

On *The Limits of Critique*

For Rita Felski, contemporary literary criticism is dominated by efforts to “expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings” (1). Our discipline remains captive to a mentality of “critique,” characterized by disinterestedness, arrogance, and distrust. Felski’s aim is not to reject critique altogether, but to challenge its exceptionalism, and to call for a wider range of approaches to literary analysis. *The Limits of Critique* invites sharp ambivalence. On the one hand, it is difficult to disagree with the majority of Felski’s claims: let’s vary our methods during this time of crisis; let’s curb our elitism, “chic bitterness” (45), and “rhetoric of *againstness*” (17); let’s better demonstrate the value of the humanities. Yes, let’s do these things! On the other hand, her argument for the authoritative status and insidious ubiquity of suspicious reading rings false, especially for scholars who did not come of age, as Felski did, during the throes of critical theory.

“There is, after all,” Felski laments, “something perplexing about the ease with which a certain style of reading has settled into the default option” (5). For very few critics who received their doctorates within the past ten years, I would argue, is suspicious reading the “default option.” Ironically, reflecting on this book about limitations has left me refreshed to discover just how many different approaches thrive in the present climate. For example, as Patrick Jagoda observes in his *PMLA* response to Felski’s book, the digital humanities movement has shifted attention away from “critiquing” and toward “building and making” (Jagoda *PMLA* 132.2 [March 2017]: 357). We are producing extraordinary stores of new knowledge as we assemble, collate, and survey forgotten archives. In Felski’s view, static depth (not interconnected surface) is the metaphor overused by practitioners of critique, who can’t stop “digging for buried truths” (33). Yet, a wave of recent criticism has popularized the network metaphor. Think, for example, of Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015) and David Alworth’s *Site Reading* (2015). In these studies, the heuristic figure of the network fosters arguments and affects distinct from—even antonymical to—the depth model Felski rebukes. In my work, I have argued for the intrinsic function of literary criticism in fiction, developing a vocabulary for influence analysis (the “surrogate-author function”) that adapts a Foucauldian concept, yet which does not employ the interrogative sensibility Felski ascribes to poststructuralist approaches (Bellonby *Criticism* 55.2 [Spring 2013]: 203-31). Felski herself makes careful qualifications about the multifarious ways we read and write about literature today, offering a healthy list of alternatives: “biographical criticism, textual editing, the recovery of lost or neglected works, New Critical-style close readings, narratological or rhetorical analyses, belle-lettrism, computer-generated quantitative scholarship, empirical cultural history, and so on” (26).

The power of Felski’s book, as Sarah Beckwith diplomatically puts it, “will rest on whether its characterizations of critique are recognizable: whether we can see what she sees” (Beckwith *PMLA* 333). Here Beckwith intimates the fact that readers will have to draw from their own experiences in order to validate (or invalidate) the book’s thesis because Felski herself does not supply evidence to substantiate it. Nowhere does she cite trends in scholarly publications, or offer close readings of critical works. Stephen Best wonders, “Can you give account of...your ‘orientation [toward the work of art] in the phenomenological sense’ without close readings of literature as such?” (Best *PMLA* 339). In place of textual evidence,

she offers an array of provocative, lucid, erudite reflections, which spin off from her central scrutiny of Paul Ricoeur's phrase, "hermeneutics of suspicion." She differentiates among *suspicion*, *skepticism*, and *paranoia*; likens the practitioner of critique with the figure of the detective; mourns our lack of engagement with the hermeneutical tradition; and promotes the philosophy of Bruno Latour, as well as phenomenology more generally. The integrity of her argument about the destructive ubiquity of critique rests, not on any of these reflections, but on her assertion that our chronic suspicion represents a remnant of the types of symptomatic reading introduced by Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Certainly, there is truth to this genealogical claim. The force of critical theory remains strong. But, this force is partial, not pervasive. Generational, not universal. To return to Beckwith's question, I see a more variegated, if no less crisis-laden, status quo. While my experiences do not support the bleak picture Felski paints (or, more precisely, the target she chooses), her manifesto for positive change is nuanced, eloquent, timely, and worthy of thoughtful engagement.

Her real targets, I think, are 1) symptomatic reading and 2) elitism in higher education. She is fatigued by the perception of literary texts as mere effects of larger structures, rather than agents of new futures (hence her proposed solution to treat texts as "coactors"). The problem with this complaint is that many scholars long ago jettisoned this element of poststructuralism in favor of new and less deterministic orientations. Academic elitism, on the other hand, is a very real political dilemma. When Felski bemoans what she considers the common belief that critique is inherently rigorous or, worse, the *most* rigorous method, she is not trying to get us to stop doing it; she is trying to get us to stop being narrow-minded snobs. It is when she articulates the character of our snobbery that her brilliance and the urgency of her book shine the brightest. *The Limits of Critique* reminds us that American scholars often display—and are *rewarded for displaying*—these attitudes: hardheaded detachment, arrogance, exclusivity, mistrust, cynicism, coldness, antagonism, self-righteousness, negativity, and hypercriticism. Elitism, often considered endemic to the American Left, undeniably contributed to the rise of Donald Trump. For this reason alone, it is worth considering how we might limit its livelihood in university English departments.

We can start, I think, by more precisely tracing the history of elitism in the humanities, which is neither limited to the history of critique, nor always attendant upon it. Felski acknowledges the *longue durée* of critique's bad attitude when she links its genealogy to historically masculinized figures (e.g. the detective, the aesthete) and male authors: "Literary theory, especially," she writes, "cast its lot with a spirit of ceaseless skepticism and incessant interrogation; modeling itself on Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, it was 'der Geist, der stets verneint'—the spirit that always negates" (15). Later, she observes that feminist scholars (a largely female group) shifted the paradigm—or, at least, tried to: "Feminists were among the first critics to emphasize the affective dimensions of interpretation" (29). In these and other indirect ways, she implies a relationship between gender and academic elitism, but she resists naming it explicitly. I find this resistance disappointing and surprising, given her lifelong commitment to feminism. The affective modes she assembles under the label of critique—while they may be practiced by plenty of women—are hallmarks of a masculinist tradition. Why not address this fact directly?

We will do justice to Felski's call for change if we answer one of her best questions: "Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (13). Two powerful forces are working to ensure that we stick to competitive faultfinding and avoid effusive appreciation. The first has just been identified by Joseph North in *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Harvard UP 2017), wherein he illuminates the transformation of our discipline during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Prior to this period, North observes, the profession encompassed two types: "scholars" and "critics." The former examined culture; the latter actively intervened in it. Around 1980, literary criticism experienced what North calls a "scholarly turn," whereby "scholarly" approaches, which treat texts as instruments of cultural and historical analysis, have replaced "critical" approaches, which treat texts as tools for the cultivation of readers' aesthetic sensibilities. Now, "for the first time in the history of literary studies," North writes, "almost all of [us] are 'scholars.' For better or worse, one half of the discipline is all but gone" (2). This loss is considered a gain because we tend to view evaluative criticism as the terrain of amateurish, unprofessional, "genteel" generalists. Unfortunately, its discourse, and the public intellectuals who fueled it, not only fostered all manner of discussion about literary "loves," but also represented the source of the academy's connection to the world outside the classroom. Kicking evaluative criticism to the curb in favor of diagnostic scholarship, or, what North calls the current "historicist/contextualist paradigm," has virtually guaranteed our irrelevance. The second force exacerbating our tongue-tie is the gendered system of definition that underpins the realms of *agon* and *eros* in academic discourse: i.e., the supposedly masculine, scientific, professional rhetoric of the disinterested scholar versus the supposedly feminine, unscientific, amateurish rhetoric of the evaluative critic. We are thwarted at once by the narrow task we've set for ourselves and by the masculine authority we attribute to its execution in dispassionate terms.

The solution to our legitimation crisis is not, I don't think, to denigrate "critique" as the source of our bad behavior. In the end, Felski's anti-negativity rallying cry channels so much negative energy into demarcating the ills of this school of thought that her book does more to invite defenses of the condemned school than to encourage efforts to go beyond it (See, for example, Bruce Robbins's impassioned defense of critique in *PMLA* 132.2 [March 2017]: 371-76). If we begin to authorize modes of analysis that address the moral, emotional, and interpersonal value of literature for our students, while attempting once again to publicly intervene in culture, we might begin to reclaim our social relevance. Attempting this radical transition would be one way of heeding Felski's call for us to be pragmatic readers who interpret texts as agents, not symptoms. If we believe—not as haughty, antagonistic idealists, but as enthusiastic, realistic educators—that literature can change the world, we might as well act like it.