


# How to use literature in political theory: five questions of methodology in ‘politics and literature’

Hans-Ludwig Buchholz 

Accepted: 19 February 2024 / Published online: 12 March 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

**Abstract** Two influential but strangely separate bodies of research have emerged in the field of Politics and Literature. Either political theorists write about literature in a theoretical way by describing how literature enriches our understanding of politics, or they interpret individual works of literature. Comprehensive methodological accounts that aim to connect these two research literatures do not exist. In order to start such a methodological debate, the article will ask what methodology means in Politics and Literature. It will identify five methodological questions, ranging from how to read literary elements of style and how to deal with fictionality to what else to do with literature apart from interpretation. Any set of answers to these questions can be called a methodology in the field, and every methodology must find answers to all five questions.

**Keywords** Politics and literature · Political theory · Interpretation · Methodology · Narrative

---

✉ Dr. Hans-Ludwig Buchholz  
RPTU Kaiserslautern-Landau, Kaufhausgasse 9, 76829 Landau, Germany  
E-Mail: hl.buchholz@rptu.de

## Literatur in der politischen Theorie nutzen: zur Methodologie des Forschungsfelds „Politics and Literature“

**Zusammenfassung** Im Forschungsfeld „Politics and Literature“ haben sich zwei einflussreiche Forschungsliteraturen entwickelt, die weitgehend getrennt voneinander geblieben sind. Politiktheoretiker\*innen beschäftigen sich entweder theoretisch damit, wie Literatur unser Verständnis von Politik bereichert – oder sie interpretieren einzelne literarische Werke. Umfassende methodologische Darstellungen, die diese beiden Forschungsliteraturen miteinander verbinden, gibt es praktisch nicht. Um eine solche methodologische Debatte anzustoßen, fragt dieser Artikel, was der Begriff der Methodologie in „Politics and Literature“ bedeutet. Es werden hierfür fünf konkrete methodologische Fragen formuliert, ausgehend vom richtigen Umgang mit literarischen Stilelementen über die richtige Herangehensweise an Fiktionalität bis hin zu der Frage, welche weiteren Nutzungsmöglichkeiten von Literatur neben der Interpretation der Politiktheorie offenstehen. Das Artikel schlussfolgert, dass jede Kombination von Antworten auf diese fünf Fragen als Methodologie des Forschungsfeldes dienen kann und jede entsprechende Methodologie Antworten auf alle fünf vorgeschlagenen Fragen finden muss.

**Schlüsselwörter** Politics and Literatur · Politische Theorie · Interpretation · Methoden · Narrative

### 1 Introduction

Most political theorists would agree now that reading Shakespeare, Schiller, or Steinbeck can be just as valuable for their research as reading Hegel or Rawls. The sub-discipline of Politics and Literature<sup>1</sup> is a comparatively small one in terms of academic institutionalisation, but the fundamental assumption that art has a place in political theory is widely accepted. Seminars on literature are well established in political science departments, at least at US universities, and the stream of relevant interpretations flows steadily. This indicates strongly that the days when political theorists had to defend their work as soon as it was concerned with literature are over in all parts of the discipline.

Nevertheless, research in Politics and Literature faces a fundamental difficulty as soon as it actively engages with literature instead of merely theorising about its role in society. While excellent work has been and continues to be done in individual interpretations, these too often remain separate from theories of interpretation in Politics and Literature. A comprehensive methodological debate that reconnects these separate bodies of research by discussing in detail how to deal with the unfamiliar language of literary texts has not happened yet in political theory. It is not even clear what ‘methodology’ means in the context of Politics and Literature.

---

<sup>1</sup> The article uses ‘Politics and Literature’ to describe the subdiscipline of political theory, which concerns itself with literary works of art from a political science perspective (for a recent review of the research field see McWilliams 2015).

The article aims to encourage such a methodological debate by showing what methodology means and which questions must be answered by a methodology in Politics and Literature. Doing so requires understanding the reasons for the lack of comprehensive methodological approaches. I will argue that the unsatisfactory status quo results from the discipline's historical development. For the most time, political theorists were forced to work on defences of their research instead of filling their methodological toolboxes. Hence, the latter was refined to partial efforts in individual interpretations.

In order to overcome this status quo, theorists need to identify those exact areas in which gaps appear between their practical and theoretical approaches to literature. Based on the existing justifications for reading literature in political theory, I will point out five relevant problem areas in the form of five methodological questions: (1) Which concrete methodological tools should political theorists apply to deal with literary forms and literary elements of style? (2) How can political theorists handle fictionality? (3) How can theorists engage with literary works that are not explicitly about politics? (4) Which parts of literary works are relevant for Politics and Literature? (5) What else can political theorists do with literature apart from interpretation?

Together, these five questions form what might best be called a meta-methodology in Politics and Literature. Obviously, there cannot be the one right methodology in this field, or otherwise political theorists would severely limit their use of literature. Methodologies in Politics and Literature must be defined as particular sets of answers to these questions instead. Only by providing answers to all five questions can a methodology comprehensively guide an interpretation and reconnect the practical and theoretical research done in Politics and Literature.

The sub-discipline of Politics and Literature, to which this article aims to contribute, is firmly situated in an analytical, foundationalist tradition of thought (as explained in Chap. 2). Consequently, the article will argue in a mainly foundationalist way, too. Nevertheless, it will remain open for arguments from the post-foundationalist perspective that rejects the distinction between theoretical and literary languages.

## 2 Literary and theoretical texts: the creation of a border

Some distinction has always been made between texts written in a literary language and those written in a theoretical, philosophical, or scientific language. Consequently, authors and readers concerned with political questions were always forced to distinguish between literary and theoretical texts. Herodotus already dismisses Homer's epics for their fictionality (McWilliams 2015). Nevertheless, this distinction was not seen as an absolute one by most classical authors. Many of those who make the canon of political theory and the history of political thought have written literature as well as theory, and many canonical works are both. The most obvious examples are Plato's fictionalised accounts of Socrates, Machiavelli's play *Mandragola* and Rousseau's autobiographical works.

However, research and writing practices changed with the rise of liberalism and the formation of the academic disciplines in the nineteenth century. Political theory and literature now became separate worlds with distinct languages and functions (Whitebrook 1984, pp. 4–5). Even though the line drawn between literature and theory was not an entirely new one, it now had become, for the first time, a clearly defined and strictly guarded border. The consequence was strict expectations for authors and interpreters. Now, authors wrote either literature or theory, thereby indicating which form of knowledge they aimed to portray or produce. Meanwhile, interpreters had to decide whether to read/interpret texts as literature or as theory and obey the appropriate standards of good research. The older texts written without the knowledge of the strict border began to be read with a distinctly disciplinary gaze. In that sense, political theorists approach Homer's *Iliad*, for example, with an entirely different set of questions and different assumptions about authorship, truth, aesthetics, etc. than literary critics do.

Three main defining characteristics have emerged to mark the border between literature and theory:

1. The role of aesthetics: The literary use of language is much more creative than the theoretical one, applying literary elements of style and formal elements such as narration, plot, personification, and intratextual contextualisation (Zuckert 1981, p. 686). These elements of style and form follow aesthetic standards and can serve as ends in themselves.
2. The status of language: The literary use of language is much more absolute, self-sufficient, and less directed towards external worlds than the theoretical one. Roland Barthes writes: 'the role of literature is to represent actively to the scientific institution just what it rejects, i.e., the sovereignty of language' (Barthes 1989, p. 10). This means that works of literature might relate to real contexts and originate in them, but they remain sovereign, self-referential entities.
3. The use of fiction: Following from the second point, literature is always, in principle, fictional, whereas theory is not. A literary work's sovereign world can be set in relation to the unwritten world; the two might even be identical. However, literature's primary function is never imitating an existing world but creating something different that exists only in language and can be analysed instead of or as a substitute for the existing world. Jürgen Habermas effectively makes that point when he differentiates between literary language's function of 'world-disclosure' and theoretical language's function of 'problem-solving' (Habermas 1987, p. 207). While the former creates its own fictional context, the latter operates in given social or historical contexts. Both are structurally different, even though the difference originates not in the piece of language itself but depends on whether it is read as theory or as literature.

When dealing with texts defined by this differentiation between literary and theoretical languages, political theorists can follow one of two philosophical directions:

foundationalism and post-foundationalism.<sup>2</sup> The foundationalist (or analytical) tradition accepts the border drawn between theory and literature, based on fundamental differences between the two languages (hence the term foundationalism). If political theorists subscribed to this approach, they aim to utilize the border between theory and literature, rather than dissolving it. The research field of Politics and Literature, as referred to in this article, is firmly situated on this side of the argument.

The second approach in which theorists have dealt with the border drawn between theory and literature is often associated with Continental philosophy in general but is more accurately termed post-foundationalist. Theorists and philosophers on this side of the argument strongly contest any fundamental difference between theoretical and literary languages. This includes post-modern, post-structuralist and deconstructivist thinkers, but also authors in hermeneutics and those theorists, who do not distinguish between theory and literature in their own writing. Since they contest the border between the languages and genres and deconstruct the notion of such a border, post-foundationalists cannot utilise it. Moreover, the post-foundationalist argument rejects the concept of research methodology in the traditional sense. Hence, the remainder of the article will focus on the foundationalist argument.

Of course, this distinction between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist views on politics and literature is a very crude one and should not be applied too rigidly. There is a clear line between those who accept foundational differences between politics and literature and those who do not. However, some authors who would be described foundationalist in other matters take a partly post-foundationalist position in respect to politics and literature (authors like Lukács and Benjamin spring to mind). Moreover, arguments have crossed the analytical/Continental divide. For example, post-structuralist and deconstructivist thought has inspired the foundationalist sub-discipline of Politics and Literature in its struggle against a behaviouralist political science mainstream (Trepanier 2020, p. 4).

Consequently, this article will consider and utilize arguments from the post-foundationalist tradition where this is possible. At the same time, post-foundationalists will be able to make use of a method of Politics and Literature, at least in the restricted ways that the post-foundational rejection of methodology allows for. Of course, also those texts that explicitly cross or deconstruct the border between theoretical and literary languages will be interpretable by a methodology of Politics and Literature.

### 3 Politics and literature: contesting and utilising a border

Once the strict line between literature and (political) theory had become a foundational truth of foundationalist political science and theory (as described above), this did not mean that all political theorists abandoned literary texts. Many continued to work with them, but now they did it with the knowledge of crossing a strictly defined border. First, instead of reading or producing literary texts themselves, political theo-

---

<sup>2</sup> This use of foundationalism and post-foundationalism is based on William Connolly's terminology (Connolly 2006).

rists increasingly studied literature's effects on individuals and societies (e.g. Arendt 1958; Horkheimer and Adorno 1995, chap. The Culture Industry). And theorists did not read nor tell fictional narratives themselves anymore but studied their role in society (e.g. most of the essays in Crick 1989). In many other cases, literature is merely used to provide historical context information or illustrative examples.

This is still the mainstream use of literature in the discipline today, but it is not the only one anymore. In the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, some political theorists developed a renewed interest in working with literary language directly. They, too, accepted a difference between literature and theory but aimed to utilise this difference and therefore approached works of literature deliberately as such. The concrete, first-order engagement with literary texts from a political theory perspective became the defining characteristic of a new sub-discipline and research topic called 'Politics and Literature' (Ingle 1977). To these authors, it was precisely the differing character of literary language, that allowed political theorists to gain new insights (a comprehensive list of benefits that literature offers to political scientists can be found in Trepanier 2020).

The first essential contributions to this newly developed research area were pioneering interpretations of literature, mostly of novels. These origins are associated with names such as Conal Condren, Wilson Carey McWilliams, and Michael Rogin. Based on concrete texts and questions, they demonstrated practically that the border between the disciplines can be crossed. Their main concern at the time was to show that something relevant could be done with literature in political theory and they put not much emphasis on explaining their method.

Consequently, when Maureen Whitebrook in 1995 reviewed the different ways in which political theorists had engaged with literature, she concluded that 'the impulses for so doing have, hitherto, been rather diverse and unsystematic' (Whitebrook 1995, p. 60). More than a decade later, Simon Stow stated that there is still no clear theoretical and methodological foundation for Politics and Literature. He warns that the sub-discipline needs more fundamental research because 'continuing to perpetuate the confusion between the written [fictional] and unwritten worlds and their respective standards of justification, between readings and arguments, means continuing to perpetuate a lack of conceptual clarity and analytical rigour' (Stow 2007, p. 156).

It is easy to get the impression from this that political theorists approach literary texts without any theoretical foundation or look at these texts, somewhat naively, in the same way in which they would read a theoretical source. However, this critique cannot be substantiated. A theoretical debate in Politics and Literature started almost at the same time as the first interpretations were published. Already in 1981, Catherine Zuckert listed some methodological questions and challenges (Zuckert 1981). In 1984, Whitebrook sketched an outline of what a 'Political Literary Criticism' should achieve (Whitebrook 1984, pp. 152–173). Some influence can also be attributed to Continental efforts to, as suggested by Derrida in an interview in 1997, renegotiate the criteria that classify theoretical and literary sources of philosophy in an 'enormous research programme in which the received—or receivable—categories of academic scholarship must not be trusted' (Derrida 2001, pp. 9–12). Many similar examples exist.

Consequently, the picture that researchers in Politics and Literature face is not the absence of fundamental research. Instead, they can refer to two relevant bodies of research, a theoretical and a practical one, which too often are unrelated. On one side, there are fundamental, theoretical, and philosophical publications, discussing why theorists should read literature and how literature influences society. On the other side, there are numerous studies which focus on individual literary texts, interpret them, and relate them to concrete political problems. Both sides have helped to advance our understanding of political theory, and both have produced valuable results. However, an explicit connection between the fundamental and the concrete is made only too rarely.

The reason for this development lies in the discipline's history. The rebellious origins of the sub-discipline had forced theorists that were interested in the fundamental problems of Politics and Literature into a defensive position. Reading literature was also a way for political theorists to reject the discipline's behaviouralist, positivist, scientific mainstream (Zuckert 1995, p. 189; O'Donnell 2010, p. 279, 284). To succeed against this mainstream, much, if not all, of the earlier theoretical publications focus on justifying the use of literature or arguments against the charge of literature being too unscientific and too vague to be useful for theorists. This defensive tone still influences the style of fundamental work in Politics and Literature (as can be observed in Trepanier 2020).

For this reason, most of the relevant literature available deals almost exclusively with the possibilities and benefits that literature offers the discipline. These contributions explain in detail why, but not how, literature can serve as the most important (possibly the only) instrument to deal with human emotions, attitudes, and opinions without simplification (Nussbaum 1990, p. 3, 7; Whitebrook 1996, p. 48), and that, but not how, literature 'stretches the limits of experience' and allows theorists to experience, hence understand ideas and situations more deeply (Dannhauser 1995, p. 190). Still today, some contributions list benefits of literature but fail to mention methodological standards for recognising and utilising these benefits (e.g. Donskis 2008; Philips and Shaw 2013). Since the debates on whether to engage with literature at all in political science are fought and won though, such fundamental contributions to the field of Politics and Literature have become rare.

Three conclusions can be drawn from the sub-discipline's history and its status quo: First, it is important to remember that, even though the difference between literature and theory is often hard to define and at least partly constructed by academic disciplines, it is this difference that most of the quoted authors use productively rather than abolish. This implies that, second, Politics and Literature cannot simply refer to the existing methodological approaches to interpretation used by political theorists (summarised in Ball 2004). While by far not all these methodologies focus on a standard idea of theoretical text, an engagement with literature that appreciates it as such requires its own methodological concerns. Therefore, third, a conversation about methodology is needed, which helps to formulate methodological approaches, structures the methodological landscape formed by these approaches, and finally bridges the gap between general theory and concrete interpretation.

## 4 Questions of methodology in politics and literature

Numerous topics for such a methodological conversation have been named by the various theoretical accounts of Politics and Literature, and different practical answers have been implied in interpretations. Again, the two remain relatively unconnected. In order to change this, it will be useful to identify those methodological issues that specifically arise on the border between literature and theory. They highlight where Politics and Literature cannot rely on the existing theories of interpretation of political theory.

These issues will be identified in the form of five methodologically relevant questions, which are derived from the existing theoretical literature and summarise the concerns that underlie every practical interpretation of literature in political theory. There cannot be just one right answer to any of these questions. How they are answered in an interpretation will partly depend on the interpreter, his or her research question, and his or her theoretical background. Another important influence is the interpreted text itself. The literary language's 'sovereignty' and its aesthetic function mean that a literary text can make methodological demands, metaphorically spoken. The difference between literature and theory can only be utilised if the instruments of interpretation react to it; it will be destroyed if a literary text is merely approached as if it were a theoretical text. Therefore, interpreters must remain open to the literary text's possibilities and linguistic, formal, stylistic etc. peculiarities in order to utilise its differing character.

Because there are multiple answers to each question identified below, the term 'methodology' in Politics and Literature cannot be used in an absolute way. So, methodology in this context means a specific set of answers to the five questions. Thus, the list of questions below functions as meta-methodology: The questions serve as guidelines for debates on methodology, point out relevant fault lines, structure the inevitable methodological pluralism in the subfield, and support the formulation of coherent methodological approaches based on the existing theoretical texts.

*Question 1: Which concrete methodological tools should political theorists apply to deal with literary forms and literary elements of style?*

This first question is a methodological one in the narrowest sense. Theorists turn to literature because it enriches their vocabulary, research topics, ways of expression, and experiences, and these functions rely heavily on the defining characteristics of poetic language named above. Literary language is much more complex than the theoretical one. As described above, content is inseparably linked to the literary form. In addition, the content element of literature is made more complex by characters and plot, while formal aspects include various elements like stylistic instruments, diction, or performance aspects. Of course, political theorists are familiar even with things like character (or agency) and performativity. However, literature transports meaning in ways unfamiliar to political theory. Consequently, political theorists need a way to make sense of these additional possibilities of language without neglecting the theoretical style and aim of their interpretation. Zuckert describes this as a careful balance: 'We need to find a framework of analysis that preserves each novelist's



distinctive form and vision and yet enables us to specify the relation of fiction to fact' (Zuckert 1981, p. 685).

If theorists want to make full use of literary language and achieve the balance described by Zuckert, they must carefully engage with the methodologies of literary criticism. Literary studies themselves have often crossed the line between literature and politics. In fact, critics have become so strongly entangled in political debates, that a recent companion to literary studies observed: 'Bluntly, "literature and politics" is not really a sub-discipline of literary studies today; "literature and politics" is literary studies today' (Stratton 2023, p. 1). However, literary criticism by definition has other research questions and aims as political science. Therefore, political theorists cannot simply apply the literary critics' methods. These methods need to be adapted.

Taking this into account, two kinds of answer can be given to the first methodological question: First, research in politics and literature can be approached as an ideal field for interdisciplinarity. Political theorists and critics can work together and develop methodological tools that fit them both. Alternatively, political theorists must carefully assess methods from literary criticism, making them useful for their own purposes. The second answer in particular might best be achieved by focussing on those approaches in literary criticism that emphasise style and form in the interpretation. Most importantly, narratology provides tools to analyse things like plot structure, time structure, dramatic action, embellishment, opaqueness, metric arrangement and elements of style such as alliteration and anaphor (summarised in Prince 1990).

Structuralists and post-structuralists as well have something to say about these things and, most importantly, provide insights into the peculiarity of literary authorship. In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes lays the foundations for a literary criticism that rejects the author's authority over a work's meaning once it is finished. As soon as a piece of language becomes more than an immediate speech act, he argues, language starts to have no 'function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself' and leaves its author behind (Barthes 1977, p. 142). Most literary critics now share this indifference towards the author. Political theorists should use this to question whether their assumption that text is an intentional communicative act of a political actor still holds true when literature is concerned.

Some answers to this first methodological question exist, of course, in Politics and Literature as well as in the study of narratives in political science. Elements of literature that are also common to rhetoric, such as irony, metaphor, and narrative unity, are relatively unproblematic (Whitebrook 1996, p. 40, 49). Moreover, John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister have indicated how the ambiguities of literary language can enrich theory with counterexamples and added layers of complexity (Horton and Baumeister 1996, pp. 13–17). Erik Ringmar has used plot structures to analyse narratives in international relations (Ringmar 2006). And I have suggested elsewhere a methodology of authorless interpretation in political science, which can also be applied to Politics and Literature (Buchholz 2021).

However, there is still a certain scepticism in political theory concerning the literary critics' tools, caused mainly by the continued fear of violating the behavioural standards of good research, objectivity, clarity and transparency of language.

*Question 2: How can political theorists handle fictionality?*

As was said at the beginning, literature is always, by principle, creating a fictional world. A simple example can show how this becomes a methodological problem for Literature and Politics. Readers can either decide to interpret Rousseau's autobiographies as a truthful description of his life and of the origins of his theoretical works. Or they can see these autobiographies as works of fiction, which paint the literary figure 'Rousseau' behind which the historical figure Rousseau hides. Rousseau hints at the first possibility when he claims to show himself 'in all the truth of nature' in the *Confessions* (Rousseau 1995, p. 5), and he hints towards the latter by distinguishing between a narrator Rousseau and a narrated character, Jean-Jacques in the *Dialogues* (Rousseau 1990). Political theorists who read and interpret literary texts as literature are caught between the two principles. They need to decide whether to accept the work's fictionality or read it as a description of the unwritten world. There are arguments for both, and both fulfil different functions.

There is a deeper problem underlying this decision. Literary fiction and scientific truth are distinguished by different 'standards of justification' and interpreters have to carefully navigate this difference (Stow 2007, p. 151). Seen as a depiction of the unwritten world, literature can be compared to reality and be judged according to standards of truthfulness. The conspiracy against him that Rousseau describes in the autobiographies must then appear as a paranoid fantasy. Seen as a fictional world, on contrast, a work of literature must be judged according to its own standards of truth. The main standard of justification is now plausibility. Seen as literature, Rousseau's autobiographies lose some of their value as a historical source but can be read as a moral fable (Kelly 1987, p. xi). They hint at general social and philosophical insights rather than telling specific empirical truths. If theorists read literature as fictional but still want to approach it from a theoretical perspective and with their own research questions in mind, they must be aware of the act of translation that they engage in. They transfer knowledge from the written to the unwritten world, i.e. between contexts with different types of truth, and they must think about how this can be done.

Several solutions to the problem of fictionality have been suggested. Fictional texts can be used to formulate hypotheses or general truths about society, values, human behaviour etc. that go beyond concrete empirical observations. For example, Stephen Greenblatt shows how Shakespeare's works reveal different types of tyrannical power (e.g. Greenblatt 2018). In another line of argument, Martha Nussbaum suggests the use of fiction as a tool to gain insights into the typical life and thinking of people who are otherwise inaccessible to researchers, at least as a first step preceding more empirical research (Nussbaum 1995, pp. xiv–xvii). Similarly, historians of political thought of the *Cambridge School* search for the historical, linguistic, or sociological context information mirrored in a fictional world (e.g. Skinner 2014). Deciding for one of these ways to utilise fictionality or creating new ones must be part of every methodology in Politics and Literature.

*Question 3: How can theorists engage with literary works that are not explicitly about politics?*

Political theorists tend to focus on those novels, plays, and sometimes poems that are explicitly concerned with political topics; texts like Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and Shakespeare's histories. This is an obvious choice, but it also raises the question of whether works on topics other than politics are irrelevant to political theory or if they could prove to be politically relevant in the interpretation. Reading romantic novels, detective novels, and similar texts makes theorists even more vulnerable to the behaviouralists' scepticism, but it also might indirectly tell them something about politics. To solve this puzzle, theorists need to find ways to reconnect apparently unpolitical literature to their research interests in politics.

Whitebrook argues that literature 'enlarges the vocabulary of politics', by introducing it, for example, to the categories of the tragic and the evil (Whitebrook 1995, p. 60). These categories are not necessarily political themselves, but they shape the minds of political agents and thinkers, they contribute to what defines a society, or they are indirectly political in the sense that 'the private is political'. New vocabularies can lead the theorist outside the realm of politics in order to look at politics from a new angle. Methodologically, that often means to find political meaning in a text that is not obviously there as a result of auctorial intention, which means using rather than interpreting the text (cf. the terminology of Eco 1994, p. 57, 62). As literary criticism shows, this is legitimate, but theorists must be aware of what they are doing.

Some of the possibilities of using fiction listed above are also relevant here, especially Nussbaum's use of literature to access marginalised or clandestine groups. If literature can be used to understand someone's possible experiences and ways of thinking, then this applies to all aspects of life. Apparently non-political descriptions of everyday life etc. have political significance if they tell something about living conditions or the contexts of an emerging ideology. Here as well, literature cannot replace empirical studies but adds information which might be overlooked by focusing solely on politics proper.

*Question 4: Which parts of literary works are relevant to Politics and Literature?*

Barthes writes that 'literature [...] is alone today in bearing the entire responsibility for language; for though science needs language, it is not, like literature, within language' (Barthes 1989, p. 5). Literary language offers many more levels of meaning and expression than theoretical language does. Some of the consequences were already discussed with questions one and three, but two more must be noted. Whereas the main function of theoretical and scientific texts is the transparent communication of meaning, literary texts can communicate, please, affect, play, insinuate and do many other things all at the same time. Moreover, literature creates and displays worlds in their full complexity.

On the one hand, this offers an artificial, literary world to theorists, which they can only comprehend and think through in its completeness: with all its formal el-

ements, aesthetic aspects, embellishments, and potentially unimportant side-stories. This is particularly relevant if political theorists hope to study in literature complex emotions, opinions and ideas in their circumstances. Methodological tools are required for translating this literary complexity into a stricter theoretical language without them being ‘reduced to a lesson’ (Zuckert 1995, p. 190).

On the other hand, theorists must decide, either by methodological principle or in individual interpretations, on which elements of the literary text they focus, which elements they translate into theory, and which they exclude from the interpretation as untranslatable. Due to the specific character of literary language, combining content, form, and other elements of language into a meaningful-aesthetic entity, no absolute choices are possible here. Nevertheless, political theorists can decide—to name only a few examples—how strongly they rely on stylistic aspects in their interpretation, how much they focus on auctorial intention and situatedness, and if they aim to observe, analyse, or recreate the impression that the work leaves on a reader. In short, political theorists must decide and justify whether they just look for surface information and ideas in the literary text or value its literary language as a meaningful characteristic.

Making exclusions is indeed legitimate and even necessary in the interpretation of literature because such an interpretation can never produce more than one out of many possible readings of a literary text. After all, ambiguity and the fluid play of meanings are two of literature’s main characteristics. This is challenging for political theorists, as most of their theories of interpretation, from the *Cambridge School* to the *Straussians*, aim to pin down the text to one meaning. They try to find out ‘what authors mean, [...] what the ideas mean [...] [or] what one or both of these mean to the reader’ (Blau 2017, p. 243). This requires taking every aspect of the text and its context into account, or at least justifying omissions, to make sure that the extracted meaning is the right one. The methodological challenge here is to find a compromise between the ideal of absoluteness in theory and the necessarily partial character of readings of literature.

The two ways to tackle this fourth question complement each other. The work can be read and understood as a whole before choices are made in the interpretation. Theorists can find complete and complex worlds in literature, but interpretations of these worlds are always partial and limited.

*Question 5: What else can political theorists do with literature apart from interpretation?*

Based on their traditional methodologies, political theorists almost always *interpret* literary works, in the sense that they extract information and ideas and let these inform their theoretical research. That is an obvious choice, but more can be done if theorists learn to appreciate literature’s subjectivity. Two main arguments for such an alternative use of literature are repeatedly named.

First, advocates of Politics and Literature stress the power of the aesthetic experience. Werner Dannhauser writes, typical of researchers in the field: ‘Ensnares by that wonderful poem [*The Odyssey*], I became convinced that poetry can teach us things beyond the reach of philosophy. [...] I sensed that Homer did indeed have

things to teach me that I needed to learn' (Dannhauser 1995, p. 190). The things taught by literature are often emotional, vague and subjective, but nonetheless, they are there. Because of the subjectivity and singularity of the literary experience, this can hardly be described in more concrete terms. Hence, using subjective insights productively and in compliance with the standards of good research is a methodological puzzle. One solution could be a process of engaging with the text that starts with an open-minded (even naïve) reading of the text. This would allow theorists to analyse their own emotional and rational reactions to the text and then think about the relations between these effects and the content level of the work in the second and third steps.

A second important point of reference is the neo-Aristotelian argument expressed, for example, by Arendt (1958) and Nussbaum (1990), saying that experiences are accessible to reason through narratives. This implies that theorists can make experiences in literature, which allow them to re-feel someone else's experience or to alter their own perspective towards a topic. More systematic research on how to do this is needed, and it might start from the observation that different plot types create different perspectives on a topic. Northrop Frye (1973) list of the archetypal narrative types or plot structures of romance, tragedy, comedy and satire can be used for this. The elevation of a heroic figure and the clear distinction between good and evil in the romance make the reader identify with the literary characters' ideas, whereas the ironic stance and parasitic use of the other narrative types in satire create a critical distance to the text's topic. Based on this, texts on the same subject but from different genres can offer different comparable perspectives on the subject.

## 5 Conclusion

The article showed that scholars in Politics and Literature face two strangely separate bodies of research: theoretical accounts of the place of literature in political theory and individual interpretations of literature. Methodological debates that can reconnect these two research literatures are thwarted by the apologetic character of foundational research in the field. Paradoxically, increasing methodological awareness could also be the strongest argument against the behaviouralist insistence on scientific objectivity and theoretical language.

Due to the diverse range of research interests in Politics and Literature and to the character of literary language, there cannot be the single right methodology in the field. Instead, five methodological questions that arise when theorists engage with literary language, must be answered. Every set of answers to these questions can then be called a methodology (or even school of interpretation) of Politics and Literature. Political theorists can learn new answers to the proposed questions if they engage more with the methodologies of cognate disciplines, primarily with those of literary criticism and cultural theory. The inherent interdisciplinarity of Politics and Literature needs to reflect better in its methodological debate.

In this debate, Politics and Literature has the chance to rehabilitate some possibilities of research that had been excluded from political theory when the discipline's borders were first defined.

Primarily, political theorists need to take language, style, and form more seriously as significant parts of texts. The full potential of literature is needlessly limited if theorists focus exclusively on apparently clear political ideas and theses in interpretation. When approaching works of literature, political theorists should not view them exclusively as sources that communicate and discuss already existing ideas. Literature can also be a starting point for thinking, and not all aspects of literature should be translated into theory.

Moreover, literary authors should be taken seriously also as political thinkers. Literature offers a possibility for authors to escape traditional ideas, linguistic, stylistic and argumentative conventions, prejudices, or short-term political distractions in their political thought. Philosophers can also write literature to create an instrument to think about and think with. However, it is important to reiterate that the benefits of literary language are mainly useful to inspire and inform independent thought rather than to communicate, educate, propagate, or preach. Political literature of the latter kind is not only ineffective but literally unenjoyable. This must be remembered not only when writing literature but also when reading it.

Finally, the potential answers discussed for all five methodological questions imply that Politics and Literature as a research field is just as fluid as its literary sources are. Literary language invites a multitude of possible reactions and remains fundamentally open to new ways of approaching it. This is not a reason for neglecting methodological rigour. Instead, new methodological tools can always be added, and future methodological discussions need to retain a fundamental openness.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ball, Terence. 2004. History and the interpretation of texts. In *Handbook of political theory*, ed. Gerald Gaus, Chandran Kukathas, 18–30. London: SAGE.
- Barthes, Roland. 1977. The death of the author. In *Image music text*, ed. Stephen Heath, 142–148. London: Fontana Press.
- Barthes, Roland. 1989. *The rustle of language*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Blau, Adrian. 2017. Interpreting texts. In *Methods in analytical political theory*, ed. Adrian Blau, 243–269. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buchholz, Hans-Ludwig. 2021. Let there be text: reading political narratives as authorless texts. *The Political Science Reviewer* 45:319–354.
- Connolly, William E. 2006. Then and now: participant-observation in political theory. In *The oxford handbook of political theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips, 827–843. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crick, Bernard (ed.). 1989. *Essays on politics and literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Dannhauser, Werner J. 1995. Poetry vs. politics. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28:190–192.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2001. I have a taste for the secret. In *A taste for the secret*, ed. Giacomo Donis, David Webb, 1–92. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Donskis, Leonidas. 2008. *Power and imagination: studies in politics and literature. New studies in aesthetics*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Eco, Umberto. 1994. *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. 1973. *Anatomy of criticism: four essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 2018. *Tyrant: Shakespeare on politics*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. *The philosophical discourse of modernity. Translated by Frederick Lawrence*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1995. *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer.
- Horton, John, and Andrea T. Baumeister. 1996. Literature, philosophy and political theory. In *Literature and the political imagination*, ed. John Horton, Andrea T. Baumeister, 1–31. London: Routledge.
- Ingle, Stephen. 1977. Politics and literature: an unconsummated relationship. *Political Studies* 23:549–562.
- Kelly, Christopher. 1987. *Rousseau's exemplary life. The confessions as political theory*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- McWilliams, Susan. 2015. Politics and literature. In *The encyclopedia of political thought*, ed. M.T. Gibbons. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1990. *Love's knowledge: essays on philosophy and literature*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 1995. *Poetic justice. The literary imagination and public life*. Boston: Beacon.
- O'Donnell, Catherine. 2010. Literature and politics in the early republic: view from the bridge. *Journal of the Early Republic* 30:279–292.
- Philips, Deborah, and Katy Shaw (eds.). 2013. *Literary politics. The politics of literature and the literature of politics*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Prince, Gerald. 1990. On narrative studies and narrative genres. *Poetics Today* 11:271–282.
- Ringmar, Erik. 2006. Inter-textual relations. The quarrel over the Iraq war as a conflict between narrative types. *Cooperation and Conflict: Journal of the Nordic International Studies Association* 41:403–421.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1990. *Rousseau judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*. The collected writings of Rousseau, Vol. 1. Hanover: University Press of New England, edited by Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly. Translated by Judith R. Bush, Christopher Kelly, and Roger D. Masters.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1995. The confessions. In *The confessions and correspondence, including the letters to Malesherbes* The collected writings of Rousseau, Vol. 5, ed. Christopher Roger D. Kelly Masters, Peter G. Christopher Kelly Stillman tran, 1–550. Hanover, London: University Press of New England.
- Skinner, Quentin. 2014. *Forensic Shakespeare*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stow, Simon. 2007. *Republic of readers? The literary turn in political thought and analysis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Stratton, Matthew. 2023. Introduction. In *The Routledge companion to politics and literature in English*, ed. Matthew Stratton, 1–7. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.
- Trepanier, Lee. 2020. What can political science learn from literature? *The Political Science Reviewer* 44:1–19.
- Whitebrook, Maureen. 1984. *Politics and literature: works of literature as models and depictions of political ideas*. London: Birkbeck College, University of London.
- Whitebrook, Maureen. 1995. State of the art: politics and literature? *Politics* 15:55–62.
- Whitebrook, Maureen. 1996. Taking the narrative turn. What the novel has to offer political theory. In *Literature and the political imagination*, ed. John Horton, Andrea T. Baumeister, 32–52. New York, London: Routledge.
- Zuckert, Catherine. 1981. On reading classic American novelists as political thinkers. *The Journal of Politics* 43:683–706.
- Zuckert, Catherine. 1995. Why political scientists want to study literature. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28:189–190.