

Book Review: Michael Keren (2015). *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium*. Calgary, AB: Calgary University Press.

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The narrative turn in International Relations scholarship has been rich with debates about the merits of narrative-as-method in addition to beautifully woven autoethnographic and narrative tales. But what the narrative turn has lacked thus far is a complex discussion about the incorporation of narrative as part of a pedagogical approach. While scholars are certainly teaching courses on narrative, too little attention has been given in published works to the sort of titles that could be incorporated in political science courses. For those who wish to expand their syllabi to reflect an appreciation of alternative forms of inquiry, what options exist? How have other scholars integrated narrative works and with what level of success?

Michael Keren's *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium* is a valuable contribution to the narrative turn. Specifically, *Politics and Literature* should be of interest to any scholar questioning if or how to incorporate literature into political science courses. Keren's book, which couples 12 fictional texts with more traditional political science readings and general themes, offers a potential syllabus for a course that would deal with major contemporary political issues (e.g., terrorism, genocide, poverty, mind/body dualism). Moreover, Keren's analysis highlights some of the often overlooked affinities between the political science and literature disciplines, offering a starting point for a discussion about the merits of current disciplinary boundaries. Through his analysis of these 12 fictional texts and their political science counterparts, Keren encourages the narrative turn to proliferate more fully within university classrooms. His choice of texts offers scholars who may not already utilize narrative approaches a natural segue into critical methodologies.

Early in *Politics and Literature*, Keren asks his readers, 'What is it in novels and other aesthetics forms — poems, plays, films, photographs, paintings, and the like — that make them useful in the study of contemporary politics?'¹ To answer this question, Keren outlines the departure the aesthetic turn took (and continues to take) from behaviouralism and positivism. According to Keren, aesthetic forms of representation have the ability to offer a more nuanced depiction of political events or issues by 'exposing the representational nature of notions... which are mistaken for reality.'² Although Keren does not argue that aesthetic forms should supplant more traditional forms of knowledge production, he sees them as a useful and necessary supplement. Keren writes:

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¹ Michael Keren, *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium*, p. 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Novels like *Life of Pi* and *Blindness* are not necessarily more helpful in learning about the political world than scholarly essays, but they provide fresh perspectives about reality by allowing us to temporarily transcend it. Fiction is mostly an escape from reality, but it is also a way to imagine hidden dimensions that may not reveal themselves in a straightforward empirical investigation, such as behavioural scenarios that have not been materialized, and may never do so, but whose consideration gives meaning to existing practices and allows value judgments about them.³

For Keren, novels like *Blindness* and *Life of Pi* could offer a more approachable catalyst for classroom discussion about contemporary political issues than John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' theory alone. Both Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* and Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' theory operate within a behaviouralist frame of understanding the world. As Keren explains, these two texts seem to offer readers obvious conclusions about the state of the world and human behaviour. Keren uses José Saramago's novel *Blindness*, which is about 'a society that is not situated in any specific time or place,'⁴ as a compliment to Rawls' assumptions and Yann Martel's novel *Life of Pi* as an 'alternative of coexistence between civilizations'⁵ in contrast to Huntington's thesis. In both instances, the combination of these texts endeavors to provide readers with a necessary juxtaposition, instigating discussion and critical thought. What may seem obvious to a student first approaching *A Theory of Justice* or 'The Clash of Civilizations?' suddenly requires further investigation.

Although Keren creates space for literary works to enter into political science classrooms, his coupling in many chapters of literature with more traditional political science texts in concert with his argument that novels function as a supplement to said texts sets up a hierarchy that privileges the latter form of writing. If novels generally act as supplementary readings, then only more traditional political science works are able to stand on their own. It is my position that there is not a clear distinction between either scholarly or fictional texts. As such, I believe that narrative works do not need more traditional political science texts in order to teach us something about contemporary political issues. This is not to say that the choice to bring two texts together is in and of itself problematic, but to question the supplementary nature attributed to novels. Given this perspective, I would have liked further discussion from Keren about the extent to which it is possible for literary pieces to stand on their own and where the boundaries lie between what constitutes literature and what constitutes political science. There are chapters where Keren does not engage in this sort of coupling. For instance, in chapter seven, Keren discusses John Le Carré's novel *Absolute Friends* on its own as a way of looking at public intellectuals. However, Keren does not clarify in these chapters what happens when novels are utilized without more traditional political science texts and if these novels can go farther than merely enriching political inquiry.

Regardless, *Politics and Literature* encourages a type of pedagogical innovation that has the potential to impact the way that political science is taught and how literature is represented in the discipline. It offers a fresh pedagogical approach that embeds the narrative turn firmly within the classroom. Keren illustrates that novels can enhance political discussions and illuminate alternatives to normative representations of how the world functions.

³ Michael Keren, *Politics and Literature at the Turn of the Millennium*, p. 8-9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210.