of the Axis'? We are climbing up the backbone." (I, p. 375)

N.B. this style is not just "being a good speaker". It was a mark of being able to *think*. Bevan provided the main Commons criticism of Churchill's war strategy. The starting-point was a handsome recognition of the necessity and greatness of Churchill, progressing to serious and reasonable doubts about whether Churchill understood the significance of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, or whether North Africa was *en route* to Berlin. Not a military man himself, Bevan nevertheless made himself capable of knowing what he was talking about.

The Bevan family in Tredegar has strong resemblances to the Lawrence family in Eastwood. It is a great pity that Aneurin's range and intelligence did not, it seems, get as far as discovering David Herbert. But if Lawrence had lived he might well have learnt from Bevan too.

Michael Foot, a lifelong atheist, expects his readers' equipment to include a good knowledge of the Bible. He does not rest with the David-and-Goliath cliché but glances at Goliath's boast when Bevan's enemies expect to "feed his flesh to the fowls of the air and the beasts of the field." (I, p. 382) And his tribute to José Enrique Rodo calls his *magnum opus* a "book of wisdom . . . on how to live and how to have life more abundantly." (I, p. 168) Throughout two long volumes Foot writes with energy and crispness. But he does expect us to know the word *meiosis*.

When Mr Cameron shows any sign of being able to think as deeply and clearly as Bevan about what the good society is, it may be possible to take his "big society" more seriously, even if we still don't agree with him. It does not count as thinking to assert deadpan that you are passionate about something or that it is your mission (14 February 2011). It would be a help if there were any journalists able to discuss the matter as well as Michael Foot discusses Bevan.

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