theories and methodologies

Not So Well Attached

BRUCE ROBBINS

FAULTFINDING IS THE FAULT THAT RITA FELSKI'S *THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE* ATTRIBUTES TO LITERARY CRITICISM. FAULTFINDING IS ALSO, OF course, what Felski's book spends most of its time doing. Had it not abandoned itself so completely to faultfinding, its central insight might have led it to do more interesting things. (The fact that these more interesting things are already being done by much socially engaged criticism is one obvious weakness of her argument, which puffs itself up by expanding its range of targets so as to take in nearly the whole profession and then, sensing a challenge, steps back in mock horror so as to suggest, "No, of course, I didn't mean *that*!") As an example of these alternative, nonfaultfinding versions of critique, the book might have tried to explore the reasons the humanities are as susceptible as they are to the holier-than-thou self-righteousness that Felski both accuses and, however reluctantly, also personifies.

I myself have a fondness for faultfinding and, given the encouragement of the format of this feature, will unashamedly expose one or two additional faults below. After all, discipline must be maintained.[1] But it is surely more valuable to pursue the question of why faultfinding has been and remains so popular among us—to inquire into the preconditions of critique. One possible answer is the marginal position of the humanities vis-à-vis other areas of knowledge that are more lucrative and closer to power. Another, not inconsistent with the first possibility, is our dependence on the concept of culture. From the Romantic period on, the putative wholeness of culture was defined in strict relation to the putative *absence* of wholeness in society at large. This meant that anything falling under the category of culture could be assumed to possess a critical distance from the present society to which the speaker belongs. This assumption did much to bring the discipline of literary criticism into being and to shape the habits of mind of those who take themselves to be culture's representatives. We reaffirm it every time we or the texts we talk about enact socially critical criticism.

I note in passing that it is false to imply, as Felski does, that it has to be us critics who perform socially critical criticism and not the

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literary texts themselves. If she were to admit that critique is often unambiguously organic to the texts themselves, she would find it harder to accuse the critics of arrogance.[2]

This logic of culture as critical distance goes deep. It got its classical formulation in the era of Matthew Arnold, but it applies as fully to the era (perhaps even now being erased by the waves) of Michel Foucault. The consistent assumption has been that though the mainstream may flatter itself on improvement and reform, for us our society remains, as the shorthand saying goes, problematic. This follows from the double proposition that we in the academy have reverence for our object of knowledge (literature) and that literature belongs to the domain of culture (critical distance). For us, then, critique goes with the territory. Professionally speaking (for better or worse, this distinguishes us as academics from fans as well as from most reviewers, belletrists, and other adjuncts to the publishing industry), talking about literature entails an edginess or distancing ourselves from the values of the society around us.

One way to rephrase Felski's project, then, is to say that it wants to extricate literature from its entanglement in the culture concept. If it were to succeed, what would be the result? Perhaps a criticism that is closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry's dollars-and-cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer. In a book less given over to faultfinding, Felski might have paid more heed to this question, considering possible disadvantages of putting the discipline through what looks to me like a corporate restructuring.

Granted, the academic commitment to culture, which underwrites our anticorporate reflex, is not all advantages. It sponsors romantic complaints about modernity that have often been dazed and confused. In rejecting modern rational calculation, it tends to be soft on neomedievalism and unprotected against the uncritical return of past mistakes, including submission to natural hierarchy and supernaturalism. The complainers have not always distinguished between dark satanic mills (bad) and democracy (good), both of them aspects of modernity. Such confusions have persisted and recently, I think, intensified. But the consequences that would follow from an abandonment of the commitment to culture are almost certainly worse. Some of the self-righteousness would go, but with it would go most of the critical edge.

Yes, the word *problematic* invites mockery, but consider the cost of doing without it, or without its more precise equivalents. I for one would like a chance to respond to the counterassumption that the society around us is *not* properly described as problematic or that the ways in which it is problematic are not properly our business. All protestations to the contrary, those counterassumptions are what Felski and her friends, listed in note 4 to her introduction (195–96), would be committing us to.

In a recent article about young Tunisian men who left to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the editor of the *Arab Weekly* is quoted as saying that "in the Arab world the most likely radicals are people in technical or scientific fields who lack the kind of humanities education that fosters critical thought" (qtd. in Packer 40). The word "critical" here might seem vague, but it is not disablingly so. The ability to hold at arm's length the political loyalties of those around you could theoretically be measured. I would be surprised, for example, if there were not a strong correlation between higher education in the humanities and opposition to the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. It seems reasonable to imagine that there would be less such opposition if Felski and her allies were to get their wish and make criticism less critical.

The list in note 4 to the introduction begins with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and ends

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with Bruno Latour. In my opinion Felski misreads Sedgwick, who is well worth taking back from Felski (as are Amanda Anderson, Ian Hunter, and Helen Small)—but she is welcome to Latour. Since Latour is the thinker most pertinent to this conversation and the most pernicious influence on it, I turn here to him.

Like Foucault before him, Latour appeals to the reflex antiprogressivism that runs so deep in the cultural disciplines. Like Foucault, but perhaps even more emphatically, Latour rejects the premise that modernity registers in any way a progress over premodernity. His book *We Have Never Been Modern* mocks the very opposition on which this idea depends. What vanity for us human beings of the present to assume that we inhabit a modernity distinct from, superior to, or more knowing than what came before! We should be more humble.

Felski unreservedly embraces Latour's affect or mood of modesty. And this approach works on many literary critics. Critics are structurally vulnerable to appeals to modesty. We respond well to them because modesty is part of our professional raison d'être. We exist, we tell ourselves, because the objects we study are so much greater than ourselves. Of course, we get something back for this provisional self-abasement. Because we are the ones who represent those objects, we are ourselves greater than those who do not. The text is a deity before which we bow down, but because we (and not others) are its priests, we are the ones who get to speak in the name of the divine. It's self-serving, if not more so than other professional rationales. But the fact remains that we will seize any chance we can get to accuse ourselves of arrogance, thereby proving that at heart we are actually exceptionally humble. In this sense, what Jeffrey Williams has called "the new modesty in literary criticism" is not really new and is not really modesty.

What *is* new, then, about the so-called new modesty? For one thing, it insists on its own squeaky-clean newness. Consider the word *now* in *The Way We Read Now*, the title of the 2009 issue of *Representations* that launched the slogan "surface reading" (Best and Marcus).[3] Or consider the 2004 essay (quoted by Felski on page 9) in which Bruno Latour named what was to become Felski's target: "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" The first thing you notice about the title is that it is structured like the old comic line "When did you stop beating your wife?" It tries to trick the reader into accepting the premise that critique *has* run out of steam before the reader has any rational reason to think this is in fact the case; it assumes that which it would seem obliged to establish.[4] And what it assumes, more precisely, is that history has confirmed the author's argument. The work that argument might not have been able to do has been done for it, Latour suggests, by time's passage, which has helpfully opened the valve and let the steam out of critique. An epistemologically superior position rejecting critique appears, magically verified, by virtue of mere presentness, up-to-dateness, fashionability. With due allowance for the diminished scale, this break with the errors of the past might be described as a claim to modernity.

I say this, of course, so as to catch Latour in a self-contradiction. He is, after all, the guy who so famously argued against the concept of modernity, the very idea of achieving a break with the past radical enough to confer epistemological superiority on the present. If the concept of modernity is triumphalist, then here Latour is triumphalist. In my own view, using the concept of modernity does not always involve a self-congratulatory power grab. Approached dialectically, modernity merely indicates a willingness to recognize the positive even in the present's negatives and vice versa. The present backlash in the United States against decades of

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struggle for the rights of women and minorities can be read dialectically as a backhanded recognition that such struggles have in fact accomplished something. But Latour's modesty *is* a power grab—as is the collective project, to the extent that it is more than a public relations phenomenon, of renouncing normal critical procedures as aggressive mastery and instead flaunting our feelings (which can't be argued with) or prostrating ourselves reverently and above all humbly before the ineffable greatness of our object. Some reader of *David Copperfield* somewhere is surely remembering, in this context, the meaning of the word "umble" as pronounced by the Cockney villain Uriah Heep.

There are better and more topical reasons why humility is in fashion today. One is sociological: the collapse of the job market, which allows the practice of ordinary criticism by those with tenure-track jobs to look like callousness and self-importance vis-à-vis those with no prospect of decent employment. Critique makes the enterprise of criticism seem meaningful, and, when the job market is so apocalyptically dried up, I can see why even quite reasonable claims for the meaningfulness of criticism might come to seem overinflated. Another reason is the urgency of climate change and concern for the environment. The idea of culpable human arrogance seems almost self-evident if we think about how badly the species has treated nature. Yet even this self-accusation can easily feed a craving for humility that is fundamentally unreasonable. After all, the desire to protect nature and even (the extreme form of that desire) the urge for human self-extinction on nature's behalf (a voluntary die-off) are assertions of human values, not natural ones. Also, anyone thinking seriously about climate change would seem obliged to embrace a linear, noncyclical, collective history. And if so, then why should a linear, noncyclical, collective history be frowned on as somehow immodest if applied to an object other than climate change? If you can have climate change, why can't you have modernity too? Don't you *need* it?

This is not the place to make an extended connection between Latour's critique of science and his circuitous defense of religion. Science was one of religion's antagonists; critique is another. With both out of the picture, religion escapes scrutiny. Belief, unscrutinized belief, is of course where the collapse of critical distance leads, at least in our day and age; there are other thinkers, like Talal Asad, whose wholesale rejection of the Enlightenment makes this clearer. Like Asad's use of the vocabulary of Foucault, Latour's high-tech range of allusion obscures the will to obscurantism.

The best-known form of modesty Latour espouses is actor-network theory, which gets some twenty-five or so mentions in Felski's index.[5] Latour's signature example for actor-network theory, and one that Felski repeats, is the modest speed bump. If this is what the sharing of agency with nonhuman objects looks like, there would seem to be no problem. Who could object to recognizing the trivial but real agency of a speed bump? Why then do I remain (unrepentantly) suspicious? Because the speed bump is clearly being offered as a paradigm or allegory of social causation in general. It is the allegory of a social world where all the infractions are minor—where some people may want to drive too fast, but there are no malevolent intentions, there is no collective coercion, there is no systemic injustice.

Consider another example. In his seminal 1996 essay "On Interobjectivity," Latour discusses at length the physical layout of a post office: "When I am at the counter buying my postage stamps and talking into the speaking grill, I don't have my family, colleagues, or bosses breathing down my neck. And thank heavens, the server doesn't tell me stories about his mother-in-law, or his darlings' teeth" (233). He is spared these minor irritations by the framing of the interaction by the physical environment—the counter,

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the grill, the partitions—which has been there so long as to have become second nature:

> As a tool, the speaking grill . . . would serve only to prevent customers from attacking the staff, and its function goes no further; it does not directly influence the interaction, only facilitates or hinders it. As an infrastructure, the speaking grill is directly connected to walls, partitions, and computers so as to compose a material world that, it is said, completely shapes the remainder of the relationship just as a waffle iron molds a waffle. (235)

To conclude from this little parable of infrastructure as social causation only that agency is shared out more democratically between society and objects would be to miss its force as a would-be paradigm. Latour can imagine a day when customers might want to assault the post office staff (perhaps in a fit of pique over their slowness), but his example leaves no space for anything more momentous than pique—say, poverty, racial discrimination, or systemic oppression of any kind. Power for Latour is as gentle and neutral as traffic signals—which are another of his favored examples (240).

As has often been noted, the currently fashionable term *network*, Latour's preferred metaphor for causal interconnectedness, has one enormous problem: it makes all causes seem equal, thereby erasing the differentials of power that determine in any given case who or what is in fact the major cause and who or what suffers the most significant effects (see Conrad; Kirsch and Mitchell). Felski seems not only unfazed by this suppression of hierarchies of power but eager to expand it. She writes: "Anyone who attends academic talks has learned to expect the inevitable question, 'But what about power?' Perhaps it is time to start asking different questions: 'But what about love?'" (17).

Power has sometimes been used, it is true, in vague and intellectually sloppy ways. But when the overcritical critics of whom Felski so lengthily disapproves talk about power, they are most often trying, successfully or not, to talk about injustice. If you think of power as shorthand for injustice, you will perhaps hesitate before calling for the term to be decommissioned. The word *injustice* does not appear in the index of Felski's book. Would she maintain that it is an inappropriate or a played-out topic? A flower can be beautiful. The photograph of the corpse of a Syrian child on a Turkish beach, beautiful or not, will also have to be discussed in terms of injustice. Is it clear to *PMLA*'s readers that the task of literature, and therefore of critics of literature, is to talk about flowers rather than drowned Syrian children or to see such photographs as if they were flowers? I am curious to know whether Felski would be brave enough to make the case. I am also curious to know why society should pay for us to make this substitution.

And love? We all feel it, but we don't all feel we need to talk about it. Perhaps the test of the need to talk about it is whether doing so would be publicly edifying. But if you can be edifying about a literary text, do you also have to confess your love for it? Like love of country, the slogan love of literature seems mostly intended to suggest that some other party doesn't love literature enough. Personally, I'd prefer not to see the bumper sticker or the flag in the yard unless the lover is prepared to say what difference her or his love makes in a world where not all objects deserve love equally and where love also generates bombing, among other forms of injustice. Suppose, like some political figures today, I read Ayn Rand in childhood and just kept loving her?

Felski quotes Latour to the effect that true emancipation "does not mean 'freed from bonds,' but *well*-attached" (189). No, no one lives in a state of complete detachment. But how do you tell the difference between being *well* attached and *not* so well attached, in fact even really *badly* attached? That's a question for critique.

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Notes

1. One example among many: Felski argues "that suspicion and storytelling are closely aligned" (7). Storytelling is indeed one of the more common ways in which we suspicious folks think of what we do. But telling stories about texts does not correspond at all to what Felski claims. When Fredric Jameson, say, performs an act of criticism by fitting a text into a new narrative (I choose Jameson because he is a preferred target of Felski and her allies), he is not surrendering to some overwhelming need to be perpetually suspicious. He is not acting like a detective (a metaphor Felski favors) whose goal is to "track down a guilty party" (7). On the contrary, he is refreshing the experience of the text in question, as often in a "positive" as in a "negative" direction. More often still, he reveals something that would not be accurately described by either of those adjectives. If anyone here is on a monomaniacal hunt for a guilty party, it is Felski herself.

2. On this point Bruno Latour is even more aggressively personifying and cynical. What is gained by the critic's scrutiny of "naïve believers" is never truth or wisdom but only the smug feeling that "[the critic] is always right!" ("Why" 237, 239). This is demonstrably untrue.

3. Here I am indebted to Ellen Rooney on *now*. The habit of questioning the authority concealed in claims to presentness is one of the more commonsensical legacies of Jacques Derrida.

4. I reread Latour's essay in order to reassure myself that in leading with this crude and blatant fallacy (the loaded question, or petitio principii), Latour was not attempting some sort of joke. If he was, it was too subtle for me. Another possibility is that the essay as a whole can be described as a rant, a label that would lower the logical bar. The discursive model, suggesting as it does that logic can and must give way in the face of high passion (affect), seems a useful one to get into play, especially since 8 November 2016. One hopes one can describe a text as a rant without being accused of ranting oneself.

5. Actor-network theory must be distinguished from object-oriented ontology, which shares the impulse to puncture human self-importance but follows that road much further—one might say, to the vanishing point. It is to Felski's credit that object-oriented ontology's mystical, self-abnegating adoration of the nonhuman gets only one mention in the index.

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