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I'm new to the Alabama symposium, and looking forward to it. My response to reading Felski's *Limits of Critique* is determined by two personal-professional factors: first as a Victorianist, and second as someone who has, since graduate school, taught exclusively at undergraduate, teaching-focused institutions.

One of the "hot" topics in Victorian studies the last two years has been the V21 manifesto – <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/> – 10-point provocation aiming to re-invigorate Victorian studies. The manifesto begins, "Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past" (#1). Part of the fault, they say, is Victorianists' resistance to theory (#4) – and perhaps therefore to critique. The manifesto seems to me grounded in the critical mood to which Felski refers. It states, for example, that "A survey of the Victorian period is a survey of empire, war, and ecological destruction," and calls for a "strategic presentism" to interrogate "conceptual problems, political quandaries, and theoretical issues" that link us to the Victorians (#8).

The Limits of Critique is also a kind of manifesto, but one that seems to come from the opposite direction. While V21 finds too little critique in literary-historical arguments, Felski finds too much. Yet V21's and Felski's solutions don't seem that different. For example, V21 calls for "a critical rethinking of form and formalism," with attention to the "politics of form" (#7). Felski, meanwhile, notes that "art's distinctive qualities do not rule out connectedness but are the very reason that connections are forged and sustained" (165), which seems to me a turn to form, and offers Actor Network Theory as a way to trace transhistorical trends (157).

So my question is, can literary-historical fields (18th- and 19th-century studies) break from this polarity: can we discuss literature from the past without "merely describing" but also without engaging in "critique"? Or do we have to choose? (And how exactly does ANT differ from description? Perhaps I need more examples of what it looks like).

My relationship to theory as a *teacher* is different. Pedagogically I find critique indispensable. Compared to, say, iambic pentameter, I find students really receptive to critique and suspicion. That it's not the only thing we do is, as Felski puts it, "obvious to anyone who has spent half an hour in the undergraduate classroom" (4); she later grants that the dominance of critique is truer in graduate than in undergraduate education (26). But critique gives one answer to the all-too-familiar joke from a proverbial uncle: "Why do you teach English, don't students already speak it?" If language hides rather than reveals, and special skills are needed to discover true meaning, then our jobs are secure.

This for me connects to Felski's contrast between the critique of literature and the literature of critique, and her desire to include Eros alongside Agon, in our reading practices (16-17). We can take pleasure both in our suspicious readings of a text and in teasing out a text's

own suspicions. Some texts are fun to teach because they are so open to critique, and others because they engage in it so gleefully: teaching the Romantics, for example, it's fun to critique Wordsworth's silencing of Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey," and also fun to teach Barbauld's re-gendering of the epic mode (i.e., her critiquing of the epic) in "Washing Day." That doesn't preclude enjoying either poem for other reasons: clearly in teaching, critique is a part, not the whole. And this is Felski's point. So in that sense, maybe the lesson is to blur the lines between teaching and scholarship, and let classrooms filter more into our research. (I confess I already believe that).

But I – and probably many seminar participants, either now or while they were graduate students – teach not just literature but also composition, and not just humanities majors, but students from all disciplines. And I wonder about the suspicious stance in that context. As Felski notes (45-46), pop culture is saturated with suspicion, and I find many students already in that mood, unready to accept any authority. Yet at the same time, they need training in evaluating sources and distinguishing real scholarship from fake news. Teaching those skills is part of the "knowledge work" we do, and the part that perhaps seems most inimical to a critical mood. To believe in peer review is to accept expertise.

In her conclusion, Felski states the goal of articulating "a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value," that can be shared with "intellectual strangers" who may not already be 100% behind the humanities (186). I wonder about students here – especially non-majors, or composition students. What do English departments, in particular, offer those students, if not a stance of critique? Is ANT a *literary* method, distinct from history or political science departments?