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Not Just Anybody

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The Limits of Critique by [Rita Felski](#)

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The title of this book has an odd ring to it, since in Kantian philosophy the notion of critique is closely bound up with the setting of limits, distinguishing what a form of inquiry may legitimately address from what is off-bounds to it. Rita Felski's bold, stylish new study, however, is about critique in the less specialised sense of critical analysis. It is not a work about the limits of setting limits but a critical view of the idea of critique, or at least of a certain widely accepted version of it. Felski finds this version churlish and mean-spirited, and the reader is likely to end up feeling that she has a point.

The critical approach she has in mind is a form of what Paul Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of suspicion. On this view, the task of critique is to dig out hidden meanings and concealed contradictions in a text, scanning it for those symptomatic points at which it falters, deadlocks, disrupts its own logic or threatens to come apart at the seams. The critical act is one of unmasking and demystification, confronting the work like a seasoned cop browbeating a shifty suspect. Artefacts are not to be trusted but deciphered. Their habit is to disguise truth rather than disclose it. The aim of critique, as the philosopher Pierre Macherey remarked, is to know the work as it cannot know itself. Like most of us, works of literature are rather more spiritually dishevelled than they care to appear, and the task of critique is to lay bare their blindspots and ambiguities. In demonstrating how their projects come unstuck, or how they end up subverting their own claims, critique shows up their unity (a sacred critical doctrine from Aristotle to Northrop Frye) as something of a sham. It also has an interest in demonstrating how a poem or novel, whatever it may think it's up to, is unwittingly complicit with political power.

What, however, if critique itself were plagued by contradictions? For one thing, its epistemology seems to be at odds with its politics. In assuming a position of superior knowledge to the work of art, it sits uneasily with the egalitarian sensibility of most of its practitioners. Hierarchies may be undone in the artwork itself, but they remain firmly in place in the relation between artwork and critic. For another thing, there is a smack of the Enlightenment about this approach, which is not a view of the world most of its adherents greet with acclaim. It is the task of the Aufklärer to bring truth to the befuddled, self-deluded masses, whose surrogate in the case of critique is the self-blinded literary text. In contemporary critique, however, good old-fashioned Enlightenment terms like truth, fact and

objectivity are generally draped in self-righteous scare quotes, to indicate that the author is far too sophisticated to accept unreservedly that Dorking is in Surrey or that men really do oppress women. By what standard, then, is the literary work self-deceived? And why do postmodern writers make it so exasperatingly difficult to say that Tony Blair really did hoodwink the British public over Iraq?

There is a form of literary critique that takes this problem on board, though Felski's book does not address this head-on. For disciples of the late Yale critic Paul de Man, there is a sense in which the work of literature has always pre-empted or second-guessed the demystificatory work of the critic. The text turns out to be smarter than its commentators, whose own insights depend on a certain ineradicable blindness. The closest one can come to the truth is a knowledge of one's self-deception. In fact, there is a sense in which the work of art is actually an allegory of its own (mis)reading, as well as a source of resistance to any attempt to master it. To grasp this truth, however, requires the teaching of a Master, who in his refusal to make definitive truth claims is all the more insulated from criticism, and thus all the more authoritative.

In a vivid portrait of the practice of critique, Felski notes its sceptical, dispassionate, adversarial, mildly paranoid qualities, its air of embarrassment with the open and affective, its preference for irony over passionate engagement. It is, in short, a tough-minded, rather macho affair, and Felski's rebuking of it is inspired by her feminist politics, though she makes no bones about the fact that she herself is a recovering *Kritiker*. (I have been known to indulge in the practice myself.) What unites such critics is 'a spirit of ferocious and blistering detachment – a desire to puncture illusions, topple idols and destroy divinities'. This desire depends on a surface-and-depth model of the work of art which the later Wittgenstein, with his airy insistence that nothing is concealed and that everything lies open to view, would have found ominously metaphysical. The language of critique is one of 'symptoms, repressions, anxieties, disavowals, rifts, cracks and fissures', behind which it is not hard to detect the influence of psychoanalysis. Or, indeed, of geology, as literary critics scrutinise the text for faultlines and fractures that betray the presence of powerful subterranean forces.

Most critics of this persuasion regard themselves as being in some sense materialists, so it is curious that in Platonic spirit they should refuse the material presence of the artefact in their hunt for its underlying essence. They are heedless of Lenin's exhortation to respect what he called 'the reality of appearances'. It is also paradoxical that when confronted with a work of which it politically approves, critique is bound to be struck silent. It cannot celebrate it, since this is not its habit; but neither can it probe it for repressions and distortions, since it doesn't have any worth mentioning. One is reminded of Freud's observation that schizophrenics could not be subject to psychoanalysis since their unconscious processes were all on the surface in any case.

Most critical writing of this kind stems these days from the United States, and in some ways it fits well enough with old-fashioned American Puritanism. The high moral or political tone, the air of spiritual superiority, the wariness of the aesthetic, the suspicion of outward appearances as deceitful, the search for an inner truth that's hard to come by, the anxious scanning for symptoms of impurity, which is also to be found in the cult of political

correctness: none of this of course is peculiarly American, but it is probably no accident that it has flourished so prodigally there. Frank Kermode once wrote that reading a certain poem by Wallace Stevens made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end, a statement it would be as hard to imagine issuing from the lips of a young American professor in pursuit of tenure as it would be unthinkable in the writing of Georg Lukács. It is the kind of thing anybody might say, and academics are not paid for being just anybody.

There are also, however, political and institutional reasons for the rise of critique, which Felski seemingly regards as beyond her brief. It has always been an embarrassment to literary scholars that reading, along with talking about what you read, is something that a lot of non-scholarly people do as well. This is not the case with brain surgeons or analytic philosophers, whose professional status is untroubled by the awareness that ordinary men and women may be practising such pursuits in their front parlours. The exponents of academic criticism, however, have traditionally needed to distinguish themselves from those who read Catherine Cookson on the train, even if the emergence of cultural studies means that the two spheres now increasingly interlock. Literary scholarship used to be one way of drawing the line, as was the critic's claim to be endowed with a more than usually refined sensibility. Not reading for enjoyment can also buttress one's professional credentials, though the practice of critique may itself be gratifying enough to compensate for this loss of pleasure. The difference between the academic critic and the common reader in this respect is not that the former approaches the work gingerly where the latter does not. Common readers can be just as critical as professors. The difference is that unlike professors they tend not to keep books they feel deeply negative about on their shelves in order to reread them from time to time. In fact, the more a work invites critique, the more highly esteemed it may be. Reading poems and novels has always been too congenial an affair to count as a proper academic discipline; ways had to be found of making it less agreeable, or at least a good deal more technical and laborious. The situation is complicated by the fact that there is a common reader in every professional critic, just as there is a querulous infant in both of them.

Literary studies in the United States are more highly professionalised than in most other places, which is one reason American critics tend to evolve specialist idioms, less charitably known as jargon. On this view, to be lucid is to make one's peace with the prevailing powers. It is to speak a commodified language, even though in Marx's opinion there are few more enigmatic phenomena than the commodity form. The clear is confused with the plain. It is perhaps significant in this respect that the very readable Felski, though a professor at the University of Virginia, comes originally from the English Midlands. There is also a yawning gulf in the States between the campus and everyday culture, with the result that academics are more likely to be conscious of their deviant, minority status.

What the practice of critique then does is to project that sociological condition into an intellectual one. What is precious in a literary text is what is marginal, subversive, aberrant or non-normative. Margins and minorities, the anomalous and transgressive, are lauded by postmodern dogma as goods in themselves, a judgment that strangely overlooks the existence of serial killers and neo-Nazis, along with the fact that there are plenty of norms and conventions which are life-yielding as well as death-dealing. It is what Felski calls an 'anti-

normative normativity', which constitutes as much an embattled orthodoxy in some US political circles as believing that Obama is a Muslim does in others.

In its disdain for the common life – for what is familiar, natural and habitual – critique is the true inheritor of high modernism. For both currents, everyday existence can be valid only if it is estranged, disrupted, dismantled, fragmented or penetrated to some deeper, more elusive level of being. The Russian Formalists plucked a whole aesthetic from this prejudice; the clarion call of the phenomenologists is to suspend the so-called natural attitude. If literary modernism sends language out on a spree, it is not least because it is deeply distrustful of the stale, automated world it reflects in its normal condition. From Kierkegaard to Heidegger, Rilke to T.S. Eliot, the life of the masses is dismissed as vacuous and degenerate. Value is to be found only in some privileged moment or rare epiphany, some fleeting revelation or fitful intimation. Art, or theory, is the enemy of the natural and familiar. Felski quotes Judith Butler as denigrating the familiar in contrast to the other or unknown, a standard postmodern move; but one continues to hope in one's churlish, outmoded way that the species will remain unfamiliar with global nuclear war, while recalling that the familiar for some people involves teaching disabled children and organising the low-paid.

As Felski is aware, no word in the postmodern lexicon is placed in scare quotes more compulsively than 'natural'. A suspicion of the natural as no more than an ideological ploy goes hand in hand with a remoteness from the common life. Most men and women think it natural to grieve over the death of a loved one, feel a frisson of alarm when embraced by a grizzly bear or a surge of relief at narrowly avoiding an atrocious injury. In any case, not all ideology is 'naturalising'. Nature has served as a revolutionary concept in its day, while from Edmund Burke to Michael Oakeshott the notion of culture has been for the most part a conservative one. When the political regimes of 18th-century Europe heard the word nature, they reached for their cultural privileges. The notion that everything is cultural, including the Andes and the aorta, is among other things a piece of self-flattery on the part of some in the humanities. It is just as much a form of reductionism or foundationalism as the idea that everything is made out of Geist or the will-to-power.

The alternative to this downgrading of everyday life is not to romanticise it, just as the alternative to critique is not to gush. There is a particular problem here for the political left. On the one hand, leftists tend to place their faith in certain common decencies and generous impulses. If these were lacking in humanity, it would scarcely be worth the effort of seeking to transform its condition. On the other hand, the left is acutely conscious of just what a catastrophe human history has largely been – a 'sewer', as Jacques Lacan curtly described it. For the most part, the human narrative to date has been one of brutality and injustice, wretchedness and sweated labour. It remains so for many millions in our own time. If it did not, there would be no need to transform the situation as thoroughly as radicals aspire to do.

There is no simple contradiction here. If history has been deafened by the din of hacking and gouging, it is partly because violence and scarcity mean that we have not been able to observe men and women at their finest. The faith of the left is that in less burdensome conditions, their creative powers and capacities might have freer rein. It is hard, however, to hold a trust in humanity in tension with a necessary vigilance to the horrors it has manufactured. The left

must accordingly tread a narrow line between cynicism and credulity. There are thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson who can be too positive about ordinary human capabilities, and others like Michel Foucault, Alain Badiou and the later Frankfurt School who are a good deal too sceptical of them.

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This is a bold book, not least because Felski must know that it risks giving comfort to the adversaries of theory as such. Yet it is judicious as well as brave. It is not out to reject critique as such (though it overstates its case from time to time), but to refuse to identify it with literary criticism as a whole. It is simply one mode of such inquiry, and should not be allowed to sweep aside those more affective, affirmative, empathetic approaches to literature by which we are 'surprised, stirred, reoriented, replenished'. The ideal critical act in Felski's view is neither to denounce the text as a tool of oppression nor to celebrate it as a form of transcendence before which all censure is struck dumb. One can be post-critique without being post-critical. It is not, to be sure, the most original case. One of the strengths of pre-theoretical critics like F.R. Leavis or John Bayley is that, as well as occasionally rapping a literary work on the knuckles, they can also convey what is moving or enriching about it without falling back into 18th-century chit-chat about 'beauties'.

Even so, the critics of critique need to remind themselves that there is a lot of self-deception about. Felski teaches in a country that elected an authoritarian buffoon to the White House. There are indeed concealed truths, dissembled powers and illusory appearances. In being chary of the seductions of depth, we should not fall for the phenomenalism according to which things are always simply as they appear. As Marx once wrote, all the most important processes in class-society are carried on 'behind the backs' of the agents involved. He looked forward to a social order that would be more transparent to itself. Brecht had the same opacity in mind when he remarked that putting a factory on stage would tell you nothing about the nature of capitalism. Some of the powers that govern us are as invisible as the forces that rule the cosmos.

One the most scandalous insights of late modernity – of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud in particular – is that a certain self-delusion is essential, even salutary, for human existence. Indeed, Nietzsche would seem to hold that all cognition is miscognition, though it is hard to know how we can know this. On this view, false consciousness is a chronic condition. If this is true, however, it serves as much as an argument against critique as one in its favour. For one thing, how are its practitioners to avoid delusion themselves long enough to expose its insidious presence in works of art; and, for another thing, what is the point of doing so if, like some ghastly stuff in a science-fiction movie, it knits together again the moment we have dispelled it?

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