

1 ELIZABETH S. ANKER and RITA FELSKI (eds.),
2 *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC:
3 Duke UP, 2017), 329 pp.

5 Another death of Theory? Another burial?
Another entombment during which no one
sheds a single tear and all one hears are listless-
ly uttered anecdotes, as well as some mumbled
and incoherent obscenities? Since many peo-
ple outside academia think that literary stud-
ies is a scandalously useless discipline, it has
10 to constantly justify its own existence. Those
attempts at justification and the respective
self-reflections of the discipline's proponents
can be useful or boring, stimulating and enter-
taining or jargon-filled nonsense. Whatever
their nature, they keep the "Fach" alive. The
15 "theory wars" of the past decades have shown
how intense such debates can get. The discus-
sion centering on the possibility of developing
forms of postcritique of course has to be seen
in connection with those "theory wars." How-
ever, there is more to it. This becomes obvious
20 in Rita Felski's widely discussed *The Limits
of Critique* (2015). In her opinion, critique is
a style of thinking that is reflected in Fredric
Jameson's symptomatic reading, ideology crit-
ique, Foucauldian discourse analysis, certain
forms of deconstruction, and versions of liter-
ary and cultural criticism that see it as their
primary task to discover signs of transgres-
sion or (political) resistance in texts or that
unmask political quietism. It is crucial to see
that Felski does not offer a polemic against
critique. Furthermore, it is of the utmost im-
portance to appreciate that she does not seek
to counterbalance the reign of critique and
suspicious reading with the imperative that it
was high time to realize the promising poten-
tial of a new aestheticism or new formalism.
Instead, as Felski emphasizes, she presents "a
35 close-up scrutiny of a thought style,"¹ which
goes hand in hand with a certain intellectual
mood or disposition.

In *Critique and Postcritique*, the editors,
Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski, continue the
work begun in *The Limits of Critique*. In their
introduction, they seek to convince their read-
ers that it is deplorable that the practices of
symptomatic or suspicious reading still seem
de rigueur for many literary scholars, and
they thus seek to convince their colleagues
to fully realize the tempting possibilities of a

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46 ¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chi-
cago, IL: U of Chicago P, 2015), 2.

wide range of affective styles, modes of argu-
ment, and tones. Critique must not be seen as
the only possible theoretical approach. While
Felski's argument in *The Limits of Critique*
constantly returned to the ideas, and prac-
tices, of affect, style, ethos, mood, and tone,
the editors of *Critique and Postcritique* also
ask whether critique entails "a distinctive
disposition, tone, attitude, or sensibility" (1).
Moreover, they call attention to the question
of whether "postcritique require[s] a different
ethos or affect" (2).

Critique has often been dominated by a
self-critical dimension, a desire to reach a
metalevel. Anker and Felski suggest that it is
interesting to ask how recent debates in liter-
ary and cultural theory differ from those at-
tempts at self-scrutiny or self-reflexivity, and
whether current reassessments of critique
will be capable of elucidating the promising
potential of a plurality of forms of postcri-
tique. Emphasizing the "chronic negativity
of critique" (11) and its self-proclaimed "op-
positional, marginal, and embattled status"
(13), the editors' contention is that postcri-
tical thought offers an alternative disposition.
Today's versions of postcritique include, for
instance, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's
notion of "surface reading," Heather Love's
idea of "thin description," Franco Moretti's
notion of "distant reading," affect theory, and
Bruno Latour's actor-network-theory and its
move from debunking to assembling and from
critique to composition.

What does *Critique and Postcritique* seek to
achieve? According to the editors, it "carries
out a threefold project: it offers an assessment
of the legacy and status of critique; it explores
a range of alternative methods and orienta-
tions; and it presents multiple perspectives on
the value of a postcritical turn" (2). The first
part, "Countertraditions of Critique," offers
discussions of counterhistories of critique that
have hitherto been mostly neglected in liter-
ary and cultural studies. It consists of three
essays: Toril Moi, "'Nothing is Hidden': From
Confusion to Clarity; or, Wittgenstein on
Critique"; Heather Love, "The Temptations:
Donna Haraway, Feminist Objectivity, and
the Problem of Critique;"; and Simon Dur-
ing, "The Eighteenth-Century Origins of Cri-
tique." The second part, "Styles of Reading,"
shows the postcritical critic at work, as it were.
The essays of this part combine theoretical
reflections with readings of novels as diverse
as Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love*, Jim Thomp-

son's noir novel *The Killer Inside Me*, and J.M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*. The essays in this section are: Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism"; Ellen Rooney, "Symptomatic Reading Is a Problem of Form"; C. Namwali Serpell, "A Heap of Cliché"; and Elizabeth S. Anker, "Why We Love Coetzee; or, *The Childhood of Jesus* and the Funhouse of Critique." The third and final part, "Affects, Politics, Institutions," focuses on the disposition of critique in the context of its politics. The essays in this section, even more so than the pieces in the other two parts, discuss the possible futures of critique. These futures, as the authors propose, have much to do with hope, imagination, a weak messianic power, and the idea of criticism-as-translation: Christopher Castiglia, "Hope for Critique?"; Russ Castronovo, "What Are the Politics of Critique? The Function of Criticism at a Different Time"; John Michael, "Tragedy and Translation: A Future for Critique in a Secular Age"; and Eric Hayot, "Then and Now."

Critique and Postcritique is an important, stimulating, and timely volume. In a thought-provoking manner, these elegantly argued essays highlight the consequences of the post-critical turn, and at the same time they demonstrate how exactly a postcritical reading differs from a close reading, the work of ideology critique, a deconstructionist reading, or a version of discourse analysis. It is as interesting to follow Moi's use of the later Wittgenstein and to understand why she holds that literary criticism "doesn't have anything we can plausibly call competing methods" (34), as it is stimulating to contemplate Castronovo's suggestion that it might be "productive to understand critique as the impossible pursuit of political relevance and meaning, one that anticipates but is destined never to achieve its exigent ends" (235). Moreover, there are productive tensions between Heather Love and Jennifer L. Fleissner's creative use of Latour's ANT and Christopher Castiglia's proposal that instead of rushing *postcritique* we should try to revitalize and redescribe critique. As Castiglia puts it in an important passage:

It may not be "critique" that has outlived its usefulness [. . .], but the dispositions that have become customary, even mandatory, to carry it out. Dispositions have their corollary in methodology, however, so as part of suggesting an alternative disposition for criticism—hopefulness—I will argue that the

introduction of two concepts—idealism and imagination—can revitalize critique. (212)

As one can see from these few examples, the essays in this volume do not simply engage in a mechanistic or ritualistic condemnation of critique. Rather, they seek to clarify how one can (dialectically) use critique's shortcomings, oversights, and liabilities in order to accentuate the possibility of demarcating a realm beyond critique. It is problematic that these attempts to elucidate the futures of critique completely ignore the significance of American pragmatism (the irony is that almost all contributors to this collection of essays teach at American universities and most of them are American). If one intends to draw attention to the possibilities offered by a combination of panrelationalism, antifoundationalism, historicist nominalism, and the creativity of action, it is not only Latour's ANT that serves this purpose. Pragmatism does the job just as well. From John Dewey's attack on Platonism, dualistic thought, and the quest for certainty to Rorty's scenario of a post-philosophical or poeticized culture, the development from finding to making has been central to pragmatism. Furthermore, pragmatism has the additional advantage that it is unwilling to consign the idea of humanism to the dustbin of history and instead shows how pragmatism, humanism, anti-authoritarianism, and postmetaphysics are linked. If one considers this combination as helpful then Latour's move toward ontology and Best and Marcus's neoempiricism and its attempt to reactivate the categories of "objectivity, validity, truth"² become problematic. In other words, pragmatism offers another perspective on the endeavor to imagine the contours of postcritique.

The same can be said about Jacques Rancière's philosophy. While pragmatism does not play a role in *Critique and Postcritique* (nor in Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, for that matter), Rancière is briefly mentioned in the introduction and in Castiglia's essay. Nonetheless, as far as I can see the proponents of postcritique have so far avoided a detailed discussion of Rancière's work and its implications for a critique of critique. From his early study *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1973) to *Aisthesis: Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* (2011), Rancière has

² Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (2009): 1-21, 17.

1 criticized a hermeneutics of depth, the notion
 2 of pure philosophy (or theory), and the idea of
 3 an immutable truth. He has sought to highlight
 the advantages of a horizontal and topographi-
 cal analysis that directs attention to forms of
 5 dissensus hitherto unnoticed or marginalized.
 Instead of keeping philosophy and theory pure,
 he is interested in the creativity, contingency,
 and singularity of practices, their delimitations,
 and ways of confronting those delimitations.
 Furthermore, he claims that his practice of phi-
 10 losophy “is an-archival, in the sense that it trac-
 es back the specificity of disciplines and discurs-
 ive competences to the ‘egalitarian’ level of
 linguistic competence and poetic invention.”³
 Striving to disclose “the contingency or the
 poetic character of any *arkhê*,”⁴ the Rancièrian
 15 poetics of knowledge can be seen as trying to
 convince us that we should attempt to reach a
 point where we no longer deify anything and
 where we stop looking to philosopher-kings or
 theorists for versions of an immutable truth.
 Rancièr’s poetics of knowledge and horizon-
 tal analysis concentrates on the common pow-
 20 ers of linguistic innovation, the power of poetic
 invention in the world of practice, the relations
 between texts, images, and gestures, as well as
 on the contingency of any man-made founda-
 tion. It should be obvious that postcritical read-
 25 ings could profit from Rancièr’s version of
 critique.

As mentioned above, one of the *bêtes noires*
 of postcritique is Marxism. In particular
 Jameson’s version of (Hegelian) Marxism has
 been criticized by Best and Marcus, Felski,
 30 and others. The problem is that these authors
 concentrate exclusively on Jameson’s *The Po-
 litical Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially
 Symbolic Act* (1981) without seeing the neces-
 sity of considering the rest of this Marxist’s
 impressive oeuvre. None of the postcritics, for
 35 instance, discusses Jameson’s understanding

of utopia, which is central to his work from his
 early essay, “Reification and Utopia in Mass
 Culture” (1979), to many of the pieces collect-
 ed in *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009). That the
 postcritical analysis of Marxism is too undif-
 ferentiated also becomes obvious when Anker
 and Felski maintain that a hermeneutics of
 suspicion “can lead to a neglect of the formal
 qualities of art” (16). Anker and Felski make
 unequivocally clear that they think that Marx-
 40 ism is one of the most important theoretical
 approaches that they subsume under the cat-
 egorical critique. At the same time, however,
 they submit that critique too often is incapable
 of fully appreciating the formal dimensions of
 literary texts and works of art. This argument
 of course ignores the work of Adorno and
 Jameson. Undoubtedly, one can question the
 intimate link between narrative, depth, form,
 and truth in their texts (think of Adorno’s in-
 sistence upon the “truth-content of the works
 of art”—“der Wahrheitsgehalt der Werke”),
 but one ought to refrain from contending that
 postcritique as surface reading is superior to
 critique as far as the interpretation of aesthet-
 ic form is concerned. In this regard, postcri-
 45 tique still has much work to do.

Critique and Postcritique does not pro-
 claim another death of Theory. There will be
 no burial, no fake tears, and no obscenities.
 On the contrary, this volume is one of the most
 convincingly and elegantly argued reflections
 on the state of—you guessed it—Theory that
 have been published in the past two decades.
 Critique is not the same as Theory, but it is
 dangerously close. Without doubt, the essays
 collected in this volume will have a profound
 and lasting impact on discussions centering on
 the question of what it means to move beyond
 critique.

Ulf Schulenberg (Bremen)

3 Jacques Rancièr, “The Thinking of Dis-
 44 sensus: Politics and Aesthetics,” Paul Bowman
 and Richard Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancièr*
 (New York: Continuum, 2011), 1-17, 14.

4 Rancièr, 15.