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Reading Against Polemic: Disciplinary Histories, Critical Futures

This article suggests that the self-consciously polemical tenor of recent conversations about critical method has hindered efforts to change or diversify our repertoire of approaches. Critics curious about alternative paradigms have been greeted on a regular basis by any number of self-styled interventions—postcritical reading, the new formalism, the new affect studies, and so on—which proclaim the discipline’s current practices inadequate or outmoded. In the first section of this article, I argue that those who seek to challenge the purported dominance of a given method need to refocus their efforts away from telling others that their preferred approaches have ‘run out of steam,’ and towards giving innovative readings that demonstrate, rather than merely assert, their novelty and value.¹ The second section seeks to justify this recommendation by offering an ecumenical critical history showing how movements which succeeded in transforming the field did so, not by publishing polemical manifestos (though they often did that too), but through extraordinary readings which illuminated texts in ways that critics had never seen before—whether discussing their rhetorical effects with unprecedented detail and elaboration, parsing their philosophical implications, placing them in surprising new historical contexts, or drawing our attention to attributes that had formerly been overlooked or deemed unworthy of interest. Unlike recent more theoretical or historicist

reassessments of mid-century criticism, such as Helen Thaventhiran's *Radical Empiricists* (2015) and Marina MacKay's *Ian Watt: The Novel and the Wartime Critic* (2018), this genealogy is less concerned with how individual scholars developed their ideas than with the effectiveness of specific forms of argumentation and rhetorical presentation in influencing other critics (which is why it focuses on a thoroughly canonical corpus).² My aims are broadly consonant with Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian's call for methodological pluralism—as well as their attempt to 'turn down the volume on the reading debates' by 'emphasizing the everyday realities of the profession,' as Heather Love puts it—even if this article gives us good reasons to be less than convinced by recent developments in the field.³ If its stance seems unduly sceptical, that is principally because it aims to model a mode of engagement with methodological polemics that refuses to be diverted from the disarmingly basic question of what a 'new' approach can tell us about a text that prior approaches couldn't. This argument therefore has significant implications, not only for the discipline's would-be reformers, but also for readers searching for more discriminating criteria for appraising the validity, efficacy, and value of claims to critical innovation.

* * *

Rita Felski's recent polemical intervention, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), is a good place to start.⁴ Where other criticisms of the book have understandably focused on its global characterisations of the discipline in terms of the hegemony of critique, I want to focus on the rhetorical positioning of its argument. Throughout *The Limits of Critique*, Felski states her apparently benign intention to 'expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods' (L, p. 13). Who could object to such a project? And yet vying with this rhetoric of supplementarity is a rather different posture, dimly felt in the reductive,

slightly condescending, characterizations of ‘critique’ in the abstract (as opposed to an actual critic practicing critique), present from the opening page: ‘The task of the social critic is now to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see’ (*L*, p. 1). I suspect that most self-identifying ‘social critics’ would find this picture deeply uncharitable in its suggestion that their only interest is in unflattering and counterintuitive meanings. This is nevertheless all rather subdued compared with the more caustic rhetoric of Felski’s earlier book, *Uses of Literature* (2008): ‘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.’⁵ In his forthright response to *The Limits of Critique*, Bruce Robbins takes aim at the implications of this tonal evasiveness:

Faultfinding is the fault that Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique* attributes to literary criticism. Faultfinding is also, of course, what Felski’s book spends most of its time doing. Had it not abandoned itself so completely to faultfinding, its central insight might have led it to do more interesting things. ... [Felski’s] argument ... puffs itself up by expanding its range of targets so as to take in nearly the whole profession and then, sensing a challenge, steps back in mock horror so as to suggest, ‘No, of course, I didn’t mean that!’⁶

Without wishing to defend this pugnacious response in its entirety, it is hardly surprising that Robbins is quite so defensive; after all, Felski is attacking the kind of scholarship Robbins has produced, with great distinction, for much of his career, whilst simultaneously implying that her aims are merely pluralist.⁷ For all the caveats about not wishing to outlaw or supplant critique, the title of Felski’s book is an accurate reflection of its prevailing stance: *The Limits of*

That the book's recursive attention to the pitfalls of critique crowds out any sustained argument for doing things differently is apparent from how brief and abstract its positive vision for an alternative critical future proves to be. As Susan Stanford Friedman notes, '[f]our and a half of the five chapters of *The Limits of Critique* focus on Felski's critique of critique.'⁹ After promising in the introduction that the book will eventually 'sketch out an alternative model' of 'postcritical reading' (L, p. 12), Felski acknowledges the frustration readers may feel at the negativity of the preceding pages at the beginning of her final chapter (L, p. 151), and once again at the beginning of its final section: 'The question of reading can no longer be deferred. It is time to connect these comments on the mobility and agency of texts to current debates about interpretation' (L, p. 172). The 'question of reading,' then, turns out not to involve any actual readings of literary works showing what 'postcritical reading' means in practice, but to be a matter of connecting Felski's theoretical contentions with the contentions of other critics.

Best, one of Felski's more sympathetic responders, is right that '*The Limits of Critique* reads more like literary sociology than literary theory, more like a statement of literary ethics than a working out of method; and to the extent that the book calls for *return* without providing a clear map for how to get there, it remains weakly committed to that goal.'¹⁰ Felski accepts this charge, suggesting that 'postcritical approaches' were not her primary focus, and instead directing us to *Uses of Literature*.¹¹ But whilst this earlier study offers compelling intellectual histories and phenomenologies of recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock, the readings of particular works, persuasive and eloquent as they are, are neither close nor sustained enough for something genuinely novel to emerge—and indeed it is far from clear that that is the book's aim. Insofar as its stated ambition is 'to capture something of the grain and texture of everyday aesthetic experience' (U, p. 132), *Uses of Literature* is primarily about *recovering* ways of thinking and feeling that have apparently been diminished in contemporary

criticism; its strategies of reading are more *ante-* than *post-* critique. It is conspicuous that the chapter on enchantment ends in the conditional mode: ‘Once we face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and theoretical ideal, once we relinquish the modern dogma that our lives should become thoroughly disenchanted, we can truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience’ (*U*, p. 76). What this accurately suggests is that *Uses of Literature* has not yet begun to ‘truly’ engage with the affective and absorptive; this is a promise of a criticism to come, not an inauguration or exemplification of that criticism. As another sympathetic responder, Diana Fuss, points out: ‘New ways of reading remain for [Felski] largely in the future and will only emerge when we stop assuming that critique is the only or best way to read.’¹² But what are we to do in the meantime? It is unreasonable to suggest that those drawn to critique simply stop writing criticism; most of us are not engaged with methodological innovation for its own sake, but rather experiment with alternative approaches when exemplary readings demonstrate the intellectual and affective value of doing so. Critics will be converted when they are shown exciting alternatives, not when with a weary sigh they read—or hear about and decline to read—the latest methodological critique of the field.¹³ None of this to diminish the vital service Felski has performed in shedding light on the intellectual and affective investments of a critical sensibility that has significantly shaped the history of the discipline.

Perhaps the best demonstration of why new critical methods have struggled to gain ground is the most widely cited intervention of the last decade or so: ‘surface reading.’ Where Felski’s book declines to offer a practical demonstration of ‘postcritical reading,’ Best and Marcus’s proposal suffers from the opposite problem. In its original context, as the introduction to a special issue of *Representations*, ‘The Way We Read Now’ (2009), ‘surface reading’ is used to describe an exceedingly diverse range of critical projects: Margaret Cohen’s advocacy of narratology over close reading amidst literature’s forgotten archive; Mary Thomas

Crane's cognitive, rather than Freudian, understanding of the unconscious; Leah Price's histories of the book; Anna Cheng's erotics of immersion; and Christopher Nealon's politically motivated, non-symptomatic reading.¹⁴ The array of critical approaches on display here is such that it is difficult to see the value of collecting them under a single term. Apparently anticipating this objection, Best and Marcus suggest that:

The 'way' of our title should not be construed as a unitary mode or a pilgrimage to a single point, but as a road branching in multiple directions, like Jorge Luis Borges's garden of forking paths. It would be inaccurate, however, to call this issue 'the *ways* we read now,' because these articles demonstrate significant overlap among our contributors. To that extent, a different literary allusion is also apt for picturing how these articles are related, that of Swann's way, which initially appears separate from the Guermantes way but turns out to be connected to it at key points. ('SR,' p. 3)

This effort to rhetorically align surface reading with formally innovative writing doesn't quite disguise the fact that, though they might claim to map out a single way of reading, Best and Marcus decline to elaborate on what the key points of connection between these projects are, other than a weariness with suspicious interpretation—an uncertainty perhaps registered by the slippages between the singular way and plural ways later in the article ('SR,' pp. 6, 11). The most explicit elaboration we get is the suggestion that the contributors '[a]ll seem to be relatively neutral about their objects of study, which they tend less to evaluate than to describe' ('SR,' p. 16). But even this tentative claim sits uncomfortably with, say, Cheng's description of a 'mutual pedagogy of erotics,'¹⁵ or indeed Best and Marcus's own assertion, on the very same page, that 'surface reading ... want[s] to reclaim ... the accent on immersion in texts' ('SR,' p. 16); eroticism and immersion may be many things, but neutral is not one of them.

Despite the salutary effect of bringing questions about interpretative priority to the fore, surface reading is ultimately too methodologically amorphous to amount to a distinct critical approach that others might adopt. Best and Marcus delineate a bewildering number of ways of understanding their tag: ‘*Surface as materiality*’; ‘*Surface as the intricate verbal structure of literary language*’; ‘*Embrace of the surface as an affective and ethical stance*’; ‘*Attention to surface as a practice of critical description*’; ‘*Surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts*’; ‘*Surface as literal meaning*’ (‘SR,’ pp. 9-13). The very multiplicity of methodological possibilities here makes it difficult to imagine an exemplary surface reading in the way that we can point to paradigmatic works of New Criticism or New Historicism—which has in turn made it difficult for detractors to frame their objections other than on the level of metaphor. Thus, James Simpson and Garrett Stewart invoke their own metaphors, of masks and depth charges, to counter Best and Marcus’s claims for surface reading—and the critical discourse continues to slide further away from actual readings of literary works.¹⁶

The most discerning piece of critical analysis explicitly allied with Best and Marcus’s aims is Love’s reading of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in ‘Close but not Deep’ (2010).¹⁷ Wary of the humanistic assumptions that have often accompanied the practice of close reading, Love turns to two social scientists, Latour and Erving Goffman, whose analyses provide a model for ‘modes of reading that are close but not deep’ insofar as they ‘rely on description rather than interpretation’ (‘C,’ 375). To illustrate such an approach, Love turns to the coolly dispassionate first description of Sethe’s attempt to kill her children to prevent them from being re-enslaved, rather than the more lyrical and resolutely subjective narration later in the novel which has elicited so much attention from readers and critics. Where James Phelan takes the racist epithets in the passage (‘nigger woman’ and ‘old nigger boy’) as a sign that the prose holistically focalises the dehumanising perspective of the slave catcher, Love perceptively shows how an interpolating phrase—‘in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at’—

more problematically suggests the presence of a non-characterised narrator whose ‘perspective cannot be cleanly extracted’ from the slave catcher’s (‘C,’ p. 385). Where for Phelan, the scene pedagogically provides a negative ethical example of how it should never have been interpreted, for Love, its ‘flatness, objectivity, and literalism’ demonstrate ‘how reading *Beloved* at the surface allows us to see Morrison’s project as registering the losses of history rather than repairing them’ (‘C,’ p. 386).

My only, admittedly slight, criticism of Love’s daring response is her characterisation of the narrator’s perspective as ‘neutral’ and ‘purely descriptive’ (‘C,’ p. 385), a characterisation seemingly necessitated by the essay’s prior methodological commitments; the rhythmic elegance, subtly evocative metaphor, and lilting alliteration of the phrase she foregrounds are surely more troubling than the neutrality she describes, presenting us with a narration which is simultaneously aestheticising and affectively detached, unencumbered by the queasiness and horror that this scene arouses in so many of its readers. More consequentially, the great insight that Love brings to this passage emerges precisely from her exquisite attentiveness to how different registers suggest the presence and absence of focalisation (even within distinct phrases of the same sentence)—that is, insofar as she ignores her own methodological injunctions and traverses from description into interpretation. After all, shifts in perspective enacted through manipulations of style have been a cardinal concern for the close reading of modern novels at least since Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921).¹⁸ This is not to deny the subtlety and brilliance of Love’s reading, only to say that it doesn’t herald the methodological break announced in the essay’s preceding pages. It is no surprise that other studies allied with surface reading have been no more effective at spelling out what distinguishes their approaches from conventional close reading.¹⁹ A decade later, it remains unclear what an ‘orthodox’ surface reading might look like, and what it might contribute to literary studies by way of methodological innovation.

My claim that, though individually compelling, the range of methods Best and Marcus classify as ‘surface reading’ are too disparate to amount to a cogent critical approach has also been made with respect to the New Formalism. In her widely-read survey essay, Marjorie Levinson notes that, ‘despite the advocacy rhetoric, New Formalism does not advocate for a particular method.’²⁰ Samuel Otter similarly suggests that ‘[t]here is no such thing as “new formalism,” if the term is meant to name a system of thought or a sustained method’; rather, the term ‘discloses a variety of intellectual and emotional responses, spurred by a perceived indifference’ to ‘form’ and ‘aesthetics.’²¹ Like postcritique (and indeed the ‘Manifesto of the V21 Collective’), New Formalism knows more about what it is against than what it is for, other than formalism.²² In her introduction to *Reading for Form* (2006), Susan J. Wolfson takes this as a point of pride, quoting the criticism of an anonymous reviewer that ‘it’s hard to see a new program for formalist literary studies emerging from this volume’ as a ‘positive advertisement’ for the movement, and proclaiming that ‘the essays within demonstrate, again and again, the vitality of reading for form is freedom from program and manifesto, from any uniform discipline.’²³ The refusal of programmatic thinking, as well as tenuous claims for an essential commonality amongst disparate enquiries, is welcome; but such methodological permissiveness makes it very difficult to discern any positive, alternative path to be taken by the discipline, or even individual critics. ‘What,’ Levinson asks, ‘is a shared commitment minus articulated agreement about the object to which one commits?’ (‘NF,’ p. 562).

Or, to put the question differently, what is *new* about the New Formalism? For most new formalist work in fact closely resembles New Historicism with a ‘renewed’ or restored commitment to form. In her foreword to *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (2013), Heather Dubrow, whom Levinson praises as practicing ‘new formalism at its best’ (‘NF,’ p. 562), rightly notes that ‘the imperative to concentrate on the ways a New Formalism differs from its predecessors is intense’—making the volume’s inadequate response to that imperative all the

more frustrating.²⁴ Verena Theile's introduction does little to clarify the matter: '*New Formalisms and Literary Theory* is interested in the political motivations of a return to formalism, but, together with our contributors, we also, and perhaps simultaneously, want to propose and challenge the conception of New Formalism as an extension of contextual readings or a "mere" return to aesthetic readings.'²⁵ What exactly *is* being proposed gets lost in the syntax of this sentence. Apparently moving from theory to practice, Theile attempts to differentiate New Formalism from New Historicism via an elaborate analogy about a recent Reuters article about a recently discovered trove of seventeenth-century decorative bowls (*NFLT*, pp. 8-11). Stressing the way that the interviewed archeologist 'initially gives a nod to form' but 'soon moves on to cultural context' (*NFLT*, p. 10), Theile concludes:

Obviously, this is a crude example of New Historicist methodology, but the template fits.

The New Formalism that this volume is proposing here would not have fit this template, however, and that is despite the fact that it likely would have provided similar historical context and would have likewise thought to link the earthenware to the seventeenth century culturally. But it would not have let go of the patterns; in none of the chapters below would such abandonment have been tolerated. (*NFLT*, p. 10)

Does the template fit? No one could accuse Stephen Greenblatt of abandoning the aesthetic particulars of *Othello* in his compelling reading at the end of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), arguably the paradigmatic New Historicist study.²⁶ If there are important New Historicist readings which are inattentive to form, why conjure up a straw man? It is difficult to see why Theile resorts to a hypothetical, if literary criticism really does need the New Formalism. Also note that, once again, emphasis falls on the putative errors or omissions of other critics rather

than any genuinely new mode of interpretation, something reflected in the prevalence of past-oriented prefixes ('recover,' 'rediscover,' etc.).

This retrospective orientation, far from unique to the New Formalism, is characteristic of many contemporary accounts of critical method, something most conspicuously felt in the increasing popularity of autobiographical sketches where a scholar—usually senior—reflects on their own intellectual development by way of assessing the present state and future prospects for the discipline. Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (L, pp. 18-20) and Caroline Levine's *Forms* (2015)—perhaps the two most prominent recent contributions to debates about method—relate distinct but rhetorically similar narratives, beginning with an intoxication with theory (especially Marxist-inflected forms of ideological critique) and ending with disenchantment and a restless search for more satisfying alternatives.²⁷ Eric Hayot, in the final essay of *Critique and Postcritique* (2017), gives another personal account, and meditates on the various contexts that drive such narratives of disaffection, including: the stalling of social-democratic political progress across the globe; the destruction of liberal elements in the universities; the accelerated rhythms of intellectual fashion; a conception of disciplinary history as novelty-and-progression bestowed by 'the Theory era'; and, last but not least, the age and career stage of those decrying the staleness of dominant methods.²⁸ (As Hayot wryly notes, 'the "crisis" [of critique] is being described largely by professors in their forties and fifties.')²⁹ Genuinely interesting as the autobiographical reflections of influential critics can be, their contribution to efforts to change the direction of the field is not immediately obvious, sounding, to the millennial generation of scholars, more like disciplinary histories than incitements to regime change, speaking more of tiredness and disaffection than excitement or novelty.

It's worth asking why so many literary critical movements in the twenty-first century seem to be labelled and put into circulation before their (often tantalising) interpretative

potential has been realised; by contrast, in the previous century, critical innovations tended to be demarcated and classified years and sometimes decades after the fact. An ideologically suspicious reader might correlate the packaging up of new methods with the neoliberalisation of the American universities in which they came to life and the increased prevalence of the marketised idiom of intellectual competition and personal branding (an idiom which admittedly has become ineluctably pervasive). But in the absence of exemplary readings that concretely demonstrate, or even provide the basic building blocks for, a distinct critical approach, postcritical reading, surface reading, the new formalism, and other such interventions have little prospect of catalysing disciplinary transformation—an absence that gives readers good reason to arrive at a more modest assessment of the significance of these interventions to everyday literary critical practice than their extremely wide circulation might suggest.

* * *

Disenchantment has of course been a powerful motivator for methodological innovation over the years, but merely expressing one's disenchantment has rarely been enabling for other critics. Moreover, allowing disaffection to play too prominent a role in our disciplinary histories risks making them more dry, anxious, and oppositional than they need be. In *Modernism and the New Criticism* (2000) (volume seven of *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*), Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey describe the appeal of T. S. Eliot's critical style for the New Critics: 'it had the look of being theoretical rather than journalistic or belletristic ... [it] seemed a deliberate departure from the sort of appreciatory criticism the turn-of-the-century man and woman of letters produced, and thus an ideal model for an academic literary criticism.'³⁰ Menand and Rainey go on to point out that the New Critics' own disciplinary

histories almost entirely ignored any inheritances from the journalistic tradition—indifference being the ultimate expression of disparagement—and instead fashioned a new tradition, for which various poet-critics and philosophers from across the centuries (including Aristotle, Coleridge, and Kant) were recruited as allies and forebears (*MNC*, pp. 11-12).

The unique role played by the New Critics in the institutionalization of literary studies is largely due to their insistence that the merits of the theories they promoted be measured by the practice. In their influential textbook, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren outline their paradigmatically New Critical ‘principles’ for the analysis of poetry: ‘Emphasis should be kept on the poem as a poem’; ‘The treatment should be concrete and inductive’; ‘A Poem should always be treated as an organic system of relationships.’³¹ But just as crucially, Brooks and Warren insist that their ‘book must stand or fall by the analyses of individual poems which it contains.’³² These analyses were unprecedented in their combination of formal attentiveness and self-reflexive theorisation. Brooks later claimed that the anthology’s subordination of historical context to formal analysis was primarily a product of the limited number of pages available for explication, and thus an effort ‘to apply the grease to the wheel that squeaked the loudest’: ‘We believed that [the typical college instructor] could be counted on to supply historical and biographical material. We were concerned to provide help of another sort.’³³ This fortuitous exigency facilitated a kind of interpretative ingenuity that—partly because of its replicability—swept the Anglo-American academy.

Brooks placed a similar emphasis on judging the theory by the practice in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), the paradigmatic study of the New Criticism.³⁴ Deferring most of the ‘technical’ deliberations to the conclusion and two appendices, Brooks spends ten chapters closely and patiently attending to ten poems spanning the history of modern English in readings of great nuance and verve.³⁵ His approach was self-consciously experimental, an investigation of what might be learnt by concentrating intensely on ‘what the poem says as a

poem' to the exclusion of the kind of context that was the primary concern of much other criticism written at the time.³⁶ It is an unfortunate irony that critics today tend to overlook these intricately crafted readings in favour of the book's concluding chapter, 'The Heresy of Paraphrase,' which is more amenable to being read for manifesto-like statements of methodological commitment, and so are at risk of misconstruing the nature of Brook's galvanising effect on his contemporaries. This irony is only underscored by the fact that, as is widely recognized, it was above all the particular mode of close reading the New Criticism promulgated that was responsible for its success, bestowing a methodological legacy which, despite periodic declarations of crisis, largely endures today.

This practice of close reading was most directly inherited by American deconstruction, as indeed was the ethos of readerly exemplification. What deconstruction responded to in the New Criticism, negatively but creatively, was the guiding ambition to demonstrate a unity or coherence of meaning of the sort implied by Brooks's over-interpreted metaphor of the text as self-enclosed object. The extraordinary influence of Paul de Man, for instance, was due less to his philosophically sophisticated engagement with the theories of Jacques Derrida than his ability to mobilize that engagement so as to present texts as radically more unstable and contradictory than they had previously appeared. This is no more apparent than in the opening essay of *Allegories of Reading* (1979), which moves from the mischievously over-elaborated allegory of Archie Bunker's bowling shoes to the celebrated final lines of W. B. Yeats's 'Among School Children' ('How can we know the dancer from the dance?').³⁷ The final essay, on performative self-exposure in Rousseau's *Confessions*, resembles *The Well Wrought Urn* in its passionate pursuit of a methodological strategy possessing considerable—and for some, wildly exaggerated—explanatory power.

Geoffrey Hartman suggests that part of the reason that de Man's writing has invited such antagonism over the years was the suspicion that he was 'fascinating the seducible young

by strength and ingenuity, rather than justness of mind.’³⁸ The same suspicion was directed at Brooks, and perhaps every genuine methodological innovator; as Hartman notes, the ‘allegation’ that a new approach is dangerously seductive has been ‘made against intellectuals in almost every generation.’³⁹ That Barbara Johnson uses the Archie Bunker allegory as an epigraph to *The Critical Difference* (1985) is a good indication of the nature of de Man’s catalysing appeal for his students and contemporaries, including Johnson, Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller.⁴⁰ Johnson’s canonical reading of *Billy Budd* (reprinted in *The Critical Difference*), which refused to privilege the implications of either plot or character as previous critics had and instead explored their fundamental incommensurability, exemplifies the kind of energetically inventive readings of previously familiar works that made deconstruction so successful in enthusing young scholars—Levine, for instance: ‘Deconstruction had encouraged a kind of intellectual pyrotechnics: my teachers had performed readings so dazzling that a physical thrill would run through me.’⁴¹

Subsequent critical movements that pivoted away from the rhetorical focus of deconstruction largely concentrated their attention on the kinds of questions about identity that had previously been marginalized. But the complaint that such movements were motivated primarily by political rather than aesthetic matters—encapsulated by Harold Bloom’s derisive allusions to the ‘School of Resentment’—misses much of the readerly force of, say, queer theory and postcolonial criticism at their best.⁴² The theoretical tools that Sedgwick fashions in the introduction to *Between Men* (1985) are utilized in the book’s first sustained close reading, which argues that the peculiar semantic and syntactic demarcations of gender difference in Shakespeare’s ‘breathhtaking’ Sonnet 140 are central to what ‘makes the poem so disconcerted [*sic*] and moving.’⁴³ In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick goes toe-to-toe with deconstruction, showing how the problematics of signification Johnson identifies in her seminal reading of *Billy Budd* are closely bound up with the semantic field of

homosexual/homophobic knowledge.⁴⁴ But perhaps most (in)famous of all was Sedgwick's reading of *Sense and Sensibility* alongside nineteenth-century medical accounts of female onanism, in 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl' (1991), which, as Susan Fraiman points out, played upon the 'oxymoronic scandal of such a pairing.'⁴⁵

Around the same time, Jane Austen was the subject of another endeavour to bring to light hitherto overlooked or unrecognized facets of literary works—Edward Said's influential reading of *Mansfield Park* in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), which focuses on the way the novel at once divulges and conceals the fact that the Bertrams' country estate is financed by the slave labour of Antigua sugar plantations.⁴⁶ Said argues that, though the novel undeniably belongs to 'the canon of "great literary masterpieces,"' '[w]e must not say that ... its affiliations with a sordid history are irrelevant or transcended, not only because it is irresponsible to do so, but because we know too much to say so in good faith'—suggesting, in effect, that there is no recovering from the knowledge his reading conveys.⁴⁷ For good measure, Said adds that he has 'read *Mansfield Park* as part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture ... to illustrate a type of analysis infrequently encountered' in criticism of the time, underlining the replicable nature of his approach.⁴⁸ Fraiman notes that although the chapter on '*Mansfield Park*' takes up relatively little space in the vastness of ... *Culture and Imperialism*, 'it has been central to the reception of Said's thought in literary studies.⁴⁹ This is in fact not particularly surprising; at the risk of sounding obtuse, what literary critics mostly share is a fascination with literature and its study, and an imitable reading that transfigures our understanding of a major canonical novel naturally steals much of the show.⁵⁰

There is a very real sense in which each of these critical projects arose from a dissatisfaction with the New Criticism; the principal outlet of that dissatisfaction was not, however, methodological critique, but energetic efforts to demonstrate other ways of approaching literary works.⁵¹ This is no more true than of the movement that has arguably

shaped the contemporary critical scene more than any other: the New Historicism. In his provocative, revisionist account, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017), Joseph North argues that since the 1980s literary studies has operated within a 'historicist/contextualist paradigm,' and places Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher's *Practicing New Historicism* (2000), 'the closest thing to a manifesto the movement produced,' at the heart of his description of the emergence and consolidation of that paradigm.⁵² North questions whether New Historicism 'was ... in fact radically new, exciting, and transgressive' (LC, p. 87), primarily attributing its 'popularity' to a rhetorical strategy of intimating political radicalism without making any actual political commitments, a posture he suggests has increasingly 'become a necessary requirement for advancement' in the academy today (LC, p. 93). Given the lack of demonstrable emancipatory successes achieved by the movement, the second claim seems eminently defensible. I do, however, want to challenge North's contention that there was nothing 'new' or 'exciting' about the New Historicism, which is a direct consequence of his decision to focus on the quasi-manifesto of *Practicing New Historicism*, which, as he (LC, pp. 86-7), Gallagher, and Greenblatt all recognize, trails the pioneering studies of the movement by nearly two decades.⁵³

North's passionate commitment to the practice of close reading makes this decision to prioritise a belated manifesto over exemplary readings all the more ungenerous. Like the disciplinary narratives of postcritique, a tendency to under-appreciate the *allure* of certain styles of reading and writing that have captivated other critics is in evidence here. In the introduction to *Learning to Curse* (1990), Greenblatt elaborates on the narrative appeal of the anecdote, as the characteristic essayistic move of the New Historicism, in the context of his 'will to tell stories, critical stories or stories told as a form of criticism.'⁵⁴ The conversation Greenblatt stages between religious discourses about excessive intra-marital desire and the scene of Desdemona's murder in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, or his graceful movement in *Shakespearean*

Negotiations (1988) from a police report about Christopher Marlowe, to Thomas Harriot's colonial account, to the history plays—these are not simply elegant forms of writing, but offer a new perspective on some of the most well-known works of English literature.⁵⁵ The New Historicist practice of reading across 'literary' and 'non-literary' works was not merely an unsettling of the canon, but represented a genuine expansion of what critics could do with texts, opening up new possibilities for surprising juxtapositions or the introduction of previously unrecognized or illegitimate contexts that naturally proved appealing to a great number of scholars. It is no accident that New Historicism remains most entrenched in the study of the early modern period, and especially Shakespeare.⁵⁶ Though the circulation of a privileged set of theoretical terms—particularly relating to notions of subversion and containment—has largely fallen out of favour, across literary studies, many of the interpretative manoeuvres that the New Historicism introduced (and in which Greenblatt excelled) have retained their currency.⁵⁷

* * *

Though the sketch above, for reasons of concision, is necessarily partial, it is a fair representation of those critics who have most dramatically modified or added to the discipline's repertoire of critical approaches. One assumption that has governed the preceding argument is, however, worth briefly registering: the notion that the value of a critical method lies principally in the innovative readings it makes possible. Derek Attridge is an obvious example of a scholar who does not share this assumption, instead placing emphasis on criticism doing 'justice' to works of literature, and warning us of the 'need to stop congratulating each other on producing ever more ingenious interpretations, as if originality and out-of-the-wayness were guarantees of rightness.'⁵⁸ Yet even the discipline's most iconoclastic innovators

have, like Attridge, invariably voiced their concern that ‘the most basic norms of careful reading are sometimes ignored in the rush to say something ingenious or different,’ indicating just how deep the critical desire to shed light on texts runs, which is the principle reason that readings which are gratuitously or merely clever have tended not to ignite sustained or widespread enthusiasm and have rarely stood the test of time.⁵⁹ Which is to say that a desire to do justice to the distinctiveness of particular literary works is baked into this article’s understanding of critical excitement, and the allure of novel interpretative methods. None of this is to deny that many (though far from all) of the most influential works of criticism also combine readerly insight with considerable writerly flair.⁶⁰

In a different but related way, though comparatively uncommon, there are some schools of criticism which purportedly *don’t* strive to produce new readings of texts. In *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), Jonathan Culler argued for the importance of structuralism in such terms:

The type of literary study which structuralism helps one to envisage would not be primarily interpretive; it would not offer a method which, when applied to literary works, produced new and hitherto unexpected meanings. Rather than a criticism which discovers or assigns meanings, it would be a poetics which strives to define the conditions of meaning. Granting new attention to the activity of reading, it would attempt to specify how we go about making sense of texts, what are the interpretive operations on which literature itself, as an institution, is based.⁶¹

Despite the emphatic denial here, it is difficult to see why paying attention to ‘the conditions of meaning’ and ‘the activity of reading’ should not also lead to a newly qualified understanding of specific texts—as the book’s subsequent discussions of numerous quotations, from a wide range of literary works, eloquently attest.

But critical innovation need not and in fact rarely does take the form of fundamental methodological transformation. There is no shortage of critics producing new, sometimes profound, insights about particular genres, literary forms, modes of attention, authors, works, or specific passages from texts. To stick solely with, say, the study of the novel, examples include: Peter Brooks on the dramatization of ethical conflicts in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1995); Sianne Ngai on ‘minor’ affects in *Ugly Feelings* (2007); H. Porter Abbott on unknowable narratives in *Real Mysteries* (2013); and John Frow’s *Character and Person* (2014) and Alex Woloch’s *The One vs. the Many* (2003) on the slippage between characters and persons.⁶² Woloch’s virtuosic prologue on Homer’s *Iliad*, which approaches Thersites as ‘the first truly minor character in Western literature,’ performatively demonstrates how the implications of the book’s claims about character and narrative attention in the nineteenth-century novel far exceed that period and genre—an argumentative mode that has made it one of the most important and influential works of narrative theory of the last two decades.⁶³

These valuable critical pursuits are at odds with the current critical propensity to declare literary studies in a state of crisis due to the hegemony of historicism, contextualism, or critique. North, for instance, sees only glimmers of hope for the discipline, mainly in the later work of Sedgwick and D. A. Miller. There is something to his claim that Sedgwick and Miller, in ‘Paranoid Reading or Reparative Reading’ (1997) and *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2003) respectively, in different ways and to different degrees, refuse to turn their experiments into injunctions for others to follow, and thus are in some sense working beyond or without a paradigm (*LC*, pp. 162, 168).⁶⁴ But then so were William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, and Stephen Greenblatt. Paradigms and manifestos can and often do come later—and sometimes much later—than the readings that make them possible. In *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) and afterwards, Empson was deeply committed to studying authorial intention; that did not stop the mode of close reading he practiced being taken up by those, such as Brooks, who deployed

it with a different, even antithetical, set of theoretical commitments and aims, and with great success.⁶⁵ North is right that Miller's bravura performance is utterly inimitable in its writerly charisma and flair, that it is 'quite evidently not of such a kind as to be generally repeatable without massive adjustment, not only of the performance itself, but of the wider disciplinary context in which such efforts would have to take their place' (*LC*, p. 168)—and again, the same was true of Empson. At the risk of sounding like Harold Bloom, it was precisely the provocative power of that readerly performance that caused massive changes to take place in the discipline. In much the same way, Miller's performative exhibition of the indelibly personal drives that impel critical writing, and his drawing out the entanglement of two related sense of the word 'style' (with all their affective investments) in his opening reading of *Sense and Sensibility*, has already inspired many scholars. Likewise, nearly every critic involved in debates about critical method passionately claims Sedgwick as a forebear. Much of the energy of her extraordinary essay comes from its incisive engagement with the argumentative and rhetorical mode of Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988), with its jostling paranoid and reparative strains, its strong theory and local pleasures, the latter famously described by Sedgwick as 'a wealth of tonal nuance, attitude, worldly observation, performative paradox, aggression, tenderness, wit, inventive reading, obiter dicta, and writerly panache'—a catalogue so often quoted partly because it enumerates the textual features that criticism both possesses and obsessively peruses.⁶⁶ Which is to say that Sedgwick's essay is a readerly *tour de force* as much as a theoretical one, and that is central to its success.

In *Loving Literature* (2015), Deidre Shauna Lynch tells the story of 'how it has come to be that those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature and to ensure that others do so too.'⁶⁷ The feeling that historicism and critique are inimical to such foundational passions has been at the heart of many recent methodological polemics. But for those polemics to gain the ground they deserve, it is not enough to demand that other critics

take up a more positive affective orientation towards texts. As Sedgwick has shown us, and Freud before her, love and aggression often work hand in hand: ‘it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices.’⁶⁸ In a sense, many of the protagonists in debates about critical method have forgotten the lesson that Greenblatt learnt so well—that, as scholars of literature, we are peculiarly susceptible to writerly strategies of persuasion, including suspense, exhilaration, suspicion, and, above all, fascination. Of course, most of us can’t spin a critical tale like Greenblatt, or write in Miller’s near-Jamesian style, with those lithe turns in tone, attitude, and affect—but we can explicitly demonstrate how our methods or lines of enquiry allow us to see or know things about literary works that we couldn’t before.

‘Whether or not a critic or theorist thematizes reading as a topic,’ Paul Armstrong argues, ‘the measure of what his or her argument signifies—not only its validity, but its very meaning—is how (or whether) a reader will read differently as a result.’⁶⁹ The lesson of this article’s genealogy of critical method for the discipline’s would-be innovators is to refocus their efforts away from packaged polemics and towards compelling readings that have the potential to persuade others of the analytic value of their intellectual insights. Meanwhile, a more granular historical sense of the forms of rhetorical argumentation that have succeeded in producing real changes to disciplinary practice should encourage us to compel critics pushing new approaches to practically demonstrate the readerly payoff of their theoretical contentions, and more generally to adopt a more pragmatic stance towards the methodological polemics that have dominated the field for the past decade and show little sign of receding.

Notes

¹ I allude here to Bruno Latour's widely-read essay, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,' *Critical Inquiry*, 30/2 (2004) pp. 225-248.

² Helen Thaventhiran, *Radical Empiricists: Five Modernist Close Readers* (Oxford 2015); Marina MacKay, *Ian Watt: The Novel and the Wartime Critic* (Oxford 2018).

³ Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, 'Form and Explanation,' *Critical Inquiry*, 43/3 (2017) pp. 668-9. Heather Love, 'Strange Quarry,' *Critical Inquiry*, 44/11 (2017) p. 160. Tom Eyers's *Speculative Formalism* is methodologically exemplary in its patiently unfolding a theory which is subsequently activated in textually attentive readings, though its philosophical idiom is ultimately too remote from the experience of reading to be compelling as an account of the centrality of form to literary studies. It is difficult to see, for instance, how Eyers's central claim—that '[l]iterature stages better than most phenomena the manner in which, far from shutting down the possibility of meaning, the impossibility of any final, formal integration of a structure and its component parts is the very condition of possibility of that structure'—speaks to the pleasures and interests that bring readers to literature. *Speculative Formalism: Literature, Theory, and the Critical Present* (Evanston 2017) p. 8.

⁴ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago 2015) (hereafter *L*).

⁵ Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford 2008) p. 1 (hereafter *U*).

⁶ Bruce Robbins, 'Not So Well Attached,' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) p. 371.

⁷ Robbins has continued to defend critique in the most provocative terms, claiming that postcritique is little more than 'a familiar PR technique,' and that 'post-critiquers have dislodged and disrespected the experience of African Americans, for whom paranoia is a perfectly acceptable language for the experience of systemic racial injustice.' Bruce Robbins, 'Fashion Conscious Phenomenon,' *American Book Review*, 38/5 (2017) p. 5; 'Reading Bad,' *Los*

Angeles Review of Books (21 Jan. 2018) par. 17.

⁸ I have in mind here Geoffrey Hartman's *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven 1970).

⁹ Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Both/And: Critique and Discovery in the Humanities,' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) p. 345.

¹⁰ Stephen Best, 'La Foi Postcritique, on Second Thought,' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) p. 388.

¹¹ Rita Felski, 'Response,' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) p. 389.

¹² Diana Fuss, 'But What About Love?' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) p. 355 n. 1.

¹³ Anahid Nersessian has recently described her occasional feelings of embarrassment, upon reading 'the manifestos, counter-manifestos, defences and autotaxonomies our discipline has produced over the last handful of years,' that she does not feel as strongly about such matters as some of her colleagues. Anahid Nersessian, 'Who Cares?' *Arcade: Literature, the Humanities, & the World* (2018): <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/who-cares>: par. 7.

¹⁴ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 1-21 (hereafter 'SR'). Margaret Cohen, 'Narratology in the Archive of Literature,' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 51-75; Mary Thomas Crane, 'Surface, Depth, and the Spatial Imaginary: A Cognitive Reading of The Political Unconscious,' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 76-97; Leah Price, 'From *The History of a Book* to a "History of the Book,"' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 120-138; Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility,' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 98-119; Christopher Nealon, 'Reading on the Left,' *Representations*, 108/1 (2009) pp. 22-50.

¹⁵ Cheng, p. 102.

¹⁶ James Simpson, 'Interrogation Over,' *PMLA*, 132/2 (2017) pp. 378-9; Garrett Stewart, *The Deed of Reading: Literature, Writing, Language, Philosophy* (Ithaca 2015) p. 16.

¹⁷ Heather Love, 'Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,' *New Literary*

History, 41/2 (2010) (hereafter 'C').

¹⁸ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London 1921).

¹⁹ Lee Clark Mitchell's *Mere Reading*, Sharon Marcus's *Between Women*, and Derek Attridge and Henry Staten's *The Craft of Poetry* all give compelling accounts of the works they discuss, but as the modesty of their modifiers—'mere reading,' 'just reading,' and 'minimal interpretation'—suggests, their practices are characterised more by the critical manoeuvres they refuse to perform than any novel strategies for the interpretation of texts. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Mere Reading: The Poetics of Wonder in Modern American Novels* (New York 2017); Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton 2007); Derek Attridge and Henry Staten, *The Craft of Poetry: Dialogues on Minimal Interpretation* (New York 2015).

²⁰ Marjorie Levinson, 'What Is New Formalism?' *PMLA*, 122/2 (2007) p. 562 (hereafter 'NF').

²¹ Samuel Otter, 'An Aesthetics in All Things,' *Representations*, 104/1 (2008) pp. 116–7.

²² The 'Manifesto of the V21 Collective' is as emphatic in its rejection of 'positivist historicism' as it is cautiously provisional in outlining alternatives. As Wai Chee Dimock inadvertently highlights when celebrating the willingness of the V21 group to embrace affiliates and fellow travellers whose theoretical commitments fundamentally diverge from its 'Ten Theses,' this manifesto has been valuable in its provocation of debate, and rather less so as an articulation of an alternative approach or programme for literary studies. 'Manifesto of the V21 Collective,' *V21: Victorian Studies for the Twenty-First Century*: <http://v21collective.org/manifesto-of-the-v21-collective-ten-theses/>; Wai Chee Dimock, 'Historicism, Presentism, Futurism,' *PMLA*, 133/2 (2018) pp. 258–9.

²³ Susan J. Wolfson, 'Introduction: Reading for Form,' in Marshall Brown and Wolfson (eds.), *Reading for Form* (Seattle 2006) p. 5.

²⁴ Heather Dubrow, 'Foreword,' in Verne Theile and Linda Tredennick (eds.), *New Formalisms*

and *Literary Theory* (New York 2013) p. x.

25 Verena Theile, 'New Formalism(s): A Prologue,' in Theile and Linda Tredennick (eds.), *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (New York 2013) p. 6 (hereafter NFLT).

26 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago 1980).

27 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton 2015) pp. ix–xiii.

28 Eric Hayot, 'Then and Now,' in Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham 2017) p. 292.

29 Hayot, p. 283.

30 Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey, 'Introduction,' in A. Walton Litz, Menand and Rainey (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 7: Modernism and the New Criticism* (Cambridge c2008) p. 10 (hereafter MNC).

31 Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (eds.), *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York 1938) p. ix. Mark Jancovich claims of *Understanding Poetry* and the later *Understanding Fiction* that, '[m]ore than any other New Critical activity, these text-books were responsible for redefining the object of literary study ... and defined the terms of reference within which literary studies largely continues to operate.' Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (eds.), *Understanding Fiction* (New York 1943); Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge 1993) p. 87.

32 Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, p. ix.

33 Cleanth Brooks, 'The New Criticism,' *The Sewanee Review*, 87/4 (1979) p. 593.

34 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, revised ed. (London 1968) [1947] pp. iii, 177.

35 Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. iv.

36 Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, p. v.

37 Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New

Haven 1979) pp. 9—13.

³⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, 'Paul de Man's Proverbs of Hell,' *London Review of Books*, 6/5 (1984): <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v06/n05/geoffrey-hartman/paul-de-mans-proverbs-of-hell>: par. 3.

³⁹ Hartman, 'Paul de Man's Proverbs of Hell,' par. 4.

⁴⁰ Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore 1985).

⁴¹ Levine, p. ix.

⁴² Throughout *The Western Canon*, Bloom casually groups vast swathes of heterogeneous criticism under the 'School of Resentment' label, often invoking preposterous -isms, without ever bothering to actually engage a strong reading—from a Greenblatt or Sedgwick—to show what his mode of criticism apparently possesses that theirs doesn't. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Orlando 1994).

⁴³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York 1985) pp. 30–3, 31.

⁴⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, revised ed. (Berkeley 2008) [1990] pp. 94–7.

⁴⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,' *Critical Inquiry*, 17/4 (1991) pp. 818–837; Susan Fraiman, 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism,' *Critical Inquiry*, 21/4 (1995) p. 807.

⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York 1994) pp. 80–97.

⁴⁷ Said, p. 95.

⁴⁸ Said, p. 95.

⁴⁹ Fraiman, p. 805.

⁵⁰ Similarly, after Chinua Achebe's blistering critique of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, no conscientious critic can fail to worry about the text's representations of people of different

cultures or ethnicities, or unproblematically treat Marlow's pronouncements about darkness being found everywhere as the novella's final word on empire. 'An Image of Africa,' *Research in African Literatures*, 9/1 (1978) pp. 1–15.

⁵¹ See: Love, 'Close but not Deep,' p. 372.

⁵² Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge 2017) p. 86 (hereafter *LC*). Paul B. Armstrong similarly describes a 'contextualist consensus' and Eysers an 'empirical-historicist consensus.' 'In Defense of Reading: Or, Why Reading Still Matters in a Contextualist Age,' *New Literary History*, 42/1 (2011) pp. 87-113; Tom Eysers, 'Response to Review Essays,' *Syndicate*, 2018: <https://syndicate.network/symposia/literature/speculative-formalism/>.

⁵³ Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago 2000) p. 1. That North tries to find the innovation of the movement in its political efficacy (or lack thereof) is partly the fault of Greenblatt and Gallagher, who tell readers of their manifesto to look for it there, and partly due to North's own preoccupation with the possibility of a materialist political criticism.

⁵⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York 2007) [1990] p. 6.

⁵⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 246–52; *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford 1988) pp. 21–65.

⁵⁶ Similarly, the intensified historicism of British Romanticism is owing, in large part, to the fiercely polemical readings of Jerome McGann.

⁵⁷ One recent, particularly surprising conjunction comes to mind—Ellen Rooney's sudden turn from the problematics of symptomatic reading to the animated film, *Ratatouille*, in 'Symptomatic Reading Is a Problem of Form,' in Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds.), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham 2017) p. 141.

⁵⁸ Attridge and Staten, p. 13. Attridge outlines his account of critical justice in *The Singularity*

of *Literature* (New York 2004) and *The Work of Literature* (Oxford 2015).

59 Attridge and Staten, p. 5. A case in point is Cleanth Brooks's reservations about the 'mad plausibility' of J. Hillis Miller's acrobatic readings. Brooks, 'The New Criticism,' p. 603.

60 David R. Shumway charts the increasing manifestation of personality in criticism of the postwar period in 'The Star System in Literary Studies,' *PMLA*, 112/1 (1997) pp. 85-100.

61 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (New York 2002) [1975] p. xiv.

62 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven 1995); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge 2007); H. Porter Abbott, *Real Mysteries: Narrative and the Unknowable* (Columbus 2013); John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford 2014); Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Realist Novel* (Princeton 2003).

63 Woloch, p. 4.

64 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham 2003) pp. 123–151; D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secrets of Style* (Princeton 2003).

65 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd ed. (London 1949) [1930].

66 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, pp. 135–6. D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley 1988).

67 Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago 2015) p. 1.

68 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, p. 150.

69 Armstrong, p. 89.