In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski argues that humanities scholars should reassess whether the longstanding hegemony of “critique” in our fields serves our interests well. “Critique,” for Felski, refers to a myriad of seemingly eclectic approaches to humanistic study such as Foucauldian discourse analysis, Jamesonian psychoanalytic/Marxist historicism, feminism, queer theory, and New Historicism. Practitioners of these approaches have meaningful differences and engage in high-profile disputes. However, Felski explains that they share in common a mood of detachment, skepticism, and to put it more bluntly, suspicion and paranoia (2). Critique once yielded astonishing, ground-breaking arguments, but those arguments have increasingly become routinized, predictable, and stale (47). Scholars critique a vast array of texts, but those texts are repetitively described as either complicit with or resistant to stifling ideologies. The obvious individuality of the text is lost. The institutionalization of critique as the primary mode of humanistic scholarship has crowded out other modes that might yield new insights (47).

Felski explains that she was spurred to reassess critique by concerns over the future of humanistic study. We work in a climate in which the value of the humanities is increasingly being questioned. Funding for such study is eroding. As Felski explains,

Reassessing critique…is not an abandonment of social or ethical commitments but a realization…that these commitments require us to communicate with intellectual strangers who do not share our assumptions. And here, a persuasive defense of the humanities is hindered rather than helped by an ethos of critique that encourages scholars
to pride themselves on their vanguard role and to equate serious thought with a reflexive negativity” (186).

With the detached, condescending posturing of humanists alienating potential audiences, Felski argues that we acknowledge the positive affective possibilities that reading literature makes possible. Such an embrace entails recuperating “the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than just to denounce mystifying illusions” (187). Lay readers experience reading literature as a transformative experience, and while trained humanists can and should bring their expertise to bear on their craft as teachers and scholars, they stand to expand their influence if they embrace what is moving about literature.

Felski would be gratified to learn that her argument is rooted in a venerable psychological truth. This is a truth many would do well to keep in mind in our polarized socio-political climate, where many would like to persuade others of their passionately held arguments but struggle to do more than talk past those who disagree with them. This truth was understood by Blaise Pascal, who claimed that

When we wish to correct with advantage, and to show another that he errs, we must notice from what side he views the matter, for on that side it is usually true, and admit that truth to him, but reveal to him the side on which it is false. He is satisfied with that, for he sees that he was not mistaken, and that he only failed to see all sides. Now, no one is offended at not seeing everything; but one does not like to be mistaken, and that perhaps arises from the fact that man naturally cannot see everything, and that naturally he cannot err in the side he looks at, since the perceptions of our senses are always true. (Goldhill)
In other words, someone may hold a mistaken belief because s/he only understands an issue from one perspective. Someone seeking to correct this individual may find success by affirming what is right about the mistaken person’s perspective but then providing another frame through which to view the issue. In short, when seeking to persuade someone that they might be mistaken in a belief, first point out what they get right. Otherwise, you risk your opponent feeling cornered and digging in her/his heels. Pascal’s claim has been confirmed by modern-day psychologists who study persuasion (Goldhill).

I would argue that critique, as Felski understands it, can be understood in this light. Practitioners of critique have noble aims in seeking to teach critical thinking and socio-political engagement, but they are not generous to those with whom they disagree. Whereas lay readers experience reading literature as inspirational and life-changing, practitioners of critique present such lay-reading experiences as naïve submissions to the coercive pull of texts whose ideological complicities must be sternly dissected and laid bare. As Felski explains, critique operates from the “assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical” (2). This dismissive attitude does not affirm what is valid in lay-reading approaches, namely that reading obviously can be inspirational in ways that can make us better, more ethical people. According to the psychology of persuasion, it is thus unlikely to appeal to students who are pondering the value of humanistic study. As Felski insists, socially and politically engaged scholars need not throw the baby out with the bathwater by giving up their socio-political commitments when they reembrace literature’s transformative power. When critics ask “But what about love?” or “Where is your theory of attachment?”, they are not “abandon[ing] politics for aesthetics.” Rather, they are acknowledging “that both art and politics are also a matter of connecting, composing, creating, coproducing, inventing, imagining, making possible: that neither is reducible to the
piercing but one-eyed gaze of critique” (Felski 17-18). Pursuing this path enables humanists to affirm what is right in lay-reading approaches and thus to bring their training and socio-political commitments to a hopefully more amenable audience.
Works Cited
