theories and methodologies

Response

RITA FELSKI

I WANT TO THANK WAI CHEE DIMOCK FOR INITIATING THIS FORUM AND MY AGILE INTERLOCUTORS FOR RESPONDING TO MY WORK. IN the final chapter of *The Limits of Critique*, I talk about reading as an act of cocreation and composition—a practice of thinking and feeling with, rather than against, a text. Such a vision of what it means to read is amply confirmed in these generous and generative essays.

Sarah Beckwith is almost preternaturally attuned to what I am trying to do in *The Limits of Critique*, to the extent of conveying my ideas better than I do myself. She glosses *postcritical*, for example, as meaning 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." Nailed on both counts. I appreciate her attentiveness to how I write: to mood and disposition as being fundamentally a matter of form as well as content. I am not sure whether the style of *The Limits of Critique* is my voice—it is a way of writing I adopted for a specific purpose that may or may not appear again—but it seemed crucial, in tackling a book about critique's limits, to aim for a tone that was playful rather than censorious—or at least playfully censorious.

Attunement is a word I've been thinking about lately. Why do we "get" a certain novel, for example, and remain unmoved by another, even if we acknowledge its merits? Sociology can account for the most obvious variations in taste but tells us little about why a specific work in a broader category may resonate more powerfully than others. Attunement points to those aspects of aesthetic response that often seem to evade or elude explanation. Similarly, as Beckwith implies, whether we are attuned to a style of intellectual thought is a matter not just of its ideas or its politics but also of its aesthetics. Stanley Cavell writes of reaching a point where disagreements about art cannot be resolved and intellectual justifications falter: "don't you see, don't you hear, don't you dig? . . . Because if you do not see *somethin*g, without explanation, there is nothing further to discuss" (93). So, too, Beckwith writes of *The Limits of Critique* and me as author: "the power of [the] book will rest on whether its character-

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contribution). To be sure, redefining literary interpretation as an act of making does not make it equivalent to "cultural hacking, digital zine creation, or serious game design"—nor should it—but it does allow us to think of these practices as partially related rather than antithetical and also to promote, as Jagoda proposes, closer ties between literary theory and literary practice, reading and writing. In reference to a language of tinkering, playing, hacking, and experimenting, Jagoda notes that what "these metaphors have in common is that they do not rely on depth and distance; they instead foreground experiences that blur an otherwise sharp separation between critic and text. Making introduces the possibility, if never the promise, of changing the maker not only at an intellectual level, but also at an affective, material, and communal level." This sounds very similar to my account of reading in the final chapter of *Limits of Critique*.

In this context, it's worth pointing out that *postcritical* can hardly be taken to mean that we are no longer influenced by the ideas of Marx or Foucault. Any such attempt at intellectual purification and mental cleansing is not only absurd but unachievable—at least for anyone, including myself, whose intellectual sensibility was formed through an exposure to critical theory.

Rather, the issue at hand is one of striving for a different relation to the works one is reading. And here the question of stance—a question that also interests Jagoda—turns out to be key: not peripheral or ornamental but fundamental. If one is no longer "digging down" to expose hidden meanings invisible to all others, if one is no longer "standing back" by denaturalizing things that everyone else is held to take for granted, then one has moved away from the thought styles described in *The Limits of Critique*. As I point out more than once, I am not arguing against disagreement or dissent; the focus of my book is on the asymmetry that defines a certain critical posture. Here I am benefiting from Adriana Cavarero's feminist analysis of the gendered aspects of this posture. The tendency to reduce every relationship to power, she remarks, inhibits all other modes of relation, including one of inclination (121–32).

As a medievalist and scholar of hermeneutics, James Simpson offers yet another valuable perspective: that students need to be trained in critical decryption but also in much more, that a hermeneutic of suspicion is just one aspect of a much richer hermeneutic tradition, that masked indirection can serve many different ends, and that endless distrust can lead to ignorance rather than insight. I'd like to take up his typology of stranger, friend, lover as conveying differing degrees of interpretative intimacy. Simpson observes that the affect of each relation "is, respectively, cold, friendly, and enthusiastic." And yet this gloss is complicated by the fact that strangeness is a term not just of approbation (distancing oneself from history as a document of barbarism) but also of approval (the centrality of estrangement to twentieth-century aesthetics). In the latter case, the coolness of an alienating literature becomes the object of much lover-like enthusiasm. I also do not agree that the scholarly movements produced by identity politics treat texts only as akin to lovers; feminist criticism, to take the field I know best, has ranged across the full affective and relational spectrum.

Simpson is drawn to the metaphor of texts as friends, as offering the ideal combination of intimacy and distance. "Our friends disagree with us; they sometimes infuriate us; we struggle with them; they can fail us; we can fail them; yet . . . [w]e don't divorce our friends; they can be of any age; one more does not mean one less." I've been thinking a lot about friendship since reading Alexander Nehamas's recent book on the topic, and much of what Simpson says seems right. And yet, as I've mentioned elsewhere (*Uses* 107), the language of books as friends doesn't fully resonate with me—perhaps be-

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cause I'm often drawn to narrators who are demented, deranged, sadistic, solipsistic, or perverse. It is difficult, for example, to envision a work by Thomas Bernhard as a friend. Moreover, such a language can have a clubby, in-group tone; people often choose friends with similar social backgrounds, and friendship circles can sometimes exclude others in careless or cruel ways. I am very grateful to Simpson for prompting me to reflect on what other metaphors—beyond those of personification—might help to capture the quality of our aesthetic attachments.

I agree with Diana Fuss that one can find postcritical moments in the writings of Althusser and Freud (not to mention Adorno and Foucault). As I think she recognizes, *The Limits of Critique* is not about hauling the intellectual giants of modern thought before a firing squad (I would hardly be so foolish or so arrogant). Its focus is more circumscribed: on the dominance of a certain thought style and practices of reading in literary studies in recent decades. And here her own examples are revelatory. Over the last thirty-five years, I've read hundreds of Althusserian exercises in literary and film criticism, not one of which has taken their bearings from the friendship scenes she mentions. (The police officer anecdote, however, is a staple of every primer and introduction to theory.) My beef, in short, is not with Althusser or Foucault, but with "Althusser" and "Foucault"—the selective citation of names to authorize a predictable practice of reading.

Fuss also points out that the political mood has darkened dramatically in recent months. My own mood, however, was hardly irenic while I was writing *The Limits of Critique*. The positive aspects of Obama's presidency notwithstanding, the levels of economic inequality and immiseration in the United States remained staggering—and seemed especially striking, perhaps, to those of us from elsewhere. Yet this does not let literary and cultural critics off the hook in requiring them to reckon with the mediations, refractions, and translations between art and other spheres. In the age of Trump, meanwhile, do we double down on critiques of novels, poems, films, treating them as reflections, indexes, or symptoms of larger structures? Do we focus on their capacity to destabilize and disrupt—as if their agency were parsed only in the negative? Or might we also consider other possibilities? My modest proposal is that the value of art does not lie only in its capacity to critique. As Beckwith—and Jeanette Winterson, quoted in Beckwith's contribution—reminds us, readers often turn to fiction for consolation, hope, wonder, safekeeping, recognition, refuge, or rescue, especially in difficult times. If literary and cultural studies cannot engage such fundamental motives for reading, it is likely to doom itself to irrelevance.

Bruce Robbins comes out of his corner with all guns firing, but many of his targets seem to be figments of his imagination. Let me first note a few places where I recognize the picture he is drawing. He argues that the history of literary studies is tied up with a certain idea of culture: namely, the wholeness of culture as affording a critical perspective on an alienated society. I've discussed this idea elsewhere (*Doing Time* 154–74) and am hardly the first person to indicate its problems (see, e.g., Mulhern). Conceiving of culture and society, or art and society, as mutually opposed blocs is, in my view, part of the problem, not the solution.[1] I also agree—how could I not?—that literary texts often engage in social criticism, as registered at various points in *The Limits of Critique* (e.g., the account of "literature as critique" on 16–17) and in every other book I've written. Robbins, however, is determined to present my case for the limits of critique as a call to do away with critique.

It is difficult to know how to respond to his scattershot remarks, which never engage my main arguments. He spends a lot of time talking about modesty, a term coined by

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Jeffrey Williams to describe recent critical trends but not one I use or have any interest in. (There is nothing modest about finding better justifications for why literature matters: a daunting array of aesthetic, ethical, and political issues are involved.) In heated rhetoric Robbins warns the readers of *PMLA* about the dangers of "flaunting our feelings" and "prostrating ourselves reverently and above all humbly before the ineffable greatness of our object"—things I explicitly argue against in the pages of *The Limits of Critique*.[2] His implication that I have no interest in injustice is offensive; a long history of feminist scholarship and engagement with Habermas, class hierarchies, political theories of recognition, and cultural studies is all dismissed with a wave of his hand. (Invoking images of drowned Syrian children to prop up his rhetoric, meanwhile, is more than offensive.) Power is also not "shorthand" for injustice; they are related but different words. Injustice, for example, includes and implies an ideal of justice. And as many political theorists have argued, the drift toward an ever more skeptical mind-set has seriously hindered attempts to articulate what such an ideal might look like. One of the claims of *The Limits of Critique* is that we lack persuasive vocabularies of value; in this essay, at least, Robbins would seem to confirm the validity of my claim.[3]

Having some affinity with *The Limits of Critique* does not require any interest in actor-network theory, but I cannot let Robbins's account go unremarked. Latour does take aim at a self-congratulatory narrative of modernity; he does not, however, engage in a "critique of science." Rather, he painstakingly assembles accounts of exactly how and why science *works*. The speed bump is not "the signature example" for actor-network theory but one of numerous examples used to illustrate how objects can have effects without having intentions. Neither a speed bump nor anything else is offered as an "allegory of social causation in general," because such language makes no sense in actor-network theory. Latour devotes hundreds of pages to questioning the reflex use by critical theorists of words such as *social* and *causation*—not to deny that inequities exist but to argue that such words presume what needs to be accounted for: how certain associations of actors come to acquire exceptional stability, durability, and influence while others do not (*Reassembling*). Addressing such questions calls for investigations and description rather than perorations from the theorist's armchair. And anyone inclined to take seriously Robbins's claim that power is portrayed as gentle and neutral should read Graham Harman's recent book on the Hobbesian aspects of Latour's thought. There are certainly discussions to be had about the value and limits of actor-network theory for politics, some initiated by Latour himself (*Inquiry*), others by key interlocutors and critics of Latour such as Donna Haraway. Such discussions, however, need to be based on a surer grasp of its basic arguments and premises.

Heather Love conveys the key arguments of *The Limits of Critique* with a remarkable precision, clarity, and succinctness. The aim of the book, as she writes, is not to do away with critique but to show why its sense of exceptionalism is misplaced; there is nothing intrinsically radical or rigorous about being a suspicious reader: "Critique, instead of being a prerogative of elites, is deeply integrated into the infrastructure and techniques of modern life. Techniques of record keeping, forensics, and interrogation common in the law, state agencies, police work, and many other sectors of bureaucratic society all rely on the cultivation of suspicion. Critique can be used for both insurgent and repressive ends; tied to any number of 'humdrum and routinized' practices, it is anything but heroic. It is also here to stay." That critique is ordinary and deeply entangled in the world means that it cannot claim special status (and neither can any other approach). Instead, the onus is on us to weigh the merits of different

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ways of thinking and reading at specific historical and cultural conjunctures. My claim is that the dominance of a certain version of critique in literary studies over recent years has exacted certain costs. A decade from now, of course, things may look quite different.

This way of thinking—the insistence that no method, no framework, no position comes with guarantees—stems, as Love recognizes, from cultural studies. I am grateful to her for drawing out the ways in which my arguments are in dialogue with the tradition of British cultural studies as well as feminism, especially in terms of a shared commitment to the everyday and the ordinary.[4] And my dissatisfaction with both critique and aestheticism does indeed have much to do with their shared disdain for the judgments, experiences, and feelings of so-called ordinary (i.e., less educated) readers. This same dissatisfaction drives my interest in more expansive rationales for why art matters as well as in forms of political criticism that do not, as Love says, second-guess other people's motives or treat them as dopes, pawns, or puppets.

Stephen Best challenges me in the best possible way, through his meticulous account of my work and his reflections on the temporality of reading. As he notes, *The Limits of Critique* centers on a redescription of critique and has less to say about postcritical approaches. This focus is largely a function of the task I set myself in the book; I expand on the question of postcritical reading in *Uses of Literature* and in my current work on aesthetic attachments. And yet I do not strive for a "clear map" or a "method" and do not think my arguments are well described as "literary theory," though they do involve theoretical reflections on literature. I certainly agree with Best that critique has made it difficult for literary scholars to "account for their objects and their relation to them." My commitment to both aspects of this phrase—not just objects but also relations—inclines me to the view that literary criticism cannot proceed without help from phenomenology and sociology and that the messiness of aesthetic experience eludes a single literary-theoretical method.[5]

Best's reflections on first and second reading have triggered much productive thought. I assume these terms are meant as ideal types rather than empirical descriptions: a suspicious reading may come at the start (the immersive stage being absent or only weakly present). Best points out that in looking back—from a position after critique to a position that precedes it—we cannot entirely forego suspicion (what has been learned cannot be unlearned); this, presumably, is the salient distinction between the postcritical and the noncritical. (Another of Ricoeur's key phrases, "second naïveté," comes to mind.) Best's account of Ricoeur's thought and the entanglement of skepticism and faith is astute, and his reflections on the recursive temporality of reading are exceptionally clarifying. I very much hope his example will prompt more engagement with Ricoeur and hermeneutics in literary studies.

Let me stress, finally, that *The Limits of Critique* is not an intellectual or political history or an attempt to describe the varied uses of critique over the centuries (though it briefly surveys the prehistories of contemporary suspicion [40–50]). Rather, it is a book about rhetoric, mood, and method in an influential strand of interpretation in literary studies. I do not, for example, tackle related debates in fields such as sociology or political theory, which are having their own postcritical moments. (Robbins's reference to "Felski and her friends" has an appealing ring, suggesting a small and easily contained cabal; in fact, discussions of critique's limits are multiplying across the intellectual and political spectrum. A major conference on challenges to critique, with Latour and Luc Boltanski, is taking place at the University of Frankfurt as I write these words.) And anyone who claims I am making an argument against political dissent has read nothing of the book but its title. Certainly, the

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extent to which its arguments can be generalized is open to debate; as Terry Eagleton points out in his (favorable) review, many of my examples are inflected by the specific—and in some respects idiosyncratic—features of academic culture in the United States. When invited to discuss the book elsewhere, I stress that my arguments may have only a limited purchase in other national contexts.

After describing some of the uses of literature in an earlier book, I felt impelled to turn to the limits of critique, to articulate my reservations about a style of thinking that has shaped much of my own intellectual life. Yet it was not easy to discern how much of this malaise was personal or even generational. Perhaps my sense of intellectual fatigue was largely due to having spent almost four decades in the trenches of literary and critical theory? So I've been very heartened by the responses from graduate students and assistant professors, who count among *The Limits of Critique*'s most enthusiastic readers. Some of these scholars are already doing what I gesture toward in the book's final pages: trying out different vocabularies and experimenting with other ways of reading and writing. I look forward to learning from their example.

Notes

1. See my discussion of this question in "Comparison and Translation" 761–62.

2. For example, I address the concern that a turn to affect will result in anti-intellectualism and "subjective effusion" (178–79) and indicate my strong disagreement with aestheticist views of art (28–29 and ch. 5).

3. Mocking my reference to love, Robbins seems oblivious to its rich spectrum of meanings—in the history of philosophy and politics as well as of art. And he invokes yet another imaginary opponent: who on earth has ever argued that "all objects deserve love equally"?

I specify "in this essay" because I have learned much from Robbins's work. His accounts of professionalization and qualified defense of institutions; his engagement with the importance of the welfare state: these strike me as much-needed arguments that also illustrate (in my view, though presumably not in his) the limits of critique.

4. Readers interested in this theme will learn much from Toril Moi's new book, *Revolution of the Ordinary*. I accept Love's criticism that the account of queer studies in *The Limits of Critique* is too thin, given its extensive history of intertwining critique and attachment, irony and sentimentality. Tyler Bradway's *Queer Experimental Literature* is a noteworthy addition to this history and to broader debates about the affective politics of reading.

5. A word on close reading. Best interprets a sentence from *The Limits of Critique* in a way that is different from what I'd intended. In writing that the book's method is not the "close reading of a few canonical works," I did not mean canonical works of literature; I meant canonical works of critique. (The book aims to describe the overall intellectual climate of literary studies rather than focus on a few exemplary theorists.) Nonetheless, Best rightly notes a strong ambivalence in my work toward close reading, at least as it is currently practiced. I plan to address this ambivalence in a later essay, but some of my reservations are noted in "Modernist Studies."

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