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Response to *Limits of Criticism*

I have followed Felski's (re)examination of the hermeneutics of suspicion with great interest since early drafts started surfacing in talks and snippets years ago. My interest is partly due to idiosyncrasies of the materials I work on (more on that in a minute). But I also shared her frustration with what seemed like formulaic criticism and was attracted to her claim that at least part of the issue was that "professional suspicion" had been institutionalized (LOC 46). Why did so many arguments seem to veer away from "literature" so quickly? And doesn't it seem a bit too convenient that sifting through literary texts somehow offered a master code to the hidden origins of power and injustice? Felski's conclusions sure made sense to me and voiced many of my own misgivings about the work I had read in graduate school. Additionally, Felski's expansive notion of the "uses" of literature also intrigued me at that time. Armed with the thoroughly unsurprising "realization that people often turn to books for knowledge and entertainment," it is/was appealing to envision ways of writing about literature that imagined new categories of analysis (*Uses of Literature*, 5)

In the past, Felski always seemed a bit foggy on what this should look like in practice. How exactly does one create this more expansive version of literary criticism? How can we really talk about how literature affects us/others without sliding back into belle lettres, reader-response or New Criticism? To that end, I find her formulation of a Latour influenced "post-critical" scholarship to be a welcome, if not entirely conclusive, answer.

As I understand it, the core of it lies with her suggestion that "literature's singularity and its sociability are intertwined rather than opposed" (176). This would seem to imply that the actual task of the literary scholar lies with tracing how literary expression opens up new styles of perceiving and new dimensions of thought and how this act of being affected by literature is, in turn, inflected by social life. In other words, it's one thing to say that

Understanding the "politics" of literature in this sense, "is no longer a matter of gesturing toward the hidden forces that explain everything" it instead becomes a matter of understanding the relationship between the social, the affective, and the aesthetic. In the realm of the social, this means the "interconnections, attachments, and conflicts" that go into our experience of literature, how the circulation of literary texts makes them into "non human actors" who exert real consequences in the social world. In some cases, this might mean participation in commercial consumer ("when join an endlessly snaking line at the movie theater"); in others, it's how private reading practices are structured by expectations surrounding as in the different implications "when we devour the words of James Joyce or James Patterson." All of this, in turn, contributes to the affective and aesthetic, how literature offers "fresh ways of organizing perception, rhythms of rapprochement and distancing, relaxation." (LOC 171, 176).

From this standpoint, formerly impermissible "uses" of literature such as "knowledge" and "entertainment" suddenly become fair game for scholarly study. They don't seem like such

naïve or abstract speculation about how one might hypothetically encounter a text, but instead “social artifacts” composed of a matrix of social, historical, and formal features. The literary scholar, this would seem to suggest, must become a kind of sociologist, studying the influence that the non-human actor of the literary text exerts upon thoughts, emotions, and perceptions.

Wow, does that ever seem like a tall order. Even Felski admits that much of this seems to fall squarely in the realm of the unknowable. It all makes me want to burrow my head in a Foucauldian cave armed with my copies of *The Novel and the Police* and *The Gold Standard*. How can we really ever know if a literary text is actually “interesting” or “enjoyable?” Or if it opens up “fresh perceptions?” Where the heck do I start?

Joking aside, I actually find Felski’s ambitious model of yoking the social to the singular quite useful for solving particular problems within my own research.

And here’s where I get to the idiosyncrasies of my own materials:

I’m researching American comic strips prior to the Sunday funnies (not political cartoons, but narrative comic strips). In most cases, answers to very basic questions about “how” exactly one would go about reading these comics are not immediately obvious. Many of them draw on conventions that have, more or less, fallen by the wayside. Some utilize panel transitions to organize time or space in ways that will feel thoroughly foreign to modern readers while others rely on visual allusions to the point where the comics come to resemble pictographs or even hieroglyphs to the uninitiated.

We can see this, for instance, in the work of David Claypoole Johnston. Johnston’s pamphlet series *Scraps* is a kind of tour de force of lost or neglected early nineteenth century reading practices for graphic narrative. The high water mark of Johnston’s efforts was his 1833 pamphlet, which consisted of a raucous and elaborate satire on Frances Trollope, who had enraged many Americans the year before with her unflattering travel book *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. Each of the vignettes on are composed of a dense layering of burlesque caricatures, puns (both visual and verbal), crude dialogue, and, above all, elaborate chains of allusions and quotations from other authors such as Milton, Sterne, and Swift, that the reader was to use as a means of ironizing the actual quotations from Trollope’s book (which were reproduced on a separate page with numbers corresponding to the illustrations). The specific details are perhaps too complex to parse here. For now, I would say that it all adds up to what we might think of as a rhythmic “point and counterpoint” between visual and textual sources contained both in and outside of pamphlet. It’s a style of reading that engages readers’ embeddedness in an active culture of reading periodicals, interacting in public spaces, and privately reading “classics.” All of these formal and social dimensions necessarily need to go into understanding how a nineteenth century eye moves across one of Johnston’s pages. (<http://www.americanantiquarian.org/Inventories/Johnston/b9f3a.jpg>)

I tend to think that materials like this are among of the areas where Felski’s “postcritical” model fits most comfortably. Felski reminds us to slow down and get to the most basic acts of reading

before we dive into contemporary critiques of power. In a hermeneutics of suspicion model, Johnston's work will seem like low hanging fruit insofar as it is symptomatic of countless offenses of power (economic, gendered, racial, class etc. etc.). But to read it that way is to neglect to really even read it in the first place. We miss the very literacies that put those questions of power into context. Felski perhaps then points us to the stakes of exploring with a more generous eye: It's more than just the recovery of practical techniques for reading situated in its networks of sociability; it's also an epistemological project that involves recovering the styles of thought and emotion that attended these reading practices. Now, this becomes more complicated with more well-tread ground. One might, for instance, ask how these types of readings would work for the novels of Henry James or Longfellow's poetry where answers to basic questions seem to be more settled. But then again, maybe the point is that those reading styles "seem" settled. We may well be surprised what we find when we return to some of those most basic questions.