

After Suspicion

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# *After Suspicion*

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RITA FELSKI

On Tuesdays and Thursdays I tell a roomful of students that myth is culture masquerading as nature and that signifiers beget ever more signifiers in the prison house of language. Postmodernism just is the cultural logic of late capitalism, and the documents of civilization turn out to be synonymous with the documents of barbarism. The Orient, we surmise, does not exist, even as the discourse of orientalism cranks out endless proofs of its essential and unchanging nature. And sexual identity, far from being the truth of the self, is forged by a cultural imperative to confess so deeply ingrained that we no longer see it as the effect of a power that constrains us.

To teach a survey course in literary theory is to induct one's students in techniques of suspicious interpretation, to train them to read between the lines and against the grain. In some of the essays we read, suspicion slices into a text like a scalpel to expose its complicity with the logic of imperialism or heteronormativity; in other essays, it is ratcheted up to a higher-order skepticism that calls the feasibility of truth into question and that hammers home the contingency and ungroundedness of our beliefs. But the animating spirit of our inquiry is the conviction that appearances deceive and that texts do not willingly surrender their secrets. Instead of being emblazoned in the words on the page, meaning lies beneath or to the side of these words, encrypted in what the literary work cannot or will not say, in its eloquent stuttering and recalcitrant silences. Disdain-

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ing the obvious in order to probe the infinite mysteries of the unsaid, the hermeneutics of suspicion promotes a sensibility that prides itself on its uncompromising wariness and hypervigilance.

To be sure, not every author on the syllabus is equally intent on outfoxing literary texts by pouncing on their contradictions and deciphering their ideological inscriptions. My students ponder Theodor Adorno's proposition that the seemingly solipsistic works of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, in the very dissonance and brokenness of their form, hold out a fragile promise of human freedom. My students encounter, in Hélène Cixous's poetic and polyphonic prose, a vertiginous torrent of words that seeks to shake up thought and to imagine the yet unknown. And in grappling with deconstruction, they absorb some basic lessons about the pitfalls of masterful interpretation and the ways in which texts elude or escape the analytic grids we press upon them. Our repertoire of theoretical examples includes many injunctions to respect the otherness of texts, to attend to the aesthetic and figurative dimensions of language, to conceive of works of art as sources of illumination or insurrection rather than as documents to be diagnosed and found wanting. The current surge of interest in literary ethics speaks directly to this question, advocating a style of reading that can do justice to a text's singularity and strangeness instead of trying to shoehorn it into a predetermined conceptual frame.

And yet suspicion is not so much dissipated in this second set of arguments as it is displaced. The literary text is lauded for its staunch resistance to ordinary language and thought, its subversion of *idées fixes* and *idées reçues*. We do not need to be suspicious of the text, in other words, because the text is already doing all the work of suspicion for us. It anticipates and outstrips our critical vigilance through its skills in undermining the self-evident, estranging familiar structures of experience, thwarting the banality or obtuseness of everyday beliefs. We prize its wariness of closure, its disarming of thought, its giddy dislocations of causality and coherence. The literary text performs a metacommentary on the traps of interpretation, a canny reading of its own possible readings, a knowing anticipation and exposure of all possible hermeneutic blunders. Critic and work are thus bound together in an alliance of mutual mistrust *vis-à-vis* congealed forms of language and thought. Suspicion sustains and reproduces itself in a reflexive distrust of common knowledge and an emphasis on the chasm that separates scholarly and lay interpretation.

What else could we teach our students besides critical reading? The bemusement likely to greet such a question speaks to the entrenched nature of a scholarly habitus, the ubiquity of a particular form of intellectual life. As Michael Warner points out, the slogan of critical reading has colonized

literary studies with exceptional efficiency, thanks to its success in synchronizing the practice of scholarship with the exercise of skepticism. In the theory classroom, especially, intellectual rigor is equated with deft acts of defamiliarization, rebuttals of evident or obvious meanings, rehearsals of the self-undermining and self-questioning movements of language. Becoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment, undergoing not just an intellectual but also a sentimental education. The only alternative to such a process of *askesis*, it seems, is remaining stalled in the role of an uncritical reader, hardly a plausible or attractive educational goal.

Thanks to this institutionally mandated division of reading practices, my students often learn to disparage their previous responses to texts as naive, rudimentary, even embarrassing. Such responses are not easily or efficiently excised, but they are driven out of sight and mind in the theory classroom, screened by shinier, sexier, more charismatic vocabularies. By and large, my students are intrigued by these vocabularies; they relish a challenge to their commonsense assumptions; they grapple heroically with puzzling and counterintuitive ideas; they ventriloquize and sometimes take to heart various idioms of critique and countercritique. And yet there comes a point when many of them—especially those who do not see themselves as professors in the making—turn away. They do so, I believe, not because of any inherent distaste for theory but because the theories they encounter are so excruciatingly tongue-tied about why literary texts matter, offering only a critical deflation of the reasons rather than a searching engagement with them. To be sure, the readings in feminist, African American, and queer theory appeal to the commitments of some of my students, yet even here the vocabularies at their disposal fail to clarify key discriminations in their responses, to shed light on why a student may be entranced by the work of one feminist poet and left entirely indifferent by another.

Cultural studies often proves the most popular unit of the semester, not only because my students can flaunt their superior knowledge of rap music or reality TV but also because of their patent relief at finally encountering a vigorous defense of everyday aesthetic pleasure. And yet the anthropological gaze that cultural studies directs at the enthusiasm of romance novel readers and *Star Trek* fans reinforces the sense of an unbridgeable chasm between acts of reading inside and outside the classroom. Such an insistence on the radical differences between interpretative communities disallows the possibility of overlapping modes of reading and shared cognitive and affective parameters. While this emphasis on incommensurable modes of reception is often justified by invoking Pierre Bourdieu, new sociological work is challenging his findings and his reduction of individual

to class tastes and is documenting the blurring and intermingling of cultural tastes, modes of appreciation, and regimes of value (Lahire). In this context, the protocols of scholarly criticism may owe more to everyday pleasures, mundane motives, and habits of thought than we like to admit.

My own turn to what I call neophenomenology springs from a desire to build better bridges between theory and common sense, between academic criticism and ordinary reading, by delving into the mysteries of our many-sided attachments to texts. Such an approach pivots on our first-person implication and involvement in what we read, calling on us to clarify how and why particular texts matter to us. Its orientation is toward meaning rather than truth or the demystification of truth, toward examining the intricate play of perception, interpretation, and affective orientation that constitutes aesthetic response. Yet because consciousness is always intentional, that is to say consciousness of something, it also draws our attention to the stylistic and narrative devices that shape aesthetic experience. Neophenomenology is phenomenology after the linguistic turn, cognizant that cultural mediation renders consciousness neither self-contained nor self-evident. It declines to quarantine personhood from the pressures of context, to bracket the historical and cultural factors that shape interpretation. What it borrows from phenomenology is the willingness to be patient rather than impatient, to describe rather than prescribe, to look carefully at rather than through appearances, to respect rather than to reject what is in plain view. It presumes, in other words, the irreducible complexity of everyday structures of experience.

Such an orientation has clear affinities with the burgeoning interest in affect. One of the distinguishing marks of works of art, after all, is their ability to inspire intense responses, inchoate emotions, quasi-visceral passions, working and worming their way into our minds and bodies. Art is the quintessential mood-altering substance. Broaching questions of aesthetic emotion virtually guarantees surges of animation and spirited engagement in the classroom, as I've often found in discussions of the sublime, perhaps the only affective response to have gained a dose of critical respect. Yet a wide spectrum of responses remains unexamined and unaccounted for: trance-like states of immersion or absorption in literature's virtual worlds; surges of sympathy or mistrust, affinity or alienation, triggered by particular formal devices; the suddenness with which we can fall in love with, or feel ourselves addressed by, an author's style; less auspicious, but all too frequent, sensations of fretfulness, irritation, or boredom. Our students have hardly begun to reflect on the multilayered interplay of affect and expectation, of habitual schemata, cultural training, and idiosyncrasies of individual histories, that shapes what and how they read.

As such phrasing suggests, affect cannot be separated from interpretation. Aesthetic raptures and intensities are triggered not just by subliminal reactions to signifiers but also by what such signifiers represent and how they hook up to imaginative, ethical, cultural, and sociopolitical lifeworlds. An investigation of the modality of recognition, for example, allows students to analyze how and why they feel themselves addressed by particular novels, films, or plays. A certain amount of spadework may be needed to dislodge well-worn phrases about such texts to get at the truth of students' experience. Yet the standard theoretical response—demoting any instance of recognition to an example of misrecognition—proves no less formulaic, while conspicuously failing to do justice to a pervasive and many-sided structure of response. More fruitful intellectual options come to mind: turning to novels that represent and think through processes of readerly recognition, analyzing how formal devices encourage or attenuate such processes, exploring the deeper philosophical implications of recognition as both knowing again and knowing anew, weighing up the consequences of such knowing as it operates within or across temporal and cultural divides.

To be sure, such approaches carry a modicum of risk. Some students will need reminding that their devotion to Jane Austen or their passion for Jonathan Frantzen is a puzzle for investigation, not a cause for self-congratulation. Phenomenology seeks to make the familiar newly surprising through the scrupulousness of its attention, exposing the strangeness of the self-evident. It calls not for complacency or confession but for strenuous reflection on how aesthetic devices speak to and help shape selves. Such reflection reaches outward to the world as well as inward to the text, asking how reader response is shaped by educational training or social circumstance, how structures of feeling and interpretative registers are modulated across space and time. Yet the starting point is a deep sense of curiosity about the nature of our aesthetic attachments, as worthy of sustained and sophisticated investigation. Such an approach offers unique opportunities, as well as risks, in allowing students to reflect on rather than repress their engagement in what they read.

The nature of such engagement, it must be said, is not predetermined, self-evident, or unchanging. One hoped-for consequence of a literary education is that students acquire new attachments, affinities, interpretative repertoires. Such pedagogic dislocations and transformations often spring from works that initially baffle or frustrate their readers or that speak to them across a chasm of historical or cultural difference. Taking student response seriously does not mean underwriting catch-all calls for relevance that underestimate the power of texts to redefine what counts

as individually salient. Our goal is not to cater indiscriminately to student preferences but to shake up and reconfigure such preferences, introducing not only new texts but other ways of engaging them.

Yet this process is poorly characterized as a shift from uncritical to critical reading, as if literary training were a rarefied intellectual and analytic pursuit purged of all prejudice and passion. I've argued elsewhere that modes of enchantment imbue scholarly as well as popular reading, that our institutionally mandated styles of argument often screen murkier and messier involvements (Felski). We can be taken hold of, possessed, invaded by a text in a way that we cannot fully control or explain and in a manner that fails to jibe with public postures of ironic dispassion or disciplinary detachment. James Joyce enthusiasts are no less obsessive and monomaniacal than *Star Trek* fans, and experiences of absorption and self-loss are not the exclusive property of swooning adolescents.

What, then, comes after suspicion? Six more weeks of classroom instruction, another twelve sessions devoted to alternate styles of interpretation and aesthetic response. Every syllabus constitutes an argument, and I'm no longer convinced by my old reading list, by a repertoire of ideas that still resonate individually but that no longer add up to a compelling or comprehensive whole. Suspicion remains an indispensable sensibility and reading strategy in the classroom; students need to learn to read against the grain, to question received wisdoms, to learn the fundamentals of critical interpretation. The canon of theory remains newly challenging, and newly necessary, for each batch of students that wanders into my classroom. Indeed, a hermeneutics of suspicion, far from being the consequence of political correctness run wild, is a style of reading deeply implicated in the history of literary form, with its panoply of self-deceiving narrators, conflicting viewpoints, and metafictional devices that train readers to tread warily and read skeptically. And while distrustful of pleasure, suspicious reading generates its own pleasures: a sense of prowess in ingenious methods of interpretation, appreciation of the economy and elegance of particular explanatory patterns, the intellectual satisfaction of a heightened or sharpened understanding.

Elevated to the governing principle of literary studies, however, suspicion solidifies into a sensibility and set of disciplinary norms no less doctrinaire than the fastidious aestheticism and canon worship it sought to replace. Critique needs to be supplemented by generosity, pessimism by hope, negative aesthetics by a sustained reckoning with the communicative, expressive, and world-disclosing aspects of art. My revised course, then, will feature a new structure and a new title. While retaining many of my previous readings, I plan to teach them slightly differently, to frame

them as not only political or philosophical arguments but also specific styles of interpretation shaped by institutional, intellectual, and in some cases vernacular histories. And these readings will be juxtaposed against, and placed in conversation with, alternative frameworks: classic texts such as Susan Sontag's "Against Interpretation" and Eve Sedgwick on the limits of paranoid reading; Suzanne Keen on empathy and Martha Nussbaum on sympathy; both Marie-Laure Ryan and Charles Bernstein on the relations between absorption and literary form; Stephen Greenblatt on wonder; Janice Radway on middle-brow reading and Deidre Lynch on the cult of Austen; Wayne Koestenbaum on opera queens; Henry Jenkins on the emotional punch of popular culture; Elizabeth Long on reading as collective action. The heterogeneity of these perspectives is self-evident, but they share a willingness to push beyond regimes of suspicious reading, a conviction that aesthetic engagement does not have to mean intellectual naïveté or political complacency.

Beyond critical and uncritical reading lies a third option: what is sometimes described as postcritical reading. I prefer to call it reflective reading. Reflective reading harnesses the intellectual and theoretical curiosity associated with critique to develop more compelling and comprehensive accounts of why texts matter to us. It assumes that literature's relation to worldly knowledge is not only suspicious, subversive, or adversarial, that it can also amplify and replenish our sense of how things are. It attends to the depth, intensity, and power of our attachments and does not see scholarly reading as requiring a shedding of such attachments. It offers, in other words, a more dialogic and capacious vision of theory, one that can do better justice to the energies and enthusiasms that drive our students to literary studies in the first place.

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