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RESEARCH ARTICLE

What is a novel in the political novel? The perspectives of contemporary feminist theory

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Abstract

The paper examines the theoretical and methodological questions that arise from the feminist critical encounter with the genre of the political novel. On the one hand, a relatively small number of studies explicitly devoted to the political novel as a genre do not present a differentiated feminist perspective. On the other hand, since its beginnings in the late 1960s, feminist criticism has developed both its various readings and ideas of literature as inherently political. Feminist readings and ideas of politics are above all reflected in the treatment of nineteenth and twentieth century novels as privileged literary sources. While having the theoretical and methodological apparatus of these approaches in mind, and particularly those that defined political dimensions of literature in the manner of thematic criticism, we take a closer look at one of the most influential early feminist readings of political narrative prose – Shoshana Felman's "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" (1975). Using this example, we explore the possibilities of interpreting the political elements in political fiction and the usefulness of the feminist perspective on the politics of literature in general to rethink the genre of the political novel. Furthermore, we raise the issue of the feminist reading of the political novel in light of the most influential contemporary feminist conceptions of politics developed in the horizon of post-foundational political thought.

Keywords

political novel, politics of literature, feminist reading, the critical phallacy, post-foundational politics

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The encounter between feminist theory as a field of discipline and the status of the political novel in the genre system of modern novel gives rise to more than one cluster of questions. This applies in particular to the literary scholarship within the feminist field, which consists of a heterogeneous spectrum of feminist theoretical and critical approaches to the literary text and its relationship to the realm of politics and the political.[1] Moreover, since its emergence as a discipline in the late 1960s, feminist literary theory and criticism have privileged the novel as the genre that offers the most resources for its insights into literature and society, as well as for the development of its theoretical and methodological apparatus. In addition to engaging critically with the canon of the novel, early feminist criticism was one of the most prominent fields of thought to take up the challenge of relating literature to politics. Looking at the dynamics of feminist criticism as a mode of reading on the one hand, and literature and politics on the other, in this paper I will examine the interpretative possibilities that arise from the feminist encounter with the genre of the political novel. Although feminist criticism was not explicitly devoted to this genre, it offered a political perspective on literature in general, and on the genre of the novel in particular, which could be useful in rethinking the genre of the political novel and the elements of its generic status. This view is even more important considering the fact that a few studies explicitly devoted to the genre generally do not adopt a feminist perspective. Therefore, one of the main questions I wish to raise is the following: How could the (potential) canon of the political novel be read from a feminist perspective?

To illustrate the critical potentials of the feminist perspective for rethinking the genre of the political novel, let us take a look at a study that examines a similar corpus of literature. In the preface to the 1993 edition of *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*, Susan Rubin Suleiman looks back at the first version of this study published a decade earlier. Having become known for her feminist work, the author emphasises the lack of a feminist perspective in her earlier book:

> But where is feminism? This is a question that will certainly occur to those who know me primarily as a feminist critic, many of whom are unaware that I have also written other kinds of work. It is a question that occurred to me, too, as I was reading this book and noting with astonishment how very little feminist consciousness it seemed to manifest. How to explain this absence? Clearly, a dismissive shrugging of the shoulders ("I hadn't really discovered feminism yet") is not sufficient – and besides, it would be untrue, even if most of my feminist work came after this book. Nor would it be sufficient to respond that "the subject does not lend itself to feminist analysis," for in fact it does, and in some places even cries out for it: What is the relation between authoritarianism and patriarchy? Why are all the authors in my corpus of French *romans à thèse* men? (2 on page xvii)

While Suleiman further explains the *antipaternal* elements of *Authoritarian Fictions* as an implicit feminist layer, in this paper I will explore the possibilities of a more explicit relationship between feminist criticism and the political novel. What could happen if we read a corpus of the political novel (national, regional, European, global, twentieth century, nineteenth century, etc.) through feminist lenses? Is this a single-layered perspective or do we have several theoretical and methodological options before us? How might these choices contribute to a theoretical and historical account of the genre? And how does the political novel intervene in the existing literary corpus endorsed by feminist criticism?

In part one of this paper, I will refer to some comprehensive studies on the political novel and outline the problem of its form as an outstanding and unanswered question of this corpus of work. Second, I raise a general question of the relationship between literature and politics within the framework of feminist theory and criticism, and outline specific feminist contributions to rethinking the concept of the politics of literature within contemporary literary studies. While analysing different approaches to the topic, I will argue that drawing on a formalist analysis and the post-foundational conception of politics, the feminist approach to the political novel – whether in the theoretical and historiographic understanding of the genre or a new corpus of feminist 'case studies' – could find its disciplinary focus and bring a substantial novelty to the corpus of knowledge on this heterogeneous social and literary phenomenon.

The political novel and the (outstanding) question of form

One of the central issues of studies dealing with the genre of the political novel is a broader relationship between politics and literature, which is partly transferred here to the relationship between the theme of the novel and its form, and the relationship between the political and social context on the one hand and the literary text on the other. These studies do not treat these multiple layers related to the definition of the genre and the question of form in the same manner, but *the way* in which they attempt to treat this question or implicitly refuse to do so has theoretical and methodological consequences. For example, the first comprehensive study of the genre of the political novel – *Politics and the Novel*, published in 1957 by American literary scholar Irwing Howe – polemicises with what he sees as a conception of literature affirmed by New Criticism: the concept of the literary work as "a self-contained structure, all but free from the pressures of history"; or "a kind of sanctuary against the corruptions and vulgarities of the world" (3 on page ix). Although Howe departs from this view by addressing the political context and content of the selected novels, the relationship between politics as a theme and the formal features of the political novel is not central to his study, at least not explicitly.

[1] By keeping both terms, we have in mind the difference between them developed in contemporary theoretical discussions on the subject with the aim of a critical analysis of a nominal concept of politics, as well as certain semantic analogies and discordances between the terms used by different authors. For a general introduction to these discussions, see 1.

Howe elegantly defines the political novel as one of the possible "perspectives of observation" (3 on page 18) of the novel "in which *we take to be dominant* political ideas or the political milieu, a novel which permits this assumption without thereby suffering any radical distortion and, it follows, with the possibility of some analytical profit" (3 on page 19). Beyond this definition, Howe is interested in the critical use of this and similar categories. He claims:

> Whether a novel may be called a political or a psychological novel – and it is seldom anything more than a matter of convenience – seems rather trivial beside the question, why does a particular critic, bringing to bear his own accumulation of experience, propose to use one or the other of these labels? What is it that his approach is to make us see more clearly? What mode of analysis does the critic employ, or what body of insights does he command, to persuade us to "grant" him his classification? (3 on page 18)

Drawing on the picaresque novel as a generic precursor of the modern political novel – or, more precisely, on the new possibilities of social mobility through the class barriers it introduced (3 on page 19–20), Howe emphasises the shift in the nineteenth century from "the gradations within society to the fate of the society itself", and recognises the political novel as the novel "in which the idea of society, as distinct from the mere unquestioned workings of society, has penetrated the consciousness of the characters in all of its profoundly problematic aspects" (3 on page 21). Despite the thematic basis of this "observational perspective", Howe does not fall into the trap of "sociological reductionism". On the contrary, although he takes into account the socio-historical and literary genesis of the political novel, he nevertheless insists on its literary matter as the decisive moment of the genre. At the same time, Howe's critical credo – that "the criteria for evaluating a political novel must finally be the same as those for any other novel" (3 on page 25) – leaves the question of its form open.

Other authors of comprehensive studies of political novels have also touched on this question, without intending to give a decisive answer. Robert Boyers, for example, echoes Howe's findings, claiming that "if it is impossible to speak in generic terms of the form of the political novel, though our experience tells us that there is such a novel, it may yet be possible to work toward an acceptable, if fluid, definition" (4 on page 5). In a critical manner similar to Howe's, Boyers argues that "it is vital to read a novel as a novel, not as an effort to take a position on an issue of current interest" (4 on page 8), while "the expectation that a work will conform to the pattern of a political fiction is useful only if we can also plausibly account for elements not ordinarily associated with the pattern" (4 on page 15).

On the other hand, Susan Rubin Suleiman's previously mentioned study entitled *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (1983) stands out as the author approaches the problem of the form of political fiction from an explicitly formalist, or more precisely structuralist and narratological perspective. In her selection of novels, which she calls *ideological novels* or *romans à thèse*, the author intervenes both in their traditional, rather 'mimetic' reception, and in a critical revision of the narratological canon, which mostly consists of classics on the one hand, and popular culture on the other. In contrast to Howe, Suleiman insists that "the concept of genre implies that there exist certain properties that texts have in common, not that (or not only that) there exist certain modes of reading or […] certain interpretive strategies – that can be applied to any and every text" (2 on page 10). Again, in contrast to Howe, Suleiman gives much more importance to the act of naming:

> The perception and the naming of the genre are interpretive and evaluative acts, which indicate, prior to any commentary, a certain attitude on the part of the reader or critic. One can probably say the same thing about all genres: to name them is already to interpret them by half. (2 on page 4)

The other half, as Suleiman shows, is the choice of theoretical and methodological categories that are explicitly mentioned or implied in the reading of the novel, and in this half, she turns against the traditional concept of the ideological novel. In the following paragraph, let us consider the theoretical and methodological choices made in the corpus of the most distinguished feminist readings of the novel. While feminist criticism also suffered from 'mimetic' conceptions of the novel and its politics, a more instructive example of formalist analysis could offer some valuable guidelines for approaching the genre of the political novel.

The novel and feminist novelties

If we begin this discussion from a feminist understanding of the relationship between literature and politics, and the central role that the genre of the novel occupies in this setting, a broad range of feminist approaches, theories and methods is the first element of the disciplinary field that needs to be considered. Over the last two decades, several studies have attempted to provide a general overview of the almost half-century long critical engagement of feminists with literature. One of the most comprehensive contributions of the kind is Rita Felski's *Literature after Feminism* (2003). In contrast to a one-dimensional or even reductionist view of the feminist literary field, Felski reminds us that "presenting feminism as a field with many voices rather than as a single, doctrinaire ideology would seriously weaken many an author's polemical point" (5 on page 3). Furthermore, in approaching the feminist critical perspective, it is important to become sensitive to the ways in which feminist critics productively differ and disagree on the relationship between gender and writing (5 on page 5). In a similar comprehensive account of this field of discipline, while opening the volume on the corpus of contemporary feminist literary theory, Ellen Rooney also states: "no sooner has the point been made that women read and that their reading introduces a difference into literary history and criticism, than the meanings of both women and reading are put into question" (6 on page 5). The author therefore concludes that "replacing the potentially monolithic concept of feminist literary theory with the multiplicity of feminist literary theories allows us to renounce any effort

to totalize them or misrepresent them in a singular form" (6 on page 9).

In the context of the disciplinary and thematic heterogeneity of a broader field of feminist theory, the last decade has even seen a call for a feminist return to literature as a crucial step in rethinking feminist political positions. A call of this kind turns from Felski's question – *How has feminism changed the way we think about literature?* – to the question: "How has literature changed the ways we think about feminism?" (7 on page 10). This turn is based on the assumption that literature has a particular role to play in addressing current social, political and cultural conditions: "Literature provides a space for thinking about how the world might have been different and might be different still, or, as Theodor Adorno said, it 'is the antithesis of that which is the case' […], the 'negative knowledge of the actual world'" (7 on page 4–5).

In arguing for the necessity of literature for a feminist understanding of politics, Robin Truth Goodman also invokes Hannah Arendt's notion of politics developed in her seminal work *The Human Condition*, in the light of which literature proves "necessary for politics because literature testifies to the presence of others, giving recognition to the 'who' rather than the 'what' that connects individual acts to social existence" (7 on page 5). Goodman reminds us of the novel's privileged place in this equation, especially if we keep in mind the particularities of the novelistic word as dialogically oriented towards the other's word, conceptualised in Mihail Bakhtin's theory.[2] The author emphasises that the polyphonic novel, as a genre that establishes a privileged relationship with society, is the place

> where the literary word is in tension with itself, pulled in multiple directions, formative of the expressive dynamics of social conflict, unified in style and yet diversified in its sociopolitical purposes and individual origins, producing a dynamic of social intercourse (7 on page 5).

All of these theorists of the social and political dimensions of literature in general, or the novel in particular, as well as many others, inspire an important question for current debates in feminist theory: "whether the insufficient attention to literature's specificity corresponds to a parallel demise of attention to feminism's politics" (7 on page 6). Goodman continues with her reference to the crucial relationship between literature and politics for contemporary feminist thought:

> Does the loss of a specifically literary concept correspond to social impoverishment, conformism, and dis-identification with politics? Is literature crucial to developing the ideas of social difference, consequential critique, dialog, conflict, autonomy, social interaction, emancipation, and opposition that feminism requires? […] Does the persistence of a specifically feminist literary project allow the imagination of a type of "living together" that jars, distorts, challenges, exceeds, and innovates current unaccountable, disconnected, dystopic, even despotic social, political and economic formations? (7 on page 6)

Although the widespread use of feminist reading lenses profoundly changed the entire field of literary studies since the late 1960s, the implication that feminist criticism "affects everyone with expertise or interest in the study of literature, because it raises questions that are central to the field" (5 on page 20) is perhaps most visible in literary studies devoted to the history, theory, and criticism of the novel. Ironically, feminist critics of the 1960s and 1970s responded to centuries old "fears of the impact that novels might have on their female readers: on their chastity, their docility, their submission to (often patriarchal) authority" (6 on page 5). They established perspectives and approaches that are now considered the canon of contemporary feminist criticism, primarily by reading the corpus of eighteenth and nineteenth century novels – mostly those written by women. This literary source played a crucial role in the development of recognisable feminist approaches in literature and literary history, such as the critique of images of women in both fiction and traditional literary history and criticism, as well as the exploration of the women's literary tradition known as *gynocriticism*. Groundbreaking studies such as *Sexual Politics* (1970) by Kate Millett[9], *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1976) by Ellen Moers[10], *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) by Elaine Showalter[11] and *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar[12] have permanently changed the way we see the novel canon in English literature. Echoing Simone de Beauvoir's account of literature in *The Second Sex*, Kate Millett was one of the first feminist critics to consider the concept of politics outside the nominal political realm and view literary discourse as a mechanism for reproducing or obstructing traditional, patriarchal sexual politics. A necessary historical reconstruction and description of neglected or lost novels written by women was offered by Moers and Showalter, while Gilbert and Gubar polemicised with traditional criticism and developed an original method for reading the figuration of female madness present in an important part of nineteenth century women's fiction. On the other side of the Atlantic, the modernist novel became a privileged site for the development of feminist thought in the early works of the most influential French authors, such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Monique Wittig.[3] Authors such as Joyce and Proust influenced the development of their ideas of literature and language, which

[2] For a detailed analysis of the difference between the word in the novel and poetry, see Bakhtin's essay "Discourse in the Novel" (8). In contrast to the traditional stylistic understanding of the word, which corresponds to the monologic word, Bakhtin introduces his own concept of the dialogic word that is best realised in the novel: "Instead of the virginal fulness and inexhaustibility of the object itself, the prose writer confronts a multitude of routes, roads and paths that have been laid down in the object by social consciousness. Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer also witnesses the unfolding of social heteroglossia *surrounding* the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it" (8 on page 278).

[3] See, for example, 13, 14, 15 and 16.

differed greatly in theory and method from the approaches developed in the Anglo-American context. Furthermore, seminal feminist works on literature have also had an influence in other national and regional contexts through their reception and translations, changing the way literature is read, whether by professional readers such as literary critics and historians, or through the presence of feminist themes in the part of the public discourse engaged with literature.

In addition to the development of feminist literary theories and methodologies, early feminist readings of the novel also paved the way for rethinking a profound relationship between literature and politics. Indeed, politics was involved in various feminist approaches to literature on both sides of the Atlantic from the very beginning. In her account of the feminist intervention in novel studies, Nancy Armstrong argues for an inherent political engagement of the feminist reader: "The idea that fiction secretly endorsed rebellion against an oppressive father, husband, culture and literary mode became so attractive that critics looked for signs of rebellion even in heroines who seem compliant to a fault, and they found its indirect expression in the most unlikely places" (17 on page 101). This inherent inclination of feminist criticism towards politics characterised the reception of the discipline in the broader context of literary studies. Discredited by proponents of traditional literary studies along with other eager disciples of the "school of resentment" (all those who bring "'politics' into literature", 5 on page 13), the feminist critic – as a reader devoted simultaneously to literature and politics – appears as "an oxymoron, a mythical creature, as impossible as a unicorn" (5 on page 1). Alluding to a rather conservative image of the feminist critic who is "zealously scanning the pages for the slightest hint of sexism" (5 on page 1) and is therefore unable to do "justice to literature as literature" (5 on page 6), Felski turns to the much more complex relationship between literature and politics in her account of *literature after feminism*. She considers the intertwinement of the literary and the political (5 on page 12) in accordance with the diversity of feminist approaches and their development, as well as the internal disputes and debates on the one hand, and the feminist dialogue with other schools and disciplines on the other. Rejecting the above criticism, Felski argues for a double perspective: "holding art and society together in the mind's eye. It means tracing the ways they inform and shape each other without in any simple sense being 'the same'" (5 on page 22).

Although early feminist approaches such as Kate Millett's theory of sexual politics offered a groundbreaking insight into the specific role of literature in the system of political relations, such readings soon became the target of critics for reasons that Jonathan Culler recognised while describing *the first moment* of feminist criticism. In the influential chapter "Reading as a Woman" in his book *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (1982), Culler puts Millett's book in the conceptual framework of a feminist reading based on women's experiences in the social world:

> Criticism founded on this postulate of continuity takes considerable interest in the situations and psychology of female characters, investigating attitudes to women or the "images of women" in the works of an author, a genre, or a period. […] Such criticism is resolutely thematic – focused on woman as a theme in literary works – and resolute too in its appeal to the literary and nonliterary experience of readers. […] Criticism based on the presumption of continuity between the reader's experience and a woman's experience and on a concern with images of women is likely to become most forceful as a critique of the phallocentric assumptions that govern literary works. (18 on page 46)

Indeed, while Millett defined politics as "power-structured relationships" (9 on page 23) and considered patriarchy as "a social constant so deeply entrenched as to run through all other political, social, or economic forms" (9 on page 25), we have learned from the later discussion of her approach to literature that "what counts as 'the literary' cannot be reduced to the content, the form, the objects of narrative, or the polemics alone, nor is it particularly sheltered in realism or guaranteed in any particular form or genre" (7 on page 9).

Thus, if we are to understand the genre of the political novel beyond thematic criticism and consider the act of reading beyond the reader's experience, we should turn to a critical corpus that Culler referred to as *the second moment* of feminist criticism. This kind of criticism offers, in my view, a possible starting point for a feminist contribution to rethinking the political novel as a genre, since it profoundly alters not only the concept of reading but also the concept of politics.

Political moments of reading

"In its second moment", Culler explains, "feminist criticism undertakes, through the postulate of a woman reader, to bring about a new experience of reading and to make readers – men and women – question the literary and political assumptions on which their reading has been based" (18 on page 51). Furthermore, the aim is "to reverse the usual situation in which the perspective of a male critic is assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as a case of special pleading and an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mold" (18 on page 55). This type of feminist criticism aims to redefine the concept of universality. Contrary to the gendered oppositions of "rational/emotional, serious/frivolous, or reflective/spontaneous; feminist criticism of the second moment works to prove itself more rational, serious, and reflective than male readings that omit and distort" (18 on page 58). The second moment of feminist criticism can be illustrated by one of the most brilliant readings published in the early stages of the emergence of the disciplinary field. The text best known by its subtitle – Shoshana Felman's "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" – was published in 1975 in *Diacritics* as the inaugural review of the issue devoted to the current state of contemporary feminist thought in the humanities, and in literary studies in particular. Let us take a closer look at this reading as it addresses the issue of the relationship between thematic and structural elements of the text as the site of its political meanings and effects.

This review draws on three books from different disciplines (psychology, psychoanalysis, philosophy and literary studies) that are loosely connected by the problem of madness. As Felman shows, the problem raised in the perspective of Luce Irigaray's *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974; translated as *Speculum of*

the Other Woman) seems to be relevant in the field of literature as well. Indeed, in her analysis of Western philosophy Irigaray recognises a "latent design to exclude the woman from the production of speech, since the women, and the Other as such, are philosophically subjugated to the logical principle of Identity – Identity being conceived as a solely masculine sameness, apprehended as male self-presence and consciousness-to-itself" (19 on page 3). As Felman shows, this design is repeated in the literary institution, as a "theoretical blindness to the woman's actual Difference" (19 on page 3). The author addresses this problem in the central section of the review, which is devoted to a literary text – Honoré de Balzac's story "Adieu" (translated into English as "Farewell"), first published in 1830 and included in the *Études philosophiques* (*Philosophical Studies*) of the *Comédie humaine* (*Human Comedy*) (1829–1848). Since Felman deals with the narrative prose of a canonical realist author, whose subject matter is political, I find the author's insights into Balzac's prose and its broader reception instructive for general issues of reading narrative prose with a political topic, including the political novel. The story consists of three parts, which Felman refers to as: 1) *the discovery of the madwoman in the mysterious domain*, 2) *the war scene*, and 3) *the scene of the cure*. The dominant reception of the story repeats the pattern that Irigaray criticises; what is privileged in influential readings of the story is the historical narrative and the depiction of war, and what is neglected and even excluded from the critics' view are both madness and women. As Felman objects, "viewed through the eyes of the […] academic critics, *Adieu* becomes a story about the suffering of men in which the real protagonists are none but 'the soldiers of the Grand Army'" (19 on page 5). She draws general conclusions: "This critical oversight, which appears as a systematic blindness to significant facts, functions as a censorship mechanism, as a symbolic eradication of women from the world of literature" (19 on page 6).

However, as Felman argues, this omission concerns not only thematic elements of the story but above all the reflection on the literary material – and its critical potential – itself. As Balzac is primarily praised for his realistic depiction of war, she exposes the theoretical background of the critical concept of *Balzacian realism* and explicitly subjects it to feminist interrogation as she offers a rereading and reinterpretation of Balzac's story. Can we consider Balzac's story political because it offers the canonical representation of war as a political subject *par excellence*? As Felman shows, the story goes much further – it questions the nature of (literary) representation and the possibilities of its reading.

In contrast to the prevailing interpretations of the story, Felman attempts to show how the text reveals, unravels and puts on trial the crucial antagonists of the plot: not the men fighting a war, but the opposition between reason and madness, which is analogous to the dichotomy of speech and silence and, of course, to the gendered pair. Reason and speech are on the side of the masculine, silence and madness on the side of the feminine. (At least for a while.) This economy is in fact very similar to the encounter between the text and the reader. The problem that reveals itself inside the text suddenly involves the outside: "With respect to the woman's madness, man's reason reacts by trying to appropriate it: in the first place, by claiming to 'understand' it", treating it as "an object which can be known and possessed" (19 on page 7). However, the feminine protagonist resists this intention, as her madness causes

> the dislocation of any transitive, communicative language, of "propriety" as such, of any correspondence or transparency joining "names" to "things", the blind opacity of a lost signifier unmatched by any signified, the pure recurrent difference of a word detached from both its meaning and its context. (19 on page 9)

To bring her back to her senses through the theatrical representation of the '*Adieu*'-scene means death – the woman dies at the moment of (re)cognition. Felman concludes,

> when transparency and meaning, "reason" and "representation" are regained, when madness ends, so does the text itself. Literature, in this way, seems to indicate its *impuissance* to dominate or to recuperate the madness of the signifier from which it speaks, its radical incapacity to master its signifying repetition, to "tame" its own linguistic difference, to "represent" identity or truth. Like madness and unlike representation, literature can signify but not make sense. (19 on page 9–10)

Felman uses the logic of Balzac's text to question the logic of the aforementioned literary critics, whom she refers to as realist critics. In doing so, she exposes their *critical phallacy*:

> the "realist" critic seeks representation, tries, by means of fiction, to reproduce "the real thing"; the readable is designed as a stimulus not for knowledge and cognition, but for acknowledgement and recognition, not for the production of a question, but for the reproduction of a foreknown answer – delimited with a preexisting, predefined horizon, where the "truth" to be discovered is reduced to the natural status of a simple given, immediately perceptible, directly "representable" (through the totally intelligible medium of transparent language). (19 on page 10)

This reading offers us valuable lessons for rethinking both generic and critical categories when approaching the issue of political literature and the political novel as such. First of all, Felman shows us how to engage with traditional criticism without neglecting the specific literary devices of the chosen text. Secondly, in the stream of the reception of French theory in the mid-1970s it manifests the credo of later discussions about the politics of literature, which emerged after Jacques Rancière's *Politique de la littérature* (*The Politics of Literature*): that literature remains political only as literature.[4] Therefore, the criteria of thematic criticism simply cannot do justice to a literary

[4] Rancière's famous book opens with a well-known thesis: "The politics of literature is not the same thing as the politics of writers. It does not concern the personal engagements of writers in the social or political struggles of their times. Neither does it concern the way writers represent social structures, political movements or various identities in their books. The expression 'politics of literature' implies that literature does politics simply by being literature. It assumes that we don't need to worry about whether writers should go in for politics or stick to the purity of their art instead, but that this very purity has something to do with politics. It assumes that there is an essential connection between politics as a specific form of collective practice and literature as a well-defined practice of the art of writing" (20 on page 3).

text as a literary text. Furthermore, Felman's text exemplifies the emergence of a feminist literary field at the intersection of French and Anglophone linguistic, intellectual and institutional conditions, but also demonstrates the possibilities of feminist interventions in the theory and methodology of traditional literary studies. At the same time, this relatively early reading refutes the prejudices of its proponents (protected by the shield of so-called universality) against feminist criticism. As Culler concludes, "Felman's critical mode thus leads back to the second level at which political choices are debated and where notions of what one wants animate critical practice" (18 on page 63). To the extent that we might see Felman's text as exemplary of this second moment, it is consistent with later assessments of the critical impact of feminist reading. Rooney argues:

> If readers "make a difference" it is because they read to undo previous phallic paradigms of interpretative mastery and to disclose as yet unimagined textual possibilities, possibilities that invalidate our "available paradigms" and leave ambivalence, conflict, and contradiction in place for us to explore. (6 on page 7)

This kind of reading therefore becomes a possible site for new conceptualisations of politics that emerge from literature in the current feminist field:

> reading as a mode of work, as attention to the impasse, to the figuration of the impossible, threatens the transparency of categories like the (lesbian) woman or (black) women or even gender (in postcoloniality). Insofar as such categories imagine identity as rooted in an experience beyond representation, a unified experience given by some unmediated practice and not both formed and undone by language, literature is the site of their deconstruction as well as their renewal. (6 on page 7)

Through the feminist lenses

But what about the status of literature and the novel in contemporary feminist theory? In many recent accounts of its development, it is assumed that the 1990s brought about an epistemological, theoretical and methodological shift in the feminist discipline. The shift displaces the focus of analysis from the sexual/gendered subject to the critical analysis of its genealogy and the mechanisms of its performative construction, challenging the theoretical assumptions and methodological efforts that had long left the category of the subject untouched. This movement is also underway in queer studies. Consequently, "queer" persists as: 1) "an umbrella term for a range of sexual and gender identities that are not 'straight', or at least not normative"; 2) and it "functions more as a verb than a noun, signalling a critical stance […] that is sceptical of existing identity categories and more interested in understanding the production of normativity and its queer companion" (21 on page 2).

Although this shift is often described as a radical break and attributed to Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), it is important to consider the continuous relationships between the current state of the discipline and long-standing trends in feminist theory. Otherwise, one might conclude that this shift significantly alters feminist reading lists. Referring critically to interpretive clichés, Felski claims that "modernist and postmodernist fiction, rather than the Victorian novel, were now mined for the new truth of gender – the truth that there is no truth" (5 on page 76). She further asserts, the "works most favored by feminist critics were those that wove a playful and self-conscious artfulness into a probing exploration of the ontology of gender and sexuality" (5 on page 77). Returning to Felman's text, however, it becomes clear that the question of the status of literature – and consequently, its political dimension – in feminist theory is much more complex. Approaching the corpus of the political novel from a feminist perspective is therefore part of a complex system of theories and methods that have been rethinking the concept of the politics of literature and the politics of reading for more than half a century. "Women and Madness: the Critical Phallacy" is an early example of a particular kind of criticism that combines a feminist perspective with an antirepresentational understanding of the literary text, and of the specific kind of literary engagement that corresponds to this theoretical and methodological credo. It is a kind of reading whose pleasure, as Felski puts it, cannot be explained "in terms of a language of recognition and shared identity" (5 on page 43). It is the one that "alters our vision of literature as literature" (5 on page 20). Thus, while the interest in the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel did not necessarily mean the mere repetition of the methods of realist critics in search of the representation of the different faces of the gender divide, the modernist and postmodernist novel has attracted the attention of feminist readers since the 1960s (and not only from the 1990s). On the other hand, the change that interest in modernism brings to the discipline is a different question – but it certainly relates to the discipline as a whole and not just to its current state. Thus, the central question of Felman's text has lost none of its relevance almost half a century later: "How can a reading lead to something other than recognition, 'normalization' and the 'cure'?" (5 on page 10)

There are still many accounts that cling to the category of (sexual, gender) identity, while leaving aside the question of the resistance of literary form to the discourses that constitute the general understanding of sex/gender. Given the disciplinary disagreements in feminist and queer theory, the 'feminist' definition of the political novel could be placed within this specific theoretical and interpretative framework. Although Butler's position has been accused of the disappearance of literature from the horizon of contemporary feminist theory (see, for example, 22), this gathering could also be framed differently. The starting point of Butler's conceptualisation of the performative is Derrida's notion of iterability, which provides insight into "gender as an effect of the repetition of meaning over time. By thus incorporating the necessary temporal gap or discontinuity of its individual performances into the act, it opens up space for the restaging, deformation, and parodic twisting of its effects" (23 on page 48).

Finally, let us turn to Butler's influential essay "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism" (1992). Here, Butler is confronted with the presumption that "politics is

unthinkable without a foundation", which presupposes a "subject, the referentiality of language, the integrity of the institutional descriptions it provides" (24 on page 3). However, when these premises are addressed, a specific feminist politics emerges in its contingency. While critically distancing herself from an anti-foundationalism as another kind of foundationalism, she nevertheless insists that the moment the category of women describes the constituency for which feminism speaks, "an internal debate invariably begins over what the descriptive content of that term might be" (24 on page 15). On the other hand, Butler – implicitly following a line of feminist theory that began with Irigaray and Cixous – assumes that if "'women' designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability" (24 on page 16). As she claims, this place is "the ungrounded ground of feminist theory" (24 on page 16). In calling for the signifier to be liberated from the signified, her quest has much in common with literature and with politics – or the politics of literature – for "to safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman" (24 on page 16). In this sense, we could consider literature as a privileged critical site that resists the naturalisation of its signifying practice. The crucial question is: how can the specific literary rupture of the relationship between the signifier and the signified resist the mimetic relationship of gender and sex on the one hand, and the mimetic demand in the (feminist) literary field on the other? If we transfer this question to the field of feminist reading of the political novel, this kind of reading would be interested in the function of gender in the economy of literary discourse, which could discover so far neglected aspects of this literary corpus and even shed completely new light on the much-read canonical works. The articulation of a post-foundational politics, however, requires an understanding of the literary text that avoids its interpretative anchoring in the realms of politics, history, biography, identity, etc. – which according to distinguished perspectives on the politics of literature such as Felman's and Rancière's – does not make it apolitical, but political in its own, literary way.

With this brief outline of the relationship between literature and politics in the feminist literary field and the place of the novel – and the possible place of the political novel – in this scene, I have attempted to approach the subject in all its complexity. This overview sheds light on several blind spots. On the one hand, general accounts of the political novel lack a feminist perspective, and there is no systematic feminist study of this literary corpus. On the other hand, both disciplinary perspectives could benefit more from a formalist understanding and analysis of the novel, as well as from a post-foundational conception of politics. In considering the relationship between literature and politics, feminist criticism, in different ways, went broader and further from the center of the debate: its interest in the novel in general has always been political, while the supposed canon of the political novel can look different and new through feminist lenses.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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This article presents an exploration of the intersection between feminist literary theory and the genre of the political novel. The author argues that feminist perspectives, often overlooked in studies of the political novel, can offer new interpretive tools to rethink the genre's form, canon, and relationship to politics. The central question is how a (potential) canon of the political novel might be read from a feminist perspective. The article's strengths lie in its call for a "post-foundational" approach to politics in literature, which avoids reductive thematic readings. The article identifies a genuine gap in the literature: while feminist criticism has privileged the novel, it has not systematically engaged with the "political novel" as a genre, and vice versa. The author's proposal to apply feminist "lenses" (drawing on formalist and post-foundational theories) to rethink the genre's form and canon is innovative. Weaknesses: Subheadings are used inconsistently, and the paper jumps between historical overviews, theoretical summaries, and brief examples without smooth linkages. The paper's feminist framework is predominantly white, Western, and cisgender-focused, with limited attention to intersectional perspectives (e.g., race, class, postcolonialism, or queer theory beyond a brief mention of Butler). The paper also repeats ideas (e.g., the critique of thematic reductionism appears multiple times), which could be streamlined. I recommend: Strengthen the conclusion by addressing how this feminist rethinking could impact pedagogy, canon formation, or contemporary political fiction. Proofread for typos (e.g., "Irwing Howe" should be "Irving Howe"; "picaresque novel" is correctly referenced but could link to specific examples). Ensure gender-neutral language throughout.

Is the work original in terms of material and argument?
Yes

Does it sufficiently engage with relevant methodologies and secondary literature on the topic?
Yes

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?

Yes

Is the argument persuasive and supported by evidence?
Yes

If any, are all the source data and materials underlying the results available?
Yes

Does the research article contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Yes

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I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.