

Forum

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Reading Felski: Playfulness, Politics, Pedagogy

TO THE EDITOR:

Playfulness, politics, and pedagogy: these characterize the three comments I'd like to make about the responses to Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* that appeared in a recent *Theories and Methodologies* feature ("On Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*" [vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 331–91]). First, the *playfulness* of Felski's challenge to the hegemony of critique seemed to me underacknowledged. Her unbarbed wit and good-humored tone contribute to her broader argument that many kinds of writerly energies or critical "moods" exceed the bounds of critique. Downplaying this dimension makes it easier for some to decide that Felski is fundamentally against critique.

Sarah Beckwith provides a happy exception when she acknowledges "Felski's voice—her sense of fun, her own delight and relish" ("Reading for Our Lives" 333). Beckwith also earns points for suggesting that critique ascribes to its imagined other "a gormless credulity" for wishing to speak of anything apart from power (332). (Clearly POTUS does not have *all* the best words.) Stephen Best's call for finer-grained investigations of "how aesthetic pleasure works" is also in tune with Felski's concerns ("*La Foi Postcritique*, on Second Thought" 342), and Heather Love's embrace of everyday life as a counter to "immaculate" criticism welcomes into criticism an affective complexity that critique too often does not acknowledge ("Critique Is Ordinary" 367). Also regrounding criticism in everyday life is James Simpson's typology of stances toward the text: "[s]tranger, friend, and lover" ("Interrogation Over" 380). I wondered about a possible fourth, the familial: early unreflective attachment that years later turns to violence over Thanksgiving dinner. That describes my relation to *Forrest Gump*. And my family.

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PMLA 133.1 (2018), published by the Modern Language Association of America

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Here's Felski in her characteristically maculate style: "Critique first sniffs out the guilt of others, only to engage, finally, in an anguished flurry of breast-beating and self-incrimination, a relentless rooting out of concealed motives and impure thoughts. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa—except that, in contrast to Christian theology, there is no hope of final salvation!" (*The Limits of Critique*; U of Chicago P, 2015 [114]). One might object that the collectivizing of guilt is valuable as political strategy—witness Black Lives Matter. But that truth doesn't mean that critique always produces the most useful accounts of literature. Felski notes that when subscribing to critique's picture of social meaning as determined exclusively by power, critics must scramble to find things that resist this principle in order to have something to value: "The result is a zigzagging between categories of inside and outside, center and margins, transgression and containment, as critique tries, like a frantically sprinting cartoon rabbit, to outrun the snapping jaws of its own recuperation" (189). The question Felski poses, in part at the level of style, is whether it is possible to modify the idea of literature as ideological ruse without reverting to aestheticism or mere appreciation. Her answer is that if we value modes of criticism sensitive to the pleasures of reading and to the motives of ordinary readers, we should try. Granted, attention to a broader readership need not be everyone's concern. By the same token, we don't all have to be doing critique, or doing it the same way.

Second, the identification of critique as the default genre of most literary criticism does not equate to the desire to suppress the oppositional politics of critique. A good deal of the dismissive hostility toward Felski's book (more evident in social media than in most of the *PMLA* responses) and, more generally, toward affect theory as an accommodationist substitute for speaking truth to power, probably derives from wounded narcissism. Many of us would like to believe that our critiques of contemporary structures of power, particularly in the age of Trump, can gain traction beyond the university.

The sad fact is that few do, and it is not pleasant to be reminded of the possibility that our efforts to intervene in society through literary criticism may amount to little more than well-intentioned yet routinized gestures. Looking for options beyond critique is not the same as choosing between politics and quietism.

Given that genres don't carry intrinsic politics, new genres of critical approach can target dominant power in ways consonant with the aims of critique. Sadiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* use very different means toward similar ends. Diana Fuss, in her response to *The Limits of Critique*, is thus right that other options already exist ("But What about Love?"), but insofar as the alterity of alt-criticism is produced by the way critique's prestige crowds out other possible worlds, such examples seem rather to confirm Felski's point. In contrast, Patrick Jagoda's discussion of critical making in the digital humanities as a blurring of distinctions between theory and practice remains true to the terms of Felski's argument by suggesting a way forward that preserves the force of critique without remaining bound within its generic limitations ("Critique and Critical Making"). It also likely helps on the job market.

Finally, that critique operates as the default mode of criticism registers distinctly in the pressure graduate students feel to adopt it. (Ask them.) What, then, does *The Limits of Critique* imply for pedagogy? Licensing students in the undergraduate classroom to express their visceral dissatisfaction with Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times* can lead to a productive discussion of characterization per se or to an examination of Dickens's hostility toward labor unions. Graduate students, however, probably need to master the moves of critique from the start: to deform the master's tools you first have to know how to wield them. The challenge is how to teach critique and its limits at the same time. But until schools are ready to hire PhDs who in effect write their second book first, the problem of expanding the critical toolbox for our graduate students is fraught.

Actor-network theory, or ANT, is Felski's "other than critique" ("OTC," or the sound of choking on current critical norms), but nowhere does she say it should be everyone's. And if Bruno Latour's vermicular puns make you want to reach for a can of Raid, that should come as a welcome relief. *The Limits of Critique* is an invitation to experiment with new ways to

connect with a broader audience, but would it be wise now for graduate students in literature to make the attempt? I'm inclined to say let a hundred OTCs blossom, but maybe we need to reconfigure the garden before inviting graduate students into a space whose future is dubious.

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