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What's Wrong With Literary Studies?

Some scholars think the field has become cynical and paranoid

By Marc Parry | NOVEMBER 27, 2016

✔ PREMIUM

In the low-budget realm of humanities grantmaking, a University of Virginia press release this May came as a shock. The Danish National Research Foundation had awarded roughly $4.2 million to a literary-studies project led by an English professor at Virginia, Rita Felski. And this wasn't yet another big-ticket digital-humanities effort to map the social history of the United States or crunch the cultural data stored in five million books. This money would help Felski assemble a team of scholars to investigate the social uses of literature.

For Felski, the windfall validates a nearly decade-long push to change the way literature and other art forms are studied. In a series of manifestoes, she has developed a sophisticated language for talking about our attachments to literature and prodded literary scholars to reconsider their habit of approaching texts like suspicious detectives on the hunt for hidden meanings. Felski's message boils down to prefixes. Literary critics have emphasized "de" words, like "debunk" and "deconstruct." But they've shortchanged "re" words — literature's capacity to reshape and recharge perception.

"There's actually quite a diverse range of intellectual frameworks, politically, theoretically, philosophically," says Felski, who specializes in literary theory and method. "Yet there's an underlying similarity in terms of this mood of vigilance, wariness, suspicion, distrust, which doesn't really allow us to grapple with these really basic questions about why people actually take up books in the first place, why they matter to people."

Though the size of her grant may be unique, Felski's sense of frustration is not. Her work joins a groundswell of scholarship questioning a certain kind of critique that has prevailed in literary studies in recent decades. "Critique" can be a blurry word — isn't all criticism critique? — but in Felski's usage it carries a specific flavor. Critique means a negative commentary, an act of resistance against dominant values, an intellectual discourse that defines itself against popular understanding. Felski sketches the shake-up of literary studies that started in the '60s as a shift from criticism ("the interpretation and evaluation of literary works") to critique ("the politically motivated analysis of the larger philosophical or historical conditions shaping these works"). Most frameworks taught today in a literary-theory class, such as feminism, Marxism, deconstruction, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, would count as variants of critique.

Contemporary literary scholarship has never lacked for detractors: Down with politics in the academy! Back to the Great Books! What's different now is that the questioning of critique is coming from people steeped in its theories. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a founder of queer theory and sexuality studies, galvanized this soul-searching with a 2003 essay arguing that theory had spawned a paranoid mood in literary studies. The debate gained momentum with a special issue of the journal *Representations* in 2009, when Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus challenged a method of interpretation known as symptomatic reading, in which critics read texts like psychoanalysts probing for repressed meanings.

Then, last year, came Lisa Ruddick's essay "When Nothing Is Cool," a hand grenade lobbed at her field. Ruddick, an expert on British literature at the University of Chicago, attacked literary studies for favoring an antihumanist ideology that looks askance at inner life and, in her view, alienates scholars from their own moral intuitions. "I have spoken with many young academics who say that their theoretical training has left them benumbed," she wrote in *The Point* magazine. "After a few years in the profession, they can hardly locate the part of themselves that can be moved by a poem or novel. It is as if their souls have gone into hiding, to await tenure or some other deliverance."

If you exist outside the bubble of academic literary criticism, some of these ideas, like cultivating the inner life or talking about the pleasures of literature, might seem uncontroversial — obvious, even. But the recent debates over literary method have generated considerable hostility because they touch on existential questions of what English professors do. If they abandon suspicion, does that mean retreating into banal admiring description? Should criticism always have a political aim? Is it really necessary, as one of Felski's allies puts it, for a literary critic to speak truth to power every time she reads Virginia Woolf?

Members of Felski's circle, who sometimes publish under the banner of "postcritical reading," feel a need to emphasize that questioning critique does not mean abandoning one's political commitments, be they Marxist, feminist, or queer. "If you challenge the idea of suspicion as the only mode of reading, you are then immediately accused of being conservative in relation to all those politics," says Toril Moi, a Duke literature professor who contributed to a forthcoming essay collection on critique. "I don't think that's true at all. I still think I'm a feminist." The current "revolt," she says, "is very much against the idea that we all can only read for one reason, namely political critique."

But critics of that "revolt" contend that its advocates offer a distorted picture of what's actually happening in literary studies. These skeptics, in classic critique fashion, also see the methods fight as a displacement of larger economic concerns: an attempt to make a case for literary study as budgets are cut and career opportunities dry up. But no change of methods will appease outside detractors of literary studies, they warn.

"Graduate students who are facing an extremely bad job market — really a collapse of the job market — may look at the ordinary procedures of criticism and say, 'How can people go on performing these critical acts, these interpretive acts, when the world has just fallen apart for us?' " says Bruce Robbins, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University. Referring to Ruddick's essay, which got an emotional response, he adds, "It may be that — and this is perfectly legitimate — there are people who are ripe for that kind of denunciation because they feel betrayed. They were led to think that their talents could lead them into good careers, and all they had to do was keep plugging along. And then they plug along and suddenly the whole structure just collapses around them."

ita Felski is a pillar of that structure, which gives particular weight to her analysis of what ails English departments. The British-born scholar edits *New Literary History,* an influential journal of theory and criticism that prides itself on redrawing the frameworks of literary studies. Her own writing balances a commitment to high theory with a sympathy for ordinary language and everyday experience. For example, her first book, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (Harvard University Press, 1989), attempted to defend the value of popular feminist fiction of the '70s and '80s. It challenged efforts to anchor feminist literary criticism in a general notion of female identity or feminine poetic writing. Felski turned instead to the sociological concept of the "public sphere" — a space where people come together for critical discussion and political debate — arguing that popular feminist fiction had created a "feminist counter-public sphere" that spread new scripts and stories for women (a feminist bildungsroman, for example).

Felski's more recent writing arose from her frustration with the limited vocabulary of literary critique, particularly its inability, in her view, to consider fundamental questions about why literature matters. What interested her was how literature creates powerful bonds across space and time: how we become attached to a 300-year-old play, or get transfixed by a novel written in a very different historical or cultural context. When theorists addressed such positive aspects of literature or art, they tended to put forward what Felski felt was "a rather narrow view of what's going on in aesthetic experience." *We enjoy art because of the elegance of its form*, they might say. *We take a disinterested pleasure in beauty*. In Felski's opinion, there was a lot more going on. Critics should describe the full range of motivations that drive people to take up literature.

Chris Tyree for The Chronicle Review

Rita Felski: Literary critique puts forth "a rather narrow view of what's going on in aesthetic experience."

In 2008, Felski gave that a try with a slim manifesto called *Uses of Literature* (Blackwell). She explored how people read fiction for recognition (its capacity to foster self-understanding); enchantment (the escapism of total absorption in an imaginary world); and shock (that emotional mix of revulsion and fascination you might get from avant-garde theater).

The book did reasonably well. Yet Felski says some people responded with statements like "What you say is very true, but this kind of argument can't really challenge the importance of critique in literary studies." There was a widespread assumption that practicing critique was the only way to be a serious intellectual. Scholars considered it the most rigorous form of thought, Felski says, because of its persistent theoretical interrogation of ideas that are taken for granted: nature, reality, gender, the self, the human. They also saw it as the most radical way of thinking because it allowed them to challenge dominant values.

Felski was unconvinced. So last year she published a gentle polemic called *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press). Her book walks a rhetorical tightrope, crediting the contributions of literary theory while deflating its claims to rigor or radicalism. The book's basic thrust is to redescribe critique rather than refute its ideas. It dwells on the mood of literary scholars, their way of relating to texts. "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 encounter," Felski writes. "The critic advances holding a shield, scanning the horizon for possible assailants, fearful of being tricked or taken in."

But these shield-wielding naysayers are prey to a predictable repertoire of tics, conventions, and assumptions, Felski argues. Like detectives, they search for clues that ordinary people miss, probe those clues for hidden meanings, and come up with a story that explains them. In one move characteristic of an older style of interpretation, feminist critics would argue that female desire was "repressed in the texts of a patriarchal culture," as Felski puts it. Digging down beneath the surface, they found gaps and contradictions that suggested this buried longing. In another trope that has found favor more recently, a feminist critic might stand back from a text to question its basic assumptions, Felski says. Now the critic shows how a text is "part of a larger system of gender conventions and power relations" that she wants to "denaturalize" (that is, to call into question).

Literary critics write a lot about the positive aspects of fiction, Felski says. But they generally root that appreciation in the subversive premises of critique. They value literature because it disrupts, because it challenges identity, because it opposes the status quo — in other words, because it's critical. When Felski talks about the "limits" of critique, she means, in part, that this account of why art matters is inadequate. The critical aspects of creative works are "not the only reason, or the main reason, why people turn to literature or films or paintings," she says.

Felski attacks critique's stature as the most radical form of thought. Here she draws on the work of Bruno Latour, a French anthropologist and sociologist. Latour questions the assumption that being suspicious and critical makes you a progressive thinker, in contrast to the purportedly credulous and complacent masses. He points out that conservative thinkers are now just as likely to draw on the forms of suspicious questioning associated with critique. Think of climate-change deniers, or all those Trump voters so deeply suspicious of elites.

ike Felski, Lisa Ruddick, who established herself in 1990 with a psychoanalytic study of Gertrude Stein's writing, also takes issue with the suspicious mood in literary studies. But she emphasizes the psychological fallout.

L What's wrong, as she sees it, is literary scholars' tendency to condemn certain ideas and beliefs as "humanist." The problem dates to the 1980s, she argues, when literary scholars became enamored of French poststructuralist theories. These ideas held that the "self" was not fully stable or autonomous — that we are formed variously by language, culture, and history. While Ruddick considers that a legitimate point, she argues that the "stigma" of humanism has gradually come to encompass more and more of what makes life meaningful, most notably our very sense of an interior world.

Adam Alexander for The Chronicle Review

Lisa Ruddick: "English, without knowing it, has fallen into an intense version of this kind of professional groupthink."

This antipathy to the individual has moral ramifications for the field, Ruddick says. If its initiates lose investment in their inner lives and grow alienated from their moral intuitions, the profession as a collective benefits: People throw themselves into professional satisfactions like status and praise. But the intellectual stagnation, the discouragement against following one's moral feelings — these, in Ruddick's view, foster a deep cynicism. Family is rejected as "provincial," home as a "disciplinary mechanism," and the inner life as a "bourgeois" luxury. At worst, they create an opening for "violent and sadistic ideas." In the most shocking example, an analysis of a Henry James story tries to make the sexual abuse of children look politically progressive. "Today's anti-pedophile," Ruddick writes, summarizing the analysis, "perpetrates the 'potential violence' of 'speaking on [children's] behalf.' " Such ideas violate scholars' private convictions, Ruddick says, but they go unchallenged because they seem to mesh with the ideology of the group.

To reality-check this tale of dysfunction, Ruddick interviewed about 70 young academics, mostly Ph.D. students, at seven major research universities. She found that two types of scholars tended to be satisfied: those with a political commitment to an issue favored by the field of English, and those who, not especially stirred up by theory, study literary-historical questions. But the interviews also strongly confirmed her sense of the discouragement and constraint that students can feel adapting to the discipline. "English, without knowing it, has fallen into an intense version of this kind of professional groupthink," says Ruddick, who is writing a book that expands on her "When Nothing Is Cool" essay. "I believe that the profession can't really move forward until we shed our fear of saying and thinking things that colleagues would call 'humanist.' "

On social media, many responded to Ruddick with appreciation. "This essay felt like I'd been holding my breath, waiting for it for decades," wrote Gardner Campbell, an associate professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"Stunning piece. Finally thoughtful people, long cowed into silence, are starting to speak up," wrote Terry Castle, a Stanford English professor.

Felski's work has also been widely touted; *The Times Literary Supplement* called it "perhaps the most ambitious reappraisal of the discipline to appear since theory's heyday." But other scholars are just as passionate in their criticism of Felski and Ruddick. What animates them, often, is a feeling that the reassessments of critique distort what's actually happening in literary studies.

That was the reaction of Columbia's Bruce Robbins, who sees himself as one of the ethical-political critics being taken to task. He dismisses Ruddick as an out-of-touch scholar bent on tarring the entire field with the worst practices of a relatively small number of people. Though Robbins considers Felski a more careful thinker, he finds her portrayal of critique unfair, too, because she represents those who do it primarily as faultfinders. "She's not paying attention to the many varied and extremely interesting ways in which people's positive appreciation is part of their critical practice," he says.

Felski also makes critique seem more dominant than it is, says another skeptic, Lee Konstantinou, an assistant professor of English at the University of Maryland at College Park. "It might be that I just went to graduate school at a different time" — Konstantinou earned his Ph.D. in 2009, while Felski got hers in 1987 — "but I was not told that the only valuable thing that I could be doing as a literary critic would be to debunk or expose the disavowed meanings hidden within literary texts," he says. As a doctoral student at Stanford, he learned to think of himself as a scholar engaged in literary and cultural history — a practice that, while it did involve critiquing, also put a premium on visiting archives and documenting the past. "The picture of criticism that these post-critics create seems a little bit reductive," he says, adding, "Literary critics are not handcuffed to the project of critique."

Konstantinou thinks this debate conceals bigger issues, like the dwindling numbers of English majors and the university funding crisis. He quotes Felski's hope, in *The Limits of Critique*, to "articulate a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value." No methods shift will appease outside critics, he says. "It's not the case that if you were just less politicized in your reading of Jane Austen, all of a sudden Scott Walker's going to say, 'Oh, no, I love the University of Wisconsin system.' If the postcritical project is going to survive, it can't just rest on the idea that we have to make literary studies comprehensible to people who don't know a lot about it or don't do the requisite reading."

But to talk about a "postcritical project" implies a cohesiveness that doesn't seem to exist beyond a desire for more diversity of approaches. Among the scholars who have challenged critique — and not all of them accept the label "postcritical" — Ruddick wants to broaden the acceptable palette of psychoanalytic theories. Duke's Moi wants to rethink prevalent notions of language as a self-contained system cut off from the world. Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best introduce "surface reading." This approach "describes works without interpreting or evaluating them," Marcus says, focusing more on what is in a text rather than what it excludes or represses.

Felski is returning to the work she began in *Uses of Literature.* That book partially inspired the project she'll work on with the $4.2-million Danish grant. Spending her fall semesters at the University of Southern Denmark, she will team up with literary scholars, historians, and social scientists to tackle questions about the social dimensions of literature. For example, the relationship between literature and medicine: Could novels give us new ways of thinking about diseases? Or class: What does literature tell us about the "precariat," that growing segment of society defined by underemployment? Or welfare: Why does that word carry such negative connotations in the United States, and such positive ones in Scandinavia? How do people attach themselves to certain words, making them part of their identity, while disengaging from other ones?

That question of attachments — to novels and films, paintings and music — is at the heart of Felski's next book. She operates from the premise that people's everyday experience of art is much more mysterious than commonly thought. Consider the story of Zadie Smith's changing relationship to Joni Mitchell. The novelist once dismissed Mitchell's music as, in Felski's words, "a white girl's warbling." Then one day Smith could no longer listen to Mitchell's songs without crying. Why? To think about such questions, Felski draws on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, looking closely at first-person experience. So, in that musical epiphany, Smith is in her 30s. She and her husband are driving to a wedding in Wales, with Mitchell playing on the car radio. They bicker. They spend an afternoon at Tintern Abbey, where Smith gazes out at the green hills. And suddenly she's humming Joni Mitchell. Felski writes about the way such different strands of experience come together to shape perceptions of art.

"Our attitudes to artworks are much more unpredictable and surprising than a lot of social theories allow for," she says. "And therefore we need to look at these specific examples of a relationship to an artwork. A lot of specific examples are going to explode our theories rather than confirm them."

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