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# Shamefaced Concepts

c r i t i c s :  
Rita Felski *Uses of Literature*, Malden 2008.

The various meanings of the peculiar term “manifesto” all refer primarily to public declarations formulated clearly and directly, revealing one’s stance. A manifesto uncovers, lays bare, reveals, displays, makes accessible, but no doubt the best word to define what it in fact engages in is “betrayal.” The authors of manifestos betray their own views, but also betray the ones(s) to which they owe their allegiance – in betraying the “new” vision, they thus betray what is “old” – tradition. A manifesto is a public undertaking, binding one to maintain a certain posture, to practice a certain form of action with certain effects on art or reality. The word most probably arose from the combination of the words *manus* (hand) and *festus* (attack); a manifesto appears as a real struggle, postulating direct engagement and voluntary exposure to the personal danger of opposition and to the threat issuing from what is being confronted. This aggressive, conflictual aspect throws a specific light on the nature of the manifesto, designated by that risky friction whose stakes are exceptionally serious: action, an attempt to change the state of things.

In her 2008 book *Uses of Literature*, recently translated into Polish as *Literatura w użyciu* (Literature in Use), Rita Felski declares her enthusiastic entry into this fray, but already in the first sentences attempts to neutralize somewhat the risk associated with her endeavour. Introducing her manifesto / un-manifesto (“neither fish nor fowl” in Felski’s words), she simultaneously lets it be understood that its conflictual aspect will be only simulated, and the “manifesto” itself, like the literature in the title, will appear in the role of a “manifesto in use.” The proof? We find it in the very first sentences of the text:

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 bathwater. Yet the manifestos of the avant-garde were driven by the fury of their againstness [...] 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Felski thus announces that in contrast to the avant-garde manifest-writers who sought to “knock art off its pedestal,” and whose methods have permeated literary theory, she wishes to propose “a negation of a negation,” an affirmative gesture, on whose foundation, according to her, the construction of a new and positive reading project will become possible.

Przemysław Czapliński once wrote that a literary manifesto is the “troubled conscience of literary studies”<sup>2</sup> – as a genre that unambiguously and undeliberately settles questions that literary scholarship is indisputably and for obvious reasons incapable of settling. Aiming to be ostentatiously unscientific, it formulates extremely

<sup>1</sup> R. Felski: *Uses of Literature*, Malden 2008, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> P. Czapliński: “Manifest literacki jako tekst literaturoznawczy” (The Literary Manifesto as a Literary Studies Text) *Pamiętnik Literacki* 1992, no. 1, p. 74.

“irresponsible,”<sup>3</sup> unambiguous, severe judgments and postulates, which neither have to function as nor seek a solution. In this sense the opening confrontation of Felski’s literary scholarship project with the avant-garde gesture is surprising, appearing as it does to dream of committing what literary studies have defined as the “sin,” proper to criticism, of evaluation, is surprising; but at the same time, she defensively demurs before doing so by accident.

### What Is Literary Theory Ashamed Of?

Literature is not written for literary scholars. Though that conviction is not formulated so explicitly in the book, there can be no doubt that it underpins Rita Felski’s reflections and could happily wave on the banner of her manifesto/un-manifesto, because if Felski declares herself particularly strongly against something, it is the elite nature of literary studies. For its part, that elite nature is founded on the removal beyond the horizon of literary scholars’ research pursuits of the reading motivations and experiences of the non-professional reader, which appear to the perspective of theory (in its various iterations) as particularly shameful. As Felski writes, “[t]hanks to the institutional entrenchment of negative aesthetics, a spectrum of reader responses has been ruled out of court in literary theory, deemed shamefully naïve at best, and rationalist, reactionary, or totalizing at worst.”<sup>4</sup> The concept of negative aesthetics, which Felski uses interchangeably with the hermeneutics of suspicion, becomes a true sacrificial lamb, burdened by her with blame for that repudiation by literary studies, the blindness to facts of theory’s thorough depreciation of “the heterogeneous, and politically variable, uses of literary texts in daily life,”<sup>5</sup> forms of engaging with the text, motivations to read or affects that accompany reading. She therefore asks whether there exists some kind of alternative to the specialist hermeneutics of suspicion, attempting to oppose the scepticism and negation that are so deeply rooted in literary theory with a peculiar kind of affirmation. As she postulates passionately in the introduction to her analysis: “When scepticism 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.”<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it is hard to resist the conviction that for all its seductive power, Felski’s project is based on the naïve dream of a return to a state of lost innocence. Though she herself would surely be cheered by the imputation of naïveté.

The title of the Polish translation, *Literature in Use*, immediately refers us to the lexicon of pragmatism, while the English original, *Uses of Literature*, tells us a great deal more about the content of the book than the Polish version, in which the heterogeneous nature of the act of reading, and of readers’ experience, when in fact its opposition to the stereotypical homogenization of reading is what’s at stake in Felski’s entire project. The project relates above all to readers’ search for literature’s various applications and uses, the varied motivations and purposes for which people read, and finally, the varied forms of aesthetic engagement with the text, in contrast with critical reading, which does not leave room for them in the space of theory. There is no doubt that Felski would subscribe to the statement by Ryszard Koziółek, in the book *Dobrze się myśli literaturą* (*Literature is Good to Think With*), which has been so much discussed in recent months: “Literature should be used, if necessary even for holding up a cabinet with a broken leg by means of books.”<sup>7</sup> In fact, Felski herself writes in similar terms, presenting words as “hand-me-downs, well-worn tokens used by countless others before us, the detritus of endless myths and movies [...]”<sup>8</sup> It is not, however, the problem of the use of literature itself that is the topic of her book, but the attempt to find out what different purposes it can serve, what applications it can have for readers, who here become precisely users, making use – depending on their needs – of the broadly diverse functions offered by literary texts.

For a manifesto, however, Felski’s work defines its adversaries with exceptional indefiniteness: their image gets washed out in the pursuit of new metaphors, only to next take on the shape of an opposition so extreme that

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Felski, *Uses*, p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> R. Koziółek: *Dobrze się myśli literaturą*. Wydawnictwo Czarne. Wołowiec 2016, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Felski, *Uses*, p. 31.

it is impossible to maintain. In only a few pages, Felski settles accounts with all of literary theory, dividing its space into two leading trends, identified with two styles of reading, the theological and the ideological. In the first case literature would allegedly be valued for its otherness and the quality of being exceptional, while in the second its relation to social reality would become its crucial element. Let us begin, then, from the traditional (and, it must be admitted, very well-worn) opposition between “the Scylla of political functionalism and the Charybdis of art for art’s sake [...]”<sup>9</sup> It is nonetheless hard to say why all ways of reading that question literature’s autonomy are accused by Felski of instrumentalization, political functionalism and the definition of literature as ideology, which, in her view, means having “decided ahead of time that literary works can be objects of knowledge but never sources of knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> Why should an approach to the study of literature (or art) within the perspective of the influence of external forces that violate the integrity of its boundaries, one opposed to the belief in its autonomous nature, constitute an unequivocal resignation from the cognitive function? And furthermore, why should belief in the causative power of literature, which can be a sphere of projected social change and a space of real public debate, eliminate its specific knowledge, being a kind of conglomerate of individual articulation and collective consciousness and artistic form? Why should it depreciate such knowledge, instead of welcoming it as boon that certainly enhances the conditions for the potential formation of artistic agency? Why should every form of opposition to the vision of art’s autonomy automatically “force an equivalence of textual structures with social structures”?<sup>11</sup> Felski’s book does not provide answers to these questions. At the same time, both sides of the dispute – drawn, it must be said, in what can only be called a quite reductive vein – are accused by her, also somewhat traditionally, of reductionism, in order to then build her own project in the narrow middle ground, one which, needless to say, is not so radical or so reductive; nor is it in any way despotic, but rather “respectful,”

affirmative and “dialogic.”<sup>12</sup> And, above all, it submits the hermeneutics of suspicion to its own suspicions.

Regardless of the various doubts aroused especially by the generalities – developed at a fairly high level – of Rita Felski’s polemic with literary theory, things only really begin to heat up (and become highly engaging) when she begins pitilessly enumerating the chief sins of academic reading, among which the biggest relates to the marginalization of the theory of reading and the political situation of reading. In this light, historians of literature take cover behind history and do not ask questions about the contemporary importance of the text, its potential participation in current social debates. In addition, the rhetoric imposed by theoreticians is alleged to have drowned out readerly reactions in general. Felski thus exaggerates the antagonisms between reading specialists, who not only create a hierarchy in the world of literature but also project the nature of the act of reading itself, and “ordinary readers.” That distance is directly proportional to the distance separating the lowly motives, pronounced to be primitive by experts, that animate the “masses” from a “proper” reading, available to a handful of initiates. Felski simultaneously lays bare the tremendous problem theory has with the fact that literature can be evaluated for reasons other than those recognized and accepted by theory itself.

Starting from there, Felski shows the necessity of freeing academic reading from the enclave of elitism that it has created itself. The point of departure for this gesture must nonetheless be the perception of literary studies’ great oversight: everyday motives for reading, readers’ practices and the political situation of reading. That leads us to the need to break down the opposition between low and high, popular and artistic, revealing the class-based nature of the contempt with which elite readers treat “ordinary” readers. And this is undoubtedly the most interesting, most important element of the plan developed in *Uses of Literature* and the one most needed by literary theory itself. Felski thus writes her manifesto / un-manifesto, cutting herself off from the avant-garde sensibility which she claims marks most theoretical gestures, above all in terms of their drive to unmask universal, everyday practices and aspirations to expose “false consciousness.” Instead she

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

takes as her guides – with no fear of the risk it entails – “common sense” and intuition. As Felski declares, “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.”<sup>13</sup> Felski takes philosophical and simultaneously methodological inspiration from a phenomenology of reading that “calls for an undogmatic openness to a spectrum of literary responses [...]”<sup>14</sup> Dreading the accusation of ahistoricism, she nevertheless wades into a project of neophenomenology that unites phenomenology with a historical and sociopolitical perspective.

In her effort to implement the goals she has set herself, Rita Felski creates a real cabinet of curiosities in her book, in which a multitude of concepts despised by literary theory are gathered together, generally speaking, those derided by the hermeneutics of suspicion, which undeniably becomes the main adversary in Felski’s reflections.<sup>15</sup> Proceeding down this path, Felski distinguishes four categories within which she organizes her thought: *recognition*, *enchantment*, *knowledge* and *shock*. These concepts, she claims, “name quite ordinary structures of experience that are also political, philosophical, and aesthetic concepts fanning out into complex histories.”<sup>16</sup> These four keywords define the various forms of engagement with reading, designating the axis of interaction between reader and text. In these four concepts, she would have us feel intimations of “the shadowy presence of some venerable aesthetic categories”<sup>17</sup> such as anagnorisis, beauty, *mimesis* and the sublime, which she seeks to submit to revision, formulating the reasons why we read and the values based on which the nature and functions of literature are defined, offering an answer diametrically opposed to the one that emerges from the main areas of literary studies. In Felski’s opinion, the most important task

of literature does not boil down to either eliciting aesthetic rapture or action in the sphere of power relations. It is situated in other registers – to which academic literary studies remain blind.

### Self-Discovery or Self-Deception?

The first of the crucial categories Felski uses to describe reading practices is recognition, a process that joins together cognitive function and affective charge and involves “finding yourself in the work,” i.e., what Dorian Gray experienced when reading a book that was presumably Huysmans’s *À rebours*, recognizing in its hero his “prototype”, and nourishing the belief that the book was really about his own life, written out before he came to live through it. On the one hand, recognition is therefore a narcissistic allegorization, while on the other hand, it expresses an extremely unprofessional readerly naïveté, which is why Felski finds it so very interesting. And thus for reasons exactly opposite to those for which it appeared as a functional category for twentieth century theory, in which recognition serves exploration only to the extent that it is an erroneous or false recognition, revealing simultaneously the illusory character of self-knowledge and the construction of a perpetually miscarried image of the self, who is doomed to experience non-identity with its own self. The two key inspirations here are the stories, reproduced in various forms in cultural studies, of the Lacanian mirror and the Althusserian policeman. Felski, however, shows the paradox in which the philosophical and literary scholarly critique of recognition becomes entangled: “If we are barred from achieving insight or self-understanding, how could we know that an act of misrecognition had taken place? The critique of recognition, in this respect, reveals an endemic failure to face up to the normative commitments underpinning its own premises [...]”<sup>18</sup> And here, it is hard to resist the impression that the discussions undertaken by Felski begin and end at the surface level of the problem, and the rhythm of quick leaps between threads are determined rather by pragmatic ends. Felski’s narrative in fact comes off much better when it is based on direct analysis and interpretation of works (she then frequently draws truly revelatory conclusions) than when it ascends into a high

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>15</sup>Felski further develops this thread in her 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*, devoted precisely to polemics with the demystificatory imperative that drives contemporary literary studies. See R. Felski: *The Limits of Critique*, Chicago 2015.

<sup>16</sup>Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

level of generality. At that level, for example, we see her tendency to use the rather transparent category of “the reader,” not anchored in reality and not subject to social, economic, historical or geographical conditions (all the more astonishing in the work of a scholar from a feminist school of literary criticism). Things are utterly different in the case of her concrete analyses – so it is difficult to explain the asymmetry that arises between analyses and generalized judgments which cause the concepts invoked to lose their historical and social precision, becoming somehow homogeneous, abstracted from the network of factors that determine them.

Felski attempts to capture the various forms that recognition can take – she points to self-intensification, relating to self-recognition in what is similar, and self-extension, the recognition of the self in experiences that are completely other to it. At the same time, the distance separating self-intensification from self-extension opens a broad set of problems that no doubt constitute an important and intriguing area for post-colonial studies or economic literary criticism. It is difficult to speak of recognition as something permanent, graspable or structurally defined. We can instead speak of “the shock of recognition.” The moment of recognition is an illusory pinprick to subjectivity, whose nature is undeniably reductive. Literature is ascribed the function of “a mediating role in this drama of self-formation”<sup>19</sup> when we are let down by social and political forms of struggle for recognition, acknowledgement, and inclusion in the community, which reveal their inadequacy in confrontation with exclusion and alienation. In this sense, according to Felski, art, by means of aesthetic experience, has the power to provide a sense of identification and inclusion in the community. The tragedy of non-recognition is simultaneously a tragedy of misunderstanding and of not belonging. In this respect, recognition fuses in itself the personal and the public, becoming also a kind of social diagnosis (Felski analyses this fact very interestingly using the example of the historical identification of women with the heroines of Ibsen’s dramas, indicating a crucial gender asymmetry in the space of reception). Recognition in the political sense means not only “maturity” and the

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

acknowledgement of difference or otherness, but also the acknowledgement of its value. In the realm of identity, meanwhile, it relates to the acquisition of self-knowledge, which is linked to the process of self-analysis. Felski shows, however, that those two meanings in no way contradict each other, as they remain in the sphere of questions of identity. Recognition itself oscillates between “knowledge and acknowledgement, the epistemological and the ethical, the subjective and the social [...]”<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult, nonetheless, to agree with Felski’s thesis that “books will often function as lifelines for those deprived of other forms of public acknowledgement. Until very recently, for example, such deprivation stamped the lives of women who desired other women.”<sup>21</sup> Is “recognition” and the attempt at identification really what literature should have to offer people deprived of public acknowledgement and excluded? Should its function not be situated in a completely different place? Recognition as Felski formulates it means that literature becomes a form of inherently absurd substitution that the reader would temporarily feel obligated to find satisfying since in any case there is no way to change reality. In offering that kind of “miserable consolation,” assuaging longings, answering the desire for change with empty phantasms, literature positions itself outside of efforts to influence reality, outside attempts to develop a project of real social intervention which might actually change the situation of the unacknowledged, might work in opposition to exclusion. And though Felski writes that the potential for recognition lies within literature precisely because it is “a narrative, not a sociological screed,”<sup>22</sup> because it acts as fiction, because the encounter with it is an aesthetic experience, it is hard not to agree with her but still harder to stifle the conviction that this is not where literature’s function should end.

## Disenchantment with Enchantment

The next part of the book could not exist without the belief that literature has seductive power, that it captivates with its charms, spellbinds, intoxicates but

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

also, as follows naturally from that, deceives. Literature enchants and disenchants simultaneously. The next of the despised concepts invoked by Felski is precisely *enchantment*, which she describes as “a term with precious little currency in literary theory, calling up scenarios of old-school professors swooning in rapture over the delights of Romantic poetry. Contemporary critics pride themselves on their power to disenchant, to mercilessly direct laser-sharp beams of critique at every imaginable object. In Lyotard’s words, “demystification is an endless task.”<sup>23</sup> At the same time, inevitably linked with enchantment is the abandonment of the distanced position that makes the critical gaze possible – that position is discarded on behalf of high-intensity engagement, the renunciation of one’s own autonomy and self-control. Our capacity for thought, our predispositions, scepticism, causative agency and any possibility of taking action then become irrelevant. Especially since, as the example of Emma Bovary shows, what we are dealing with is often the “erotic undertow of aesthetic enchantment [...]”<sup>24</sup> In what she writes about both recognition and enchantment, however, Felski does not make use of the full potential implicit in either affective criticism or somatic criticism, with its analysis of the body’s involvement in both the creative act and the act of reception.

The anti-intellectualism of the concept of enchantment is, in fact, obvious and places it, as Felski declares, dangerously close to the margins of secularized thought<sup>25</sup> in connection with the siren song of art: “Enchantment matters because one reason that people turn to works of art is to be taken out of themselves, to be pulled into an altered state of consciousness”<sup>26</sup>; “Enchantment in this sense is the antithesis and enemy of criticism. To be enchanted is to [...] lose one’s head and one’s wits [...]”<sup>27</sup> Felski draws attention to the fact that Max Weber’s thesis on modern disenchantment with the world, a thesis which has attained enormous popularity, is increasingly

criticized by scholars who point to both the affective nature of modern process and their entanglement in magical and mythical thinking. Curiously, the concept of enchantment conceals, in Felski’s view, a peculiar kind of blind spot that causes academic scholars to completely dismiss this seductive and intoxicating aspect of literary or (perhaps especially) filmic work, displacing it beyond the area of reflection on reception and in the process falsifying the image presented therein. The category of enchantment, as explored by Felski, though it appears similar to the concept of *jouissance*, is nonetheless radically detached from it. As we read in Felski: “[*Jouissance*] was a forbidding, highbrow, Parisian kind of pleasure, a transgressive frisson inspired by the Marquis de Sade, not chanteuse Sade.”<sup>28</sup>

The myth of the siren song, particularly apposite to this narrative of enchantment, becomes for Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* a sign of the fulfilled desire for a “euphoric suspension of the self” [...].<sup>29</sup> The nostalgic and unequivocally conservative concept of enchantment fixes the reader in a state of immobility in the form of a surrender to captivity at the hands of external forces, a relinquishment of one’s freedom and causative agency, a passive experience of pleasure which is inescapably allied with the free market mechanism of the production of needs. And it seems the most dangerous among the catalogue of concepts derided by literary scholarship and presented to us by Felski.

## Deceived Knowledge

The third key reading motivation is, we are told, designated by the knowledge people seek out in texts, and the cognitive function of literature. The questions “What does literature know?” or “What does literature not know?” present us with the concepts, heavily overused by theory, of *mimesis*, truth and representation, through the prism of which Felski in *Uses of Literature* attempts to critically read the basic foundations of several theoretical schools. She presents

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>25</sup>See *ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 71; quoting Adorno and Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford 2002, p. 26.

the history of literary studies as an archive of conflicting metaphors for truth, on one side of which we find appearance, illusion, delusion, shadow, and the big lie of falsification, and on the other, a fairy-like spectacle of glass metaphors, the mirror, the window looking out on the world and its reflection. In the space between the two shores of this metaphorical archive, Felski takes on the fairly backbreaking task of attempting to look “differently” at the problem of art’s referential obligations and predispositions, at the distance between realism, the “reality effect,” and literature’s negative knowledge, showing the history of thought on the truth of art as a “chronicle of outgrown errors [...]”<sup>30</sup> The access point of this part of the analysis is the formulation of the following thesis: “Literature’s relationship to knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or re-order our sense of how things are.”<sup>31</sup> This recognition, undeniably a rather misty one, is superseded by the question that determines the actual direction of Felski’s polemic: the problem of the connection between any type of literary knowledge and its form. Felski chooses as her opponents those whose view of the situation is different, i.e., who claim that when the purpose of the text becomes the transmission of knowledge, formal questions shift to the background. And once again, this stereotypically drawn, rather abstract opponent is not a flesh-and-blood opponent, lacking as it usually does a name or a concrete textual form, but materializes only as the sum of reported views that here serve pragmatic purposes (“uses of theory”?). This “faceless” opponent in its various incarnations is the hero of all parts of the book and stirs the most doubts in it, because, to take the example of her thoughts on cognitive function, do we really find in the history of literary studies so many examples of an approach in which literary knowledge is supposed to be completely separate from its artistic form (from problems to do with genre, for example)? Felski seems here to do battle with the long-discredited idea of the autonomy, objectivity and detachment from the contingencies of language of scholarly and scientific judgments, and in truth it is hard not to see a hint of tilting at windmills here. For does not strenuous argumentation

on behalf of claims that “all forms of knowing are shaped by [...] conventions of genre,”<sup>32</sup> that “mimesis is by no means limited to realism,”<sup>33</sup> or that *mimesis* “is an act of creative imitation, not mindless copying,”<sup>34</sup> and that metaphors can fulfil a cognitive function, resemble a debate with an imaginary interlocutor?

In focusing on an analysis of ways of conveying objects, mainly in the poetry of Pablo Neruda, Felski attempts to show how literature can examine materiality and social interactions, on the one hand “taking us in” toward imagined worlds, while on the other leading us toward referentiality. Felski tries to show literary knowledge as having been constantly led astray, as an original and fully entitled form of social knowledge (unlike Terry Eagleton, who defines it as an “analogue of knowledge” or “something like knowledge”) inseparably linked with artistic form. Her diagnosis is very important, but the author stops right at this point, not going any further and not trying to define what exactly the unique nature of this literary knowledge is to be based on, how its full authorization can be justified, what makes it a form of knowledge accessible to discourses of other systems, what proper significance artistic form has for its shape, how the social production of literary knowledge takes place, what connection it has with individual and collective experience, what sense it can be socially useful, and especially, what exactly this literary knowledge has to offer the reader – for he or she is, after all, the main focus of Felski’s book. We are here undoubtedly witnessing a very suggestive and intriguing rescue of literature from the depths of cognitive failures and referential disasters, but we do not in fact get the long-awaited answer to the question of what its cognitive victories would involve.

### Let’s Talk About Shock

In the final part of the book, Felski examines the abilities of literary texts to shock or elicit outrage. At the same time, she opposes the position of what has been called ethical criticism, within which Martha Nussbaum and

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 85

Wayne Booth have devised judgments on the particular kind of “friendly” relationship formed between the reader and the book. As Felski argues, if, in our contemporary world of blunted sensitivity, “the aura of revolution is now a styling and marketing advantage, if transgression is harnessed to the selling of sneakers and a cornucopia of sexual perversions is only a mouse-click away, then surely the project of the avant-garde is irrevocably exhausted. Under such conditions, shock is irrevocably stripped of any remaining shred of authenticity.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Felski once again proposes to detach our grasp and definition of shock from the avant-garde tradition, a project she deems irretrievably worn down, today no longer possessing any subversive or emancipatory potential and stripped of the ability to break down social and aesthetic taboos. The avant-garde artistic movements from the early twentieth century, in Felski’s view, succeeded in “frenetically debunking mythologies and slaughtering all sacred cows except one: the authenticity of their own antinomian stance.” Aggressive and extreme forms of engagement aimed at bourgeois logic, representing a powerful, instinctual cry, were supposed to act like an electric shock, but it has unexpectedly been neutralized by the assimilation of what was avant-garde into the mainstream, through the turning of what was ostentatiously anti-economic into a good investment.

Where the shock-driven aspirations of the avant-garde to demolish and reformulate the social order ended up disappointing, the art of shock in fact does, Felski claims, reveal its emancipatory and subversive properties, overcoming stereotypes and rules, when it foregoes clearly defined social goals. Shock that tears down the schemata of perception, but also the space and time in which perception is happening, becomes, by virtue of its immediacy, “the antithesis of the blissful enfolding and voluptuous pleasure that we associate with enchantment. Instead of being rocked and cradled, we find ourselves ambushed and under assault.”<sup>36</sup>

In showing the effects of shock using the example of classical tragedies (in particular Euripides’s *Bacchae*),

Felski draws attention to the lack of justification for the avant-garde rejection of the entire tradition as relating to the might of patriarchal authority and a kind of legitimization of the social order, where in fact, the transgressive and subversive potential of, for example, classical tragedy contains, she finds, significantly greater, timeless power to affect than is possible in the case of most avant-garde gestures. The aesthetic of shock, according to Felski, is not up to the tasks that the avant-garde ethos binds it to, and which are supposed primarily to boil down to a correlation between individual or collective shock and the coming transformation of society.

The aesthetic of shock is only superficially asocial in nature, however, being determined in equal parts by problems relating to class, race and gender issues. The fascination with ugliness in art, Felski claims, following Bourdieu, reveals its fundamental character to be inescapably class-based, suited as it is to the sublimated tastes of the upper middle class. On the other hand, she shows how literary provocation has historically been a male domain, representing a peculiar kind of attack on stereotypical feminine prudishness. Even if it was a series of feminine figures who in fact became symbols of the bestial, the procreative, the corporeal and the disgustingly natural. That is above all typical of the avant-garde and modernism. Felski, in her riveting analyses (for example, of the work of Sara Kane) here provides proof of the shift in contemporary culture, in keeping with whose current a particular kind of aesthetic of shock has begun to dominate in women’s writing. Felski explains that “[a]s a history of expectations about the nature of femininity comes under intense stress, ever more female writers are turning toward an aesthetic of provocation and perversity.”<sup>37</sup> The shock, however, is being absorbed by the capitalist trends of late modernity. In this sense, its subversive nature has become suspect. It has ceased to be an expression of rebellion and instead is a compromise with the free market, which – again, as in the case of enchantment, though also completely differently – found in the aesthetic of shock a supremely good tool for satisfying the cravings and needs of the mass audience.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 126.



## The Trouble with the Full-time Reader

In *Uses of Literature*, Rita Felski sketches out the conditions in which a peculiar type of “complex of diminishing returns” of the humanities and the depreciation of both literature itself and reading has taken shape, becoming one of the main sources of apathy and discouragement among literary scholars, and vice versa. As many reviewers have noted, Felski sees a possible antidote for the existing state of affairs in the continuing efforts to build a bridge between theory and general knowledge and common sense, yet does not place her complete trust in that solution. She repeatedly harmonizes with the voice of Antoine Compagnon, who in his chronicle of skirmishes in literary theory writes in the spirit of common sense: “The aim of theory is [...] the defeat of common sense. It contests it, criticizes it, denounces it as a series of fallacies [...] theory makes it seem indispensable to begin by freeing oneself from these fallacies in order to talk about literature. But the resistance of common sense to theory is unimaginable. [...] common sense never gives up, and theorists are obstinate. Having failed to settle their accounts with their bêtes noires once and for all, they become entangled.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the promised affirmation that Felski attempts to advance and oppose to the negation, critique and suspicion she finds so intolerable, despite the fact that she wants to cheer up the so-called “common” or “ordinary” reader by the mere fact that literary studies have not completely forgotten about him or her, *Uses of Literature* do not fill one with optimism. Despite the apologia for the many possible uses and applications of literature, each chapter seems underpinned by the belief that literature, when it all comes down to it, can achieve very little, has relatively low causative power, and is tasked not with projecting change but rather gratifying the narcissistic needs of the “ordinary” reader, for whom identification and enchantment are to replace what he lacks, becoming, for example, a substitute for belonging to what he or she is, in a social sense, excluded from. So the claim goes: it is all right, we don’t have much, but look, we might have had nothing at all! Even though the various attempts to move

outside the elitism of literary studies are unquestionably the most intriguing, relevant, and utterly necessary part of Felski’s project, she nevertheless fails to give voice to those readers who are not full-time specialists. A full-time reader herself, she speaks in their name while speculating on the subject of their motivations. We therefore do not get an image of how a part-time reader reads, but at best how a full-time reader reads on her day off, or after hours. And that is, to a great extent, what the book is about.

In this affirmation of reading, there are a few pieces of the puzzle that appear still to be missing – a curtain of silence falls on the fact that the influence of books on the reader is not always a good one, and that reading itself is class-conditioned, generating class conditions and distinctions in terms of both the motivation and goals for reading as well as readerly reactions. On the one hand, then – and this is doubtless the most important gesture in Rita Felski’s entire project – she seeks to draw literature out of the literary studies enclave, which establishes hierarchy and tries to turn reading, and above all, understanding, into an elite activity. Felski focuses her attention on the egalitarian, everyday, universal aspect of reading, but at the same time promotes reading as an individual activity, serving personal goals, and does not give adequate consideration to collective reception, or, more importantly, the social impact of literature (to which she only pays attention, with truly revelatory results, in her analysis of the reception of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*). And through this omission, her otherwise fascinating depiction of literature as a machine for satisfying individual needs would appear to lose most. The motivations for reading, enumerated and inspected by Felski, correspond to the beloved tools of the free market that have become the best way to ensure the profitability of each publishing initiative: literature as product wants to somehow shock, enchant or come out against the narcissistic desire for identification while simultaneously offering the individual greater self-knowledge and thereby self-improvement. But those are not the uses of literature that we would really have liked to consider.

<sup>38</sup>A. Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman, Princeton 2004, p. 193.

# KEYWORDS

literary theory

use

*hermeneutics of suspicion*

AFFECTIVE CRITICISM

aesthetics of reception

## ABSTRACT:

This text represents an attempt to analyze the main premises of Rita Felski's theoretical project presented in her book *Uses of Literature*, translated into Polish as *Literatura w użyciu* (Literature in Use). The American scholar's reflections, focused on problems of reception aesthetic and constituting a polemic with the concept, crucial to contemporary literary theory, of the hermeneutics of suspicion and with critical theory, are here interpreted using the four concepts relied on by Felski in the book: recognition enchantment, knowledge and shock. They constitute various forms of readerly engagement with the text and various forms of use, of applications of literature in practices of everyday, non-specialist reading. This article identifies Felski's attempt to disrupt the elitism of literary studies and their exclusionary stance toward non-professional readers as one of the most important elements in her project as put forth in the book.

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