



# The Limits of Critique

*Rita Felski*

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Why must critics unmask and demystify literary works? Why do they believe that language is always withholding some truth, that the critic's task is to reveal the unsaid or repressed? In this book, Rita Felski examines critique, the dominant form of interpretation in literary studies, and situates it as but one method among many, a method with strong allure—but also definite limits.

Felski argues that critique is a sensibility best captured by Paul Ricoeur's phrase "the hermeneutics of suspicion." She shows how this suspicion toward texts forecloses many potential readings while providing no guarantee of rigorous or radical thought. Instead, she suggests, literary scholars should try what she calls "postcritical reading": rather than looking behind a text for hidden causes and motives, literary scholars should place themselves in front of it and reflect on what it suggests and makes possible.

By bringing critique down to earth and exploring new modes of interpretation, *The Limits of Critique* offers a fresh approach to the relationship between artistic works and the social world.

## The Limits of Critique Details

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## From Reader Review The Limits of Critique for online ebook

### Nicole Schrag says

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in literary scholarship and pedagogy. Felski deftly explores the limits of critique (which she connects closely to Ricoeur's concept of the hermeneutics of suspicion) as a methodology and "critiquiness" (via Castiglia) as a mood of reading. In one chapter, she considers the spatial metaphors of "digging down and standing back" that mark classic projects of critique. In another of my favorite sections, she points to how critics tend to position themselves as detectives trying to discover the crime a text has committed. And she manages to explore the limits of these techniques without performing a critique herself.

In her conclusion, Felski introduces a few schools of "postcritical" reading that reinvigorate the ways we think about interpretation and the affective attachments we have to literary texts. She's especially a fan of actor-network-theory, but she also talks about some recent work coming out of the French academy (of all places) on affective hermeneutics that sounds really compelling.

This book, especially the last chapter and coda, also have really valuable ideas for how to teach students critical reading skills that incorporate our/their attachments to books and poems, as well as the modes of critical thought that tend to prevail in theory courses (Marxism, Postcolonial Theory, Psychoanalysis, etc.). \*The Limits of Critique\* offers a very readable and enjoyable overview of the history and state of the field. Five stars!

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### Nanette says

In critiquing—yes, I did read critically, especially as I waded deeper into Felski's pedantic exposé on suspicious critique. I found the text belabored—yet hopeful! (There's my empathy, sympathy, recognition and identification....) Obviously, Felski anticipated my "restive" mood at the beginning of Chapter 4, knowing I felt like "toss[ing] this book aside in a fit of exasperation" (117). It took her a long while to get to her point and, once there, it was rather unsatisfyingly platitudinal. However, I applaud her intent and cheer, "You go, Girl!" as she dedicates herself, "to the best of [her] ability...to try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of writing, to think in a more sustained and concentrated fashion about what other moods and methods might look like" and to change critique (192-3). I will be watching—and possibly following suit.!

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### Travis says

"The aim is no longer to diminish or subtract from the reality of the texts we study but to amplify their reality, as energetic coactors and vital partners in an equal encounter."

Felski ends her book there after a smart "redescription" of critique as a practice and an academic mode of suspicion. Sums up nicely and contributes to current conversations about reading practices in the Academy and offers new avenues for what she calls "postcritique." Indebted to Latour's Actor Network Theory, Felski's postcritical method begs us to be entangled with, receptive to, and pleased by the text as a capable

coactor. The book is a timely call for a redefinition of the relationship between academic reader to text.

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### **Neil says**

An intriguing, compact, and timely discussion of changing trends within literary studies, away from Marxist, feminist, new historicist, and psychoanalytic approaches that look at literary texts with suspicion, seeing them as problematically representative of larger systems of domination. Most exciting here are the last two chapters, in which Felski outlines other ways of reading and interpreting literature that avoid some of the pitfalls that she sees in critique. The book dovetails nicely with Felski's editorial work at *New Literary History*, and many of the footnotes (especially in the later chapters) direct readers to articles from thinkers and critics such as Bruno Latour and Marielle Mace who have published in *NLH*. In many ways, *NLH* provides a good backdrop for this book. The chapter on context, for instance, intrigued me and provoked me (I think I tend to identify as a new historicist), such that I will go back and read more of the articles from that issue of *NLH*. I'd like to read more about how the notion of context connects (and doesn't connect) with the hermeneutics of suspicion that Felski questions here.

This book is of interest to anyone with an investment in literary studies or who has taken upper-level English courses in college. With Felski's signature precision, it identifies an interesting shift in current thinking about literature and interpretation, and will be worthwhile to more than simply professors. If you're someone who is a fan of Eve Sedgwick's essay on paranoid reading and reparative reading, this book will also be of interest to you.

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### **Vika Kirchenbauer says**

I cannot recommend this book enough. For those who find inspiration in Eve Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' Felski's book formulates an engaging string of thoughts, thinking through some of Sedgwick's core ideas. Felski is very careful to not follow the most obviously scholarly method, which in this case would have been a critique of critique. Instead she questions critique's intrinsic claim to radicalness whilst laying out other moods of reading that do and can exist alongside critique.

Some of her thoughts on the role of critique in literature and academia also make possible different ways of reassessing arguments in leftist political discourse as well as alternative ways of meditating on art production and reception.

Her writing style is humble and humorous, clear and compassionate.

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### **Christina "6 word reviewer" Lake says**

Sigh. Sigh. Sigh.

Some of us have been saying this for years. Reading it made me as angry as the prodigal son's older brother!  
Trying to repent...

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## Mark Wollaeger says

### The Limits of Critique

by Rita Felski

Chicago and London: University Chicago Press, 2015. 228 pages

*Mark Wollaeger*

Holy shit, did I get a lot of pleasure out of Rita Felski's new book! Every time a turn of phrase or extended metaphor made me smile I put a smiley face in the margin. If I laughed aloud I sometimes circled the smiley face. A quick scan of my advance copy reveals twenty-three grinning little doofuses scrawled in the margins. That's more than one every ten pages. I think of them as doofuses (doofi?) because I fear they make me look a little dopey, perhaps mildly contemptible. That's because I've been around long enough to know that my affective responses to Felski's text are supposed to remain in the margins, not front and center, and certainly not worded in this way.

For the conventions of scholarly critique amount to a genre that presses me to summarize Felski's argument in elegantly clinical prose, locate it within existing scholarly conversations, and identify a shortcoming or two. Ideally, the identification of weaknesses, lacunae, or outright mistakes operates by showing – and this is where critique clicks into place within the subgenre of the book review – that Rita, through no fault of her own, doesn't know what she's talking about. The fault would lie not in her but in her ideological constellation, and my duty as critiquer would be to reaffirm a fundamental assumption of critique today: the critiquer has greater access to truth than does the critiqued, and it is his job to unmask what masquerades as truth within the discourse of the critiqued – ta da! – as history, which is to say, as ideology.

Note that this book is not called *Against Critique* or *Beyond Critique*. Felski delights in tracing the limits of critique not because she opposes it but because she believes as literary critics we should not be *limited* to critique. The mastertrope of *The Limits of Critique* is expansion. The introduction ends with the hope – she calls it a “wager” – that “we can expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods” (13). She presents these as simultaneous activities or commitments – new moods, new methods – though there seems to be a reciprocal causality at work: if we attend to a broader spectrum of our affective responses to texts, we may take up new methods; if we decide to take up new methods, we may rediscover the rich diversity of responses that drew most of us to literature in the first place. Later, perhaps drawing on her past work in modernism, she hopes that a diminution of critique's status may “turn out to be a liberation” (116).<sup>1</sup>

So what is the predominant critical mood today? Negative, cantankerous, and disgruntled. But Felski is not exhorting us to put on a happy face, turn that frown upside down, and regrunlde our critical mood.<sup>2</sup> Approvingly observing that “Academia has often been a haven for the disgruntled and disenchanted, for oddballs and misfits” (12), she acknowledges the power and value of critique. Felski reports that this book was motivated in part by some bemused responses to her previous book, *The Uses of Literature* (2008), in which she expressed her sense that critique seemed to be headed for a dead end and called for modes of reading and criticism more sensitive to the pleasures of reading and to the motives and needs of ordinary – that is, non- academic – readers. Arguing for a shift away from literature as ideological ruse without reverting (the horror, the horror) to aestheticism or mere appreciation, she hazarded four categories of aesthetic experience worthy of more sustained attention: recognition (not identification), knowledge, shock, and enchantment.<sup>3</sup> Some readers asked in response, “what's so wrong with critique?”

In this book she backs up to redescribe critique, the unexpanded motivating term of *The Uses of Literature*, in order to detail its status as the default genre of critical argumentation and to show why we need alternatives. Critique, as she presents it, is not only a mode of argument but also a style, tone, and ethos – a critical assembly that needn’t become criticism’s all in all. The first chapter asks “what happens if we think of critique as an affective stance that orients us in certain ways” rather than as a mode of intellectual rigor detached from affect and from its objects of inquiry. Critique itself, Felski argues, is a mode of attachment, not an affect-neutral tool, but it’s a mode of attachment that occupies a very narrow spectrum of possible affects. Although critique comes in many flavors, suspicion governs them all – one affect to rule the rest – and Felski turns to Paul Ricoeur’s concept of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to denaturalize its inevitability. Ricoeur came up with the phrase while thinking through the implications of his own work on three historic masters of critique, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, all of whom aimed to throw off the weight of the past and its ideological legacies by puncturing illusions, toppling idols, and destroying divinities. Their iconoclasm shares “a spirit of ferocious and blistering disenchantment” (32) that changed the world, but that shouldn’t make it the only language game in town. A hermeneutics of “restoration” as opposed to suspicion does not presuppose the empty poverty of language that makes everyone but the person wielding critique’s blade the stooge of ideology; it “luxuriates in the fullness of language” and assumes that “the words on the page do not disguise truth but disclose it” (32). In the hands of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche critique may have been a lever that pried apart dominant discourses, allowing new thoughts to flower from the cracks, but now, with so many critics having mastered the genre, critique’s attack on entrenched power has come to seem like an endlessly repeated trick of the trade, a set of moves that has itself become as hegemonic as what it once opposed.

The second chapter identifies these moves with a dominant set of critical tropes – “digging down and standing back” – and the third with a dominant narrative, the detective novel, in which the critic searches for clues she is able to recognize because she already knows what she’s looking for: the ubiquitous operations of power. As in a Raymond Chandler novel, a “mood of watchfulness permeates the critical theory seminar: a conviction that no text is innocent and every sentence has something to hide” (96). If the assumption that “guilt is always collective and social” is valuable as a political strategy – witness the Black Lives Matter movement – it doesn’t always produce the best, or most useful, or most engaging accounts of the literature we study. Felski finds many ways to describe the potential circularity of critique: suspicion generates the clues we need to diagnose the all-consuming guilt we posited from the beginning: “Critique 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” (114). Yes, that earned one of my smiley faces. Describing critique’s picture of social meaning as determined exclusively by power, Felski notes that in consequence 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). Circled smiley face. Here it is worth pointing out that Felski remains true to her other-than-critique commitment by refusing to put a human face on the rabbit: no where in this book does she single out a particular critic for his exemplary wrongness; everyone is treated generously.

The fourth chapter is playfully titled “Crrritique”: “the word flies off the tongue like a weapon,” far from the palatal pleasures of Humbert Humbert’s “Lo-lee-ta, “emitting a rapid guttural burst of machine-gun fire” (120). This chapter shifts focus from critique’s rhetorical and affective qualities to a discussion of its key tenets. But rather than rehash those here – the neoclassical clarity of Felski’s own account awaits you4 – it is perhaps better to leap ahead to the possible worlds critique crowds out. The chapter begins by observing “By now my more patient readers may be getting restive. (The rest will have long since tossed this book aside in

a fit of exasperation."); and the next chapter, the fifth, begins: ““So what are you proposing, then?’ The badgering voices can no longer be ignored” (150). Her instincts are right: as one of those already persuaded by her earlier pages to renounce to the seduction of suspicion, I was indeed a little impatient to get to the fifth chapter to gaze on the stars that would guide my new path. To anyone familiar with Felski’s recent journal articles, or with the provenance of the quotation that forms the title of the fifth chapter, ““Context Stinks!”,” it will come as no surprise that all along (not that she was hiding it) Felski has had her eye on one star in particular, Bruno Latour, and in particular the actor-network-theory, or ANT, he lays out in *Reassembling the Social*.<sup>5</sup>

Now if I were to give in entirely to the lure of critique, I might complain, “All this way just for an application of ANT to literary criticism?” But that would be unkind, ungenerous, and perhaps most important, unproductive. First, the path to chapter 5 is largely, as I’ve indicated, a great read. Second, figuring out how to make what has been called Latour’s sociology of mediation work with literary studies is not at all self-evident or easy, and Felski makes a good case for one way to do it.<sup>sup>6</sup> Third, a number of alternatives to critique have been advanced in recent years (critique-fatigue is widespread across disciplines), most prominently weak theory, object-oriented ontology, and surface reading, all of which show family resemblances with ANT. But given the currently hostile environment for literary study today – the challenges to its social value and consequently to its public funding – the kind of approach Felski limns seems to me the most useful

and promising supplement to critique currently making the rounds. Rhetorically, weak theory risks embracing the weakness imputed to literary study by those already critical of it inside and outside the University; surface reading, positioning itself against the kind of deep or symptomatic reading associated with critique, seems to me not to have produced many compelling examples of a viable counterpractice; and object-oriented ontology, however valuable its decentering of the human and consequent appreciation of the complex modes of existence of things, is not well-suited to making its claims resonate outside the academy in ordinary language. And frankly, bridging that gap is something we all should be worried about.

Now I could be wrong about all this, but here’s what I appreciate about Felski’s appropriation (no longer a bad word in a Latourian universe) of ANT: it provides a way of thinking about the particular kinds of agency exhibited by literary texts. We know that some texts we call literary tend to travel better than others across space and time, and actor-network-theory provides an alternative to believing either that ideology provides an exhaustive explanation for this fact or that some kind of intrinsic literary value exists outside history or particular practices of valuing. Felski’s Latourian mantra is “texts act not by themselves but with a motley assortment of coactors” (170), and she adopts Latour’s concept of non-human actors not to demystify the autonomous agency of the bourgeois subject or to invest things with the kind of omnipotent agency that critique assigns to ideology but in order to theorize a network of distributed agency in which everything acts on, mediates, everything else. As literary critics, our job, as opposed to the tasks of the sociologist or historian, is to trace the relevant networks that make particular texts (still) available to us as literature, and to ask how these texts have acted in relation to other actors, including their readers, publishers, collectors, censors, distributors, antagonists, fans, and so on. But rather than assert that all we should do is chart new itineraries within an ever-expanding network of material and causally reciprocal interconnections – a kind of updated romance quest for deferred meaning along endless chains of signification (a mantra from our poststructuralist past) – Felski shows a more circumscribed interest in developing an expanded understanding of the affective dynamics of reading. Understanding how texts act on particular readers – how readers and texts form attachments – is something literary critics are particularly well-positioned to study, for doing so requires attention to some longstanding interests, including form, literary history, and reception, and may draw on more recent ones as well, such as affect theory, ecocriticism, and the posthuman.

Is it entirely clear what such alternatives would look like? No, but that's partly the point. The considerable power and value of the first four chapters of *The Limits of Critique* derive from the impetus they provide to help us unlearn the deep-seated protocols of our profession. Why should critique, a genre committed to the overthrow of power (from an implicitly transcendental position disguised as a marginal one), be accepted as the norm? Of course the challenge of opening space for other practices should not be underestimated. I suspect graduate students still need to master critique to thrive on the job market, such as it is; possibly, with the help of *The Limits of*

*Critique*, they can learn to master it and undo its hegemony all at once. Still, judging from my own moments of resistance to Felski's redescription, the appeal of the hermeneutics of suspicion runs very deep. I have a flowering bush in my backyard with vibrant fuschia blooms. I can never remember its name. My daughter even provided me with a mnemonic; I have forgotten that too. having studied so much Freud in graduate school, I can't help thinking that the lapse must be a parapraxis shielding me from a deep conflict, one I resist dredging up from the murk of my unconscious. I've tried to diagnose the block without success. Probably it means nothing. But I suspect it does. Maybe I should just move on.<sup>7</sup>

## Endotes

1. Modernism occupies a provocatively equivocal space in *The Limits of Critique*. On one hand, it is responsible for our habits of reading suspiciously between the lines (42) and our distrust of plot and other equally artificial and arbitrary structures (88). On the other hand, the idiom of liberation from the narrow strictures of critique's investment in rationality also derives from modernism.
2. My subordinated scholarly voice, initially appearing in parenthesis in the main text, is subordinated further here, demoted in revision into this endnote to say that yes, "disgruntle" is one of those few frequentatives left in the English language, the suffix "le" turning "grunt" into a repeated action, as well as one of the even rarer instances in which the prefix "dis" operates as an intensifier. So, technically, to "regruntle" one's critical mood would not mean to ameliorate it but to deepen its ethos of dissatisfaction (note the more expected negative sense of "dis" here), just as the increasingly popular "critique of critique," as Felski points out in chapter 4, reinforces the normative power of critique by doubling back on itself. But "regruntle," I would say, fails to signify only for the pedant.
3. Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).
4. Bold clarity, given that, in the words of Trinh T. Minha, "Clarity is a means of subjection" (quoted at fuller length, in all its clarity, on p. 136).
5. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); also relevant is Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-48.
6. Felski discusses the challenge in chapter 5 and in her afterword, but see also her article "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 130.3 (2015): 737-42.
7. Hibiscus. I had to text my daughter. Her proffered mnemonic was "biscuit," which I retrieved as "muffin." I have so much work yet to do.

S says

I really enjoyed this book even though I was clearly 100% out of my depth. A lot of the phrases she used lacked any clear definition to me and I don't have enough context to feel comfortable speaking directly about them. Instead my review will use almost entirely her phrasing from the book in bits and pieces that made sense to me.

I really enjoyed this book more as a bigger social commentary than anything deep in the literature world. I don't know what the world is like anyhow. But either way, it all rings very true.

"the mistake that chronic negativity equals fearless intelligence" p51

the opposite of critique is not blind acceptance p81

"reading should be a phenomenon to engage" p84

"conviction that those at odds with the status quo see better and farther than others" p141

## What Does Critique Look Like?

A practically exclusionary academic sensibility of autonormative normativity skepticism (p9) associated with...

- \* "a spirit of disenchantment" (p2)
- \* being "serious and scrupulous" (p5)
- \* refusal to be associated with the status quo (p17)
- \* refusal to trust the text, claiming the author must have better insight to the text themselves (p31)
- \* constant search for alternative meaning (p33)
- \* an attempt to appear emotionless that is at odds with scientific objectivity (p74)
- \* an attempt to make judgement without a motive (p4)
- \* a general distaste and devaluation for the nature of society because it's fungible (p73-74)
- \* an act of taking no pleasure (p39) in an act of intellectual heroism (p84)
- \* general dissatisfaction that serves as evidence of clear sightedness (p41)

## What Critique Does?

What harm does the style of critic have? Below are some..

- \* dismantles and discredits the text at the harm of both the text and the author, continually attempting to prove lack of value or uniqueness (p62,p65)
- \* refuses to engage or contribute to the text
- \* overvalues past context rather than present relevance (p14)
- \* digs and rips to find "hidden meanings" in a sort of feeling that anything good must be hard earned and unclear. That the genuine value is always hidden from the surface. (p27)

## The Problems With Critique

- \* it is incorrectly associated with inherent rigor [and] intrinsic radicalism (p3)
- \* it is seen as having a lack of mood and emotion and therefore more likely to be truth (FALSE) (p21)
- \* the suspicion associated with lack of relaxation, ease, and indifference sells the process of critique as harder work than more positive interpretation (p37) through a barrier of self-protection from attachment (p44)
- \* it is looking for blame (p88) because the reader is instilling a sense of morality to assign a collective and social guilty party - which also denies the author credit (p90)

### Why Critique Must Be Stopped

- \* it does not allow the reader to be genuinely touched by the art (p39) and attachments are seen negatively (p41)
- \* it has a negative impact on relationships between the classes (p43) when critique is used to dismantle minority expression (p144)
- \* critique is used as a form of language that can serve as a conduit of exclusion and power (p43) which is strengthened by the fact that it is meant to be the last word (p123)
- \* critique devalues other forms of reading, because it insists by nature that if you are not critical you must be uncritical (p51)
- \* it refuses (personal/individual) deep involvement, absorption, immersion (p54)
- \* lacks a sense of positive identity (p72) and therefore lacks genuine insight (p136) and genuine complexity of thought "Dismissive Perfectionism" (p136)
- \* critique relies on a feeling of standing outside of routine, but it already taught as one of the only ways to read in academia

### Why Then Do We Critique?/When Critique is Positive

In this world where critique is the only valid form of reading, we often do it to validate literature we connect with in other ways (p4) and to legitimize things we love (p65). It can grant significance and confirm that what we read is worth of attention and gives purpose to our reading it. (p99).

It also strikes on a personal level because humans are drawn to the feeling of winning (p112) - so we make a game of reading as if it were a satisfying crossword puzzle (p107) to beat. We're "addicted to the charge of narrative suspense and revelation" (p111) and in that way critique creates a "rise before the fall" even after the reading ends. (p128)

It also seems to trigger in our monkey brains the satisfaction of clue-finding, classifying, and pattern recognition. (p89)

Critique also brings solidarity and community around a text, which otherwise wouldn't exist for long without a following, just like any art.

### What Then Do We Do?

Rita Felski proposes something called "postcritical critique" - as a way to acknowledge that critique is involved and not an invalid part of our history, but that it is not the only way. She seems to acknowledge that connecting with the reading and staying aware of our own biases will require an even higher effort put into interpretation (which can be relational (p147) and not destructive) and reading good heartily and in good faith. It can bring justice for the author/text and attachment without dispelling magic and mystery (p95) and discouraging emotional enjoyment. The reader is meant and encouraged to contribute without it being emotionally shameful or directly opposed to intellectualism. The purpose is to strengthen rather than diminish the text, without being blindly supportive of everything we read. The goal is more comparative rather than oppositional thinking. (p50)

### Some Final Quotes

"the lengths to which we go to keep at bay the force of artworks, the same artworks whose ability to snap us out of our torpor drew us to them in the first place. How curious it is that we dig wide moats - of history, ideology, formal analysis - and erect thick conceptual walls lest we be touched by what, in truth, lures us."  
Chaouli, p191

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### Diana says

I remember lamenting to my professor about what I felt to be the ruthlessness and unkindness of academia. So many times I felt like exasperatedly saying to one person or the other "What you're saying might seem contrarian but it doesn't mean you're smart! You're just being a dick!" I had sensed that the almost automatic position was one of suspicion towards the work or the discussion at hand. I found it hostile, not exactly in tandem with my own conflict-avoidant personality that preferred a more exploratory, collaborative, more appreciative way of approaching a text or discussion. If I had something to contribute, I didn't want to tear down so much as continue to participate in building up and improving a discussion.

Reading this book by Rita Felski felt quite incredible because I could finally see this automatic stance of suspicion de-centered. And I say de-centred not problematized, because she is not against critique or saying it's inherently a poor position, but simply saying that it's not the de facto best, most intellectual position out there. There are other methods of inquiry that can be taken if we are so willing. I also appreciate that she addresses the fact that to understand the limits of critique is not to fall into that apolitical stance of pure aestheticism. Unfortunately (to me, at least) that stance is very much alive in literary departments, even if literary departments might see themselves as progressive.

And that's the thing! She reveals how to be critical has its own approach, "mood", language that would eventually be employed, and stance. To be critical sometimes is just to adopt the stance of being critical. So once you've got on all the trappings, what you say can be part of the contemporary mood of "chic bitterness," but it's actually no guarantee that you're actually saying anything radical or even rigorous. It does give the shine of it though.

She offers a new pedagogy and way (inspired by Latour's ANT theory) for the literary critic and academic to approach their work, one that is Postcritical -- A hermeneutics that seeks to uncover, unveil, instead of one of suspicion. It's a beautiful thought. We wouldn't be digging into the text and feeling like we were completely demystifying it, or breaking it apart, anymore. Instead we were looking to it in a more wondrous way, and being more open to its affective potentials.

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### Eric says

Before I discuss the book itself, I should probably take a minute to mention my background, which had a big effect on my encounter with Felski's argument. I'm in the field of rhetoric and have been, basically, since I was an undergraduate. That means my familiarity with trends in literary studies is limited (e.g., I know what "New Historicism" is but would have a hard time naming more than a couple of its practitioners; I've read some work in gender and postcolonial studies that circulates across the literature/rhetoric border but don't keep up with *PMLA* or *New Literary History*). Because of this background, there were parts of Felski's book where I had to take her word on things and others where I found myself thinking, "Wait, haven't rhetoricians been defending and enacting the sort of work Felski's advocating for decades?" For instance, Felski focuses on the "rhetoric of critique" because doing so "primes us to look closely *at* current ways of reading rather than *through* them" (6). I found myself recalling *The Electronic Word* (1993), in which Richard Lanham argues for what he calls "bi-stable oscillation": looking *at* as well as *through* texts. This is not a criticism of

Felski's argument. Just as engaging rhetorical scholarship means I miss lots of what's happening in literature, of course Felski's literary orientation means she's going to miss stuff in rhetoric. Again, I'm taking her word that this is very much an argument that still needs to be made in literary studies. It just left me wishing, especially since she explicitly positions her project as rhetorical, that there were another rhetorical scholar or two in the reference list—and feeling like a greater attunement to rhetoric could've jump-started this conversation in literary studies a long time ago.

That said, I became interested in Felski's book because a similar conversation is in fact happening in rhetoric: specifically, a turn toward "postcritical" approaches to scholarship. Felski builds on French theorist Bruno Latour, who's made/is making big waves in rhetoric. She also spends a lot of time with queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose work on "reparative reading" seems to be having less influence on the "postcritical" conversation in rhetoric. (That said, I ordered Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, plus a big stack of books on affect theory, the moment I finished *The Limits of Critique*. So Felski does a nice job presenting and speaking to the significance of Sedgwick's project.) I was interested in getting both the perspective of a literary scholar and a clearer sense of the "critique" from which scholars pursuing postcritical projects are trying to distinguish themselves—especially because "critique" can be a handily vague label for people who want to dismiss a huge range of theoretical work that they already don't like. That is, scholars can nod to the term "postcritical" in order to wash their hands of deconstruction, postcolonialism, queer theory, various feminist methods, psychoanalytic criticism, and so on.

Felski aligns "critique" with what Paul Ricoeur calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion." Her gloss of Ricoeur—who is himself riffing on Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx—is this: "radicalism of thought now calls for intensive acts of *deciphering*, thanks to a heightened sense of the duplicity of language and the uncertain links between signs and meaning. Their aim is not just to underscore the unreliability of knowledge—a theme amply mined by previous generations of philosophers. Rather, these thinkers instantiate a new suspicion of *motive*—of the ubiquity of deception and self-deception.... Meaning can be retrieved only after arduous effort; it must be wrested from the text, rather than gleaned from the text" (31).

Working with Sedgwick's "reparative reading" and Latour's actor-network-theory (ANT), Felski goes on to describe the methods of "digging down" and "standing back" that are often the bread and butter of Marxist and Freudian literary criticism. She argues that such methods fail to listen to or engage texts on their own terms. The method prescribes how a text is read so that "the world view of the critic is neither shaken nor stirred. What a text ultimately portends is foretold by a prior theoretical-analytical scheme" (64). Felski goes on to link Foucauldian, poststructuralist, and certain postcolonial approaches to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Citing Latour, she claims that such approaches work to reveal how many of the beliefs, institutions, and assumptions that guide everyday life are socially constructed: "To describe something as socially constructed is to deliver an accusation or mount a reproach. It is, as Latour remarks, to seek to reduce something to dust by showing that it is made up" (77). She offers the work of Judith Butler as an example.

From there, Felski goes on to describe the critic's (often explicitly stated) similarity to the figure of the detective. The critic, like the detective, is constantly on the look out for a guilty party. She also echoes Latour's polemical claim that "Context stinks!" (152), resisting context-heavy approaches to literary criticism that reduce the text to a predetermined artifact of its time or situation. Felski isn't interested in doing away with context entirely. She just wants to position texts as "nonhuman actors" that can speak to and challenge their context (and their readers) rather than simply emerging out of that context (163). She questions the rigidity with which many literature scholars define historical eras, claiming that this rigidity can confine and reduce the agency of texts.

Pushing the limits of critical approaches, Felski argues that ANT allows scholars to see “the reader-text connection” as “part of a network rather than a self-enclosed dyad” (173). She positions this point as vitally important to literary studies, “especially in the classroom” (173). “The text,” she writes, “is not sequestered away in haughty or melancholic isolation; it is unmistakably worldly rather than otherworldly” (176). Felski goes on to describe her take on “postcritical reading,” including the way she deploys it in the classroom (172). A key aspect of such reading is its openness to the affective and emotional effects of texts. She describes, for instance, a student who “elucidated his sense of shock on watching the French film *Irreversible*, as being triggered not only by its graphic and sexually violent subject matter but also by disorienting camera angles and a reverse plot” (180). Felski describes the “most noticeable difference” that resulted from including postcritical affective approaches as “a surge of élan in the classroom, a collective sigh of relief at encountering an analytical language for reflecting on, rather than repudiating, their aesthetic attachments” (181).

There are lots of things I like about Felski’s book. She maps out the rhetoric of critique in literary studies in a thorough and accessible manner. Admittedly, I started this book a little skeptical of postcritical approaches, and I finished with a clearer sense of their possibilities. And, given her commitment to description, it’s worth noting that—argumentative claims aside—I feel like Felski’s book left me with a much better sense of what is and has been meant by “critique” in literary studies and English studies more generally. I’m also all for attending to affective and emotional matters in pedagogical settings and scholarly work.

After my first reading, I’m left with two primary misgivings, both of which have to do with Felski’s claims about the affect (and purported lack thereof) of “critique.” Felski describes critique as trying (and failing) to perform a “scission of thought from affect” (25). Felski doubts the viability of such a scission. I agree with her on this point. That is, I agree “that mood brings the world into view in a certain way” and that the pretense of “ironic detachment” doesn’t mean a writer is dis- or unaffected (25, 54). But I don’t follow her when such detachment is applied to, say, Judith Butler’s work. In fact, I’m skeptical of Felski’s Latourian claim that Butler seeks to reduce things to dust by showing that they’re made up. I’m thinking of a recent interview with Butler: “Some trans people thought that in claiming that gender is performative ... I was saying that it is all a fiction, and that a person’s felt sense of gender was therefore ‘unreal.’ That was never my intention.... But I think I needed to pay more attention to what people feel.... I did not mean to argue that gender is fluid and changeable (mine certainly is not).” So while Butler admits more attention to “what people feel” would be a good thing, she’s attentive to the fact that gender can’t be reduced to dust by being revealed as a social construct. Rather, this can be a way of thinking through and acknowledging gender’s relative stability if not obduracy. In any case, it seems to me there’s a great deal of affect at work in Butler’s writing. It may not be “élan,” but I’m not convinced that something like an affect of hope isn’t in there. And, moreover, even if we were to link Butler will less celebratory affects—frustration, resignation, melancholy, and so on—I’m not sure that such moods can or should be lumped in with either an actual or a self-styled *lack of affect*.

That said, Felski herself acknowledges this at some points. For instance, she nods to Sara Ahmed’s “spirited defense of the killjoy feminist” in an endnote (210n22). And I should mention that her assessment of Butler’s work is nuanced. Later in the book, she allows (or at least paraphrases) Butler’s suggestion that the difficult language of critique might convey “a certain humility” (137)—and I’d call “humility” an affect. In general, however, Felski characterizes critique as “ironic and deliberative rather than angry and accusatory,” and aligns Butler with the first of those two pairs. Again, I agree with Felski that ironic detachment is a mood, an affect. What I’m less sure about is her claim that practitioners of “critique” pretend it’s *not*—that, in other words, writers like Butler think they are or want to be thought of as coolly separating themselves from the commonplace beliefs and systems they’re analyzing.

This gets me to my other major misgiving, which is the distinction or lack thereof between “critique” and auto- or self-critique. According to Felski, suspicious critics claim an ironic detachment from both the socially constructed systems they’re critiquing *and* their own embroilment in those systems: “‘You do not know that you are ideologically driven, historically determined, or culturally constructed,’ declares the subject of critique to the object of critique, ‘but I do!’” (131). For Felski, there’s a sort of haughty, holier-than-thou attitude in such declarations. And I’m sure this is the case in lots of critiques. I should reiterate that I’m not squarely in Felski’s audience, and I haven’t read many of the key theorists she’s after. For instance, I’ve barely read any Frederic Jameson. I’ve read a lot more Foucault, but still not a ton—essays, interviews, and an array of excerpts, but no books. And it’s “the mode of Foucauldian genealogy” that Felski positions as paradigmatically critical and detached, and in which she suggests Butler is working. I won’t deny Foucault’s extensive influence on Butler, nor the likelihood that lots of people in literature are forwarding an ironically detached “gotcha!” style of critique. It’s just that I don’t feel such detachment in many of the key writers that Felski cites that I myself *have* read (Derrida, Butler, et al.). Moreover, I see in those writers an affectively complicated grappling with their embeddedness in the structures they’re calling attention to. I don’t see the hubristic glee that Felski seems to glimpse beneath critics’ phlegmatic performances (and here I may be going too far, because Felski is adamant that she’s not interested in diagnosing or uncovering anyone’s psychological state)—an excitement, maybe, but one mixed with at least glints of melancholy, sadness, resignation, even a tinge of hope in the possibility of approaching such artificial structures *as* structures without presuming or even wanting to destroy them by virtue of critique.

So the TL;DR version of my two hesitations: First, I’m not convinced some of the key practitioners of critique whom Felski cites are actually trying to feign the detachment and disaffection she ascribes to them (though that doesn’t mean plenty of other writers aren’t). Second, I’m not convinced that the detachment Felski ascribes to “critique” as a way of dismantling or demystifying others’ belief systems can be smoothly extended to self-critique. In other words, I think there’s a bigger affective difference between critiquing others’ positions and critiquing one’s own position than Felski generally acknowledges.

I don’t mean to sound dismissive, though. I scratched more marginalia in *The Limits of Critique* than I do in most books, and that’s a credit to the text and the writer. The argument here is made passionately and distinctly, and it unfolds in an engaging and thought-provoking manner. I think there’s a great deal of pedagogical and scholarly possibility in Felski’s ANT-style approaches to literature. Moreover, her description of the hermeneutics of suspicion holds a lot of water. I’m just uncertain how neatly some of the writers, texts, and schools of thought she characterizes as coolly “suspicious” fit into that category. Perhaps there is an affectively charged ironic entanglement happening in some cases—an entanglement that differs significantly from ironic detachment.

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### **Nathaniel says**

a little repetitive, excessive use of the word “excoriate”, but good — although I still liked *Uses of Literature* more.

there’s an uncommented-on gap between what Felski says at the beginning of the book — namely, that critique in itself isn’t *necessarily bad*, but that the *unquestioned dominance* of critique as the sole acceptable mode of academic writing about literature is bad — and the substance of her argument, which is that critique is bad and we should be doing something different. I’m on board with the first claim, but I don’t think that means we need to abandon critique altogether: surely the goal should be an academic culture where we can recognize that critique provides tools that may help with some kinds of tasks but not with others, and that

there are other approaches that are equally valid and may be more useful for different kinds of goals — in other words, that critique isn't (different kinds of critique aren't) the be-all end-all of academic writing about literature, but rather one valid practice (or group of practices) among many.

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### **Lawrence says**

I was already sufficiently embedded in the conversation and persuaded that the early chapters weren't as compelling to me-- but oh, I was excited and inspired by the end!

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### **Lucy Green says**

eh

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### **Ingeborg says**

As Rita Felski's prior book on the similar subject, *Uses of Literature*, this is a pleasure to read. An intelligent and beautifully written book about reading, theory and interpretation, that is actually full of life, experience and hope. Author's search for meaning of the texts turns naturally into larger questions of how to connect to others around us and start thinking of a new and utopian ways of reading and being.

Really, why do we read and how might texts make a difference not only in our minds but in our actual lives, and even the society? Can texts practically matter, or, to paraphrase Felski's prior title, how might one use texts to make this world a better place to live in?

Literary studies have for too long been text-obsessed, analyses have been almost paranoid in searching for hidden meanings that these texts have to offer. The academia tries really hard to hide its emotions and attachments to texts as if identifying with the characters and feeling while reading is something to be ashamed of (even though most people will have to admit it was our love of reading that brought us to study literature in the first place!)

And how are we so sure, Felski asks, that texts are always trying to hide something from us, and how do we know that this is the best interpretation manner? What about attachment, utopia, hope? Why do we persist on treating texts as closed entities of untrustworthy signs means departing from the life actually lived, as if texts were not about us, about our personalities, about society. "What if we refused to be railroaded into the false choice between the critical and the uncritical? How might argument and interpretation proceed if critique were no longer our ubiquitous watchword and ever-vigilant watchdog? What other shapes of thought could we imagine? And how else might we venture to read, if we were not ordained to read suspiciously?", asks Felski, as she calls for *postcritical reading*: "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 is wonderful - a theoretical book that can make you laugh, and think, think, pace around the room and think!

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## Richard says

Great contribution to the growing body of literature which questions the confluence of critical to suspicious reading and the almost axiomatic standing of this mode of engagement with texts in the academy. Felski argues for a plurality of post-critical modes of reading which are edifying and reparative. What's more Felski is a gifted writer: she talks about the 'barbed wire of criticism' which protects the reader from 'contamination' by texts that are read; she identifies the affective delight of the suspicious reader who sleuth like isn't taken in by any *prima facie* reading, but who is therefore never opened by a text. Here's Felski's lucid prose:

"And here the barbed wire of suspicion holds us back and hems us in, as we guard against the risk of being contaminated and animated by the words we read. The critic advances holding a shield, scanning the horizon for possible assailants, forever fearful of being tricked or taken in. Locked into an endless cycle of punitive scrutiny and self-scrutiny, she cuts herself off from a swathe of intellectual and experiential possibility."

And then there's the best sentence of the book, found in the introduction. It is a great question, a question that inspires a different mode of engagement with texts and so an alternate affective delight in interpreting them:

"Why—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyper-articulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?"

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