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There's a lot that appeals to me in Rita Felski's campaign to decenter suspicion. She's right that suspicion carries no "inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism" (3)—does anything?—and that suspicious reading is not an "ascetic exercise" but a charismatic practice "infused with a range of passions and pleasures" (10). And I agree that critical detachment is "not an absence of mood, but one manifestation of it, casting a certain shadow over its subject" (21). One might say that books act suspicious because we're looking at them a certain way, like I fidget when I walk through the scanner at the airport. Felski also has a way of persuasively boiling an intellectual debate down to a trenchant phrase, as when she cites Wai-Chee Dimock and other critics of New Historicist periodization, reviews the case for transhistorical reading, and concludes that "Art works may not be timeless, but they are . . . time-full" (161). Much of Felski's contribution comes in this sort of descriptive insight.

But of course there are questions. Because Felski's approach is plainly pragmatic, I find myself responding in a pragmatic way, so I thought I'd simply offer a few questions that Felski's book raises for me.

Is she right about how pervasive suspicion is within literary criticism? She says that, on the whole, literary studies and other academic disciplines are under the sway of a "style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment" (2). But her list of qualifications to this claim is breathtaking. Among the interpreters *not* necessarily swayed by suspicion she includes undergraduates, critics who work in narratology and other major subfields, and Marxists and poststructuralists who routinely assert their utopian hopes and aesthetic preferences (26-7). Add the giants of suspicion—such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and D. A. Miller—who have changed their tune over time. And I could suggest other exceptions: the presenters at Dickens conferences, who have no intention of repudiating their attachments or diminishing the texts they read; the writers of the books and articles that try to rescue authors like Charlotte Yonge and Marie Corelli from the derision of posterity; and of course the many recent theorists that Felski herself cites, who have written about the insights that flow from attachment and sympathetic reading. Against Felski's claim that critique is the "dominant metalanguage" of literary studies, Deirdre Lynch (in the book we discussed two years ago) says that there is a universal consensus that it is the job of the English professor to "love literature," and that literary scholars are under pressure to prove that we love the books that have soured us so. If Lynch is right that we're always professing our love, and if we take Felski's exceptions into account, then how pervasive is suspicion? It especially interests me that Felski exempts undergraduate classes, which she describes as places of communion and romantic hope (4). The undergraduate classroom, I would think, is the epicenter of the literary critical enterprise, so any idiom or attitude that isn't central to undergraduate education can hardly be pervasive. Felski says she wants us to acknowledge that suspicion is just one affective stance among many possible alternatives. But don't most critics already treat suspicion this way, putting it on and taking it off as it suits a need?

What's the relationship between subverting the text and viewing the text as subversive? These things would seem to be opposite. Most critics who try to accuse, convict, or subvert a text don't believe the text itself is subversive. Quite the contrary: this brand of suspicion usually goes along with an assumption that the text in question has colluded with

ideological structures that are oppressive or otherwise noxious. The most suspicious readings—for example, Adorno and Horkheimer’s reading of the culture industry—take a very low view of the text’s ability to be subversive. But when critics talk about texts as subversive, they’re taking a high view of the text’s capacity to speak for itself, to have the world on its own terms. While the critical practice of subverting the text seems to me rarer than it used to be (in the heyday of deconstruction, Frankfurt School critique, psychoanalytic feminism, and Foucauldian New Historicism), the idea that the text itself **is** subversive is taken for granted at every level. In high school students learn to say confidently that writers from Jane Austen to August Wilson are challenging social norms, but the idea of subverting a Wilson play or an Austen novel—the idea of treating the text as suspect—is foreign. Interestingly, Felski, even while she acknowledges the difference between subverting the text and reading the text as subversive, sees these projects as connected, especially at an affective level (16). They breathe the same air of suspicion:

All too often, we see critics tying themselves into knots in order to prove that a text harbors signs of dissonance and dissent—as if there were no other conceivable way of justifying its merits. In this respect, at least, we remain faithful descendants of Adorno and a modernist regime of aesthetic value. Both aesthetic and social worth, it seems, can only be cashed out in terms of a rhetoric of againstness. (17)

This is an intriguing claim: the idea that we’re so persuaded of the value of “againstness” that we can only be *for* a text if the text is sufficiently *against* something else. I still feel that subverting the text and cheering on the text’s subversiveness are almost diametrically opposite approaches, but maybe what’s important is that they have the same flavor, that they serve some hidebound rhetoric of againstness.

This raises an obvious question: **Is there any model of humanities work that doesn’t rely on a rhetoric of againstness?** Certainly the polemics of twentieth-century literary criticism involve critical movement after critical movement trying to put new pressures on the text and standing against the critical practices of the others; I suppose this trend was instituted by the New Critics, the most violent of the bomb-throwers. But it runs deeper than that: even the term “higher education” relies on the idea that we’re turning the tables on what our students have been taught before, standing against their former education. And of course Felski is against something. Granted, she works valiantly to say she’s not trying to level suspicion at suspicion, not trying to argue against againstness. She insists that she quite enjoys critique and she doesn’t accept what she sees as the dismissals leveled by formalist criticism, the “new ethics,” or other strident reform agendas. She says she’s just trying to open the door for other methods, other positionings, other affective dispositions. This all seems genuine to me, and I’m not saying her work founders on some sort of logical contradiction. On the other hand, when she lumps so many activities together under the umbrella of “againstness”—undermining the text, celebrating the text for its subversiveness, railing at the critics one disagrees with, trying to displace one paradigm with another—things become vague. I don’t know how one would renounce againstness tout court. I think we’re in love-and-inspiration mode most of the time, and that those things sit together comfortably with symptomatic reading and paranoia. But it seems that Felski is calling for a more total shift in world-view; she wishes readers to “place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (12). She’s speaking the language of Gadamer and Ricoeur (and I’d add Sontag and Heidegger), and maybe in their outlook—along with that of Latour, Sedgwick and other theorists Felski names—there are inklings of a kind of receptivity, a way of encountering the text head-on, that we’ve excluded from our usual polemics

of critique. But what are we even talking about here? Is there a new critical procedure being proposed, or are these just words?

This may not be a problem for Felski, since she's finally interested less in procedures than in a "thought style" (2). This leads me to my final question: **Do we accept the extent to which Felski's problems and solutions are expressed as abstractions and metaphors?** Critics are "quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage"; they see the text as "restrictive and repressive, closed, coercive, claustrophobic, exclusionary—or else . . . polyphonic, chaotic, carnivalesque, intrinsically unstable, convulsed by its internal contradictions and teetering on the edge of incoherence" (5; 19). If we were to place ourselves "in front of the text," we could hope to "forge a language of attachment as robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment" (180). We could replace suspicion with "inspiration, invention, solace, recognition, reparation, or passion" (17). As she says, it's all about a "language of attachment," and her book is less concerned with critical procedure than with "the details of sensibility and style" (22)—an interesting position for a pragmatist. I tend to think of the most exciting essays in our field are the ones that spell out a method (Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism*, Barthes in *S/Z*, Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*, Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*). It seems like Felski sees such procedures as less interesting than the moods they reflect. There are, perhaps, certain procedures that she favors: her students' essays, for instance, are not historicist and they focus on the effects the text creates on the reader or the viewer. So perhaps Felski feels that essays like that embody the abstract ideal of "standing in front of the text." But on the whole, there's something about the abstractions that doesn't ring true to me. I don't think even the most poststructuralist arguments *actually* discuss texts as though they teeter on the edge of incoherence, and I don't think even the most openly "attached" readers *actually* bring much solace or passion into their analysis. The focus on these postures these abstractions, make the book (for me) long on mood and short on method.