

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322486844>

Common Knowledge Litte Review of Felski

Article *in* Common Knowledge · September 2017

CITATIONS

0

1 author:



Susan Handelman

Bar Ilan University

33 PUBLICATIONS 22 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Literary Theory [View project](#)

All content following this page was uploaded by [Susan Handelman](#) on 14 January 2018.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

What is most interesting, when regarding Lerner's treatment of poetry and Wood's engagement with fiction, is the way in which the two writers position themselves—their lives—in relation to literature. For Lerner, the question of how to live with poetry is set against the realization that his hatred of poetry, as much as his skepticism of the ideals associated with it, actually defines him. For Wood, the question of how to live with fiction is enmeshed with the question of what literature has done with him, as much as he with it, when he was a religious boy, then a curious teenager, and now a self-exiled adult. In the case of both these writers, how to live with literature is shown to be less a subjective choice than the discovery of a unique point of view allowing access to a work or works of literature. Each writer sought to become and then became the right subject for dealing with the textual objects that preoccupied him and, in the process, became the right subject to produce a textual object that no one but he could have written. I wonder, then, why teachers of graduate proseminars in university departments of literature focus the training of young critics on the study of critical works that could have been written by many people other than their authors.

—*Adir H. Petel*

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3988322

**Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique*
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 232 pp.**

A colleague who received her PhD in literature in 1998 once wistfully said to me: “I entered graduate school a lover; I came out a fighter.” Rita Felski would sympathize. She edits a well-respected professional journal, *New Literary History*, and has published widely on feminism, modernism, postmodernism, aesthetics, and critical methods. And now she too is tired of being “a fighter,” a practitioner of what she calls *critique*. By this term, she means the modes of thought, argument, affect, and ethos of figures such as Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault, and members of the Frankfurt School, whose work undergirded the “revolutionary” literary theories dominating much criticism from the late 1960s into the new millennium: deconstruction, poststructuralism, new historicism, cultural materialism, queer theory, postcolonial criticism, and so forth. Underlying all of these is what Paul Ricoeur famously called “the hermeneutics of suspicion.” But we have now reached a time, “after decades of heady iconoclasm,” when, as Felski puts it, “we are left nursing a Sunday morning hangover and wondering what fragments, if any, can be retrieved from the ruins.” What once seemed liberatory and refreshing has become tired, dogmatic, and predictable. And Felski adds: “*We shortchange the significance of art by focusing on the “de” prefix (its power to demystify,*

destabilize, denaturalize) at the expense of the “re” prefix: its ability to recontextualize, reconfigure, or recharge perception” (italics hers).

In this manifesto, she tries to open space for alternative modes of reading, describing, writing, and interpreting. Ricoeur, as she reminds us, spoke of a “hermeneutics of restoration” or “trust” of equal importance to the hermeneutics of suspicion. So how, Felski asks, can we affirm and describe all the ways in which art generates attachments; how it inspires, absorbs, enchants, and surprises us; how it enters into the complex networks of everyday life; how it can transform us? A few decades ago, such talk might have led to a scholar being tarred and feathered by the critical avant-garde. As the saying goes, though, if you stand in one place long enough while the parade goes thrusting forward, eventually it will come back around, and you’ll find yourself at its head. But Felski maintains she is not advocating older idealistic and conservative aesthetic ideologies; the task is to be “postcritical” without lapsing into an uncritical stance. She turns to phenomenology to develop an “affective hermeneutics,” and especially to Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT), to help us develop new forms of reading and a more positive kind of humanistic thinking.

Early last semester, a student of mine who had read nothing about “post-critical” thought wrote this message to my literary criticism class: “I want you to take one moment to think about what you love about *story*. If you study literature, you by now have the authority to decide what you really love about the most powerful thing known to humanity. What about it makes you go . . . ‘ooh.’ The pleasurable exhalation kind of ‘ooh.’ Is it Sherlock’s confidence or maybe it’s how the rules of reality are different in *Harry Potter* . . . find what makes you go ‘ooh’ and hold on to it tight long before you consider other narratives. Long before criticism, politics, and sensibilities is the inner purpose that has led you to be in this class right now.” I told him he was, unknowingly, at the avant-garde forefront of current literary theory. Kudos to him and to Felski for reminding us of why we read, of what the humanities can be, and for helping us become lovers again.

—Susan Handelman

DOI 10.1215/0961754X-3988334