

RITA FELSKI, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015), 232 pp.

LEE KONSTANTINOU, *Cool Characters* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2016), 384 pp.

What can the dandy tell us about criticism? He makes appearances in two recent works, Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* and Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*, both of which diagnose the exhaustion, in our times, of stances of critical suspicion associated with the academic humanities. For Felski, the dandy is the ego-ideal for the ethos of detachment and comprehensive skepticism prized in the academy: "[T]he dandy's immaculate self-consciousness and disdain for sentimental effusions is perfectly attuned to the scholarly zeitgeist, allowing the critic to carve out a skeptical distance from the mainstream without lapsing back into an earnest language of reason and truth or old-school worship of art" (49). For Konstantinou, likewise, "the history of dandyism" is invoked as the historical origin for the ironist's oppositional savvy, "which he uses to affirm his status as part of an elect minority, a master of the cultural or symbolic field" (30, 31).

As font of irony and criticism, the dandy appears in both of these studies because they are less concerned with critique or irony as formal, logical, or argumentative problems than as subjective attitudes, ways of being. As Felski says, "[I]t is now the *posture* of the critic that carries disproportionate weight: ironic, reflexive, fastidious, prescient, an implacable foe of false dualism and foundational truths" (24, emphasis mine). Or, as Konstantinou puts it, "Irony is not a method...It is an ethos that consumes the whole person, a whole life" (16-17). "Irony" and "critique" are not of course identical, but, as these passages suggest, there is substantial overlap between them. Both are, in Konstantinou's words, "characterological"—they reflect not a set of precepts but, rather, a certain kind of person. While for Felski the dandy has pride of place, for Konstantinou the more important figure is the mid-century "hipster," who, in seminal accounts offered by such figures as Norman Mailer and Anatole Broyard, "seems like nothing less than an *intellectual*...someone whose ultimate weapon is his ability to manipulate meaning and confront the symbolic logic of social life" (57).

But the most symptomatic instances of what Felski calls "suspicious reading" (she adapts the phrase from Paul Ricoeur's well-known

"hermeneutic of suspicion") have neither the dandy's grace nor the hipster's rebellious panache. The characterological correlative of interpretation at its most suspicious is, rather, "the clinically paranoid individual" (35). The tendency Felski refers to might be summed up in David Bromwich's<sup>1</sup> rueful observation, in 1996, of "the current orthodoxy in literary theory, which says, 'Novels are instruments of social discipline, prisons that maim and kill,' or else: 'Complexity and difference...are simulated goods, pure products of the totalising discourse of the bourgeois state.'" Mark Seltzer<sup>2</sup>, for instance, is a critic of formidable intelligence—but who doesn't feel, at this point, that there is something a bit bug-eyed in insisting that Henry James enacts "the discretion achieved by modern technologies of social control...including the institution of the novel itself" (18)?

This is from Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power*, which Felski mentions in passing as exemplary of those Foucault-derived critiques that find "the novel...guilty not only of exercising power but of doing its utmost to conceal this fact" (93). But Seltzer's book, which came out in 1984, had the virtue of surprise, bolstered by Seltzer's considerable skill as a reader. In the decades since, this temperament has become rote, its presumptions of scathing demystification and political relevance ringing ever more hollow. Felski is especially good on the peculiar form of self-satisfied, bullying moralizing that "suspicious reading" can involve. "Suspicion," she writes, "sets in motion a search for agents who can be held to account for acts of wrongdoing"; "[i]nterpretation becomes a moral as well as a political exercise in the detection of guilt" (86, 94). Such interpretation is troubling to Felski not, she insists, because it violates the aesthetic integrity of works of art, but for its tedious routinization, its "banality" (115). I would add that such wearying rituals of demystification have achieved popular saturation to an almost unbelievable extent, so that one can consume predictable pseudo-critiques in, say, the *Huffington Post* about the latest reality show or Taylor Swift video almost as fast as the networks can generate new programming.

<sup>1</sup> David Bromwich, "Rat Poison." *London Review of Books* 18.20 (17 October, 1996): 13-15.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984).

In substantiating her claims about the critical attitude—its rhetoric and its ethos—Felski provides schematic histories of critique’s major intellectual traditions, which, in her account, can be roughly divided into the Freudian/Marxist (“interpretation as excavation” [61]) and the Barthesian/Foucauldian, in which “the most urgent task of critique is to ‘denaturalize’—to turn what looks like nature back into culture” (70). These thumbnail intellectual sketches are suggestive but, of necessity, rather broad-brush. Drawing on both of these traditions is a methodological orientation with particular salience in literary studies, the “strong contextualization” which sees the primary task of literary criticism as the situating of a literary work within thick descriptions of some aspect of its historical period. Felski is not opposed to historical reconstruction as such—that would be insane—but she objects to the “remarkably static view of meaning” which a hypostasized historicism can lead to (157). As always, she is mainly concerned with tone, in this case with what she sees as the historicists’ self-serving contempt for their tendentiously projected foil, mere aestheticism: “The invocation of original context has become an ethical and political duty: a sign that one is on the right side, fighting the good fight against the retrograde ranks of aesthetes and litterateurs mumbling into their sherry glasses” (161).

Felski thinks that contextualism pursued to the exclusion of everything else forecloses some of the most important questions about how artworks continue to resonate after the period of their creation. By pretending that the only valid interpretation is that which elaborates the ties between a work and its context—ties that are theoretically inexhaustible, thereby always ensuring that the critic has something to do—contextualism is ill-equipped to address the ways contemporary readers can “feel solicited, buttonholed, stirred up, by words that were drafted eons ago” (155). If contextualism sees itself as standing opposed to the mushy aestheticism that glorifies works of art as “timeless,” Felski wants instead to focus on works, “in their potential to resonate in different moments,” as “time-full” (161). What is called for is not belletristic effusions but an experientially oriented account of art according to “what kinds of emotions it elicits, what changes of perception it prompts, what bonds and attachments it calls into being” (179).

Such an “affective hermeneutics” (182) might bring the problem of a literary artifact’s transhistorical resonance into conversation with literary scholarship’s recent interest in affect and emotions while also clarifying the way literary texts can—Felski borrows the terminology from Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory—serve as actors in a social field. Latourian sociology is the rabbit Felski pulls out of her hat in the book’s final chapter, the solution, she thinks, to the woes of a scholarly emphasis on demystification grown sclerotic. But much of what she calls for sounds a lot like reader-response theory as developed, in the seventies and eighties, by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss. Iser drew on phenomenology to produce supple accounts of literary experience, and Jauss launched the influential theory of the “horizon of expectations,” which wedded empirical reader-response to genre theory to account for literary change across historical time. German reader-response is susceptible to any number of criticisms—Iser in particular has been accused of a sleight-of-hand by which putatively empirical readers are swapped out for an ideal reader, stripped of social and historical particularity—but the basic problems reader-response marks out, and has gone some way towards solving, have returned to front and center. Besides Felski, exciting and influential critics such as Sianne Ngai and Bill Brown might be associated with a general turn towards a phenomenological hermeneutics.

It is puzzling, then, that none of these critics invoke reader-response, though the overlap between their concerns and the Germans’ is considerable. I have no objection to the application of Latour to literary study, but it is worth remembering that literary scholarship has evolved its own considerable theoretical traditions for addressing the literary object as an “actor” whose impact can be gauged by a consideration of readerly phenomenology. When Felski writes that “literary works ‘make available’ certain options for moving through them,” options “taken up in wildly varying ways by empirical readers” (164), she is describing a research program for some version of reader-response theory.

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“Of the four master tropes that Kenneth Burke enumerated—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—only irony draws blood,” remarks Konstantinou in the preface

to his study (xi). Drawing blood, at least the figurative blood flowing from punctured mystifications, is typical of the dandy, exemplary for Felski of the ethos of critique. Likewise, the characterological types Konstantinou associates with irony, the hipster and the punk, achieve their superior knowingness at the expense of an explicit or implicit opponent, whose way of seeing the world suffers a loss of power at the hands of the ironist's skepticism. The shape-shifting hipster Rhinehart in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, for instance, sees more clearly than those around him that, as Konstantinou puts it, "the truth is perhaps *always* a lie" (74). The power of critical vision that permits the ironist to see through the delusions by which other people live reaches its apotheosis in the punk "positive dystopias" of William Burroughs and Kathy Acker, authors who, Konstantinou says, "imagine a thorough-going negativity that promises access to the real itself" (154). Burroughs's and Acker's obscene, scandalous, hilarious fantasies are, in this reading, the furthest reaches of the ironic ethos, but also its most desperate promise. Negative utopia is the place where irony's excoriations become visionary, even transcendent.

The second half of *Cool Characters* focuses on what Konstantinou calls "post-irony," an ethos most convincingly associated with Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace. These writers strategically renounce what they frame as the culture's automatic, thoughtless recourse to irony. Such "post-irony" hopes to establish, in place of what it sees as irony's "toxic incredulity" (215), a "general ethos of belief"—though not one committed to any particular political, ideological, or even epistemological program. To be a "believer," for Wallace and Eggers, is its own good. No longer a figure for truth-telling or resistance, the ironist, for these writers, has become a symbol of cynical acquiescence to the imperatives of a thoughtless consumer culture.

How is what Konstantinou calls "post-irony" like or unlike what Felski calls "post-critique"? Konstantinou himself identifies Felski's "phenomenology of enchantment" as a "critical tendency...aris[ing] from pressures similar to those that produced the literary and popular backlash against postmodern irony" (8). Like post-irony, post-critique will reject what has come to seem an automatic, and so no longer fruitful, attitude of negation. As Felski says:

These are some of the things that a postcritical reading will decline to do: subject a text to interrogation; diagnose its hidden anxieties; demote recognition to yet another form of misrecognition; lament our incarceration in the prison-house of language; demonstrate that resistance is just another form of containment; read a text as a metacommentary on the undecidability of meaning; score points by showing that its categories are socially constructed; brood over the gap that separates word from world. (173)

In place of such affectively negative critical habits, she recommends an emphasis on how "we may...be brought to feel differently by a text" (178); she wants a kind of rich phenomenological description of what might be called the literary relation: "[P]ostcritical reading ... can do better justice to the transtemporal liveliness of texts and the coconstruction of texts and readers—without opposing thought to emotion or divorcing intellectual rigor from affective attachment" (154). In other words, Felski recommends an approach designed to account for the longevity of literary texts that cannot but involve a focus on aesthetic appreciation, because appreciation is how a work secures uptake across time. Although Felski pointedly avoids making "appreciation" a central term in her adumbration of the "post-critical," the positive affects she is interested in—most particularly "enchantment"—are, in relation to literary works, inevitably associated with appreciation.

Like post-critique, the post-irony Konstantinou describes Eggers and Wallace endorsing takes its impetus from a general sense that attitudes once considered oppositional have become normative and therefore banal. Eggers and Wallace would like to replace such negativity at the level of mood and affect with other, more positive dispositions. At the end of his study, Konstantinou suggests that "the occupier" embodies a "post-ironic political engagement" (281). In Jonathan Lethem's 2013 *Dissident Gardens*, for instance, "Only Occupy [Wall Street] offers...a name for a political ethos (a post-ironic characterological model) that might do something to reverse, or at least halt, the American left's downward political trajectory" (285). Post-irony, in other words, is seen by the American authors who embrace it as a way back into politics. If the dandy stands at the wellspring of ironic criticality, the occupier is the dandy's opposite: he

or she resuscitates critique in the key of sincerity and earnestness. Earnestness is the dispositional common ground between “the believer” and “the occupier.” Too, earnestness surely informs Felski’s call for a renewed attention to literature’s “life-transforming” possibilities.

All criticism, even Felski’s proposed “affective hermeneutics,” must be “suspicious” in the sense that the critic must suspect that the way a work achieves its effects is opaque until elucidated. Or, to import Konstantinou’s keyword, criticism cannot be “post-ironic” because it depends on the presumption that there is some gap between meaning happening and its explanation—between the “what” and the “how” of aesthetic experience. Konstantinou makes a related point about not literary but political experience. The occupier, he says, can temper the earnestness inherited from the turn against irony by helping us to “cultivate...an ironic understanding of our own [ironic] countercultural inheritance” (288). Such strategically preserved irony recognizes that, whatever its virtues, a too-thoroughgoing post-irony necessarily dulls our perception of

what is really going on. The path Konstantinou marks out is from irony to commitment, from suspicion to “learning how to build enduring institutions” that might “dismantle the power of those whose strength partly depends on our cynicism” (288). Ironic suspicion is a *via negativa*, then, which nevertheless contains a redemptive promise. Something similar is true in the less practically urgent realm of literary reading. I am reminded of Walter Pater<sup>3</sup> on Wordsworth, whose poetry, Pater says, “begets...a *habit of reading between the lines*, a faith in the effect of concentration and collectedness of mind in the right appreciation of poetry, an expectation of things, in this order, coming to one by means of a right discipline of the temper as well as of the intellect” (126-27, emphasis mine). The limits of post-irony might also suggest the limits of post-critique. Without a dose of suspicion—without a habit of reading between the lines—thinking stagnates, and appreciation itself becomes impossible.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Pater, *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*. Ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Columbia UP, 1974).