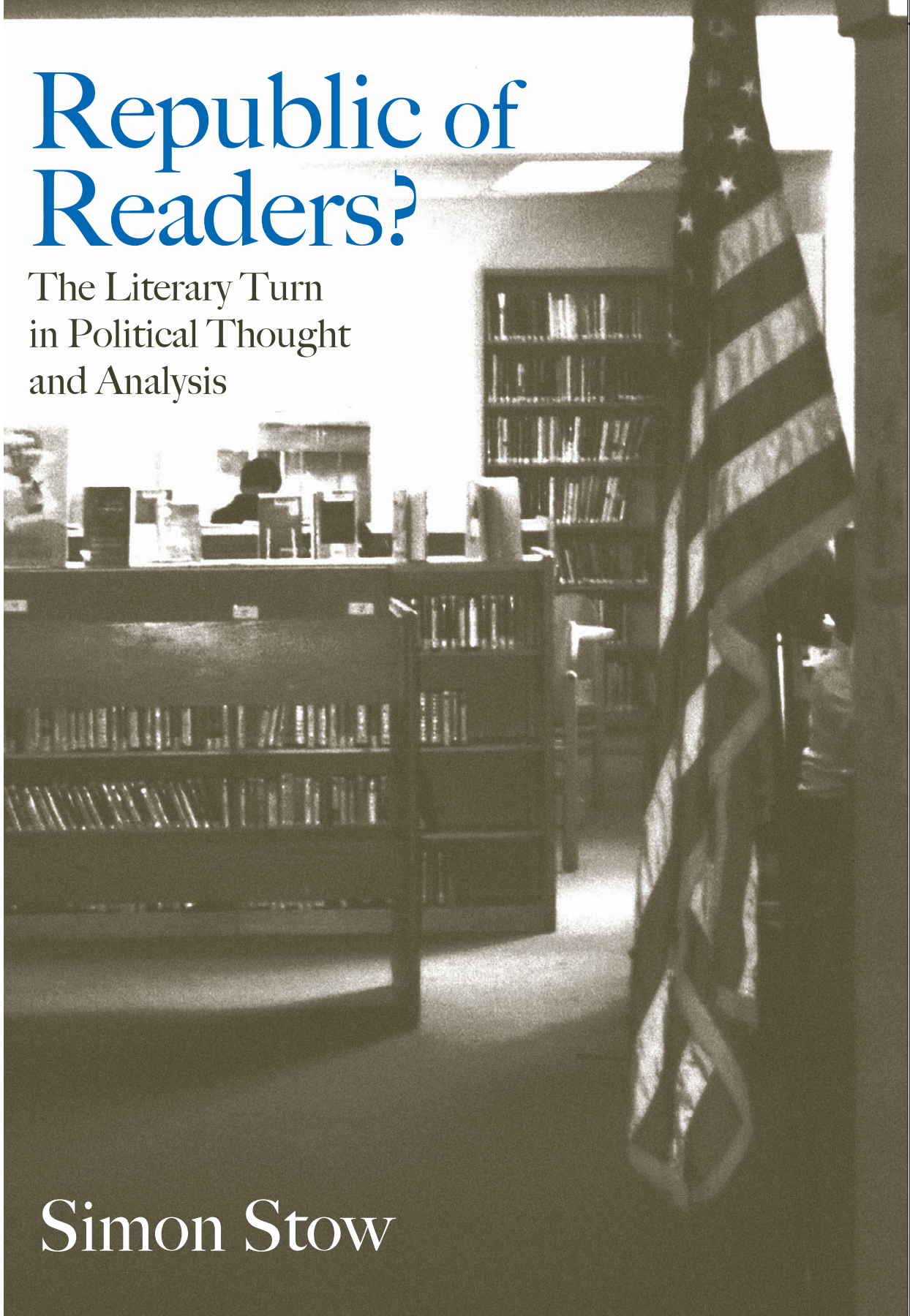


# Republic of Readers?

The Literary Turn  
in Political Thought  
and Analysis

Simon Stow



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*The Literary Turn in  
Political Thought and Analysis*

Simon Stow

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*For my parents, Graham and Christine Stow,  
and in memory of Alexander Keith Wood (2002–2003)*

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Dear Homer, if you are not a third from the truth about virtue, a craftsman of a phantom, just the one we defined as an imitator, but are also second and able to recognize what sorts of practices make human beings better or worse in private and public, tell us which of the cities was better governed thanks to you.

—Plato, *The Republic*



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A central claim of the book is that, by itself, reading cannot make us better people, but that the process of moral improvement depends crucially upon interacting with others. For me there could be no greater evidence of this than the company of Caroline Hanley, to whom I am fortunate enough to be married. She makes me and my life better and happier than I could ever have possibly imagined, and I thank her.

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# Introduction

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When politicians and politically minded people pay too much attention to literature, it is a bad sign—a bad sign mostly for literature, because it is then that literature is in most danger. But it is also a bad sign when they don't want to hear the word mentioned, and this happens as much to the most traditionally obtuse bourgeois politicians as to the most ideological revolutionaries.

—Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*<sup>1</sup>

A brief stroll through the humanities and social science sections of any North American university bookstore reveals that the study of literature and the study of politics have become somewhat indistinguishable enterprises. In the sections set aside for literature courses, novels—canonical and otherwise—now rub spines with books by thinkers such as Marx, Habermas, and Adorno, while in the section set aside for government or political science classes, in addition to impenetrable—for this reader at least—volumes on statistics and formal modeling, novels have begun to appear, and alongside them, books by thinkers and critics such as Judith Butler, Terry Eagleton, and Richard Rorty: works that do not appear to fit neatly into either category, politics nor literature. Much the same can be seen in both the law and philosophy sections. Novels now pop up on course reading lists, and with them books by figures such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Posner debating the relative merits of a “literary” approach to legal and philosophical study. In literature departments and in the popular press, this apparent merging of disciplines produced (occasionally) headline-grabbing battles over “political correctness,” tenure disputes, and a largely circular debate in which “conservatives” asserted that the “radical” obsession with issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality is simply a way of doing violence to the text; and the “radicals” countered that the “conservative” obsession with the text is simply a way of doing violence to issues of legitimate political concern.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, so pervasively did this conflict—sometimes known as the “Culture” or “Canon Wars”—embed itself in the study of literature that it became the stuff of literature, with writers as diverse as Philip Roth, A. S. Byatt, and David Lodge alternately lamenting and lampooning these academic debates in novels such as *The Human Stain*, *Possession*, and *Small World*.

In political science departments there has, however, been much less publicity for, and much less critical reflection on, a similar merging of the political and the literary in our approaches to thought and analysis. While many theorists working in political science departments now study narratives, rhetoric, and language—areas traditionally associated with the study of literature—much of the ground on issues such as class, gender, and colonialism—areas more traditionally associated with political science—appears to have been usurped by literary critics such as Terry Eagleton, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the late Edward Said. Furthermore, some political scientists appear to have been tempted to adopt the latter's methods in an effort to reclaim lost territory. There has, that is to say, been something of a “literary turn” in contemporary political thought and analysis. It is one that, while deeply influenced by a “political turn” in literary and cultural analysis that preceded it, has nevertheless failed to generate the sort of self-reflexive, potentially self-correcting debate that has marked the political turn in the study of literature.<sup>3</sup> This book is an attempt to start and to contribute to such a debate. As such, its claims are, by necessity, likely to be somewhat controversial, and occasionally, perhaps, undertheorized, not least in its suggestions about how we might more coherently utilize literature in political thought and analysis in the future. Such potential weaknesses might, however, be forgiven, for the book is—to utilize that most overworked and oftentimes disingenuous of methodological disclaimers—the work of a philosophical underlaborer, intent on clearing some paths toward future discussion. Its aim is not to *dismiss* the suggestion that literature can be a valuable source of information about the political but rather to try to *place* it. Recognizing that the literary has much to offer us as social scientists and political thinkers, this study seeks to identify what is of value in the current work in this area. It also seeks to identify what is problematic about the ways we currently use literature in political thought and analysis. It does so in order that we might add literature and literary analysis to our methodological tool kits without sacrificing either conceptual clarity or analytical rigor. In this, the concern of the book is that of the good lover in Plato's *Phaedrus*: one who highlights the object of his affection's defects in the hope that the object—in this case the use of literature in political thought and analysis—might become more perfect.

The focus here is not, however, entirely academic. Underpinning much of this discussion is a concern with the way in which politics—and political *debate* in particular—is currently practiced in liberal-democratic societies. Both the “political turn” in literary studies and the “literary turn” in political studies have, it will be argued, combined to produce a generation of students for whom *readings* are more important than *arguments*. The problem with this mode of debate is—as the claim will be developed in greater detail later—that *readings*, unlike *arguments*, have no more or less agreed-upon standards for validity, nor do they have any underlying principles to which to retreat in order to adjudicate between

competing claims, especially now that texts are widely regarded as being open to a multiplicity of possible interpretations. For this reason, it will be suggested, the literary mode of political debate is marked by what Alasdair MacIntyre called—in another context—a certain “shrill tone” among the participants.

## SHRILLNESS AND LITERARY DISCOURSE

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the contemporary polity is marked by an absence of agreed-upon principles about how to adjudicate moral debate: arguments about rights and individuality are, he says, met with arguments about universalizability; arguments about liberty met with arguments about equality. The result is, he suggests, incommensurability and stalemate. “From our rival conclusions” he notes, “we can argue back to our rival premises; but when we do arrive at our premises argument ceases and the invocation of one premise against another becomes a matter of pure assertion and counter-assertion.”<sup>4</sup> It is a condition, he suggests, with both public and private consequences:

. . . if we possess no unassailable criteria, no set of compelling reasons by which we may convince our opponents, it follows that in the process of making up our own minds we can have made no appeal to such criteria or such reasons. If I lack any good reasons to invoke against you, it must seem that I lack any good reasons. . . . Corresponding to the interminability of public argument there is at least the appearance of a disquieting private arbitrariness. It is small wonder if we become defensive and therefore shrill.<sup>5</sup>

In these circumstances, moral debate has something of a double shrillness. The impact of this unfortunate development upon the broader political culture is perhaps evidenced in the similarly shrill tone of much contemporary political debate. We see this most clearly in popular political books, where precisely due to a lack of shared principles in interpretation, disagreements over how to regard political facts and figures are presented as the difference between the writer’s own Truth and the “lies” of his or her political opponent, an approach that is, alas, prevalent across the entire political spectrum.<sup>6</sup> Somewhat unfortunately, there also appear to be strong parallels between MacIntyre’s description of our contemporary moral discussions and our literary-political debate.

In the absence of agreed-upon principles to adjudicate between literary interpretations, the literary mode of debate generates a similar tendency toward assertion and counter-assertion. This is especially true when political claims are thought to turn on such debates. As a result, philosophically and politically



important distinctions are often ignored in the ensuing melee of personal insults and attacks. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the debate over the canon has been so circular. In training a generation of students to engage in political *readings* as opposed to political *arguments*, the political turn in literary studies and the literary turn in political analysis are undoubtedly contributing to and perpetuating this problematic aspect of our contemporary political discourse. The process by which academic debates impact upon the broader political culture is, nevertheless, too random and imprecise to draw a direct causal arrow between any single instance of one affecting the other. So although this study evinces a concern with broader political questions—placing itself somewhere between Stanley Fish's assertion that academic debates are merely fun<sup>7</sup> and the poststructuralist assumption that these debates are a form of political work in and of themselves—it will largely be focused on the more tightly argued debates about the proper role of literature in political thought and analysis. The claims about the significance of this work for the world outside of academia will, by necessity, be somewhat more speculative.

## LITERATURE AND POLITICAL ANALYSIS

Literature has, of course, been part of political thought and analysis since the beginning. The quarrel between philosophy and poetry was already “old” when Socrates identified it in the *Republic*, and many early classics of the discipline have a distinctly literary bent. The emergence of behavioralism and statistical modeling in post-World War II political science, along with the apparent dominance of analytical philosophy in certain key areas of political thought—most notably in the discussion of justice—seemed, however, to diminish the significance of literary approaches in political science departments, even as political approaches to literature were gaining ground in the literature departments housed in the older, and usually nicer, buildings across campus. In recent years, however, there has been something of a revival of the literary approach to political study with the establishment of a “Politics and Literature” (now expanded to include film) organized section of the American Political Science Association and the publication in leading journals of—albeit a few—reflections on the role of literature in political analysis and indeed a number of politically inspired readings of literary texts.<sup>8</sup> In the American context, such work has been largely dominated by one method: the “classical perspective.” Drawing on the work of the political theorist Leo Strauss, the classical perspective argues that some literature is a worthwhile object of political analysis because of the special genius of its authors: figures capable of raising themselves above the perspective “of the era, the community, or the regime” to offer us unique insight into the political.<sup>9</sup> The appar-

ently widespread acceptance of this method in American political science journals has, however, not only precluded self-reflexive rumination on the *value* of the approach—that which has begun to act as a corrective to some of the more extreme claims made by proponents of the political turn in literary criticism—it has also obscured the *pervasiveness* of the turn to the literary in contemporary political thought and analysis. There is more to the literary turn than a mere revival of interest in reading novels and plays among certain groups of political scientists.

This study identifies three key aspects of the literary turn. It concerns itself with the questions they raise for the use of literature and literary-critical methods in political thought and analysis. Each expands the definition of the literary in the political far beyond the classical perspective discussion of the “political lessons” offered to us by particular authors and their works. The first of these three aspects is the *epistemological and ontological* question concerning the nature and role of *argument* in philosophical and political justification. The second is the *moral and political* question concerning the plausibility of the attempt to use literature as an emotional foundation for liberal democracy. The third is the *methodological* question concerning the validity of the turn to literature as a source of insight into the political that is allegedly unavailable through behavioral social science or philosophy, at least as each is traditionally conceived.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL QUESTION

For postmodernists and poststructuralists, analytic philosophy is, at best, a set of pseudo-problems and, at worst, dead. For such thinkers, arguments of the form “All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, Socrates is mortal” are simply another form of *narrative*, one whose validity rests not upon some logical structure or state of the world but rather upon the widespread acceptance of the argument by similarly situated beings. Having embraced this claim, a number of thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Judith Butler have turned to *redescription* as a source of political critique and construction. For them, political critique often seems to be simply a matter of redescribing, both one’s own position and that of one’s opponents, until the former appears more attractive than the latter. Persuasion, not careful and deductive argument, rules the day. Political construction in these circumstances is similarly a matter of marshalling *support* but not necessarily *evidence* for one’s position. This approach to political critique and construction relies for its critical purchase on the rhetorical power of its *language* and not the force of its *argument*. It is this concern with *language* and *narrative* that leads thinkers such as Butler and Rorty to prioritize—both consciously and unconsciously—the methods of literature and literary criticism over those of philosophy.

It is an approach that calls into question many of the traditional philosophical assumptions about *what* and *how* we know and, of course, the ontological status of arguments. It is, furthermore, an approach that has become so pervasive that even political theorists and moral philosophers with little time for the claims of postmodernity and/or poststructuralism have made a *partial* literary turn, at least as far as the *ontological and epistemological* question is concerned. Martha Nussbaum, a thinker who has openly scorned many of poststructuralism's central claims, has, for example, offered a number of seemingly powerful arguments for incorporating literature into philosophical reasoning and social science.<sup>10</sup> She seeks, however, not simply to replace philosophy with the methods of literature and literary criticism, in the manner of a Butler or a Rorty, but rather to augment it. Nussbaum wishes to embrace certain key elements of the turn toward literature while maintaining a fairly fixed view of the world and the role of Reason in it. She argues for a more modest philosophical position than either Butler or Rorty. Simply, that when combined with traditional analytical philosophy and formal modeling, the insights generated by literary analysis will offer a more complete picture of that world than that offered by Reason alone.<sup>11</sup>

This first aspect of the literary turn in contemporary political thought and analysis obviously goes much deeper than the classical perspective claim that literature can offer us critical insights unavailable elsewhere: it concerns the very foundations (or potential lack thereof) of philosophical inquiry and political argument. As such, it is intimately connected to the second aspect of the literary turn, the attempt to use literature as moral and/or emotional foundation for liberal democracy. The nature of this alleged connection, however, differs according to the philosophical perspective of those proposing it. For those who accept the value of philosophical argument, literature is merely a way to augment the existing practices; for those who reject philosophical argument, literature is both a way to justify and to maintain liberal-democratic societies.

## THE MORAL AND POLITICAL QUESTION

In his 1971 work *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls presented a defense of liberalism that attempted to separate the Right from the Good, offering a theory of "Justice as Fairness."<sup>12</sup> In an America whose social fabric was being torn apart by conflict over civil rights, the role of women, and the ongoing strife over the war in Vietnam, Rawls sought a way to regulate rather than overcome what appeared to be fundamental differences of opinion and political perspective: to offer a theory of *pure procedural justice* to which any citizen could subscribe regardless of whatever else he or she believed. The philosophical underpinnings of Rawls's

approach were largely Kantian, and his theory appeared to rely on the metaphysical claim that the self was ontologically prior to its ends. As such, it drew howls of protest from a group of thinkers who came to be known as “communitarians.”<sup>13</sup> Not only was Rawls’s account of the self inherently implausible, they suggested, but his theory was parasitic upon a conception of community that it not only did not acknowledge but that it actually undermined. In response to their criticism, Rawls revised his original theory, moving from the claim that “Justice as Fairness” was a mere *modus vivendi* for competing conceptions of the good, to the suggestion that it was itself a rather more substantive—albeit very thin—conception of the good that could be defended on minimalist terms.<sup>14</sup> There was, he suggested, a definite context for his theory: that of American-style liberal democracy.

Rawls’s acceptance of the communitarian claim that liberalism requires some recognition of its own social context—that rights are not by themselves enough, but that they must also be situated amid a culture of respect for those rights—paved the way for a debate about the best way to cultivate and support this democratic culture. The work of Robert Putnam was illustrative of this revived interest in the cultural foundations of liberal-democratic societies. Reaching back to Tocqueville’s discussion of the importance of “secondary institutions,” Putnam argued for the importance of choirs, bird-watching groups, and, most famously of course, bowling leagues in generating what he calls the “social capital” necessary to the proper functioning of liberal democracy.<sup>15</sup> Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty similarly turned to literature as a source of stability and cohesion for liberal-democratic societies.<sup>16</sup> Both thinkers argue—albeit from very different perspectives and in very different ways—that a well-read citizenry will enhance the practice of liberal democracy by generating an empathy and/or a solidarity that will promote respect for other viewpoints, an understanding of other ways of living, and a recognition of the contingency of one’s own perspective; in short, the values of civil society. This enhanced civil society, they suggest, will serve to support the values and institutions of liberal democracy, the very values that Rawls identifies as a prerequisite for a stable political system but that his theory fails to generate.

This question of the moral and political value of literature in liberal democracies is not only significant for the actual practice of liberalism, it also raises a number of questions about disciplinarity and method in the humanities and social sciences. Such questions have become all the more pertinent, given the recent revival of interest in the ethical value of literature,<sup>17</sup> for central to the consideration of literature’s power to generate moral and political insight are the questions of what we can legitimately derive from the texts under study, whether this differs according to the *way* that we read texts in and across different disciplines, and whether this *should* differ by discipline and the information and insights we are seeking from what we read.