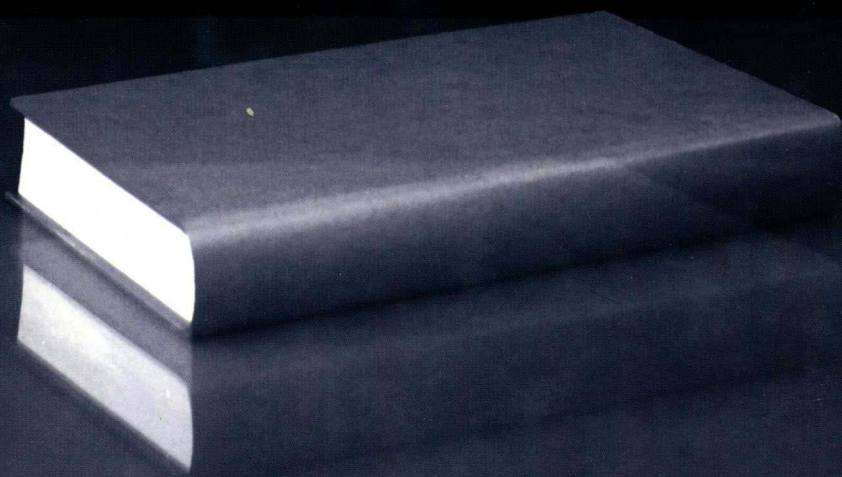


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Gerald Graff

Uses of Literature

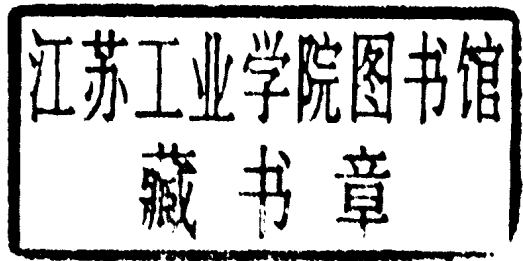
Rita Felski



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Uses of Literature

Rita Felski



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Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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manipulative or grasping; it does not have to involve the sway of instrumental rationality or a willful blindness to complex form. I venture that aesthetic value is inseparable from use, but also that our engagements with texts are extraordinarily varied, complex, and often unpredictable in kind. The pragmatic, in this sense, neither destroys nor excludes the poetic. To propose that the meaning of literature lies in its use is to open up for investigation a vast terrain of practices, expectations, emotions, hopes, dreams, and interpretations – a terrain that is, in William James’s words, “multitudinous beyond imagination, tangled, muddy, painful and perplexed.”⁹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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