Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2015), viii + 228 pp.

The Limits of Critique is a persuasive and passionate quarrel with the current state of literary studies. And who would be better equipped to pick this quarrel than Rita Felski, editor of *New Literary History* with a seismographic feel for the cutting edge of theory. At the core of her new book stands a way of reading—"against the grain and between the lines…to draw out what a text fails—or willfully refuses—to see"—that Felski (with Paul Ricoeur) calls a "*hermeneutics of suspicion*" (1, emphasis in the original). Better known as "critique," this eminent scholarly practice has assumed a stifling dominance in our field. Felski, who concedes not being immune to its intellectual charisma and, indeed, made a name for herself as a practitioner of feminist critique, finds this situation not only unfortunate but in dire need for change. For despite its undeniable merits, which are nowhere as palpable as in the recent success stories of the academic institutionalization of feminism, postcolonial and queer studies, critique "has sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic and political possibilities—ones that are just as vital to the flourishing of new fields of knowledge than older ones" (190).

Careful to not fall into the trap of performing a mere "critique of critique" that "only draws us further into [the] suspicious mind-set,…[the] endless regress of skeptical questioning" (9) which Felski seeks to overcome, the declared aim of her new book is to describe her subject in ways that expose the limits of critique and, ultimately, make room for other—restorative, resonant, trusting (151; 160; 9)—modes of reading. *Limits* thus stays in tune with Felski's investment in giving thought to what does not belong to our usual scholarly repertoire. Is it not time, she asked in her previous book, to align our critical endeavors with literature's affective affordances? To take seriously that readers are drawn to, moved by, enthralled, and at times even obsessed with literary texts because these texts harbor experiences of recognition, enchantment, shock, and knowledge?[1]

In stark contrast to the "uses of literature" explored in her previous book, the mode of reading that Felski sees at work in the scholarly practice of critique thrives on critical distance and detachment from its object while being geared toward a singular end: *disenchantment*. And because critique defines itself by cool nay-saying rather than warm affirmation, the distinct pleasures that it provides—"the intellectual kick of detecting figures and designs underneath the text's surface, the delight of crafting ingenious and counterintuitive explanations, the challenge of drawing together what seems disparate and disconnected into a satisfying pattern" (108)—are rarely acknowledged. "[I]mmersed in techniques of deciphering and diagnosing a text" (112) rather than in the text itself, critique enamors itself in a radical rhetoric of "*againstness*" (17, emphasis in the original). Yet while claiming to be inherently resistant and unorthodox, it has long become mainstream, "an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma" (9).

One powerful and, indeed, disconcerting effect of this development is that whatever is not in line with critique's unabashed commitment to bring to light the disenchanting truth that a text presumably hides from plain view is doomed as "subservient," naïve, and "uncritical" (51). And who wants to be that? For those engaging in it, critique is alluring for its refined "technique of 'self-problematization'": "scrupulous abstention from commonsense beliefs and commitments" provides access, and possibly even belonging, to a realm of "rarified knowledge" (25). There is a notable continuity with the modernist aegis of defamiliarization (what appears to the eye and meets our fancies is deemed to be treacherous), and Felski gives ample thought to this important conundrum throughout her book. The price that we pay as a discipline for complying with the overpowering negativity and the either/or self-legitimization regiment of critique (if you don't do it you must be uncritical) is a coercive streamlining, a compulsive reining in of critical perspective (suspicion, Felski does not tire to reminds us, is only one among many possible modes) and a severely impoverished vocabulary. "Why," she justly laments, "—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?" (13)

So yes, *Limits* is part of a larger project of poring over the manifold "uses of literature," yet with a renewed and reinforced insistence that our *scholarly* practice of reading comes to bear substantially on the value that we, be-

[1] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden MA and Oxford UK: Blackwell, 2008).

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stowed with the authority of the professional reader, assign to literature as such. Felski is not alone in her concern about scholarly modes of reading. In fact, one of the most productive outcomes of the current legitimization crisis of our field—why bother with literature at a time of neoliberal downsizing and digital outsourcing—is a heightened and possibly unprecedented interest in matters of reading; and one of the great merits of Felski's book lies in providing a lucid and tart overview of this debate and its main currents. The recent *Representations* issue "How We Read Now," notorious for endorsing what guest editors Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have dubbed "surface reading" and their dismissive stance toward depth and especially symptomatic reading is one of her pronounced points of reference.

But as Felski elaborates in an especially persuasive chapter, "Digging Down and Standing Back," a mere turn toward the surface would not settle her quarrel. For as oppositional as the two reading modes discussed in this chapter certainly are in practically all of their premises—"hermeneutics versus genealogy, depth versus surface, the pursuit of truth versus the interrogation of nature," Freud versus Foucault, and so on—both are well-established modes of critique. And as such, they share an understanding of the text as an "imagined opponent" or even "antagonist" whose gambit is to mislead (81); for the suspicious reader of either tribe, a text is thus "an inert object to be scrutinized rather than a phenomenon that can be engaged" (82).

Just as in Felski's earlier work on matters of reading, and notwithstanding her recent endorsement of actor-network-theory, a phenomenological hermeneutics sustains her theory of reading. Phenomenology, she writes elsewhere, wants "to really see the ordinary structure of experience—not to celebrate its authenticity, but to gain a surer grasp on the inescapable nature of our first-person-relation to the world."[2] *Limits* renders this relation as quintessentially hermeneutic. Affirmatively quoting ANT scholar Adam S. Miller—"[t]he need for interpretation…is not the mark of a fallen world, it is the substance of life" (175)[3]—she asserts that critique is no exception from this basic pattern. Like other forms of engaging with the world it is "an affective stands that orients us in a certain way, … a particular cluster of conventions rather than a synonym for freewheeling dissidence or disembodied skepticism" (18). Riffing on Raymond Williams and the pragmatic sociologists Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, she contends that "critique is ordinary" (139), not exceptional.

Phenomenology, hermeneutics and pragmatism head the list of those sidelined critical options that Felski seeks to reinvigorate in her recent work, be it as scholar or editor; with their deep-seated commitment to (ordinary) experience and an acute propensity to trouble clear-cut dichotomies (subject versus object, body versus mind, feeling or imagining versus knowing, being versus having), all three of them are, indeed, very apt for the task of challenging critique's demands for categorical disenchantment. Yet whereas phenomenology and pragmatism certainly do not belong to the critical mainstream, they have an established presence in Anglo-American literary theory (Sara Ahmed, Stephen Connor, Joan Richardson, and Stanley Cavell are some of the names that might come to mind). The dark horse in *Limits* is the hermeneutic tradition, which has no such presence in Anglo-American critical discourse to speak of today, and whose neglect Felski rightly finds "close to scandalous," especially "[g]iven the surge of interest in questions of reading" (34).

In fact, the critical climate that Felski describes so insightfully in her new book has reduced hermeneutics—a rich and nuanced philosophy of interpretation—to "the self-flattering image of the heroic, truth-uncovering critic" that continues to serve as a punching ball for critical iconoclasm.[4] And while aesthetics has suffered a similar fate in Anglo-American criticism, which Felski is also keen to contest, hermeneutics assumes a more prominent, or at least more pronounced position in her new book. In her introduction to a recent *New Literary History* issue on interpretation she seems careful to not too fully endorse the hermeneutic tradition, casting its stern alliance with interpretation as "foundational and thus self-evident" against "rivals" (in the logic of critique, the natural bearers of

[2] Rita Felski, "Everyday Aesthetics," *The Minnesota Review* 71-72 (2009), p. 174.

[3] Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013), p. 109.

[4] Rita Felski, Introduction to the Special Issue "Interpretation and Its Rivals," *New Literary History* 45.2 (Spring 2014), p. vi.

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our sympathy) such as the presumably more subtle, less abstract and self-assertive critical practice of description that she also adheres to in her new book.[5] Methodologically, *Limits* clearly leans toward describing the phenomenon at hand from various angles (critique as mood and method in chapter 1; two of its most widely practiced methods in chapter 2; critique as narrative genre in chapter 3; critique's rhetorical makeup in chapter 4; and a model for post-critical reading in chapter 5) rather than presenting its readers with conclusive interpretations.

But even in its most basic and rudimentary form, description entails some minor form of interpretation (and thus at least a small dose of the kind of valorization and hierarchization without which meaning production cannot do)—for instance, when it comes to deciding which details to work with, which ones to leave out, and how to combine the ones selected. That Felski is not unlikely to agree with this and, indeed, makes a very similar case for the genuinely interpretative—and thus intrinsically narrative—detective work of critique in chapter 3 (my personal favorite!) points toward an increased alignment with hermeneutics "as a resource to be reimagined rather than an idol to be destroyed" (34). And this is, indeed, the most daring maneuver in her new book.

Surprising as it might seem, the critical project of reimagining hermeneutics is closely bound up with Felski's already mentioned endorsement of actor-network theory, and of Latour in particular. Taking to heart Latour's wise statement that "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds' but *well*-attached" (146; emphasis in the original)[6], she contends that, no matter how austere and radical critique fathoms itself, if it wants to succeed in practice, it needs to "create real or imagined communities around a sensibility, ethos, and practice of reading" (49). And attachment is, indeed, key to the critical use that Felski draws from ANT. It allows her to construe "the view of works of art *and* of the social constellations in which they are embedded" (153, emphasis in the original) in ways that push beyond the old game of "championing text over context, or vice versa" (153) that has served generations of scholars as the primal scene of their critical endeavors.

Under the aegis of ANT, history—the most daunting of all contexts—ceases to be teleological to become strictly relational; it "is not moving forward, and none of us is leading the way" (159). But if we follow the itinerary of literary texts across time, we can see how "they run into new semantic networks, new ways of imputing meaning" (160). Literary texts thus become "non-human actors" that "survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts" (165-66), and that they, in doing so, "can *generate* criteria as well as be objects of criteria" (168, emphasis in the original).

For someone like me who has been awed by W.J.T. Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?* this is a more than welcome perspective on the "loves and lives" of literary works.[7] Even so, the truly surprising twist in Felski's model of post-critical reading is how seamlessly she makes ANT compatible with hermeneutics as a readerly activity. "If actor-network-theory is a philosophy of relation," she writes, "so, in its more modest way, is hermeneutics, which casts texts and readers as cocreators of meaning" (173). To sustain this move, she not only quotes Miller—"[t]o live is to interpret"—but also Latour: "[h]ermeneutics is not a privilege of humans, but, so to speak, a property of the world itself" (175).[8] Swiftly bypassing the (my?) urge to make sense of Latour's enigmatic "so to speak," Felski, "grafting some of [ANT's] tenets [on]to [her] own agenda" (183), contends that "within this extended frame, how humans respond to poems or paintings still retains its salience, as offering clues to art's specific mode of existence" (175).

This is a valid and valuable point. Pierre Bourdieu would call the relational networks in which these artworks reside—Felski names "publishers, advertisers, prize committees, reviews, word-to-mouth recommendations, syllabi, textbooks and anthologies, changing tastes and scholarly vocabularies, and last but not least, the passions and predilections of ourselves and our students" (170) as being among the countless helpers that secure their existence—a literary *field*, Niklas Luhmann might call them a *system*. Both have more ex-

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5 Felski, Intoduction, p. v.

6 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford: Oxford UP: 2005), p. 218.

7 W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Loves and Lives of Images* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005).

8 Miller, *Speculative Grace*, p. 109; Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 245.

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plicit ties to institutions than ANT. Debating the compatibility of field, system and network would be beyond the present scope. In any case, Felski is well aware of "the role of institutions in influencing literary longevity" (160), but she does not flesh out its significance for the shape and state of critique.

Ending her final chapter on post-critical reading with "the curatorial role of the humanities—preserving and caring for vulnerable artifacts of the past—[as]…one of its most important features" (183) is a further nod in this direction. For how can the curatorial work that she has in mind as an alterative "use" of scholarly reading function without viable institutions? And even though she ends by expressing her wish "to move on" (192-93), I hope that she will consider the institutional angle of critique at least in another short essay.

But I want to come back to the critical project of reimagining hermeneutics one more time. Besides ANT, Felski brings to this task the work by a group of French scholars that amplifies the affective dimension of hermeneutics. One possible way in which the immensely rich and productive hermeneutic tradition can generate what Felski (with Tony Bennett) calls a "reading formation" (167) in the Anglo-American scholarly community today is, indeed, by attaching itself to current concerns with affect. In foregrounding a "text's entanglement with its readers," its "spring[ing] to life via a mundane yet mysterious process in which words are animated by readers and reanimate readers in their turn" (175) "ways of reading" become thus closely interlinked with "modes of being" (177).

From such a perspective, the literary text actively shapes or "styles" existence while readers, perforce the affects that guide their reading, become "reinventors" of the text (178). The profundity of Dick Hebdige's "meaning of style" assumes a new, literary dimension here. The text as "social artifact" (176) is an "open artwork" in Umberto Eco's sense of being "a work *to be completed*"[9]—possibly even "relational" in Nicolas Bourriaud's sense of creating "ways of living and models of action" rather than "imaginary and utopian realities."[10] Perhaps aesthetics can generate new attachments, new "reading formations" in Anglo-American criticism from such a vantage point. If so, this timely, forceful and important book is likely to have played a part in it. In any case, it fully accomplishes what it sets out to do: exposing the limits of the eminent scholarly practice known as critique. Whether or not new critical possibilities flourish in its wake is up to its readers.

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[9] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 19.

[10] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses de reel, 2002), p. 13.

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