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FELSKI, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*.

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Cultural and literary scholar Rita Felski has dedicated much of her work towards exploring various perspectives on reading, a task largely articulated through the espousal of feminist theory. Her latest book, *The Limits of Critique*, is a continuation of her endeavour to draw a more nuanced assessment of how texts capture the reader in ways that more general modes of literary criticism seldom take into account.

Specifically, Felski seeks to address the reasons why literary criticism, for the most part, engages with a hermeneutics of suspicion, giving little to no credence to alternative modes of reading. Such hermeneutics have been a part of the *Zeitgeist* for quite some time, as Paul Ricoeur argued persuasively when assessing the basis of modern thought, through the works of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. By engaging in 'critique' – here understood as the notion that the text invariably contains multiple secrets that must be exposed, clarified, brought to light – the literary scholar adopts a permanent stance of vigilantism, a quasi-paranoid search for any enemy lurking in the corner of the page that may regress the critical work into the field of normative values. Through the optics of suspicion, the text must be battled with, with scholars 'all too adept at documenting the insufficiencies of meanings, values, and norms; like tenacious bloodhounds, we sniff out coercion, collusion, or exclusion at every turn' (Felski 15).

Felski's main argument is that critique has become too engaged with an either/or schematics: 'if we are not suspicious, we must be subservient; if we are not critical, we are doomed to be uncritical' (Felski 51). The mode of suspicious reading, drawing from a certain psychoanalytic conception interested in what is repressed, adopts a geometric metaphor at its core: in-depth reading, the

exploration of what lies beneath and is buried, becomes the guiding conduct for critique. Already, from the initial engagement with the text, it is clear that the search for what the text silences will be the requirement for critical engagement, undertaken in support of liberatory practices. Suspicion is the adequate tool for banishing normative values, allowing critique to underline the lingering tyrannical and repressive forces still at work even in some of those texts that seem to possess the most liberatory of qualities at heart.

As such, the figure of the detective is a powerful metaphor for the work of the suspicious scholar, not only in the engagement with details and specificities that would, in other hands, go unnoticed, but also in the portrayal of a certain mood: much like the Sherlock-like detective who will voice the ultimate discovery on who's the culprit, critique 'likes to have the last word' (Felski 123). Critique wants to say what the text is about, to underline its flaws, to pinpoint the text's omissions and insufficiencies. Furthermore, what is left outside of critique is considered to be in collusion with normativity, with the reproduction of the *status quo*, with other ways of reading 'presumed, without further ado, to be sappy and starry-eyed, compliant and complacent' (Felski 150). Critique understands itself as being away from such norms, adopting a quasi-transcendental distance from its objects.

For Felski, a recuperation of critique from its current dogmatic stance on suspicion is both necessary and possible. To re-envision critique is to assail it from its controlling grasp on the text. Rather than purporting to provide the last word on the text, critique may seek to capture 'the sense of an alternative that is glimpsed but not yet fully visible' (Felski 126). Such an argument is bound to draw a certain amount of resistance, with suspicion becoming the functioning *raison d'être* of scholarly activity, from which certain areas such as feminism or postcolonialism, known for their particular political engagement, do not remain unscathed. The continuation of critique as delineated by the tradition of suspicion does not rely solely in institutionalised practices, as Felski further acknowledges the personal pleasure derived from critique: 'a sense of prowess in the exercise of ingenious interpretation, the striking elegance and economy of its explanatory schemes, the competitive buzz of inciting the admiration and applause of fellow scholars' (Felski 110).

Saving critique from paranoia and re-establishing it as a valid, surprising way of engaging with the text must bear into consideration how affect comes into play in the relation of reader to text. For Felski, acknowledging the emotional impact of the text was one of the staples of feminism, an argument that the author had already advanced in one of her previous works, *Literature after Feminism* (2003). In continuing to advance the notion that emotions and pleasure are a part of scholarly research, Felski, now through the lens of the work of French philosopher Bruno Latour, contends that reading is 'a cocreation between actors that leaves neither party unchanged' (Felski 84). A certain celebration of the text's multifarious meanings seems to emerge

when Felski further considers how reading 'is a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling' (Felski 173). By employing a vocabulary that would be at home with the political commitments espoused by social movements, Felski advances how reading may benefit more from a hermeneutics of trust rather than its current focus on suspicion. Trust may imply a movement of faith, and yet it also opens the possibility to consider how the text is not only an (un)willing agent of social repression, but also a cultural product with its own agency, its capacity to agitate and not be confined by normativity. The stress is, then, on recapturing a more critical notion of 'critique', one that escapes from institutionalised dogma and embraces a notion of novelty stemming from the plural responses to the affective content of the reader-text complex.

Felski's argument joins the voices of those preoccupied with critique's complacency. As feminist Lynne Segal suggested in her memoir *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* (2007), drawn from her experience as both scholar and political activist, the ambitions of critique are better understood as necessarily employing a constant back and forth between the institutions through which they are represented and the creativity and suggestiveness of newness that purportedly characterises it, a newness that is to be found when engaging outside the compartments of institutionalised thinking.

Felski's latest work constitutes, then, a plea for augmenting the text and its importance, rather than leaving it reduced to what is understood as the dogmatic bent of current modes of critique, assailing it in all of its possible novelty. For Felski, there remains the possibility that the text may yet startle, agitate, inform – indeed, not only a possibility, as the acknowledgment of a constant reality. The surprise that constitutes the text may harbour more possibilities than the continuous delineation of pre-established ideas on what constitutes the desirable outcome of the task of reading.

In this vein, and notwithstanding the underlying sense of the operations of gender in the act of reading, one may argue that the mode of critique heavily argued against by Felski is a cultural derivation of masculinity, with its heavily guarded interest in ensuring the text no longer contains dimensions that remain unexplored. There remains, still, further work in assessing this particular understanding of critique as masculine.

Felski's book, with the trademark sensibility of its author, often reads as a manifesto for a wider application of the variegated ways of 'doing' the humanities. Such a work proves particularly important in a time when such scholarly inquiry finds itself in need of proving its worth in a world increasingly ordained by mechanistic, dogmatic purposes, as it reminds the reader that the act of reading is, in itself, a radical act.

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