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Uses of Literature

Rita Felski

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Introduction

This is an odd manifesto as manifestos go, neither fish nor fowl, an awkward, ungainly creature that ill-fits its parentage. In one sense it conforms perfectly to type: one-sided, skew-eyed, it harps on one thing, plays only one note, gives one half of the story. Writing a manifesto is a perfect excuse for taking cheap shots, attacking straw men, and tossing babies out with the bath water. Yet the manifestos of the avant-garde were driven by the fury of their againstness, by an overriding impulse to slash and burn, to debunk and to demolish, to knock art off its pedestal and trample its shards into the dust. What follows is, in this sense, an un-manifesto: a negation of a negation, an act of yea-saying not nay-saying, a thought experiment that seeks to advocate, not denigrate.

There is a dawning sense among literary and cultural critics that a shape of thought has grown old. We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ideas that seemed revelatory thirty years ago – the decentered subject! the social construction of reality! – have dwindled into shopworn slogans; defamiliarizing has lapsed into doxa, no less dogged and often as dogmatic as the certainties it sought to disrupt. And what virtue remains in the act of unmasking when we know full well what lies beneath the mask? More and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis, when the remedial reading of texts loses all sight of why we are drawn to such texts in the first place.

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Our students, meanwhile, are migrating in droves toward vocationally oriented degrees in the hope of guaranteeing future incomes to offset sky-rocketing college bills. The institutional fiefdoms of the natural and social sciences pull in ever heftier sums of grant money and increasingly call the shots in the micro-dramas of university politics. In the media and public life, what counts as knowledge is equated with a piling up of data and graphs, questionnaires and pie charts, input-output ratios and feedback loops. Old-school beliefs that exposure to literature and art was a sure path to moral improvement and cultural refinement have fallen by the wayside, to no one's great regret. In such an austere and inauspicious climate, how do scholars of literature make a case for the value of what we do? How do we come up with rationales for reading and talking about books without reverting to the canon-worship of the past?

According to one line of thought, literary studies is entirely to blame for its own state of malaise. The rise of theory led to the death of literature, as works of art were buried under an avalanche of sociological sermons and portentous French prose. The logic of this particular accusation, however, is difficult to discern. Theory simply is the process of reflecting on the underlying frameworks, principles, and assumptions that shape our individual acts of interpretation. Championing literature against theory turns out to be a contradiction in terms, for those who leap to literature's defense must resort to their own generalities, conjectures, and speculative claims. Even as he sulks and pouts at theory's baleful effects, Harold Bloom's assertion that we read "in order to strengthen the self and learn its authentic interests" is a quintessential theoretical statement.[1]

Yet we can concede that the current canon of theory yields a paucity of rationales for attending to literary objects. We are called on to adopt poses of analytical detachment, critical vigilance, guarded suspicion; humanities scholars suffer from a terminal case of irony, driven by the uncontrollable urge to put everything in scare quotes. Problematizing, interrogating, and subverting are the default options, the deeply grooved patterns of contemporary thought. "Critical reading" is the holy grail of literary studies, endlessly

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invoked in mission statements, graduation speeches, and conversations with deans, a slogan that peremptorily assigns all value to the act of reading and none to the objects read.[2] Are these objects really inert and indifferent, supine and submissive, entirely at the mercy of our critical maneuvers? Do we gain nothing in particular from what we read?

Literary theory has taught us that attending to the work itself is not a critical preference but a practical impossibility, that reading relies on a complex weave of presuppositions, expectations, and unconscious pre-judgments, that meaning and value are always assigned by someone, somewhere. And yet reading is far from being a one-way street; while we cannot help but impose ourselves on literary texts, we are also, inevitably, exposed to them. To elucidate the potential merits of such an exposure, rather than dwelling on its dangers, is to lay oneself open to charges of naïveté, boosterism, or metaphysical thinking. And yet, as teachers and scholars charged with advancing our discipline, we are sorely in need of more cogent and compelling justifications for what we do.

Eve Sedgwick observes that the hermeneutics of suspicion is now virtually de rigueur in literary theory, rather than one option among others. As a quintessentially paranoid style of critical engagement, it calls for constant vigilance, reading against the grain, assuming the worst-case scenario and then rediscovering its own gloomy prognosis in every text. (There is also something more than a little naïve, she observes, in the belief that the sheer gesture of exposing and demystifying ideas or images will somehow dissipate their effects.) Sedgwick's own suspicious reading of literary studies highlights the sheer strangeness of our taken-for-granted protocols of interpretation, the oddness of a critical stance so heavily saturated with negative emotion.[3] As I take it, Sedgwick is not lamenting any lack of sophisticated, formally conscious, even celebratory readings of literary works. Her point is rather that critics find themselves unable to justify such readings except by imputing to these works an intent to subvert, interrogate, or disrupt that mirrors their own. The negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative.

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Moreover, even as contemporary theory prides itself on its exquisite self-consciousness, its relentless interrogation of fixed ideas, there is a sense in which the very adoption of such a stance is pre-conscious rather than freely made, choreographed rather than chosen, determined in advance by the pressure of institutional demands, intellectual prestige, and the status-seeking protocols of professional advancement. Which is simply to say that any savvy graduate student, when faced with what looks like a choice between knowingness and naïveté, will gravitate toward the former. This dichotomy, however, will turn out to be false; knowing is far from synonymous with knowingness, understood as a stance of permanent skepticism and sharply honed suspicion. At this point, we are all resisting readers; perhaps the time has come to resist the automatism of our own resistance, to risk alternate forms of aesthetic engagement.

This manifesto, then, vocalizes some reasons for reading while trying to steer clear of positions that are, in Sedgwick's words, "sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary."[4] It also strikes a path away from the dominant trends of what I will call theological and ideological styles of reading. By "theological" I mean any strong claim for literature's other-worldly aspects, though usually in a secular rather than explicitly metaphysical sense. Simply put, literature is prized for its qualities of otherness, for turning its back on analytical and concept-driven styles of political or philosophical thought as well as our everyday assumptions and commonsense beliefs. We can find variations on such a stance in a wide range of critical positions, including Harold Bloom's Romanticism, Kristeva's avant-garde semiotics, and the current wave of Levinasian criticism. Such perspectives differ drastically in their worldview, their politics, and their methods of reading. What they share, nevertheless, is a conviction that literature is fundamentally different from the world and our other ways of making sense of that world, and that this difference – whether couched in the language of originality, singularity, alterity, untranslatability, or negativity – is the source of its value.

At first glance, this argument sounds like an ideal solution to the problem of justification. If we want to make a case for the

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importance of something, what better way to do so than by showcasing its uniqueness? Indeed, it would be hard to dispute the claim that literary works yield signs of distinctiveness, difference, and otherness. We can surely sympathize with Marjorie Perloff's injunction to respect an artwork's distinctive ontology rather than treating it as a confirmation of our own pet theories.[5] Yet this insight often comes at considerable cost. Separating literature from everything around it, critics fumble to explain how works of art arise from and move back into the social world. Highlighting literature's uniqueness, they overlook the equally salient realities of its connectedness. Applauding the ineffable and enigmatic qualities of works of art, they fail to do justice to the specific ways in which such works infiltrate and inform our lives. Faced with the disconcerting realization that people often turn to books for knowledge or entertainment, they can only lament the naïveté of those unable or unwilling to read literature "as literature." To read in such a way, it turns out, means assenting to a view of art as impervious to comprehension, assimilation, or real-world consequences, perennially guarded by a forbidding "do not touch" sign, its value adjudicated by a culture of connoisseurship and a seminar-room sensibility anxious to ward off the grubby handprints and smears of everyday life. The case for literature's significance, it seems, can only be made by showcasing its impotence.

Some critics, I realize, would strenuously object to such a description, preferring to see the otherness of literature as a source of its radical and transformative potential. Thomas Docherty, for example, has recently crafted a vigorous defense of literary alterity as the necessary ground for a genuinely democratic politics – that is to say, a politics that calls for an ongoing confrontation with the unknown. The literary work enables an encounter with the extraordinary, an imagining of the impossible, an openness to pure otherness, that is equipped with momentous political implications. There is certainly much to be said for the proposition that literature serves extra-aesthetic aims through its aesthetic features, yet these and similar claims for the radicalism of aesthetic form overlook those elements of familiarity, generic commonality, even predictability

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that shape, however subtly, all literary texts, not to mention the routinization and professionalization of literary studies that must surely compromise any rhetoric of subversion. Moreover, the paean to the radical otherness of the literary text invariably turns out to be driven by an impatience with everyday forms of experience and less avant-garde forms of reading, which are peremptorily chastised for the crudity of their hermeneutic maneuvers. The singularity of literature, it turns out, can only be secured by the homogenizing and lumping together of everything else.[6]

Those critics drawn to the concept of ideology, by contrast, seek to place literature squarely in the social world. They insist that a text is always part of something larger; they highlight literature's relationship to what it is not. Hence the tactical role of the concept of ideology, as a way of signaling a relation to a broader social whole. Yet this same idea also has the less happy effect of rendering the work of art secondary or supernumerary, a depleted resource deficient in insights that must be supplied by the critic. Whatever definition of ideology is being deployed (and I am aware that the term has undergone a labyrinthine history of twists and turns), its use implies that a text is being diagnosed rather than heard, relegated to the status of a symptom of social structures or political causes. The terms of interpretation are set elsewhere; the work is barred from knowing what the critic knows; it remains blind to its own collusion in oppressive social circumstances. Lennard Davis, in one of the most forceful expressions of the literature-as-ideology school, insists that the role of fiction is to shore up the status quo, to guard against radical aspirations, and ultimately to pull the wool over readers' eyes.[7] Yet even those critics who abjure any notion of false consciousness, who deem the condition of being in ideology to be eternal and inescapable, impute to their own analyses a grasp of social circumstance inherently more perspicacious than the text's own.

Of course, the notion of ideology can also be applied in a laudatory, if slightly altered, sense, to hail a work's affinity with feminism, or Marxism, or struggles against racism. Literature, in this view, is open to recruitment as a potential medium of political enlightenment and social transformation. Yet the difficulty of secondariness,

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indeed subordination, remains: the literary text is hauled in to confirm what the critic already knows, to illustrate what has been adjudicated in other arenas. My intent is not at all to minimize the value of asking political questions of works of art, but to ask what is lost when we deny a work any capacity to bite back, in Ellen Rooney's phrase, to challenge or change our own beliefs and commitments.[8] To define literature as ideology is to have decided ahead of time that literary works can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge. It is to rule out of court the eventuality that a literary text could know as much, or more, than a theory.

The current critical scene thus yields contrasting convictions on literature, value, and use. Ideological critics insist that works of literature, as things of this world, are always caught up in social hierarchies and struggles over power. The value of a text simply is its use, as measured by its role in either obscuring or accentuating social antagonisms. To depict art as apolitical or purposeless is simply, as Brecht famously contended, to ally oneself with the status quo. Theologically minded critics wince at such arguments, which they abjure as painfully reductive, wreaking violence on the qualities of aesthetic objects. Close at hand lies a deep reservoir of mistrust toward the idea of use; to measure the worth of something in terms of its utility, in this view, involves an alienating reduction of means to ends. Such mistrust can be voiced in many different registers: the language of Romantic aesthetics, the neo-Marxist critique of instrumental reason, the poststructuralist suspicion of identity thinking. What distinguishes literature, in this line of thought, is its obdurate resistance to all calculations of purpose and function.

By calling my book "uses of literature," I seem to have cast my lot with ideological criticism. In fact, I want to argue for an expanded understanding of "use" – one that offers an alternative to either strong claims for literary otherness or the whittling down of texts to the bare bones of political and ideological function. Such a notion of use allows us to engage the worldly aspects of literature in a way that is respectful rather than reductive, dialogic rather than high-handed. "Use" is not always strategic or purposeful,

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manipulative or grasping; it does not have to involve the sway of instrumental rationality or a willful blindness to complex form. I venture that aesthetic value is inseparable from use, but also that our engagements with texts are extraordinarily varied, complex, and often unpredictable in kind. The pragmatic, in this sense, neither destroys not excludes the poetic. To propose that the meaning of literature lies in its use is to open up for investigation a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations – a terrain that is, in William James's words, "multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed."[9]

I am always bemused, in this context, to hear critics assert that literary works serve no evident purpose, even as their engagement with such works patently showcases their critical talents, gratifies their intellectual and aesthetic interests, and, in the crassest sense, furthers their careers. How can art ever exist outside a many-sided play of passions and purposes? Conversely, those anxious to locate literature's essential qualities in well-defined ideological agendas lay themselves open to methodological objections of various stripes. It is not that such critics overlook form in favor of theme and content, as conservatives like to complain; schooled by decades of semiotics and poststructuralist theory, they are often scrupulously alert to nuances of language, structure, and style. Difficulties arise, however, when critics try to force an equivalence of textual structures with social structures, to assert a necessary causality between literary forms and larger political effects. In this context, we see frequent attempts to endow literary works with what Amanda Anderson calls aggrandized agency, to portray them as uniquely powerful objects, able to single-handedly impose coercive regimes of power or to unleash insurrectionary surges of resistance.[10]

In some cases, to be sure, literary works can boast a measurable social impact. In my first book, I made what I still find a plausible case for the role of feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s in altering political and cultural attitudes and creating what I called a counter-public sphere. But when we look at many of the works that literary critics like to read, it is often far from self-evident what role such works play in either initiating or inhibiting social change. Stripped

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of any direct links to oppositional movements, marked by often uneasy relations to centers of power, their politics are revealed as oblique and equivocal, lending themselves to alternative, even antithetical readings. Texts, furthermore, lack the power to legislate their own effects; the internal features of a literary work tell us little about how it is received and understood, let alone its impact, if any, on a larger social field. Political function cannot be deduced or derived from literary structure. As cultural studies and reception studies have amply shown, aesthetic objects may acquire very different meanings in altered contexts; the transactions between texts and readers are varied, contingent, and often unpredictable.

None of this, perhaps, sounds especially new or controversial. Aren't many of us trying to weave our way between the Scylla of political functionalism and the Charybdis of art for art's sake, striving to do justice to the social meanings of artworks without slighting their aesthetic power? One of the happier consequences of the historical turn in criticism has been the crafting of more flexible and finely tuned accounts of how literature is embedded in the world. Ato Quayson offers one such account in describing the literary work as a form of aesthetic particularity that is also a threshold, opening out onto other levels of cultural and sociopolitical life.[11] I am also thinking of my own field, feminist criticism, which has stringently reassessed many of its arguments over recent years. Rather than imputing an invariant kernel of feminist or misogynist content to literary texts, critics nowadays are more inclined to highlight their mutating and conflicting meanings. A heightened attentiveness to the details of milieu and moment and to the multifarious ways in which gender and literature interconnect allows such readings to withstand the charges of reductionism that can be leveled at more sweeping theories of social context.

Such historically attuned approaches strike me as infinitely more fruitful than the attempt to force a union between aesthetics and politics, to write as if literary forms or genres bear within them an essential and inviolable ideological core. Taking their cue from Foucault, they circumvent the problem of secondariness by treating literary texts as formative in their own right, as representations that

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summon up new ways of seeing rather than as echoes or distortions of predetermined political truths. Espousing what cultural studies calls a politics of articulation, they show how the meanings of texts change as they hook up with different interests and interpretive communities. Moreover, such neo-historical approaches have also shown a willingness to attend to the affective aspects of reading, to ponder the distinctive qualities of particular structures of feeling, and to recover, through their engagement with forms such as melodrama and the sentimental novel, lost histories of aesthetic response.[12]

Yet every method has its sins of omission as well as commission, things that it is simply unable to see or do. As a method, we might say, historical criticism encourages a focus on the meanings of texts *for others*: the work is anchored at its point of origin, defined in relation to a past interplay of interests and forces, discourses and audiences. Of course, every critic nowadays recognizes that we can never hope to recreate the past "as it really was," that our vision of history is propelled, at least in part, by the desires and needs of the present. Yet interpretation still pivots around a desire to capture, as adequately as possible, the cultural sensibility of a past moment, and literature's meaning in that moment.

One consequence of such historical embedding is that the critic is absolved of the need to think through her own relationship to the text she is reading. Why has this work been chosen for interpretation? How does it speak to me now? What is its value in the present? To focus only on a work's origins is to side-step the question of its appeal to the present-day reader. It is, in a Nietzschean sense, to use history as an alibi, a way of circumventing the question of one's own attachments, investments, and vulnerabilities as a reader. The text cannot speak, insofar as it is already spoken for by an accumulation of historical evidence. Yet the cumulative force of its past associations, connotations, and effects by no means exhausts a work's power of address. What of its ability to traverse temporal boundaries and to generate new and unanticipated resonances, including those that cannot be predicted by its original circumstances? Our conventional modes of historical criticism, observes Wai Chee Dimock, "cannot say why this text might still matter in the present,

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why, distanced from its original period, it nonetheless continues to signify, continues to invite other readings."[13]

Such questions become especially salient when we venture beyond the sphere of academic criticism. Most readers, after all, have no interest in the fine points of literary history; when they pick up a book from the past, they do so in the hope that it will speak to them in the present. And the teaching of literature in schools and universities still pivots, in the last analysis, around an individual encounter with a text. While students nowadays are likely to be informed about critical debates and literary theories, they are still expected to find their own way into a literary work, not to parrot the interpretations of others. What, then, is the nature of that encounter? What intellectual or affective responses are involved? Any attempt to clarify the value of literature must surely engage the diverse motives of readers and ponder the mysterious event of reading, yet contemporary theories give us poor guidance on such questions. We are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts.

To be sure, it is axiomatic nowadays that interpretation is never neutral or objective, but always shaped by what critics like to call the reader's "subject position." Yet the models of selfhood on hand in contemporary criticism suffer from an overly schematic imperative, as critics strain to calculate the relative impact exercised by pressures of gender, race, sexuality, and the like, in order to recruit literature in the drama of asserting or subverting such categories. The making and unmaking of identity, however, while a theme much loved by contemporary critics, is not a rubric well equipped to capture the sheer thickness of subjectivity or the mutability of aesthetic response.[14] Nor is psychoanalysis, with its built-in machinery of diagnosis and causal explanation, especially well suited for fine-grained descriptions of the affective attachments and cognitive reorientations that characterize the experience of reading a book or watching a film. The issue here is by no means one of evading or transcending the political; rather, any "textual politics" worth its weight will have to work its way through the particularities of aesthetic experience rather than bypassing them.

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In this regard, John Guillory helps us to see that what look like political disagreements often say more about the schism between academic criticism and lay reading. Scholarly reading, he points out, is an activity shaped by distinctive conditions and expectations. It is a form of *work*, compensated for by salary and other forms of recognition; it is a *disciplinary activity* governed by conventions of interpretation and research developed over decades; it espouses *vigilance*, standing back from the pleasure of reading to encourage critical reflection; it is a *communal practice*, subject to the judgment of other professional readers. Guillory's point is not at all to lament or bemoan these facts, which have allowed literary study to define and sustain itself as a scholarly field. It is rather to underscore that they exercise an intense, if often invisible, pressure on the day-to-day practice of literary critics, however avant-garde or politically progressive they claim to be. The ethos of academic reading diverges significantly from lay reading; the latter is a leisure activity, it is shaped by differing conventions of interpretation, it is undertaken voluntarily and for pleasure, and is often a solitary practice.[15] The failure to acknowledge the implications of these differences goes a long way toward explaining the communicative mishaps between scholars of literature and the broader public. That one person immerses herself in the joys of *Jane Eyre*, while another views it as a symptomatic expression of Victorian imperialism, often has less to do with the political beliefs of those involved than their position in different scenes of readings.

As Guillory acknowledges, this distinction is not a dichotomy; professional critics were once lay readers, after all, while the tenets of academic criticism often filter down, via the classroom, to larger audiences. Yet literary theorists patrol the boundaries of their field with considerable alacrity and enthusiasm. Take, for example, the idea of recognition: the widespread belief that we learn something about ourselves in the act of reading. Theological criticism responds with alarm, insisting that any act of recognition cannot help but do violence to the alterity of the literary work. Ideological criticism is equally censorious, insisting that any apparent recognition be demoted without further ado to an instance of

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misrecognition. Both styles of criticism, we should note, are propelled by a deep-seated discomfort with everyday language and thought, a conviction that commonsense beliefs exist only to be unmasked and found wanting.

It is here that I would stake a claim for the distinctiveness of my argument. Rather than pitting literary theory against common knowledge, I hope to build better bridges between them. This is not because I endorse every opinion expressed in the name of common sense – quite the contrary – but because theoretical reflection is powered by, and indebted to, many of the same motives and structures that shape everyday thinking, so that any disavowal of such thinking must reek of bad faith. In retrospect, much of the grand theory of the last three decades now looks like the last gasp of an Enlightenment tradition of *rois philosophes* persuaded that the realm of speculative thought would absolve them of the shameful ordinariness of a messy, mundane, error-prone existence. Moreover, the various jeremiads against commodification, carceral regimes of power, and the tyranny of received ideas and naturalized ideologies mesh all too comfortably with an ingrained Romantic tradition of anti-worldliness in literary studies. In idealizing an autonomous, difficult art as the only source of resistance to such repressive regimes, they also shortchange the heterogeneous, and politically variable, uses of literary texts in daily life.[16]

What follows is in this sense the quintessential un-manifesto; it demurs from the vanguardist sensibility that continues to characterize much literary theory, even as the concept of the avant-garde has lost much of its credibility. There is no compelling reason why the practice of theory requires us to go behind the backs of ordinary persons in order to expose their beliefs as deluded or delinquent. Indeed, the contemporary intellectual scene also yields an assortment of traditions – pragmatism, cultural studies, Habermasian theory, ordinary language philosophy – that address the limits of scholarly skepticism and that conceive of everyday thinking as an indispensable resource rather than a zone of dull compulsion and self-deception.[17] What would it mean to take this idea and place it at the heart of literary theory?

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Among other things, it calls on us to engage seriously with ordinary motives for reading – such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape – that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship. While rarely acknowledged, however, such motives also retain a shadowy presence among the footnotes and fortifications of academic prose. The use of the term "reading" in literary studies to encompass quite disparate activities, from turning the pages of a paperback novel to elaborate exegeses published in *PMLA*, glosses over their many differences. The latter reading constitutes a writing, a public performance subject to a host of gate-keeping practices and professional norms: a premium on novelty and deft displays of counter-intuitive interpretive ingenuity, the obligation to reference key scholars in the field, rapidly changing critical vocabularies, and the tacit prohibition of certain stylistic registers. This practice often has little in common with the commentary a teacher carries out in the classroom, or with what goes through her mind when she reads a book in an armchair, at home. Published academic criticism, in other words, is not an especially reliable or comprehensive guide to the ways in which academics read. We are less theoretically pure than we think ourselves to be; hard-edged poses of suspicion and skepticism jostle against more mundane yet more variegated responses. My argument is not a populist defense of folk reading over scholarly interpretation, but an elucidation of how, in spite of their patent differences, they share certain affective and cognitive parameters.

In the following pages, I proposes that reading involves a logic of *recognition*; that aesthetic experience has analogies with *enchantment* in a supposedly disenchanted age; that literature creates distinctive configurations of social *knowledge*; that we may value the experience of being *shocked* by what we read. These four categories epitomize what I call modes of textual engagement: they are neither intrinsic literary properties nor independent psychological states, but denote multi-leveled interactions between texts and readers that are irreducible to their separate parts. Such modes of engagement are woven into modern histories of self-formation and transformation, even as the

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very variability of their uses militates against a calculus that would pare them down to a single political purpose.

Readers will detect in these terms the shadowy presence of some venerable aesthetic categories (anagnorisis, beauty, mimesis, the sublime), to which I hope nevertheless to give a fresh spin. These four categories are obviously neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive: I separate for the sake of analytical clarity strands of aesthetic response that are frequently intertwined and even interfused. But I hold fast to the view that any account of why people read must operate on several different fronts, that we should relinquish, once and for all, the pursuit of a master concept, a key to all the mythologies. As soon as critics insist that the role of literature really is to inspire aesthetic rapture, or to encourage moral reflection and self-scrutiny, or to act as a force-field transforming relations of power, it is all too easy to come up with countless examples of forms or genres that do the exact opposite.

While ordinary intuitions are a valuable starting point for reflecting on why literature matters, it is far from self-evident what such intuitions signify. The mundane, on closer inspection, often turns out to be exceptionally mysterious. The purpose of literary criticism, if it has any pretension to being a scholarly field, cannot be to echo what non-academic readers already know. A respect for everyday perceptions is entirely compatible with a commitment to theory; such perceptions give us questions to pursue, not answers. What follows bears little relationship, I hope, to the strain of anti-intellectualism that animates literary studies in its darkest hours, the surrendering to intuition, charisma, and an all-encompassing love of literature.

I also dissent from some recent reclamations of aesthetic experiences that champion the affective over the rational, the sensual over the conceptual, and intrinsic over extrinsic meaning. I retain enough of my sociological convictions to believe that aesthetic pleasure is never unmediated or intrinsic, that even our most inchoate and seemingly ineffable responses are shaped by dispositions transmitted through education and culture. I am also not persuaded that justifying the value of aesthetic experience requires a full-scale

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repudiation of conceptual or political thought. The pleasures of literature are often tied up with epistemic gains and insights into our social being, insights that are rooted in, rather than at odds with, its distinctive uses and configurations of language. My aim is to give equal weight to cognitive and affective aspects of aesthetic response; any theory worth its salt surely needs to ponder how literature changes our understanding of ourselves and the world as well as its often visceral impact on our psyche.[18]

My argument also injects a modest dose of phenomenology into current theoretical debates. I refer to phenomenology with a degree of trepidation; as far as I can tell, my approach has very little in common with Husserl or the Geneva school. Nor have I found much guidance in the phenomenological wing of reader-response theory; while scholars like Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden usefully highlight the interactive nature of reading, they assume a highly formalist model of aesthetic response as a universal template for talking about how readers respond to books. Their imagined readers are curiously bloodless and disembodied, stripped of all passions as well as of ethical or political commitments. They conform, in other words, to a notably one-sided ideal of the academic or professional reader. I simply do not share the view that formal ambiguity, irony, and the unsettling of familiar schemata are always the highest aesthetic values and the only reasons why we look to literary texts.

Nor do I buy into the idea of what phenomenologists like to call transcendental reduction, the attempt to strip off the surface accouterments of cultural and historical difference in order to access a core subjectivity. We cannot shrug off our prejudices, beliefs and assumptions; self and society are always interfused; there is no clear place where one ends and the other begins. Subjectivity is always caught up with intersubjectivity, personal experience awash with social and political meanings. I concur with Ricoeur's recasting of phenomenology as the interpretation of symbols rather than the intuition of essences, as well as his insistence that the self is always already another, formed at its core through the mediating force of stories, metaphors, myths and images. My approach, like Ricoeur's, is best

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described as an impure or hybrid phenomenology that latches onto, rather than superseding, my historical commitments.

What I find valuable about phenomenology is its attentiveness to the first person perspective, to the ways in which phenomena disclose themselves to the self. Phenomenology insists that the world is always the world as it appears to us, as it is filtered through our consciousness, perception, and judgment. We can learn to question our own beliefs; we can come to see that our seemingly spontaneous reactions are shaped by cultural pressures; we can acknowledge, in short, the historicity of our experience. And yet we cannot vault outside our own vantage point, as the inescapable and insuperable condition for our being in the world. Phenomenology encourages us to zoom in and look closely at what this condition of being-a-self involves. Such scrutiny, it seems to me, does not require any belief in the autonomy or wholeness of persons, nor a disavowal of the obscurity or opacity of aspects of consciousness. Everyday attitudes are neither invalidated (as they are in poststructuralism and much political criticism) nor are they taken as self-explanatory (as in humanist criticism, with its unexamined use of terms such as "self" or "value"); rather they become worthy of investigation in all their many-sidedness. Thus the titles of my chapters name quite ordinary structures of experience that are also political, philosophical, and aesthetic concepts fanning out into complex histories.

How can such an injection of phenomenology deepen our sense of the aesthetics and politics of the literary text? "Back to the things themselves" was phenomenology's famous rallying cry: the insistence that we need to learn to see – to really see – what lies right under our noses. We are called on, in other words, to do justice to how readers respond to the words they encounter, rather than relying on textbook theories or wishful speculations about what reading is supposed to be. The Kantian legacy has not been helpful here: Kant was intent on developing a theory of natural beauty rather than a full-blown definition of art, and subsequent interpretations of his ideas have encouraged a misleading conflation of the aesthetic with the artistic.[19] The mode of perception valued by Kantians – a single-minded attention to form, beauty, or expressive design that is

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conventionally called "aesthetic" – is one possible response to artworks, but hardly an essential or exclusive one. This is not at all to deny that art attains a degree of autonomy in modernity, but to underscore that this process is more uneven, ambivalent, conflictual, and qualified than is often acknowledged. A phenomenology of reading calls for an undogmatic openness to a spectrum of literary responses; that some of these responses are not currently sanctioned in the annals of professional criticism does not render them any less salient.

Moreover, a dose of phenomenology allows for a notably less wishful account of the political work that texts can do. Literary critics love to assign exceptional powers to the texts they read, to write as if the rise of the novel were single-handedly responsible for the formation of bourgeois subjects or to assume that subversive currents of social agitation will flow, as if by fiat, from their favorite piece of performance art. Texts, however, are unable to act directly on the world, but only via the intercession of those who read them. These readers are heterogeneous and complex microcosms: socially sculpted yet internally regulated complexes of beliefs and sentiments, of patterns of inertia and impulses toward innovation, of cultural commonalities interwoven with quirky predispositions. In the two-way transaction we call reading, texts pass through densely woven filters of interpretation and affective orientation that both enable and limit their impact. Zooming in to scrutinize the many-sided and multiply determined act of reading cannot help but reveal that the effects of literature are neither as transfigurative as aesthetes like to claim nor as ruthlessly authoritarian as some radicals want to insist.

This book, then, contributes to a neo-phenomenology that blends historical and phenomenological perspectives, that respects the intricacy and complexity of consciousness without shelving sociopolitical reflection. Steven Connor has been a pioneer in this new phenomenological turn, arguing for closer attention to those "substances, habits, organs, rituals, obsessions, pathologies, processes and patterns of feeling" that are occluded by the usual frameworks of critical theory as well as by formalist invocations of literariness.[20] The current surge of interest in emotion and affect across a range of disciplinary fields contributes to an intellectual climate notably more

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receptive to thick descriptions of experiential states. Queer theory also comes to mind as a field that is acquiring a phenomenological flavor: inspired by Sedgwick's afore-mentioned critique of a hermeneutics of suspicion, critics are delving into the eddies and flows of affective engagement, trying to capture something of the quality and the sheer intensity of attachments and orientations rather than rushing to explain them, judge them, or wish them away.[21]

For some readers, no doubt, any hint of phenomenology will seem too crassly unhistorical, too blind to cultural specifics, so that it may be helpful to elaborate on the delicate equilibrium of commonality and difference, of theory and history. The aesthetic responses I discuss owe much to the conditions of modernity, when reading comes to assume a new and formative role in the shaping of selfhood. I hazard no claims whatsoever about structures of thought and feeling that govern pre-modern or non-modern forms of reading. While circling around these modes of literary engagement, I strive to remain mindful of the pressures of social and historical circumstance as they inflect aesthetic response. While there are differences in how modern readers experience shock or recognition, however, there are also continuities – those very continuities that make it possible to recognize a particular Gestalt, a distinctive structure of thought or feeling. There is much to be said for attending to these continuities in the context of a critical history that has paid scant attention to their distinctive features and internal complexities as modes of aesthetic engagement. I want to ponder what it means to be enchanted as well as to document particular episodes of enchantment.

There are also times when the act of historicizing can harden into a defense mechanism, a means of holding an artwork at arm's length. We quantify and qualify, hesitate and complicate, surround texts with dense thickets of historical description and empirical detail, distancing them as firmly as possible from our own threateningly inchoate, or theoretically incorrect, desires and investments. In this sense phenomenology offers a worthy complement and ally, rather than an opponent, to such acts of embedding. If historical analysis takes place in the third person, phenomenology ties such analysis back to the first person, clarifying how and why particular texts matter

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to us. We are called on to honor our implication and involvement in the works we read, rather than serving as shame-faced bystanders to our own aesthetic response. Here my argument links up with a recent ethical turn in literary studies, an exhortation to look at, rather than through, the literary work, to attend to the act of saying rather than only the substance of what is said. The act of reading enacts an ethics and a politics in its own right, rather than being a displacement of something more essential that is taking place elsewhere.[22]

In this context, I find myself drawn toward the idea of "emphatic experience," a phrase that can do justice to the differential force and intensity of aesthetic encounters without subscribing to essentialist dichotomies of high versus low art.[23] The last few decades have inspired blistering critiques of canonicity and traditional value hierarchies. Yet such critiques often lapse back into an antiquated and thoroughly discredited positivism in assuming that the problem of value can simply be eliminated. In fact, as their own arguments all too clearly demonstrate, evaluation is not optional: we are condemned to choose, required to rank, endlessly engaged in practices of selecting, sorting, distinguishing, privileging, whether in academia or in everyday life. We need only look at the texts we elect to interpret, the works we include in our syllabi, or the theories we deign to approve, ignore, or condemn. The critique of value merely underscores the persistence of evaluation in the very act of assigning a negative judgment. As John Frow remarks, "there is no escape from the discourse of value," which is neither intrinsic to the object nor forged single-handedly by a subject, but arises out of a complex interplay between institutional structures, interpretive communities, and the idiosyncrasies of individual taste.[24]

Values vary, of course, in literature as in life. Someone who praises a novel for its searingly honest depiction of the everyday lives of Icelandic fishermen is appealing to a different framework of value than another reader who lauds the same text for its subversive aesthetic of self-shattering. The following pages make a case for the variability, and in some cases the incommensurability, of value frameworks. Even within a specific framework of value, moreover,

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judgments differ. While aesthetic preferences are influenced by social cleavages and cultural pressures, they bear no simple or direct expressive relationship to a particular political demographic or collectivity. In this sense, attempts to circumscribe the features of a female aesthetic, a popular aesthetic, or a black aesthetic, to cite a few recent examples, are inevitably stymied by the variability of both value judgments and value frameworks within a particular social grouping.

The idea of "emphatic experience" is capacious enough to contain multiple value frameworks while also honoring the differential nature of our responses to specific texts. It acknowledges that our attachments differ in degree and in kind, that we do not and cannot favor all texts equally, that in any given assortment of tragedies or TV dramas we are guaranteed to find some examples more memorable, more compelling, simply more extraordinary than others. Yet by leaving open the nature and content of that emphatic experience, as well as the criteria used to evaluate it, it grants the sheer range of aesthetic response: individuals can be moved by different texts for very different reasons. This insight has often been lost to literary studies, thanks to a single-minded fixation on the merits of irony, ambiguity, and indeterminacy that leaves it mystified by other structures of value and fumbling to make sense of alternative responses to works of art.

In this regard, one advantage – or stumbling block, depending on your viewpoint – of what follows is that it canvasses ways of thinking about aesthetic experience that do not hinge on the presumed superiority of literature or literariness. My focus on novels, plays, and poems derives from my own training and limited expertise; departments of literature, moreover, are especially hard hit by a legitimation crisis that is affecting all of the humanities. Yet much of what I have to say also pertains to art forms such as film, which are assuming an increasingly vital role as purveyors of epistemic insights, vocabularies of self-understanding, and affective states (I touch most explicitly on film in chapter two). If literary studies is to survive the twenty-first century, it will need to reinvigorate its ambitions and its methods by forging closer links to the study of other media rather than clinging to ever more tenuous claims to exceptional status. Such

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collaborations will require, of course, scrupulous attention to the medium-specific features of artistic forms.

What follows, then, is a gamble, a perhaps quixotic wager that a one-sided reflection on literature will allow its many dimensions to unfold. The last few decades have molded us into skeptical readers, forever on our guard against the hidden agendas of aesthetic forms. Even when critics strain for a measure of even-handedness, texts are all too often shoe-horned into a rudimentary dialectic of coercion versus freedom, containment versus transgression, such that the distinctive modalities of aesthetic experience are shortchanged. I offer, instead, a thought experiment, an attempt to see things from another angle, to rough out, if you will, the shape of a positive aesthetics. When skepticism has become routinized, self-protective, even reassuring, it is time to become suspicious of our entrenched suspicions, to question the confidence of our own diagnostic authority, and to face up, once and for all, to the force of our attachments.

The point is not to abandon the tools we have honed, the insights we have gained; we cannot, in any event, return to a state of innocence, or ignorance. In the long run, we should all heed Ricoeur's advice to combine a willingness to suspect with an eagerness to listen; there is no reason why our readings cannot blend analysis and attachment, criticism and love. In recent years, however, the pendulum has lurched entirely too far in one direction; our language of critique is far more sophisticated and substantial than our language of justification. For the span of a few pages, I plan to pursue an alternative line of thought and err in a different direction. Is it possible to discuss the value of literature without falling into truisms and platitudes, sentimentality and *Schwärmerei*? Let us see.

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Notes

Introduction

1 Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner's, 2001), p. 22.
2 Michael Warner observes that "critical reading is the folk ideology of a learned profession, so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it." See his "Uncritical Reading," in Jane Gallop, ed., *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 14.
3 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is About You," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ed., *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997). Sedgwick's critique of the hermeneutics of suspicion has been especially influential; there are, of course, many other critiques, from varying perspectives. See, for example, Charles Altieri, *Canons and Consequences: Reflections on the Ethical Force of Imaginative Ideals* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990); Eugene Goodheart, *The Skeptical Disposition in Contemporary Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretatio*n (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mark Edmundson, *Why Read?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004).
4 Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," p. 35.
5 Marjorie Perloff, "Crisis in the Humanities? Reconfiguring Literary Study for the Twenty-first Century," in her *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), p. 7.
6 Thomas Docherty, *Aesthetic Democracy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).
7 Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 224–225.
8 Ellen Rooney, "Form and Contentment," *MLQ*, 61, 1 (2000), p. 38.

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9 William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 17–18.

10 Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

11 Ato Quayson, *Calibrations: Reading for the Social* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. xxi.

12 See, among many others, Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Political Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790–1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

13 Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA*, 112, 5 (1997), p. 1061.

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