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Disciplinary Brief

LOVE AND LITERATURE: CHALLENGING THE DOMINANCE OF “CRITIQUE” IN LITERARY STUDIES

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Should We Love Things We Study?

At the GFI round table on the insightful theological brief *The Sovereignty of Love*, much of the discussion turned on O'Donovan's mobilisation of the Augustinian idea of the orders of love. The panellists were by no means sure that O'Donovan's formulation that we should love things for the sake of persons, and persons for the sake of God, did justice to the reality of the claim that both persons and things have on us. Put very simply, if we follow Augustine in thinking that God is the true object of our love, and created beings (both persons and things) are in some way to be loved in a subordinate manner, does that not mean we treat people and things as means to another end, rather than ends in themselves?

The conversation was wide ranging and important, and there remained significant disagreement. The point in question was important to us all, since it touches on the heart of academic inquiry - how are we to love the objects which we are called to study (be they books, cells, sub-atomic particles or the history of the Roman Empire)? Should we love these things in their own right, or is the love of them ordered to another end (proximately in the love of persons, ultimately in the love of God), as O'Donovan suggests?

Personally, I am in favour of Augustine's formulation, and O'Donovan's appropriation of it. To love things in an ordered manner is, I think, to treat them as they actually are. Persons are persons, things are things. Neither are God. Yet, obvious as those statements sound, the temptation to love things in the wrong order - to treat things like people, or to treat people like God - is enormous and enormously powerful. On the former point, consider how most of us relate to our phones. On the latter, it doesn't take much pastoral or interpersonal contact to realise many relational issues spring from treating another person (especially a romantic partner or a child) as if they were a source of ultimate meaning (i.e., as if they were God).

But this is not my primary concern here. Instead, I am interested in an assumption that went unquestioned in the room: that we are indeed to love the objects of our study. This basic presupposition was never in question; what was debated was the nature of that love and its relationship to other demands on our love.

The Strange Contradiction of Critique and Love of Literature

This interests me because I think this assumption is much less self-evident to those in the humanities than it is, perhaps, to those in the hard sciences. Scientists tend to be rather unashamed about their affection for what they investigate - their eyes light up and their speach quickens when mitochondria or chemical reactions or even statistics come into conversation. By contrast, much of the humanities, and especially the artistic humanities, have long operated with a suspicion of this kind of dewy-eyed affection. Books, or artefacts, or discourses are not, for many of us, supposed to be the object of love but of critique.

Here the literary critic Rita Felski is helpful in her detailed study of the norms of her discipline and its subjection to the "hegemony of critique." [1] Felski highlights how modern literature studies, but also the humanities more broadly, are dominated by a "thought style" which seeks to mobilise what Ricoeur called the "hermeneutics of suspicion, to "expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see." [2] For Felski, critique's "key elements" include:

> a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-a-vis overbearing and oppressive social forces, the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical. [3]

These features will, I would imagine, be immediately familiar to scholars across the humanities, and recognisable as the mainstays of not only the theory on which we rely, but the political outcomes that we use to justify the existence of our field.

Felski argues that it is not the practice of critique itself which is the problem, but its hegemony: if academics in the humanities think that critique is the only way they can gain disciplinary legitimacy, then other ways of knowing will be obscured. Critique "has made certain things possible" but it has also "sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic, and political possibilities." [4] In particular, critique forces a strange myopia, whereby the real forces that drive people to study literature (usually love of books!) become unfashionable, and have to be replaced by a sense that what we are doing is intellectually and politically efficacious. This means we end up in the strange position where "we can only rationalize our love of works of art, it seems, by proving that they are engaged in critique-even if unwittingly and unknowingly." [5] She quotes with appreciation Michel Chaouli's observation of:

> The lengths to which we go to keep at bay the force of artworks, the same artworks whose ability to snap us out of our torpor drew us to them in the first place. How curious it is that we dig wide moats-of history, ideology, formal analysis-and erect thick conceptual walls lest we be touched by what, in truth, lures us. [6]

Art, texts, artefacts: across much of the humanities it is taken for granted that what we study should be the object of our criticism, and our love for it is at best an embarrassing reason we entered the discipline in

the first place, and at worst a dangerous distraction that will blind us to the pathologies of power embedded in the objects we delight in.

How Critique Plays Out in Comedy Studies

These dynamics are visible in my own current research, which focuses on theology and comedy. For many involved in comedy and humour studies, [7] what is interesting about these strange phenomena is their critical and political potential. Thus dramatic comedy is often interrogated for how it subverts established social norms (think of all that cross dressing in Shakespeare), or how it has the potential for satirical political challenge, or, by contrast, how it compares negatively to tragedy since it fails to enact change or destabilise the status quo. Indeed, comedy has often been treated with suspicion by scholars because of its supposed inherent conservatism. At the end of a typical comedy, after all, everything is restored to how it was, all the dangers have been sorted out, and all the characters are safely ensconced in heteronormative marriage.

Humour studies have also long been subject to these same critical sensibilities: jokes and joking are treated as interesting precisely in so far as they reveal how social structures are formed, how authority can be pilloried, or indeed how potential revolutionary instincts can be defused (again the spectre of humour's conservatism raises its head). All of this is, perhaps, best seen in the fact that one of the most famous and significant studies of comedy and religion - Bakhtin's monumental investigation of the medieval *Feast of Foools*, was primarily an argument about how humour could be used to criticise and subvert, within safe limits, the authority of the medieval church. [8] Indeed, his work has subsequently itself been critiqued for drawing too strong a parallel between his own soviet context and the Catholic church of the Middles Ages. [9] Both Bakhtin and the revisionists, however, share the same conviction that was is interesting about this feast - in which standard social practises were inverted, a bishop of folly was elected from the populace and general tomfoolery ensured - is its political potential or lack thereof.

Now, these critical approaches undoubtedly yield important insights. Comedy is political. It does things. Often, even as it pretends to radicality, it actually props up the status quo. But all this scholarly energy seems, to me at least, to obscure what I actually find most interesting in comedy. A significant part of why humans engage in comedy and humour - of why I watch sitcoms, or joke with my friends, or indulge in puns - is because we *enjoy* it. Laughter can be incredibly cruel: it can be biting, and sarcastic, and reinforce exclusion. Just ask a thirteen year old. But it can also be the source and fruit of love.

Love as an Alternative to Critique?

When I think of humour, when I think of comedy, I think of laughing out loud at the TV with my wife. I think of friends gathered around the table, reminiscing shared stories, or poking fun at shared inconsistencies. I think of the delights of finding those who share my sense of humour. I think, in short, of love. I love

laughing. I love humour. I love God. That is why I study theology and comedy.

And I think I, and indeed those of us engaged in the humanities more broadly, would do well to attend to these dynamics. [10] Critical distance and the suspicion that underpins it is important in a world of sin. There is much that needs putting right, in literature as in the world, and the insight which the tools of critique delivers is valuable and hard won. [11] Yet, if the Christian story is true, brokenness is not the deepest reality of the world but love, and so scholars of the world would do well to foreground love in their studies.

What might this look like, as regards comedy? My own work is in the very early stages, but I have three ambitions that I hope will inform my own study as it progresses. 1) To be curious about my attachment to various forms of comedy and humour. To treat my love of these texts and artefacts not as a suspicious encroachment of sentimentality into my work, but rather as potential sources of insight. 2) To be generous in how I read, both comic literature and other scholarship. So much of the academy, and my own intellectual formation, focusses on finding problems that I can refute rather than learning truth that I can embrace. Love seems to operate in the opposite direction. 3) To deliberately look for evidence of grace and re-creation in the texts I read and the drama I watch. Critique understands everything we study as carriers of the evidence of the fallibility of the world. Love, I would suggest, by contrast sees everything as pregnant with the possibility of God's inbreaking and healing Spirit.

Paul writes of love in 1 Corinthians 13 that it "does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." To the weary humanities scholar schooled in the hard-bitten ways of critique, such an outlook seems hopelessly niave and childish. Yet, Paul goes on to argue, the miraculous hope of Christian faith is that the opposite is true: to think through the eyes of love is, in fact, to be an adult, and to see the world clearly. That, surely, is our vocation as scholars and as Christians: to apprehend the world as it is (the speciality of critique) but also as it is becoming in the love of its creator. After all, critique will pass away, but "love never ends."

Endnotes

[1] This felicitous phrase is actaully William Wood's, in a discussion of Felski (William Wood, *Analytic Theology and the Academic Study of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 241). Felski is one particularly clear narrator of this phenomenon, but she is by no means alone: other studies of critique as it's own field of enquiry include: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003); Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York University Press, 2009); Love Heather, “Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010); and Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009).

[2] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago, 2015), 1.

[3] Felski, *Limits*, 2.

[4] Felski, *Limits*, 190.

[5] Felski, *Limits*, 16.

[6] M Chaouli, “Criticism and Style,” *New Literary History* 44, no. 3 (2013), 328. Quoted in Felski, *Limits*, 191.

[7] Humour and comedy are related but non-identical fields of enquiry. Broadly, humour studies focuses on jokes, laughter and the human instinct towards the comic, whilst comedy studies addresses the dramatic and literary genres of comedy.

[8] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indiana University Press, 1968).

[9] E.g., Marcus Pound, *Theology, Comedy, Politics* (Fortress Press, 2019), 35-43.

[10] Indeed, Felski argues at length for this in her follow up to *Limits of Critique, Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago University Press, 2020).

[11] I have written at length elsewhere on the continued value of critique as an appropriate response to the doctrine of the fall, provided it is held within limits by a doctrine of grace. See Jonathan D. Torrance, *Sin and Theory: Martin Luther's Doctrine of Sin in Dialogue With Critical Theory* (T & T Clark, 2026), 63-88.

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