theories and methodologies

La Foi Postcritique, on Second Thought

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> How strongly I have felt of pictures, that when you have seen one well, you must take your leave of it; you shall never see it again. (Emerson 476)

> Now and then there are readings that make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and shines hard and clear and infinite and exact . . . readings when the knowledge that we *shall know* the writing differently or better or satisfactorily, runs ahead of any capacity to say what we know, or how. In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we, the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognized, become fully cognizant of, our knowledge. (Byatt 512)

LITERARY CRITICISM THRIVES ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND READING, ON WHAT IS OFTEN PARSED AS ABSORPTIVE READing versus critical reading, belletristic versus analytic reading. It sets itself against the idea that a first reading of a text might be the one in which we have "seen [it] well"—on the assumption that critical insight is belated (Emerson 476). "As scholars, we read lengthy texts [such as novels] sequentially; then, in order to write, we inevitably reread recursively," which has the effect, as the critic Michaela Bronstein goes on to observe, of producing conflicted conceptions of the novel as either "a static object (a form) or an experience in time" (77). One goal of literary criticism would appear to be to keep readers from lingering in that temporal and immersive first reading in order to arrive at an assessment of the total work. First reading and critique are viewed as largely anathema; second thoughts inspire us to relinquish first impressions, in a process of questioning and revision infused with a spirit of skepticism and doubt. There is an air of supersession—something vanguardist—about critique, but as Bronstein also points out, "the purpose of rereading need not be to revise the first reading from an analytic distance. . . . Close reading [can use] the recursive process of analysis to approach, rather than to erase,

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sequential reading" (78).[1] I take Bronstein's projection of a literary criticism that accounts for rather than dismisses the absorptive aspects of first reading as an accurate description of Rita Felski's project in *The Limits of Critique*, a manifesto that calls on literature scholars to recommit to "care or concern for [aesthetic] phenomena" (107). Felski makes the case for a pragmatist phenomenology and calls her method for its achievement "postcritique," a mode of reading that declines to unmask, demystify, interrogate, subvert, or expose the literary text (the habit of generations of recent critics). Postcritique means to expand the uses of literature beyond that of marking an absence or an insufficiency, returning readers to the values that drew them to the literary work of art in the first place ("aesthetic pleasure, increased self-understanding, moral reflection, perceptual reinvigoration, ecstatic self-loss, emotional consolation, or heightened sensation" [188]).

Felski's terminology has about it an ideal of the restorative: "reflection," "reinvigoration," "self-understanding." Postcritique thus aligns with Eve Sedgwick's "reparative reading," which comes as little surprise. Felski's ideals, however, are ones to which her argument merely points. *The Limits of Critique* reads more like literary sociology than literary theory, more like a statement of literary ethics than a working out of method; and to the extent that the book calls for *return* without providing a clear map for how to get there, it remains weakly committed to that goal. Postcritique, in other words, retains the faintest perfume of vanguardist hope and desire. That desire thrives in a fog of ambiguity as to whether the "post" in *postcritique* means that we have superseded critique or passed through it (the latter a condition of our return to first impressions). As long as we continue to have reading debates, we can be reasonably certain that our critical positions will rest on distinctions between first and second reading, between sympathetic reading and suspicious reading. Felski wants to argue (and I would agree with her wholeheartedly) that the divergence between first and second reading, the lifeblood of any literary criticism, could underwrite suspicion but doesn't necessarily have to. All the same, the kind of postcritical thinking that Felski calls for ought to entail a *return* to trust from the space of doubt. A reader's "perceptual *re*-invigoration" (in which she might consider her first impressions from the perspective of their *validity*) would recognize that trust and doubt are inseparable; however, working out that possibility would require critical address of the recursions in the aesthetic, and *The Limits of Critique* remains curiously agnostic on the nanotechnics of aesthetic subjectivity. Allow me to turn, then, in the spirit of recursion, to the quotations from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Antonia S. Byatt that begin my essay, which appear to be making the same point: that there is a temporality to reading and it is deliciously involuted.

Of Byatt there can be little question on this score. It is as if the line between our pleasurable and critical readings, perception and interpretation, were impossible finally to draw, so intricate and entangled do they seem, as if our apprehension of the distinction between what we have "never before seen" and "what we know, or how" could only be felt by way of the arrhythmia of Byatt's style. Emerson requires more work. We might focus our attention on his call to sacrifice, on its particular phrasing ("you must take your leave of it"), which raises fresh problems for reading as such—whether you can know it when you see it, so to speak. How do you know, in the moment, in looking at a painting, that "you have seen [it] well"—well enough to take your leave of it? Would this involve two acts of reading, as the sentence implies, a first and a second, and are those readings related sequentially or rhetorically? Is the first reading proleptic, anticipating the second as its degradation, its decomposition, its failure ("*when you have seen*

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one well, you must take your leave of it")? Or is it that the second belatedly engenders the first as an ideal ("you shall *never* see it again")? Or do they coexist in something like a future perfect, in the sense that you will have "seen well" but will not know it until after the fact (to Byatt's point, in a way)? There is a shade of the impossible about both Emerson's sense of reading (impossible to recover, impossible to repeat) and Byatt's (impossible to locate when we know "what we know"). I found myself unable to shake these passages as I made my way through *The Limits of Critique*.

Felski offers a critical and measured interrogation of suspicious modes of reading on the assumption (shared with others) that the "hermeneutics of suspicion" Paul Ricoeur identified a half century ago is "now nearly synonymous with criticism itself" (Sedgwick 124). Felski pores over the nuances of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" looking for hints of its relevance to more recent practices of critique such as symptomatic reading and ideology critique. She issues a bracing invitation to hard thought, makes significant challenges to the practice of literary criticism, and lays out a series of critical signposts that direct us toward postcritique. And for all that effort, I retain a sense of the impossible about postcritique, of something visionary and impractical and yet exciting and conceptually generative. Postcritique may be an asymptote of critique.

That thought first began its heretical stir when I educed that *The Limits of Critique* would stake out a forceful position in the reading debates while avoiding the task of performing anything in the way of a close reading. "The aim [of *The Limits of Critique*] is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting 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. . . . [Its] method [is not] the close reading of a few canonical works" (3). It is as if Felski has manufactured the theory of postcritique and then left it for us to test-drive. Can you have a literary theory without a theory of literature? Can you give account of your involvement with the work of art, your aesthetic participation, the delicate navigation of your "orientation [toward the work of art] in the phenomenological sense" without close readings of literature as such (21)? The very ambitions of postcritique represent insurmountable challenges for *The Limits of Critique*. Second asymptote: as the term "*post*critique" implies, it is a reaction to critique. "The role of the term 'postcritical' . . . is to steer us away from the kinds of arguments we know how to conduct in our sleep"—recovering or retrieving a hidden meaning, demystifying an ostensible meaning, or diagnosing a text's hidden anxieties are among the things that a postcritical reading "will decline to do" (173). Postcritique feels rather too negatively defined given Felski's ambition to chart a "positive vision" of critical inquiry. Final asymptote: the time of reading. Felski's postcritical reading invites us to think again about why we were drawn to works of art in the first place, which has the effect of putting us in a position of looking *after* critique for a reading that is supposed to have preceded it (i.e., "*post*critique"). What kind of reading would be nonsuspicious under these circumstances? Can we discern when we know what's going on from when we know what's really going on? Emerson and Byatt hint at the futility of attempting to distinguish one's first reading from one's second, reading absorptively from reading critically, reading that is perceptive versus reading that is perspicacious. The failure to draw such distinctions would be as much of a problem for postcritique as for critique.

Of all Felski's suggestions, I found myself most intrigued by the proposal that we view differences between reading strategies as differences in comportment, or what she calls "critical mood"—a phenomenological (and Heideggerian) sense of the prerequisites

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to "any form of interaction or engagement" (20), "a constellation of attitudes and beliefs that expresses itself in a particular manner of approaching one's object" (21). She asks us to consider sensibility or disposition to be greater problems for critique in the symptomatic vein than either its philosophy or its politics: the finding virtue in critical detachment; the habits of demystifying, subverting, and unmasking, of forcing the text to yield a meaning it either can't or won't say; the goals of registering a limit, putting into question, exposing a hidden truth, and drawing out a counterintuitive meaning. These critical moods place the scholar in a particular relation to his or her object, one marked by an affective inhibition ("Critique cannot yield to a text—a process it perceives as a form of shameful abasement or ideological surrender" [188]), as well as an impoverished view of the work of art ("its conception of the uses and values of literature is simply too thin" [188]). The habits of ideology critique have made it difficult for scholars to account for their objects and their relation to them and have left literary studies at a loss for how to defend humanistic inquiry in the face of growing skepticism about its value.

Felski's postcritique accords with her phenomenological accent on mood and orientation; postcritique strives for *attentiveness* ("a preference for description over explanation, a willingness to attend rather than to analyze" [107]), *attachment* ("a judicious decrease rather than increase of distance" [192]), and *receptivity* ("to defer to a presence rather than diagnose an absence. The words on the page do not disguise truth but disclose it" [32]). She finds the tools for postcritique in a broad field of work: recent key statements in the reading debates, including Heather Love's "thin description" ("Close but Not Deep" and "Close Reading"), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "surface reading," and Sedgwick's "reparative reading," as well as a recent turn back to hermeneutics, much of it French and influenced by Bruno Latour's "actor-network theory" (9), evident in Marielle Macé's "stylistics of existence" (217), Yves Citton's emphasis on "lecture" over "histoire" or "écriture" (344), Michael Chaouli's accent on style as engrafting a "*particular* human being" into a "*particular* aesthetic experience" (328), and the encouragement of Nikolas Kompridis that readers become "unclosed" to a text (20). Where suspicious practices of reading tend to make a virtue of critical detachment, postcritical reading strives for intimacy and engagement. The end game of suspicious reading, according to Felski: critical distance and a reduction of illusions. The end game of interpretation, according to Ricoeur: "conquer a remoteness" ("Existence" 16).

How one might achieve "a judicious decrease rather than increase of distance" by way of postcritical reading remains an open question (Felski 192). Does Felski give us what we need to get closer to our texts? Can we get there from here, we might ask? Felski wonders whether "the metaphor of the surface" (central to the skeptical assessment of symptomatic reading that Marcus and I offer in "Surface Reading") remains up to the task of capturing the merits of recent critical attempts to turn away from suspicion (55). All the same, postcritical reading retains many of the features Felski laments in the work of others: "Rather 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). This may make for a worthy synopsis of calls to remain "unclosed" to the text, to allow the literary work to "disclose itself" in the reader's experience of it (Felski 191), but something about these formulations remains too spatial, too frontal and standoffish for a critical project that wishes to inspire us to remain "touched by what, in truth, lures us" (Chaouli 328). Postcritique offers meager resources for responding to the temporality

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of reading. For a critical practice that aims to inspire both our deeper involvement with works of literature and an ampler vocabulary of "attachment, passion, and inspiration" (Felski 189), postcritique offers few tools to capture the temporal recursions and involutions brought to our attention by the likes of Bronstein, Emerson, and Byatt. We would be wise to recall that "involved" and "involute" share an etymological root in the Latin *involvĕre*: "to roll into or upon, to wrap up, envelop, surround, entangle, make obscure."

Felski could have gotten us a lot closer to a sense of the involute—of the entanglements of first reading and second reading—had she attended to Ricoeur's efforts to negotiate fluctuations in his own critical mood. Though eager to find alternatives to "theological" styles of criticism ("a cult of reverence for [texts in] their sheer ineffability" [29]), she might have devoted sympathetic attention to his Catholic skepticism and the way that comportment orients and reorients him before the sacred object and the ritual action. The critical mood of the *epochê* ("suspension of judgment") allows Ricoeur to participate in the belief in the reality of the sacred object in a neutral way, "to describe and not to reduce" it to any cause, function, or absolute reality (Ricoeur, *Freud* 28, 29). Ricoeur's phenomenology doesn't oscillate between holding the object in reverence and seeing it for what it really is, between initial faith and subsequent doubt; rather, the hermeneutics of suspicion is inextricably involved with the hermeneutics of trust. Thus we find that Ricoeur speaks not of "postcritique" but of "postcritical faith": "Le contraire du soupçon, dirai-je brutalement, c'est la foi . . . la foi seconde de l'herméneute, la foi qui a traversé la critique, la foi postcritique" 'The contrary of suspicion, I will say bluntly, is faith . . . the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics, faith that has undergone criticism, postcritical faith' (*De l'interprétation* 36–37; *Freud* 28). It remains unclear whether Felski and Ricoeur mean the same thing by the term *postcritique*, but it nonetheless serves to be a bit of a pedant regarding that verb *traversé*, which precisely captures the sense of recursion and return in Ricoeur's recovery of meaning ("récollection du sens").[2] "Traversé la critique"—the faith that has passed through critique, penetrated critique through and through. This double movement captures, moreover, what Ricoeur proposes is also necessary: an "inversion du mouvement de la pensée [de la 'neutralité' phénoménologique] . . . [à] la pensée qui 's'addresse' à moi" 'inversion of the movement of thought from what I give to the object to how it addresses itself to me' (*De l'interprétation* 39; *Freud* 31; trans. modified).

One detects that sense of doubleness in Ricoeur's attempt to account for the object of the phenomenology of religion, where his initial subtleties are lost in translation:

> [L]e thème de la phénoménologie de la religion, c'est le *quelque chose* visé dans l'action rituelle, dans la parole mythique, dans la croyance ou le sentiment mystique; sa tâche est de désimpliquer cet "objet" des intentions diverses de la conduite, du discours et de l'émotion.
> (*De l'interprétation* 37)

> The theme of the phenomenology of religion is the *something* intended in ritual actions, in mythical speech, in belief or mystical feeling; its task is to dis-implicate that object from the various intentions of behavior, discourse, and emotion. (*Freud* 29)

There is an ambiguity in the verb *visé* that the English translation resolves in a specific direction, offering cognates of "intention" for both *visé* and *intentions* ("the *something* intended" and "the various intentions," respectively). *Visé*, however, vibrates with a sense both of intention and of sight. The first question I might ask simply to get a hold of the ambiguity would be "visé *par qui*?" ("seen *by whom*?")—certainly, the believer, as there would be no sense of the sacred without him or her, but also the phenomenologist, who bears a

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perception that is postcritical ("Non plus . . . la foi première du charbonnier, mais la foi seconde de l'herméneute . . . la foi post-critique"; 'No longer . . . [t]he first faith of the simple soul, but rather the second faith of one who has engaged in hermeneutics . . . postcritical faith' [*De l'interprétation* 36–37; *Freud* 28]). The ambiguity captures a sense of seeing *with* the believer: "que je croie avec le croyant, mais sans poser absolument l'objet de sa croyance" 'that I believe with the believer, but without positing absolutely the object of his belief' (38; 29). What is seen or making itself seen (the source of the action) also remains ambiguous. We might note regarding Ricoeur's passive construction that "*quelque chose* visé" offers the phenomenon in a neutral state: "*quelque chose* [est] visé [par quelque chose ou quelqu'un]." There is no a priori meaning to the sacred object / ritual act: "Appelons 'sacré' cet objet visé, sans préjuger sa nature" 'Let us call this intended object the "sacred," without determining its nature' (37; 29). The phenomenologist observes the phenomenon and constructs meaning from things when they occur. There is no subject: it is the phenomenon that acts and speaks. The passive becomes active: "c'est cette inversion du mouvement de la pensée qui 's'adresse' à moi et me fait sujet interpellé" '[It] is this inversion of the movement of thought which now addresses itself to me and makes me a subject that is spoken to' (39; 31). Inversion. Involution. Involvement.

This focus on being "spoken to" (*interpellé*) returns us to the question of when and how the work "discloses itself" in the subject's experience of it. I asked earlier what kind of reading after suspicion would dare to be nonsuspicious? *La foi postcritique*, Ricoeur might answer: a reading that retains an element of that initial absorption (*foi*) well aware that it has penetrated through and through (*traversé*) critique. The persistence of that first reading restores temporality to the analytic axis, but it is a strange type of temporality, recursive rather than progressive, more akin to a faith in what reveals itself in the first instance. To assimilate that sense of seeing with rather than seeing better, of postcritical recursion rather than critical negation, of "yay saying" rather than naysaying, all of which Felski claims to want to do, she would have to attend to the nuances of how aesthetic pleasure works, would have to acknowledge that there is more in the Ricoeur tool kit for working out how the literary text "discloses itself" aesthetically in the subject's experience of it, at least for those who strive to practice postcritique.

Notes

1. I mean "vanguardist" in the sense offered by David Graeber, who understands "ordinary intellectual practice" among academic radicals as a residue of revolutionary ambitions "to determine the correct historical analysis of the world situation, so as to lead the masses along in the one true revolutionary direction" (301).

It strikes me as no accident that at the height of the theory wars, when a theoretical school would rise only to be toppled the next season, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, my candidate for the most stellar thematization of supercessionist reading, of reading succumbing to rereading, was a text subjected to constant analysis by literary critics on the left. The number of scholarly articles and book chapters published during the 1980s and 1990s on that novella is too lengthy to list here.

2. Denis Savage translates the phrase as "faith that has undergone critique" (Ricoeur, *Freud* 28), but "undergone" dampens the resonances within "traversé" of recursion, return, and the inversion of the movement of thought that Ricoeur wants to emphasize. I thank Thomas Germaine for help with the French original.

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