theories and methodologies

Reading for Our Lives

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JEANETTE WINTERSON'S BEAUTIFUL MEMOIR *WHY BE HAPPY WHEN YOU COULD BE NORMAL?* IS A BIOGRAPHY OF A READER, A BOOK ABOUT READING—reading for your life. In addition to the Bible, there are six books in the Plymouth Brethren Winterson household, and they are all nonfiction. Jeanette's mother, Mrs. Winterson, bans the reading of fiction, so young Jeanette reads in secret, in the outside lavatory or under covers at night, carefully depositing each read book under her mattress until it floats so dangerously high that it threatens to reveal the habit considered so vicious by her mother but that is sustaining Jeanette. Mrs. Winterson reads the Bible; young Jeanette has a memory of *Jane Eyre* read aloud in her mother's good reading voice, but Mrs. Winterson doctors it (with the skill of a clever reader, an astute stylist) so that Jane marries St. John Rivers and goes off to the mission with him. T. S. Eliot makes her cry in Accrington Public Library because his lines "This is one moment / But know that another / Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy" (from *Murder in the Cathedral*; qtd. in Winterson 39) give her hope that she will survive the moment she is in, and so does Gertrude Stein saying to Alice B. Toklas: "Right or wrong, this is the road and we are on it" (from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*; qtd. in Winterson 130). Jeanette Winterson claims that she "puts herself inside books for safe-keeping" and that "a tough life needs a tough language" (36, 40). The people around her have that tough language. She hears lines that she later locates in Shakespeare, a writer she regards as "not part of the alphabet, any more than black is a colour" (115). When she is homeless and living in her Mini, supporting herself at the local sixth-form college by working at the weekend market and the local library, she reads "English Literature A–Z," in the order in which it is shelved at the Accrington Public Library (115–30). Books are home when she is homeless (61); they are doses of medicine (42), saving people from isolation and the suffering that comes from feeling that nothing about their life is recognizable to others or intelligible to themselves, from being castaways from the tribe of human.

Readers need books, and they need teachers and good critics. The Accrington Public Library, endowed by the Carnegie

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Foundation in 1906 and sporting on its facade the heads of Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, and Dante, supplied the fragile public space to make available English literature A–Z. The young Jeanette has reached M and is struggling with N, because of Nabokov, whom she finds disturbing and off-putting, when Mrs. Ratlow, her English teacher, argues with her about the writer "Mrs. Oliphant," who, according to Mrs. Ratlow, should not be in English literature A–Z. Mrs. Ratlow, discovering Jeanette's living conditions—"You are living in a Mini and when you are not, in fact, in the Mini, you are working on the market to earn money, or you are here at the college, and otherwise you are in the Accrington Public Library reading English Literature in Prose, A–Z"—gives Jeanette a room in her house.

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? (the title taken from the question Mrs. Winterson asks when Jeanette declares that she loves girls, not boys) reminds us of what Rita Felski calls "the uses of literature," one of which is recognition. (Felski counts the others as enchantment, knowledge, and shock.) Perhaps some of us who have found our way into professing literature might once have read for our lives. Winterson's memoir also reminds us of the complex social, cultural, and sometimes utterly contingent and now precarious conditions that sustain a reading life.

Felski's *The Limits of Critique* is also a book about reading and how reading is often approached in literary study with a pervasive mood. The fact is that we read sympathetically as well as suspiciously. We know this—that understanding takes a certain trust—but we appear to need reminding, and in that suspicious mood it becomes hard to see and acknowledge. In *What Are Universities For?* Stefan Collini writes that "a society in which individuals never attempted to identify and refine their experiences of other individuals in whom they partly recognized themselves would also be one which could never be persuaded of the point of studying the humanities" (84). That is why the dominance of critique in the literary academy, the practice of treating text as symptom rather than expression or action, has implications not only for those of us who work in modern language departments and MLA members and their readers but also for the humanities as a whole. Felski's exhilarating book is timely and diagnostically acute, and it will for many, I suspect, be liberating because it gives articulate, precise, and thoughtful voice to a widespread fatigue with the mind-gripping, monotonous, monopolistic *doxa* of critique; to the predictable and bad writing that abounds (though clearly not solely) under its name; to the sheer, inert lack of responsible responsiveness to the objects of its puritanical scrutiny. Felski does not deny critique its importance (like me, she was once a practitioner): her acknowledgment of its place is why she distinguishes critique from criticism and comments on critique's scandalous severance from or ignorance of hermeneutics; why she uses the witty spelling "crrritique," with three irritable *r*'s, as one of her chapter titles; and why she prefers the term *postcritical*, which, I take it, means that we come after critique and through it rather than that we have dispensed with it, though that meaning will surely be ascribed to her use of the term. She thinks critique should not be the sole and meager diet, the sole mode of approach (*sola* critique, as *sola fide*, *sola scriptura*), and she marvelously characterizes critique's pleasures; its well-defended protection of its own high ground; its stubborn, earth-scorching, hegemonic appropriation of sophistication and viewpoint, as well as the picture of text and language that underwrites it. It is as if we were stuck in a groove of questioning, accusing, unearthing, not wondering, acknowledging, judging, evaluating, appreciating, suggesting, exclaiming, implying, invoking, exhorting, persuading, delighting, inviting, inspiring, essaying, or amusing. Critique sits high on the horse: it ascribes a gormless credulity to those who wish to talk

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of love or indeed anything other than power, as if love is not intrinsically involved, as power is not, with justice, or to those who perform "ccclose" readings, as if there is any other way of reading well. It is quick on the trigger in its dismissal (as belletrist or amateur) of those who do not share its *doxa*. It certainly fails to imagine alternatives to itself, and this indeed is part of the problem. One of Felski's best questions is, "Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (13).

It is the great merit and power of Felski's book that she approaches critique not exclusively as a set of arguments but as style, attitude, and mood, mood being "the way in which the world becomes intelligible" (25) as it comes into view for us (20). This allows her to assimilate, say, post-structuralism, new historicism, discourse theory, and innumerable other approaches as recognizably sharing the rhetoric, affect, and even the form that emerge from a particular view of language even when the path of the arguments differs markedly. It also leaves her less vulnerable to the familiar, admittedly tedious, rebuttal that she or some other critic has failed to differentiate Foucault's views on this with Derrida's views on that and she should therefore read X on this or Y on that before she is in a position to judge. The power of Felski's book will rest on whether its characterizations of critique are recognizable: whether we can see what she sees. In that sense her approach is aesthetic in ways I explore below.

What mood is *sola* critique in? What characteristic attitudes does it take up in relation to its objects? What forms does it take? What, in short, is its thought style? Felski has much fun with this. I enjoyed her description of the "chic bitterness" of critique (45), of its relentlessly ascetic valences, of its coolness in the sense of both calculated distance and hypersophistication. I liked that she said that the practices of reading of cool crrritique left readers "neither shaken nor stirred" because in critique's mode of reading the text is the object and not the subject of address and, as such, has ceased to be able to hold us accountable, ceased to call for our just responses (64). Her bravura analysis of the genres of critique as murder mystery (here, Agatha Christie and J. B. Priestley rather than the infinitely cooler Alain Robbe-Grillet or Paul Auster) is playful and pleasurable (she does allow us the pleasures of the text), but it also reveals the attitude taken to the text: that it is guilty, that its guilt will be unearthed, that it can hide and disguise its secrets but that they will be brought to light and scrutinized by a critic-inspector, who will have the last word. Felski's voice—her sense of fun, her own delight and relish in identifying the genre of *sola* critique—comes across most strongly in the chapter "The Inspector Calls." Critique is not so much uncovered, she avers, as generated out of the very axioms of the critic-inspector's practice.

Genre, *ethos*, *form*, *rhetoric*, *tone*—these are aesthetic terms. They ask us to look at words not as hiding something beneath them, not as clues or disguises but as disclosive, revelatory, expressive, in need of interpretation, for sure, but interpretation that draws out the inobvious, the hidden not as underneath the words but hiding in plain sight.

That Felski's work derives its power from its aesthetic judgment is something I wish to draw out from her practice. Both as the author of *The Uses of Literature* and as a longstanding and skillful editor of *New Literary History*, she has curated an enormous amount of critical work over the years. She also regularly teaches literary theory courses, so she approaches *sola* critique as editor, teacher, curator, as well as critic and interpreter. She says that she does not wish to make prescriptions. Her aim, on the contrary, is to "de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by divesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument" (*Limits* 3).

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In writing the *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein wanted not to propound a theory of language but to make us see the picture of language that holds us captive (115) and to diagnose what stood in the way of our looking and seeing. In *The Limits of Critique*, there is a latent Wittgenstein, who might be given a stronger voice to useful effect. Felski cites the lines from the *Philosophical Investigations* about a picture holding us captive and also talks of letting the "fly out of the fly bottle" (9). In doing so she draws our attention to the model of language that underpins *sola* critique. Though she carefully and usefully distinguishes suspicion from skepticism and paranoia, *sola* critique has a skeptical picture of language, as diagnosed by Stanley Cavell's Wittgenstein and Austin. Cavell's discussion of skepticism refers to all those held captive by a picture of language dominated by reference and representation, even when that picture combats the idea that the chief task of language is reference and representation—even, that is, when, in post-Saussurean mode, it is constantly envisaging a crisis of representation (see Moi).

I shall suggest that thinking again about the capacity of judgment in literary study might widen the vocabulary of criticism and free it from the grip of crritique. It will be obvious that I find Wittgenstein as elucidated in Cavell's work, and Immanuel Kant's work as elucidated in Hannah Arendt's, to be much more fruitful, profound, and revolutionary than Bruno Latour, who features significantly in Felski's last chapter. I can give only a few pointers here and some directions for further reading and work.

What underwrites Cavell's picture of language as developed in *Must We Mean What We Say?* and *The Claim of Reason* is the question of aesthetic judgment, especially as developed in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Insofar as Felski's book clears the path for a "wider range of affective styles" and modes of argument, it is worth discussing the peculiar, and for Cavell pervasive, form of judgment that Kant recognizes, a perspective fruitfully developed both by Cavell and, as Linda Zerilli has recently shown, also by Arendt's very much misunderstood work *The Life of the Mind*, as well as by her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

Kant identified a form of judgment that, although thoroughgoingly subjective and, deriving from one's individual, ineradicable viewpoint, nevertheless made a universal claim. Such judgments have "subjective universality" (Kant 54–97). In Kant's lingo, they are reflective, not determinative; they claim to, though do not and cannot, command agreement. Moreover, they demand that the interlocutor feel the same pleasure we do in an object or work of art, for judgments of taste proceed by means of pleasurable feeling. They do not call something under a concept; they are in Arendt's phrase "without bannisters" ("ohne Geländer"; qtd. in Kohn xiii) and thus expand the very idea of a concept as "opening the space for thinking about judging outside the rule-governed framework that [Kant's] own writings are commonly taken to exemplify" (Zerilli 71). If our own universities have recently followed the rubric of measurement rather than judgment in their paralyzing evaluative schemes, the articulation of the judging capacity and its centrality to criticism is a vital task (see Pfau and Soni). In Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein and Kant, such judgments underlie the entirety of our language.

Cavell had begun his analysis of the *Philosophical Investigations* with the idea that criteria in Wittgenstein are invoked not so much for specific guidelines and rules set by experts and umpires but for things such as sitting on a chair, having a toothache, reading, thinking, pointing to something—things we are all in a position to know and that require no expertise. How do we learn pain, then? Well, we learn how to talk, says Wittgenstein—suggesting that our learning is best described not as a process of attaching a name to a thing but

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as an initiation into all the complex modes of life, habits, practices, and ways of doing things that give us a world at all: "You learned the concept pain when you learned language" (384). Furthermore, these criteria for things being what they are—which is what Wittgensteinian criteria elucidate (371, 373), why Wittgensteinian grammar shows us what kind of object anything is—can only tell us of the identity of something, not whether it actually exists. They are criteria for things being *so*, but not for their *being* so (Cavell, *Claim* 45). (This is why skepticism is a permanently available possibility, why criteria are fully open to skepticism.) Criteria are disappointing because they can't tell us whether a person is feigning pain or actually experiencing it, only that pain is at issue. But they are even more disappointing because they depend on our voicing of them to do the work they actually do, on our counting this as something here and now in this instance, for this occasion.

For Cavell, the existence of a language known only to me, which he calls the "fantasy of necessary inexpressiveness" (*Claim* 351) would mean that I do not have to take responsibility for making my desires, needs, dreams, and feelings known to others, because in the fantasy I could not do so, and I could escape myself and self-knowledge. If the word and the world could somehow be stamped on each other without my intervention, I would also not have to take a role in the voicing of criteria, and so I would not be exposed to you and all the others who make up my world. The fantasy maintains my autonomy; it denies the depth of my dependence on others. In exploring the terrain of acknowledgment, Cavell shifts our knowledge of others from the realm of epistemic failure and breast beating to the harder realm of response and responsibility. But in so doing he confronts our incredible disappointment with what criteria can do. In order for criteria to do what they do, we have to give voice to them—we have to decide whether what you are showing me now is pain, and it seems as if I may have nothing to go on but my sense of your wince or moan. Would it not be better that I knew you were in pain by some more sure means than your giving voice to pain and by my response—since my response, my acknowledgment *is* the way I know your pain, the way I respond to your expressions, which are your criteria for pain.

Cavell suggests that when we imagine some better way of knowing each other than humanly, through our bodily expressions and responses, we exit our mutual attunement and threaten how we are intelligible to each other. Such imagining is why the sections on pain and others of the *Philosophical Investigations* lead to remarks such as, "What gives us so much as the idea that living beings, things, can feel?" and, "How am I filled with pity for this man?" (283, 287).

The turn to acknowledgment makes our responses toward each other the central issue.

When Regan sees Gloucester gripping the sides of the chair on which he is bound, in helplessness, in impotent defiance, in terrified anticipation of whatever is to come, when he howls out at the pain and horror of his blinding, both the inestimable pain of it and the terror of the fact of it, Regan surely knows it is pain Gloucester is in. She knows his pain as a dimension of her power and her pleasure, so her acknowledgment of it is wrenched out of the natural ways in which we learn about pain, from being comforted, succored, and cared for (if indeed we are). Regan knows Gloucester's pain through her power and pleasure, just as the servant acknowledges Gloucester's pain by trying to put a stop to it or by fetching poultices for his bleeding rings. We are being asked to see the role such knowledge plays in their lives, and the claims such knowledge makes on them and us here and now. We know Gloucester's pain through his expression of it *and* our responses. Regan and the rebellious and faithful servant will reveal what counts for them. They will show how his pain counts for them, and that will be

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part of Gloucester's knowledge of it too. Our use of criteria thus shows what pain is, and the criteria show us too; they reveal who we are by virtue of our responses.

John Gibson has helpfully suggested that there is something dramatic about acknowledgment in the sense that "[a]n act of acknowledgment is a way of giving life to what it is that we know, of bringing it into the public world. . . . Understanding, if fully possessed, establishes a type of dramatic relation between knower and the world. It places us in the world as agents who are responsive to the range of values and experiences that are the mark of human reality" (108).

If we can see that acknowledgment is the way we as human beings know each other and come to know ourselves (since knowledge has been taken away from the false terrain of the internal objects transparently and naturally known to me by introspection), then we might be free to examine both the concept of acknowledgment as it is explored in literature, film, and theater, for example, and how thinking with this concept helps us get a better grip on the value of reading works of art and responding to them, values that not only greatly need articulation and defense but also, perhaps just as much, need to be actually practiced.[1]

I can't encounter works of art without asking what counts for me and without struggling to give voice to why what counts matters and how, so that you might be able to see it too. Cavell's idea that criteria are criteria of judgment—that they are not only predications of judgment (that this is judged to be X) but also proclamations and hence expressions of judgment (and that it counts as X for us now and in this instance)—extends to the entire terrain of language and judgment what Kant had articulated for the specific terrain of aesthetic judgment alone (*Claim* 35). When I tell you what I see in a film, I want you to see it too. I am not content to let you rest in your wrong opinion of the film but will strive to become clearer and more articulate about what I see. My judgment of the film is my acknowledgment of it; it is how I come to know it. I hope to show you the film in all its reality, and I will necessarily come to a greater self-knowledge through so doing, for I will have revealed to you and to myself what counts for me.

The alternative to crrritique is not to be uncritical. It is to exercise, refine, and develop our capacity for judgment and to read again for our lives.

Note

1. For a brilliant exploration of reading and acknowledgment, see Moi, part 3, which offers the kind of analysis afforded by a deep reading of Wittgenstein.

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