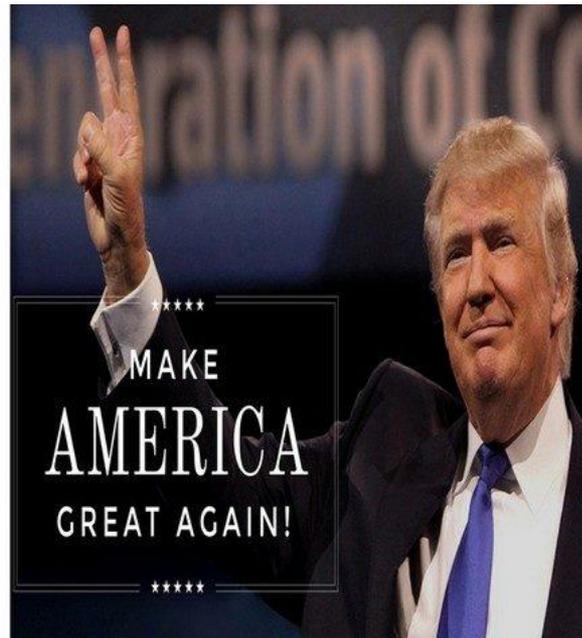


The Return of Political Fiction? Literary Reaction to the Phenomena 'Donald Trump' and 'Brexit'



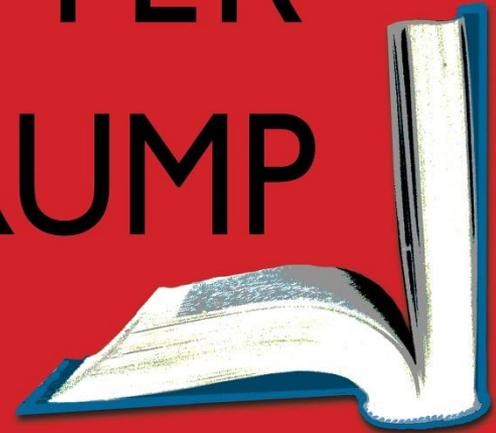
Johannes Wally
University of Graz

Content

1. A Recent Politicization of the Literary World
 2. Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel
 3. *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson
 4. *Autumn* by Ali Smith
 5. Conclusion: Educated-Middle-Class Anxieties
-

1 A Recent Politicization of the Literary World

READING
AFTER
TRUMP



1 A Recent Politicization of the Literary World

- Brexit and Donald Trump's victory have been perceived as unpredictable and thus profoundly unsettling events
- Both have been analysed in terms of an anti-intellectual populism

→ Politicization of Literature

1 A Recent Politicization of the Literary World

- *The New York Times*: “intensifying politicization of the literary world” (Parks 2017: online)

 - *The Guardian*: „The Return of the Protest Novel” (Clark 2017: online)
-

1 A Recent Politicization of the Literary World

- Problem with such a claim: How can it be verified if is not at all clear what a ‚protest novel‘ or ‚political novel‘ is?
 - George Orwell (1954: 11): „no book is genuinely free from political bias“
 - ➔ no attempt will be made at verifying/falsifying this claim. Instead: acknowledge this perception and analyse two recent novels
-

2 Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel



2 Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel

- „[T]he political novel is an entity still begging for definition“ (Stout 2012: 410f.)
 - Intuitive understanding: „a novel with a political narrative, or concerned with politics or concerned with political themes“ (OED, s.v. ‚political novel‘)
 - ➔ applies to all novels in one way or another, provided one has a wide enough understanding of the terms *politics* and *political*
-

2 Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel

- Howe (1957/2006: 443) suggests locating the political novel on a continuum stretching from „concrete experience“ to political/ideological abstractions.



2 Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel

George Orwell's *1984*



Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*



→ unhelpful simplification

2 Basic Definitions: the Political Novel vs. Politics in a Novel

My suggestion: keep notion of a continuum but modify it:

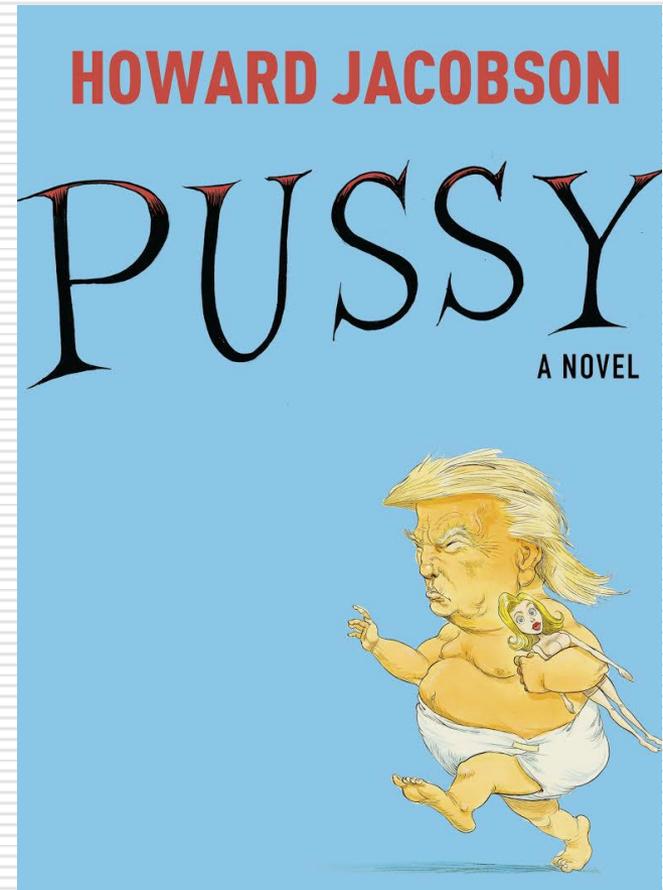


Political novel

politics in a novel

Political novel: „a work of prose fiction which primarily focuses upon the exercise of political power within the body politic and where political ambition, political plans and political acts permeate and unify the novel through both plot and character“ (Kempe 1987: 5)

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson



3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- Written in only a few months, in “a fury of disbelief, *Pussy* was published in April 2017
 - A satire in the tradition of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) and Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759)
 - Rather poorly received by reviewers many of whom thought of it as an exercise in futility
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- However, “implied worldview”-analysis of *Pussy* might be rewarding
 - „Implied worldview”-analysis → reading a text for the „tacit assumptions” on which it rests (Wolf 2008; Wally 2015:31-41)
 - Such an analysis might shed light on larger cultural and political dynamics
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- *Pussy* traces the development of Fracassus, son and heir of the Grand Duke of the Republic *Urbs Ludus*
 - *Pussy* is roman à clef and an anti-*Bildungsroman* (because Fracassus does not develop)
 - Pivotal point on which the entire satire rests is **language use** or **language abuse**
 - Can be traced at the (1) level of story and (2) at the level of discourse
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

1. Language use/abuse at story level

- Dominant motif: Fracassus' **linguistic and cultural poverty**
 - Fracassus is shown to be linguistically challenged
 - He has two tutors Dr Cobald and Professor Probrius, who have to do vocabulary exercises with Fracassus. The only concept he seems to have more than one word for is the concept of *prostitute*
 - Hilarious parts of the book are Fracassus' linguistically and intellectually impoverished tweets
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- Tweed about Sojourner Heminway, the fictional proxy for Hillary Clinton, who is characterised as a „Metropolitan Liberal Elitist“:
 - „Met a bitch called two js. Great piece of ass with two as. Moven on her, not close“ (P 99)
 - „**Great boner**, he tweeted, **Must be love**“ (P 89, original emphasis)
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- Narrative offers an explanation for Fracassus' linguistic inability

 - Explanation is an adoption of Lacan's concept of the mirror stage.
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- The enormity of the shock, for any child, of having to go from pointing to naming cannot be exaggerated. But for Fracassus, for whom to wish was to be given, it was as catastrophic as birth. To have to find a word to supply a need is to admit the difference between you and the world. Fracassus knew of no such difference. The world had to be his, to eat, to tear, to kick. He hadn't had to name it. The world was him. Fracassus.
(P 21)
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

2. Language use/abuse at discourse level

- Dominant characteristic: **linguistic and cultural richness and playfulness**
 - A number of intertextual references pointing to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Voltaire's *Candide*, *The New Testament*, *Shakespearian Sonnets*
 - Telling names given to places and characters are often taken from Latin or Latin-based language:
 - *Urbs Ludus* = Latin = *game city*
 - *Fracassus* = Italian *fracasso* = *noise, rumpus* or French *fracassant* = *sensational or thunderous*
 - Professor *Probrius* = malapropism of Latin *probrius* = *essential or* Latin *probus* = *excellent*
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

2. Language use/abuse at discourse level

- Telling names given to places and characters are also taken from ancient Greek
 - *Republic of Gnossia* = Neo-Greek psychiatric term **gnosia** = “*the perceptive faculty enabling one to recognise the form and the nature of persons and things*” (www.medical-dictionary.com, s.v. ‘gnosia’) or Greek **gnosis** = “*immediate knowledge of spiritual truth*” or “*knowledge as professed by the ancient Gnostics*” Webster’s Third International Dictionary, s.v. ‘gnosis’
 - Phonocrates = Socrates → satirical name as the secret of good government which Phonocrates divulges is “Don’t keep your promises” (P 110)
-

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

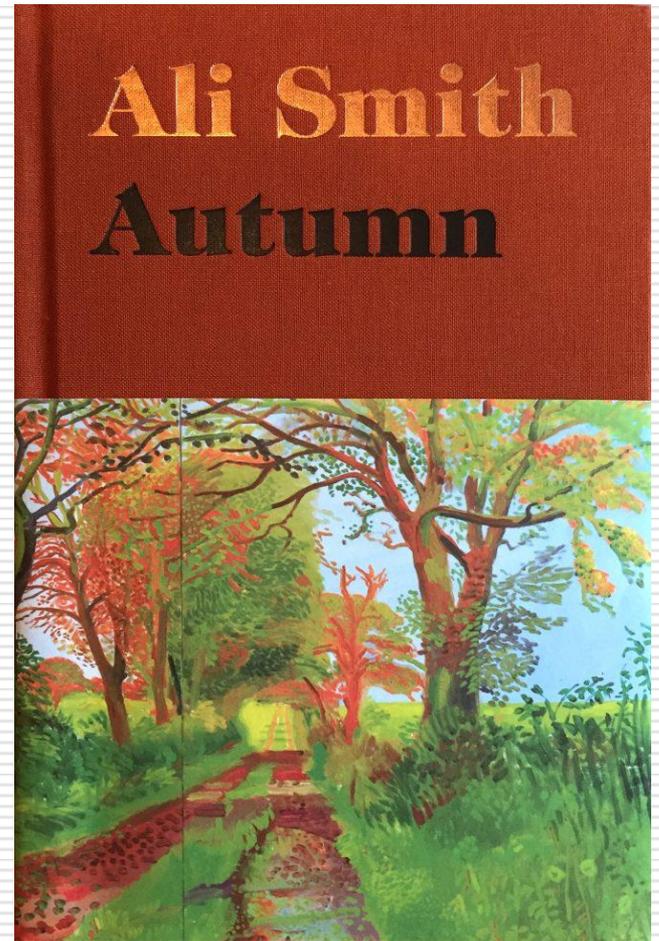
- Central question: Why all the effort? Why create a complex web of cultural references when the whole point of the text is to show how uncultured Donald Trump is?
- Profound discrepancy at the heart of *Pussy*: there is a marked difference between what the text says (story level) and how it is said (discourse level)

→ Cultural capital is superior to economic/political capital

3 *Pussy* by Howard Jacobson

- *Pussy* is the product of *Bildungsbürger*'s perspective on contemporary events
 - This perspective changes *Pussy*'s status from a literary weapon to a document of helplessness: „to have to find a word to supply a need is to admit the difference between the world and you“ (P 21)
→ depressing meta-referential statement
 - Symbolic victory of cultural education and political liberalism over economic and political power (cf. *Rambo* movies or Karl May-novels)
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith



4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

- A flood of 'Brexit'-literature has been predicted to hit the market by the end of 2017
 - Anomaly in British literature: the European Union and its predecessors have so far had little impact on the UK's cultural production
 - Gabriel Josipovici even argued, that UK's cultural life was more European in the 1960s than it is today
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

- The only better known example of non-genre fiction in the English language focusing on the European Institutions is Gillman Noonan's short story "**Dear Parents, I'm Working for the EEC**" (1976)
- Brexit-scenario was, however, anticipated by Julian Barnes' ***England, England* (1998)**, in which the fictitious entity 'Old England' is extracted from the EU:

"New political leaders proclaimed a new self-sufficiency. They extracted the country from the European Union – negotiating with such obstinate irrationality that they were eventually paid to depart" (EE 253)

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

- Ali Smith's novel *Autumn* (2016) hailed as the first Brexit novel and as an extra-ordinary literary achievement
 - While both is correct, the term 'Brexit' is not used in the book. The political situation is only alluded to
 - Typical of Ali Smith's prose, which is known for its polyphony and ambiguity
 - Reworking of a number of (high-)modernist topics (i.e. time) and techniques (i.e. stream of consciousness technique)
→ intertextual references to Marcel Proust *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927) or Thomas Manns *Der Zauberberg* (1924)
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

- *Autumn* concerned with the most fundamental categories of human sense-making.

 - This turns *Autumn* into a meditation on human identity:
 - (1) personal identity
 - (2) national identity
 - (3) nostalgia as a defence mechanism
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

- All three types of identity are introduced in the opening chapter, which presents us with a dream-like scene:
 - Daniel Gluck finds himself washed up on a shore and constantly changes in shape and age → **personal identity**
 - Being washed up on a shore: „If a clod be washed away, Europe is the less“ (John Donne) → allusion to Brexit but also refugee crisis, hence, **national identity**
 - Daniel Gluck's craving for being young again → **nostalgia**
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

1. Personal and National Identity

- Smith resorts to the (post-) structuralist notion that **identity is a relational category** → “we can say what something is by dint of what it is not” (Childs 2000/2001: 2)
 - Most obvious in a scene in which the protagonist Elisabeth Demand applies for a **new passport**, i.e. a symbol in which individual and national identity interlock
 - Elisabeth tries to establish an **identity in relation to a superordinate entity** (i.e. the state), which mirrors the UK’s attempt establish a new identity with relation to the European Union
-

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

□ In autumn 2016, creating a British identity is difficult:

All across the country, the country split in pieces
All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a
Wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there
a line you better not cross here
a line you better not cross there
a line of beauty here
a line dance there
a line you don't even know exists there
a whole new line of fire
line of battle
end of the line
here/there (A 61)

4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

2. Nostalgia as a defence mechanism

- Feeling of nostalgia evoked through the references of the paintings and life of the only female British Pop art painter **Pauline Boty**.
 - Pauline Boty is directly linked to one of the major political scandals of the 1960s, the '**Profumo affair**' → Call girl and model Christine Keeler had had affairs with John Profumo (the Secretary of State for War) and Captain Yevgeny Ivanov, a Soviet naval attaché.
 - 1963 and 2016 are similar as, according to Smith, "in both cases a political lie had dramatic consequences for the society at large." (Laing 2016: online)
-



4 *Autumn* by Ali Smith

2. Nostalgia as a defence mechanism

- Evocation of the glorious 1960s might be more complex
 1. Typical of postmodern works (cf. Jameson 1988: 166)
 2. Nostalgia can be seen as a form of escapism, hence a defence mechanism against a world that seems to be uncontrollable or incomprehensible
 3. *Autumn*, which includes criticism of Thatcherism, a portrait of migrants as victims and a positive depiction of homosexual love clearly leans towards cultural liberalism → ultimately seems to suggest we might find a cure for these times through reading.
-

5 Conclusion



Conclusion

- ❑ *Autumn* and *Pussy* are two very different types of novels.
 - ❑ *Pussy* could be analysed in terms of a political novel
 - ❑ *Autumn* falls into the category „politics in a novel“
 - ❑ Despite manifest differences there is much common ground between the two novels.
 - ❑ Knight (1980: 4): „form is crucial“ in producing a literary texts' ideology
-

Conclusion

- Both novels heavily rely on intertextuality and complex cultural allusions:
 - Novels are placed within a frame of reference which is decipherable for **members of a certain social stratum**, the educated middle class.
 - Referencing an entire literary canon is a means of **establishing a bond between author and readers**.
 - Both novels can thus be read as **acting out the identity crisis** of those that might feel particularly alienated by the rise of an anti-intellectual nationalism.
-

Conclusion

□ Thank you for your attention!

Conclusion

- ❑ Childs, Peter (2000/2001). *Modernism*. London and New York: Routledge.
 - ❑ Clark, Alex (2017, March 11). "Writers Unite! The Return of the Protest Novel." *The Guardian* [Online]
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/11/fiction-as-political-protest-can-a-novel-change-the-world> [2017, March 14]
 - ❑ Howe, Irving (1957/2006). "The Idea of the Political Novel." In: *The Development of the Novel: Literary Sources & Documents*. Edited and with an Introduction by Eleanor McNeese. Vol III: *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: The English Novel: Scott to James*. Robertsbridge: Helm Information Ltd. 442-446.
 - ❑ Jacobson, Howard (2017). *Pussy. A Novel*. London: Jonathan Cape.
 - ❑ Jameson, Fredric (1992). "Postmodernism and Consumer Society". In: Brooker, Peter, ed. *Modernism/Postmodernism*. New York: Longman. 163-179.
 - ❑ Kemme, Tom (1987). *Political Fiction, The Spirit of the Age and Allen Drury*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
 - ❑ Knight, Stephen (1980). *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 - ❑ Lacan, Jaques (1994/2001). "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." Translated by Sheridan. In: P. Rice and P. Waugh, eds. *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*. London: Arnold. 181-195.
-

Conclusion

- ❑ Orwell, George (1947/1954). "Why I Write." In: Orwell, George. *England your England and Other Essays*. London: Secker & Warburg. 7-16.
 - ❑ Parks, Tim (2017, February 8). "What are the Pitfalls for the Politically Engaged Writer." *The New York Times*. [Online]
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/08/books/review/what-are-the-pitfalls-for-the-politically-engaged-writer.html> [2017, March 28]
 - ❑ Smith, Ali (2016). *Autumn*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
 - ❑ Stout, Janis P. (2012). "Stuart A. Scheingold. *The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century*". (Review). *Modern Fiction Studies* 58.2: 410-412.
 - ❑ Wally, Johannes (2015). *Secular Falls from Grace. Religion and (New) Atheism in the Implied Worldview of Ian McEwan's Fiction*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
 - ❑ Wally, Johannes (2018). "The Return of Political Fiction? An Analysis of Howard Jacobson's *Pussy* (2017) and Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) as First Reactions to the Phenomena 'Donald Trump' and 'Brexit' in Contemporary British Literature". *AAA* 43:1: forthcoming.
 - ❑ Wolf, Werner (2008). "Chance in Fiction as a Privileged Index of Implied Worldviews: A Contribution to the Study of the World-Modelling Functions of Narrative Fiction." In: John Pier and José Angel Garcia Landa, eds. *Theorizing Narrativity*. *Narratologia* 12. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter. 165-210.
-