theories and methodologies

But What about Love?

DIANA FUSS

IT IS NO CRITICISM TO NOTE THAT RITA FELSKI'S PROVOCATIVE, FRANK, AND SPIRITED BOOK *THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE* IS ITSELF A WORK OF critique, and a rhetorically powerful and persuasive one at that. While the hermeneutics of suspicion comes under considerable analytic pressure in the book, Felski does not hesitate to read for hidden meanings, tease out internal contradictions, or cast a skeptical eye on skepticism. Rather, she effectively engages in critique, without apology or embarrassment.

To highlight this fundamental irony is not to cast suspicion on the book. In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski is interested not in crudely jettisoning what she charges has become a default hermeneutics but in creatively expanding our interpretive options. Her complaint is not that critique has become a failed practice exactly but that it has become a ubiquitous and predictable one. "Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (13). The problem with critique is that it highlights "the sphere of agon (conflict and domination) at the expense of eros (love and connection)." Felski grows especially weary of academic work focused on the question of power. "But what about love?" she challenges proponents of critique (17). "Where is your theory of attachment?" (17–18).

To change the conversation—and change it we must, she argues, if the humanities are to remain relevant—requires several steps: shifting the tone of theoretical work, creating fresh critical vocabularies, and reinventing our teaching methods. Such a paradigm shift also requires generating new ways of thinking and writing, cast preferably in less pessimistic or judgmental styles than critique tends to offer. Felski's carefully considered wager is to dethrone "oppositional thought" in order to "explore other ways of reading less invested in inspection, interrogation, and the pursuit of the guilty" (116).

Ideology critique, with its practices of demystification and exposure, comes under the most scrutiny. Felski is disenchanted with ideology critique when practiced as "a denunciation of error and a hunt

DIANA FUSS is Louis W. Fairchild Class of '24 Professor of English at Princeton University. She is the author of several books, including *Essentially Speaking*; *Identification Papers*; *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (winner of the MLA James Russell Lowell Prize); and *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy*.

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for mislaid truths" (130). She worries about critique's "bleak-eyed assessment[s] of how things really are" (129). And she questions the necessity for "vehement acts of disputing and denouncing" (131). Critique's seemingly endless and pervasive bad mood gives Felski particular pause. Isn't it time to "expand our critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods" (13)?

I began reading *The Limits of Critique* with great interest and enthusiasm a few days before the 2016 presidential election. I finished reading the book a few days after with considerably more unease. My mood, admittedly, had darkened. The book I held in my hands, which at first had seemed so right for the moment, felt suddenly and dramatically out of sync with the times, like a relic from the Obama era, striking themes of hope, opportunity, and optimism, when all I could feel was despair, disappointment, and dread. Even Felski's own critical orientation, appealingly upbeat and practical, made me instantly nostalgic for America's great pragmatist in chief.

In a new age of what can only be called outlandish indifference to truth—when unsubstantiated allegations, conspiracy theories, and fake news are embraced and abetted at the very highest level of government—should we be actively working to demote critique, an interpretative method with a proven track record of calling out and calling to account purveyors of false and pernicious narratives? The dawn of a Trump presidency, a world order defined by cynical falsehoods and moral bankruptcy, seems like a remarkably inopportune moment to downgrade the percussive force and political utility of critique. While all paranoia is suspicious, not all suspicion is paranoid. If there was ever a time for "styles of suspicious reading that blend interpretation with moral judgment" (86), it's now. Critique is not just the pragmatic thing to do; it's the right thing to do.

Felski is well aware of the ethical value and political import of critique, especially in its strongest articulation of "negation," defined here as "the explicit act of rebuttal, refusal, or rejection" (131). This form of critique, Felski acknowledges, "displays the bracing qualities of moral clarity and rhetorical force, demanding that we speak out against injustice, condemn prejudice, expose fallacious or meretricious lines of reasoning" (131–32). Nevertheless, she would prefer to see "a politics of relation rather than negation" (147). Interrogating truth claims, cross-examining evidence, remaining ever vigilant—for Felski it is time to move on from these "shopworn" conventions (149) and give new critical idioms a chance, among them inspiration, solace, happiness, play, recognition, reparation, passion, engagement, enchantment, wonder, absorption, incandescence, and rapture (e.g., 17, 151, 175, 180). Felski is "eager to back away from the rhetoric of denunciation" (129–30), the "nay-saying" of the "glaring policeman" (130). Rather than a suspicious reader's "digging down" or a surface reader's "standing back" (52), she would like to see readers "forging links between things that were previously unconnected" and thus "creating something new" (173, 174).

Forging links, a helpful reading practice that could apply to any text or subject, provides no guarantee that the critical tone will be any less moody than other forms of reading. Much depends on what is being interpreted. Reading the newspaper precisely to forge links and explore connections, I am reminded daily that some words and actions are so appalling that the only ethical response can or should be denunciation.

But let me be clear. I see no reason not to take up Felski's welcome invitation to consider alternatives to a hermeneutics of critique and to explore what "postcritique" has to offer.[1] Her call for interpretive inventiveness is irresistible. It is also based on values I fully share. While I am not convinced that critique has become obligatory or commonplace (Felski and I may be reading very

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different books), I do think that experimenting with ways of reading and writing is something we should always be doing, perhaps especially in times of political upheaval or cultural ferment. Our current moment demands drawing on insightful practices of responsible critique as well as exploring fresh forms of intellectual engagement. There is indeed still much to be said for pragmatism.

It seems to me vital to refuse any simple opposition between critique and postcritique. Postcritique will not have an easy time keeping its hands clean (of ideology, of prescription, or of just bad temper). And classic works of critique, I would suggest, have never been afraid of "attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling" (173).[2] Nor have they been devoid of positive affect. Might not many of the modes and moods of postcritique—"joy, hope, love, optimism" (152)—already be found inside critique, if we only cared to look?

Philosophical works of critique deserve a thoughtful second look, a point I think Felski might grant; after all, her book begins by recovering alternatives to the "hermeneutics of suspicion" in the work of the philosopher who gave us the phrase, Paul Ricoeur. Mentioned only briefly in his writing, his hermeneutics of suspicion, as Felski rightly notes, was never the only critical method Ricoeur identified or for that matter practiced. Hermeneutics of trust, restoration, and recollection were always present in Ricoeur's work but ultimately overlooked or cast aside by critics (perhaps because, Felski surmises, we are all afraid we will be perceived as "uncritical" [9]).

Felski's reappraisal of Ricoeur demonstrates not a new style of reading but arguably one of the oldest: the act of rereading. "Any text," Felski observes, "is jammed thick with implications, connotations, conflicting meanings, and associative echoes that will inevitably exceed any reader's immediate grasp. . . . There is always, as Ricoeur would say, a surplus of meaning" (66). Rereading for surplus meaning is one very viable hermeneutic strategy, and in fact one of the great interpretive strengths of Felski's book. But what might happen if we apply this reading-for-surplus approach to earlier texts even more foundational than Ricoeur's in the history of suspicious reading?

Consider "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," by Louis Althusser, Felski's candidate for "the quintessential suspicious reader" (113). Althusser's famous 1969 story of a policeman hailing a pedestrian on the street with the shout "Hey, you there!" has launched many a study of subjection and subject formation. Althusser's "little theoretical theater" stages an everyday drama of suspicion, guilt, and law. But it is not the only scenario of interpellation Althusser brings before his audience. In the same essay we have the scene in which someone knocks on our door; we ask, "Who's there?"; and the friend replies, "It's me." We also have the scene in which we recognize someone we know on the street; we say, "Hello, my friend"; and we shake hands (129–30). These scenes of ideological recognition are stories not of suspicion but of friendship, not of guilt but of anticipation, not of law but of love.[3] They are, in both mood and message, what Felski would call postcritical.

Or what of that other core text in the history of critique, Sigmund Freud's 1911 case history of the troubled Daniel Paul Schreber, the brilliant judge separated from the world by his own paranoid delusions? Freud's interpretation of Schreber's memoir would seem to be the perfect example of a strong suspicious reading lacking any theory of attachment or love. And yet, on careful rereading, the delusions suffered by Schreber turn out, for Freud, to be creative and constructive attempts at recovery and relation, one man's restorative and reparative efforts to live in the world again. What does it mean, Freud asks at the end of the Schreber case, to be "in the grip of an overpowering love" (65)? Transference love and deep attachment are not mere footnotes in psychoanalysis. They are bedrock

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theories—places where conflict and connection, agon and eros, are never far apart.

Felski is much more pessimistic about critique than I am. While I will continue to explore different ways of thinking and writing, I have no plans to depreciate the value of critique, despite the enormous appeal of Felski's dream of the yet to be thought. But we're in luck. We can hardly go wrong by proceeding on several fronts at once. Now is an excellent time to flex our interpretive muscles and deploy an array of credible and conscientious reading styles. In this respect, Felski's book is not in the least ill timed but very much of the moment. It offers us choices and ideas, encourages imagination and collaboration, and stimulates reflection and conversation. Above all, it is an anthem to curiosity and creativity. Who doesn't love that?

Notes

1. Felski's book is stronger on what postcritique is not than on what it is. But the fuzziness of postcritique, and the few pages devoted to it, can be explained by the nature of the concept, which Felski defines as a "placeholder for emerging ideas and barely glimpsed possibilities" (173). New ways of reading remain for her largely in the future and will only emerge when we stop assuming that critique is the only or best way to read. One example, however, of what a sustained postcritique reading might look like can be found in Felski's previous book, *Uses of Literature*, especially the chapter "Enchantment" (51–76).

2. Such terms and concepts are especially prominent in Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

3. Even the "Hey, you there!" story can be read as "a strange scene of love," as Butler nicely describes it in *The Psychic Life of Power* (128).

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