The Chronicle Review

The New Modesty in Literary Criticism

Doug Beube for The Chronicle Review

By Jeffrey J. Williams January 05, 2015

L iterary criticism once had an outsize reach, influencing the terms and concepts of disciplines like art and legal studies. With it came an outsize ego. During the 1970s and 80s, the heyday of literary theory, scholars aimed to explode the foundations of Western metaphysics, foment a revolution of the sign, overturn gender hierarchies, and fight the class struggle.

The battles weren't just in their imagination. In 1991 the columnist George Will declared Lynne Cheney, then chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, "secretary of domestic defense" for staving off literary theorists who were threatening the canon and traditional cultural values.

But in the past decade, we've seen a new modesty. Literary critics have become more subdued, adopting methods with less grand speculation, more empirical study, and more use of statistics or other data. They aim to read, describe, and mine data rather than make "interventions" of world-historical importance. Their methods include "surface reading," "thin description," "the new formalism," "book history," "distant reading," "the new sociology."

... What We Read

When we cease distinguishing between the great and the good, literature loses its spine.

At times it seems as if each year brings the next new thing, but those methods add up to more than that. Together they augur a change in the basic assumptions of literary studies.

Since the 1950s, the dominant practice in academe has been "criticism"; not the dusty excavation of facts about literature that had marked the field before that—the linguistic and historical background on Elizabethan England or Norse verb forms, or whether Chaucer traveled to France to hear his tales—but analysis and interpretation. Critics became seers who uncovered the special significance of texts, or warriors who critiqued society.

Today they are still interested in "reading" texts, but their approach to what they read is different.

In part, the shift represents a generational turnover, and dispensing with some of the overblown assertions of literary theory is refreshing. But it also seems to express the shrunken expectations of academe, particularly of the humanities, and a decline in the social prestige of literary criticism.

T he change has crystallized around "surface reading." The term comes from Sharon Marcus, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, and Stephen M. Best, an associate professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. Marcus broached it in her 2007 book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton University Press), and elaborated on it in the introduction she wrote with Best to a 2009 special issue of the journal *Representations* on "The Way We Read Now." (They had been colleagues at Berkeley in the late 1990s and early 2000s.) Surface reading, they suggest, characterizes the work of a rising generation.

A good deal of contemporary criticism has performed "symptomatic reading," a term that conveys looking for the hidden meaning of a text, using, for example, Marxian, Freudian, or deconstructive interpretation. Fredric Jameson has been one of its most influential practitioners, codifying the approach in his 1981 *Political Unconscious* to look for "a latent meaning behind a manifest one." Surface reading instead focuses on "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts," as Best and Marcus put it. Thus the critic is no longer like a detective who doesn't trust the suspect but more the social scientist who describes the manifest statements of a text.

Between Women shows how this works. Marcus examines female friendships in Victorian society, but rather than exposing the secrets underneath normative family life—as much of queer theory, for example, has done—she shows how women's relations were openly affectionate and sometimes sexual, but not secret, suppressed, or hidden in a closet. Surprisingly, she writes, the companionship among women provided a model for heterosexual marriage. While Marcus gathers her argument from the surface, she casts a wide scholarly net, drawing from Victorian fiction, fashion, domestic treatises, political debates. Marcus calls her approach "just reading."

In their *Representations* essay, Best and Marcus make clear that surface reading is a big tent, and the special issue includes essays on the history of the book, a field that focuses on the creation, production, and use of books; renewed attention to basics like literary language and form; sociological description of institutions that mediate literature, like writing programs or book awards; and identifying patterns reflected in literature, like female friendship. They also note that surface reading speaks for those trained in the 1980s and after (Marcus and Best were born in the mid-1960s, so are post-boomers), who are familiar with theory, study noncanonical as well as canonical texts, and might consult anthropological or political theory alongside literature. They don't dismiss symptomatic reading but state that "now we do things a bit differently than they did back then."

Perhaps the key difference is politics. Symptomatic reading, usually associated with the sixties' generation, often assumes that it performs "politics by other means." Best and Marcus point out that such a stance makes the critic a kind of glamorous hero who does work "more akin to activism and labor than to leisure." They propose "a sense of political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics."

Though avoiding a polemical tone, the article on surface reading has touched a nerve, with responses from many prominent critics and, according to Google Scholar, 175 citations in just a few years (most academic articles in literary studies are lucky if they get six or eight). Best and Marcus told me that they had been surprised at the prolific and sometimes vehement response.

Their opponents complain that they discard the political vista of symptomatic reading too easily. And some question the theoretical premise that one can readily determine the surface of the text. In a riposte in *PMLA,* the journal of the Modern Language Association, Crystal Bartolovich, an associate professor of English at Syracuse University, defends criticism as an emancipatory project. Among examples, she cites the work of Edward Said, who used the tools of criticism, focusing on literary and other representations of the Middle East, to make serious political comments.

It is not that Best and Marcus advocate quietism. As Marcus writes in *Between Women,* "symptomatic reading is an excellent method for excavating what societies refuse to acknowledge." Moreover, she has made a foray into the public sphere, notably co-editing the online review Public Books . Affiliated with the scholarly journal *Public Culture,* it tries to redress the lack of forums for book reviews, covering work in the humanities and social sciences, as well as contemporary fiction. However, it doesn't necessarily assume a politics; as its mission states, it focuses on "the brainy, bookish, or insatiably curious, who share our passion for connecting to the world through ideas."

As Marcus remarked in a talk at Carnegie Mellon University this past fall, if your aim is activism, literary criticism may not be the best way to do it.

"R eading" as we know it has a relatively short history. Before 1950, literary commentary was more likely to be appreciative than was detailed analysis. Midcentury critics developed a method of "close reading," paying attention to the details of literary works, especially poetry: As biologists studied cells under a microscope, scholars of literature examined literary language, particularly its images and metaphors. With the advent of theory, literary scholars continued that close attention, but reading became more allegorical, finding encoded meanings in texts. In the theory years, you were what your reading was—Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, queer. It was an era of manifestoes more than mere commentary.

Some who were in that camp, with its suspicious habits, began moving away from it by the late 1990s and early 2000s. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose influential *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) forged queer theory by exposing the ways that sexuality was hidden in our culture, came to see symptomatic reading as corrosive, similar to paranoia. Instead she advocated "reparative reading," in the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You." Other scholars also began to worry about the effects of theory. In a much-discussed 2003 essay, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" the sociologist of science Bruno Latour worried that the relativism and social constructionism of postmodern theory had discredited good science. While Latour had made a career studying how facts are constructed by scientists, he didn't mean they are fictional. When we talk about climate change or creationism, we need some sort of ground for our arguments.

In literature, one of the first forays away from the deep drilling of symptomatic reading was Franco Moretti's "distant reading." Moretti, a professor in the humanities and founder of the Literary Lab at Stanford University, pointed out that we study only a minuscule sampling of literary texts from a relatively narrow part of the world. He proposed a "distant" perspective, which initially meant tracking the birth and trajectory of the novel around the world. Since then, his work has drawn on quantitative methods, and the term "distant reading" has come to designate the general drift toward Big Data and "machine reading." Distant reading tacks to an empirical account of literary work in all its guises.

In the past few years, several scholars have aligned themselves with the general direction of Best and Marcus's initiative, embracing empirical description, shedding a suspicious stance, and looking for methods from other places. Notable among them are Heather K. Love, an associate professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, and Rita Felski, a professor of English at the University of Virginia and editor of the journal *New Literary History* .

Love looks to the postwar sociology of Erving Goffman and others, recounting cases of "microanalysis," or intensive observation of an object. Empiricism has come to seem rudimentary, she argues, but we need a "better empiricism." In "Close Reading and Thin Description," in *Public Culture* in 2013, she argues that microanalysis can "challenge narrow hermeneutic definitions of reading," concluding that "such practices might help us reframe reading as a social science."

Felski calls for a renewed interest in phenomenology and the experience of reading. Along with Marcus and Love, she advocates for description, though evoking a somewhat different tradition, that of the pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty and his concept of "redescription." Rorty held that the goal of philosophy was not to attain absolute truth, a false ideal, but better descriptions of the world. Felski similarly suggests that we leave behind "Suspicious Minds," the title of one of her essays, and redescribe the experience of literature. Felski has also co-edited a special issue of *New Literary History* on "The New Sociologies of Literature," which features essays by Love and others borrowing from a range of sociological methods.

In some ways, surface reading and allied approaches seem to return to an older orientation of criticism, one that sees its mission as more scholarly than political. The politicization of criticism is sometimes blamed on theory, but it is not foreign to American literary criticism. The theory generation may have been immodest about the claims it made, but our literary culture has always been an "adversary culture," as Lionel Trilling remarked in *Beyond Culture* (1965). "Any historian of the literature of the modern age will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing ... detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes."

Indeed, the embrace of politics in academic criticism stems not from the 1960s but the 1930s. In "Thoughts on Being Bibliographed" (1944), Edmund Wilson, often taken as an exemplar of the public intellectual, recalled that after magazines dried up during the Great Depression, critics migrated from journalism to campuses, resulting in "the curious phenomenon—which would have been quite inconceivable in my college days—of young men teaching English or French at the most venerable schools and universities at the same time that they hold radical political opinions and write for 'advanced' magazines."

That created a tension in academic literary studies. In the 1935 essay "History Versus Criticism in the Study of Literature," the University of Chicago critic R.S. Crane advocated for what was then the underdog of criticism, which had little traction as an academic pursuit and was overshadowed by historical scholarship. By 1957, however, Crane, who was a scholar of 18th-century British literature, reported that the swing toward criticism had gone too far: "There was a time, in the early and middle 30s, when the problem of criticism, as it imposed itself more and more insistently on American departments of literature, seemed a fairly simple one. The great thing was to make criticism respectable. …"

"What is surprising now, when one remembers the dust and heat engendered by that effort, is the relative ease with which the political victory of criticism was brought about."

With the new generation, we may be seeing the balance tilt back. "Surface" suggests superficial, but if you look at the work of Marcus and Best themselves (which most of their respondents have not done), it is deeply erudite. Marcus's first book, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (University of California Press, 1999), for instance, is thoroughly versed in the history of French and English housing and architecture, as well as literature. And Best's book, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), is a careful study of legal and political history as well as literature and popular culture, showing how the status of slaves helped shape legal ideas of property in the United States.

It remains to be seen, though, whether surface reading and allied approaches re-embrace a more cloistered sense of literary studies. I'd like to think that criticism has more to do than accumulate scholarly knowledge, at the least to explain our culture to ourselves, as well as serving as a political watchdog.

Today's modesty may not bode an academic withdrawal from public life. It may simply register an unsettled moment, as past practices cede and a new generation takes hold. The less-optimistic outlook is that it represents the decline of criticism as a special genre with an important role to investigate our culture. While realism carries less hubris, it leaves behind the utopian impulse of criticism.

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