



BOOK REVIEW

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. Pp 232 + vii. ISBN-13 978-022-629-403-2. \$22.50

Grand narratives may be passé, but we can't yet seem to get by without them. This one goes: once upon a time, critics approached literary works with loving attention bordering on reverence, treating the text as a font of wisdom or an autonomous crystal to be appreciated in all its luminous and refracting facets. Then, in the mid-twentieth century, critics began recognizing the ideological entanglements of these approaches to literature, as well as of the works themselves, and began a multi-fronted assault of deconstruction and critique. Decades later, some scholars in the humanities begin to feel that the new dominant paradigm leaves nothing left to love, and now the task becomes one of articulating, as Lisa Ruddick has put it, a “non-fuzzy” theory of literature that sees it not as symptom but as a *sui generis* form of human expression that speaks to fundamental and legitimate human needs and questions.

In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski takes up this challenge, first attempting to make way for the new paradigm by challenging the ascendancy of the old, analyzing what Ricoeur dubbed the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as it pervades

the academic humanities, and then suggesting an alternative to this “spirit of disenchantment” (2). She is not *against* critique and acknowledges its value and her own intellectual formation in the crucible of critical theory. What she wants is for her fellow academics to recognize that it is not the only intellectually defensible stance toward literature—where “intellectually defensible” means, on the one hand, rigorous, and on the other, politically correct, opposing dominant and oppressive structures of power. As Felski puts it, “the aim is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—therefore freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument” (3).

Felski's method is redescription. While critique fancies itself as the objective approach to literature—seeing it for what it really is, and correspondingly seeing society for what it really is—Felski shows that critique in fact depends on its own adoption of a particular attitude—suspicious, detached, “cool”—and that it has its own conventions—interpreting literary works as symptoms, “trac[ing] textual meaning back to an opaque and all-determining power” (152).

The bulk of the book is dedicated to this project of redescription (one might

say “the critique of critique” or “unmasking of critique” though Felski explicitly resists such a characterization of her project because of her desire to escape the potentially infinite regress of critique). Still, the book also has a positive moment. With reference to Michael Polanyi’s “post-critical philosophy,” which seeks a way to affirm, against skepticism and logical positivism, those human realities we actually experience in our everyday lives as real (ethical, aesthetic, spiritual or religious), Felski urges us to imagine forms of “post-critical reading” in which “[r]ather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible” (12).

Specifically, she calls for “rethinking context”—seeing critique as resting on a picture of society in which actors’ thoughts and behavior (and literary expressions) are determined by a monolithic ideology whose purpose is to preserve existing power relations. Failure to do so leaves the discipline stuck in the irresolvable argument between the “contextualists,” who insist on the necessity of recognizing the social determinants of literature but fail to recognize its degree of freedom, and the “formalists,” who insist on the irreducible value of the work as *art* but fail to see its worldly entanglements. As an alternative she turns to Bruce Latour’s action-network theory, which sees society and culture as “not a preformed being but a doing, not a hidden entity underlying the realm of

appearance, but the ongoing connections, disconnections, and reconnections between multiple actors” (158), including intertemporal connections, connections to past and future. Doing so treats texts not as products of a walled-in past with present critics peeking over the ramparts from a place of privileged observation, but rather still present and in communication with the present. Felski argues for a form, or forms, of literary criticism that recognize this and are consequently open and attuned to the two-way interplay between reader and text.

Felski’s argument is convincing—even, it seems to me, indisputable. The one thing that is troubling is her apparent relinquishment of the ideals of objectivity and reality. She does not exactly leave these terms to the reductionists, who, she is at such pains to show, are also seeing through a particular *Blick*, but she does not claim them for her imagined new regime either. Felski calls herself a pragmatist—“different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism” (9). She is also a pluralist; she wants literature to be able to be a source of “inspiration, invention, solace, recognition, reparation, or passion” (17)—but “truth” is (strikingly, to me) absent from this list. Truth does appear elsewhere, but both Felski and the critics and theorists she holds up as models tend toward the language of attachment and affect, a language which reinforces the idea of literature as the realm of feeling, with reality being elsewhere. For instance: “Emotions are not mere icing on the cake...affective

engagement is the very means by which literary works are able to reach, reorient, and even reconfigure their readers” (177). Literature can effect *transformation*, it can “estrangle [us] from ordinary consciousness” so we can “slip free, for an instant, of well-worn habits of thought” (177)—but the distinctively literary basis of the transformation (for instance, what distinguishes reading literature from having other kinds of unfamiliar experiences) is left undertheorized, or perhaps one-sidedly theorized. Felski wants to give “a better answer to the question ‘Why is literature worth bothering with?’” (5) and her answers tend to be some version of “because it moves us.” This is true, and essential. But the complement to the capacity of literature to move us is its revelatory power, and often it is the sense of revelation that moves us. The humanist critics of the first half of the twentieth century had no problem asking what we come to *know* through literature—or assuming this was the question—and another way of formulating the current problem is how to recover that tradition in light of all we have learned about its distortions and limitations.

Earlier in the book, Felski devotes some time to another entrenched habit (as she sees it) in the discipline, that is, seeing literature *as* critique, as critical of “everyday forms of language and thought” (16). That is, if the literary work escapes the critic’s reductionist critique, it is only because the work itself is doing that work of critique on society already. Even though this approach ostensibly

values literature more highly than reductionist approaches, treating it as a partner in critique, Felski sees in it, too, a rigidity to be resisted to the extent that it finds in literature only the affirmation of the socially critical views the critic already holds. While that is surely right, I would suggest that literature earns its status as literature as opposed to mere entertainment or propaganda by virtue of the fact that it does challenge some aspect of the social conventional views of things. That is, while Felski (and Latour) rightly wish to blur the sharp line between “modern” and “past” or “the critic” and “the work,” they could use one more distinction within the social—a retooling of the distinction between the forces that obscure and those that reveal, between everything in the social that is functionality masked and legitimizes the unjust, everything in our own psyches that sees through the lens of its own narcissism, on the one hand, and on the other everything that enables a vision of something, dare I say, objective. It is not just that literature enables new construals of the world and our selves, nor even that it enables more meaningful and satisfying ones, it is that it enables *better* construals. The project of saying in what precisely that “better” entails is still to be completed, but Felski and her allies at least open the way for us to ask the question again.

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