

Stella Butter

A Manifesto for Positive Aesthetics

- Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature*. (Blackwell Manifesto Series) Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell 2008. VI, 154 S. [Preis: EUR 22,90]. ISBN: 978-1-4051-4724-8.

The most frequent complaint we literary scholars express nowadays concerns probably the fact that we are required to justify the existence of our discipline. In an age in which the natural and social sciences are perceived by the public as having a monopoly on knowledge and the competition for disciplinary funding is becoming increasingly fierce, we are more than ever pressed to present convincing arguments for the uses of literature and its study. In these dire times, Rita Felski's manifesto launches a spirited defense of literature, full of inspiring ideas which promise to prove invigorating for the future development of literary theory.

Felski's premise is that the current canon of theory has gone terribly adrift in its entrenchment of a negative aesthetics, which is blind to the multiplicity of forms of engaging with a literary text or rather to common motives for reading. She states that the holy grail of literary studies is critical reading, which requires the adoption of a vigilant and detached stance. Instead of the concomitant hermeneutics of suspicion it is now high time, as Felski argues, for seriously engaging with ordinary motives for reading. The innovative quality of Felski's approach lies in its drawing on everyday perceptions as a resource for literary theory. Within such a neo-phenomenological framework, theory and everyday thinking are not only compatible, but fruitfully intersect. Felski thus manages to fulfill her aim of productively bridging the gap between ›scholarly reading‹ and ›lay reading‹. It needs to be mentioned that Felski's focus is explicitly on modern forms of reading, i.e. she assumes that for all the differences between individual aesthetic responses there are also continuities, which make for »a distinctive structure of thought or feeling« (19).

In the following, I will briefly outline Felski's convincing phenomenological conceptualization of four modes of textual engagement: recognition, enchantment, knowledge and shock. In developing her argument, Felski unabashedly embraces the opportunity a manifesto offers for giving a »one-sided reflection on literature« (22). As »our language of critique is far more sophisticated and substantial than our language of justification« (22), Felski takes on a different angle in this manifesto in order to sketch out »the shape of a positive aesthetics« (22). Writing a manifesto is, as Felski gleefully states, »a perfect excuse for taking cheap shots, attacking straw men, and tossing babies out with the bath water« (1). While this may be true for the writer of a manifesto, the job of the reviewer is to identify such straw men and acute cases of one-sidedness. The enthusiasm sparked by Felski's stimulating neo-phenomenological approach is thereby, however, at least for this reader in no way lessened by some of the critical interjections which come to mind.

The main part of Felski's book is devoted to a close analysis of the four modes of textual engagement, which are each discussed in separate chapters. While the cognitive and affective impulses Felski delineates may fuse in varying ways during the reading of literature, the separation of these aesthetic responses allows for »fine-tuned descriptions of aspects of reading that have suffered the repeated ignominy of cursory or cavalier treatment« (132) in literary theory. In each of the chapters, Felski critically deals with the reasons for the ›cavalier treatment‹ of these aesthetic responses or why current discussions have reached a stalemate. The way in which Felski develops her own argument impressively takes on dialogic qualities in a

truly Bakhtinian sense as she continuously anticipates and to a certain extent thereby pre-empted potential objections to her train of thought.

The first of her terms, recognition, focuses on the use of literature as a source of self-interpretation and self-understanding. Recognizing oneself in a book entails the feeling of being addressed, of seeing aspects of oneself and, crucially, a shift in perspective as I perceive something about me I was not aware of before, i.e. a moment of cognitive insight or rather self-understanding. Felski emphasizes the interconnections between knowledge (in the sense of self-understanding) and acknowledgement by drawing on the concept of a dialogic identity: the self can only be known via the other, i.e. by practices of acknowledgement. Reading involves the »encounter with a generalized other [...] – a conception of how others view us [...] that affects our actions as well as the stories we tell about ourselves. It denotes our first-person relationship to the social imaginary« (32f.). Felski goes on to point out that literature may serve as an important form of public acknowledgement and affirmation for many marginalized and disenfranchised groups. Recognition as Felski conceptualizes it, however, is not synonymous with unconditional affirmation for the moments of heightened insight generated by reading literature may entail disquieting and painful revelations as to the darker aspects of our self. »Recognition is about knowing, but also about the limits of knowing and knowability, and about how self-perception is mediated by the other, and the perception of otherness by the self.« (49)

Felski explains the neglect of recognition as an important motive for reading in contemporary theory with two developments. Firstly, the impact of Levinasian ethics, which emphasizes the necessity of »accepting the mysteriousness of the other« (26). While otherness may be an aspect of literature, this does not, however, as Felski rightly emphasizes, make literature pure alterity: »otherness and sameness are interfused aspects of aesthetic response« (38) because we link what we read to our existing knowledge. The second reason Felski states for critical theory's allergic reaction to recognition is the influential role of Lacan and Althusser, i.e. the concept that every recognition is a misrecognition. While conceding that acts of misrecognition occur as there is no self-transparency, Felski clearly has no patience with tipping the scales exclusively to the pole of misrecognition, thereby making a doctrine out of the hermeneutics of suspicion. Felski's caveat against the »cult« of misrecognition ties in with the widespread current critique of the impasse which the debates fostered by deconstruction and Lacanian theory have given rise to.

While I found the phenomenology of recognition as sketched out by Felski illuminating and convincing, there were some points which warrant critical queries. Felski very rightly criticizes models of subjectivity which conceptualize the subject as »bundles of signifiers or textual effects« (46) for these engender »a singularly flimsy and unsatisfying model of the self that is unable to explain either the phenomenon of self-consciousness [...] or why particular representations may strike a chord with some groups [...]« (46f.). It seems to me, however, that such models of subjectivity have been already ushered out now for quite some time in favour of the very dialogic and relational models of the self championed by Felski. I was also not quite convinced by Felski's arguments as to why the »idiom of identification [...] is poorly equipped to distinguish between the variable epistemic and experiential registers of reader involvement« (35). While it may be true that critics often wrongly conflate two forms of identification – the formal alignment with a character (e.g. via focalization) and the sense of attachment to a character –, I would say that the problem resides in the way the idiom is used and not in the idiom itself.

The second form of aesthetic response, which Felski highlights, deals with the phenomenology of immersion: enchantment. Enchantment as defined by Felski refers to a state of pleasurable self-forgetting while reading a text. We are caught in an unchanging present and our sense of autonomy and self-control erodes as the boundary between text and self becomes blurred. In light of the vigilant and critical stance upheld as the ideal mode of engaging with the arts, enchantment has received bad press in critical theory. For Felski the matter is compounded by the fact that even cultural theorists are overly keen to prove that popular consumers are not enchanted but are instead critical consumers. Felski throws in her lot with other critics such as J. Hillis Miller, who are striving to »develop a lexicon more attuned to the affective and absorbing aspects of reading« (62). Experiences of enchantment are not antithetical to modernity, but part of it as Felski emphasizes by drawing on recent studies such as Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001). Enchantment in the aesthetic realm is not restricted to the experiential effacement of the verbal medium, but may also encompass seduction by style. As such, both low and high art may enchant us. This position forms a departure from the new writing on beauty, which, as Felski stresses, overlaps with the phenomenology of enchantment, but retains prejudices against mass culture.

Felski's stimulating writing on enchantment demonstrates perhaps best the strengths but also limits of the neo-phenomenological approach. Her phenomenological analysis aptly captures the absorptive dimension of the aesthetic experience, which constitutes an important motive for reading literature. In this way, important structures and properties of the aesthetic experience, which have received scant attention or have been critically derided in literary theory, come to the fore. The phenomenological approach also allows to counter the frequent charge that enchantment renders the recipient completely passive and as such beguiles: »Even as we are bewitched, possessed, emotionally overwhelmed, we know ourselves to be immersed in an imaginary spectacle: we experience art in a state of double consciousness« (74).

The fruitful insights the phenomenological approach yields, however, need to be complemented by other theoretical frameworks. Otherwise we are left with the questions J. Hillis Miller opened up in *On Literature* (2002), enthusiastically introduced by Felski in her own line of argument: »How is it that black squiggles on a page can conjure up such vivid simula-cra of persons, things, actions, places [...]? Literature seems akin to sorcery in its power to turn absence into presence, to summon up spectral figures out of the void, [...] to fashion entire worlds into which the reader is swallowed up.« (61f.) The question of how words vividly conjure up people and things in the process of reading literature is dealt with in depth in current research in the field of cognitive narratology. While the terminology of cognitive narratology would probably be seen as too »cerebral« by Felski as to further her aim of establishing an idiom attuned to emotive aspects of reading, concepts from this field allow for a deepening and enrichment of Felski's observations.

The third form of textual engagement explored by Felski is knowledge. The question of »What does literature know?« (77) has become one of the hot topics in contemporary literary theory. Accordingly, the past years have seen an avalanche in ever increasing publications on this issue. Felski diagnoses a stalemate in current literary theory regarding the question of literary knowledge as »[I]terary theorists feel obliged to pour cold water on commonsense beliefs about what texts represent, yet such purifying rituals are unable to dislodge a widespread intuition that works of art reveal something about the way things are« (77). In a sweeping gesture aimed at surmounting this impasse Felski offers her own definition of knowledge. Knowledge refers to »what literature discloses about the world beyond the self, to what it reveals about people and things, mores and manners, symbolic meanings and social stratification« (83). It goes without saying that such a definition of knowledge will certainly not meet

with the unconditional approval of all scholars working in the field of literature and knowledge. One need only to look at the recent controversy sparked by Tilmann Köppe's sophisticated critique of the imprecise use of the term ›knowledge‹ by literary scholars as a case in point (see Tilmann Köppe, Vom Wissen in Literatur, *Zeitschrift für Germanistik N.F.* 17 [2007], 398-410).

This caveat notwithstanding, Felski outlines three achievements of literature which render it a potential source of knowledge: deep intersubjectivity, ventriloquism and linguistic still life. Deep intersubjectivity refers to the way in which literature may depict persons as »embedded and embodied agents« (91), thus giving us an inside view of »the qualities of a life-world« (89). Such an exercise in social phenomenology, which is always prone to blind spots, can also take on »a linguistic key, where the apprehension of a life-world is inseparable from the words in which it is expressed« (95). This staging of heteroglossia in literature is captured by the term ›ventriloquism‹. The third achievement of literature entails the direction of our attention to the material world. In this context, Felski discusses as one example the way in which *Dinggedichte* generate a new relationship to things which goes beyond the classical subject/object dichotomy. Felski herself stresses that this list of achievements is not exhaustive, but it does elucidate literature's potential as a »form of social knowledge« (104).

The fourth mode of textual engagement, which Felski discusses, is the opposite of enchantment: shock. Literature's »power to disturb« (105) has been cast in terms such as trauma, the sublime or transgression. Felski, however, prefers a word taken from everyday usage as she deems it having less theoretical baggage. In a similar vein to knowledge, the transgressive aspects of literature are far from having been ignored by scholars. Instead, the »glamorizing of transgression« (110) appears as the latest fad in the cultural theory scene according to Felski. Again she diagnoses shortcomings in the treatment of this aesthetic dimension: »Our ideas about the aesthetics of shock are hampered by a sequential and progressive view of history, overly constrained by a[n avant-garde] mindset that conceives of the shocking as synonymous with the new.« (115) After an in-depth critique of the avant-garde logic of shock, Felski sketches how shock »speaks to both social and asocial aspects of human existence« (119) insofar as »it can bring us face to face with what is deeply unnerving [...] or taboo, but that it is also a cultural signifier drafted into service to connote Romantic bravado, counter-cultural authenticity, or intellectual prestige« (119). The chapter on shock contains interesting observations on the intersection of the aesthetics of shock with race and gender.

All in all, this review cannot do full justice to the manifold ideas and concepts Felski discusses in her manifesto. The text is not only a stimulating read for professional and lay readers of literature, but may be of equal interest when thinking about the phenomenological dimension of movies, which Felski touches upon. Felski herself considers her manifesto as an »act of yea-saying« (1) and I would like to take up this act of ›yea-saying‹ by adding that I do not think the current state of literary theory is quite as bleak as Felski makes it out to be. Instead, her manifesto can be read as part of the ongoing ›emotional turn‹ in cultural and literary theory, with its efforts to gauge affective impulses in the reception process of art. (For a good overview of the development of an emotional turn see Thomas Anz's article *Emotional Turn? Beobachtungen zur Gefühlsforschung*, www.literaturkritik.de [Nr. 12, Dec. 2006]). Within this ongoing turn in contemporary theory, Felski's manifesto constitutes an original and thought-provoking contribution, which fulfils the expectations raised by the title: an inspired and accessible discussion of the different uses literature may have for readers.

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