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LIMITS  
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## *Introduction*

This book is about the role of suspicion in literary criticism: its pervasive presence as mood and method. It is an attempt to figure out what exactly we are doing when we engage in “critique” and what else we might do instead. And here I take my bearings from a phrase coined by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur to capture the spirit of modern thought. What unites the writings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, writes Ricoeur, is their conviction that radicalism is not just a matter of action or argument but also one of interpretation. The task of the social critic is now to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see. The modern era ushers in a new mode of militant reading: what Ricoeur calls a *hermeneutics of suspicion*.

In the following pages, I pore doggedly over Ricoeur’s phrase to clarify its resonance and relevance for the recent history of criticism. While coined to describe an earlier period of intellectual history, it seems all too prescient in capturing the mood of our own. Is it not evident to even the most guileless of graduate students that texts do not willingly yield up their meanings, that apparent content shrouds more elusive or ominous truths? Seizing the upper hand, critics read against the grain and between the lines; their self-appointed task is to draw out what a text fails—or willfully refuses—to see. Of course, not everyone subscribes equally to such a style of reading, but Ricoeur’s

phrase captures a widespread sensibility and an immediately recognizable shape of thought. As a result, it allows us to discern commonalities between methods that are often contrasted or counterposed: ideology critique versus Foucauldian historicism, forceful condemnation versus more suave and tempered modes of “troubling” or calling into question. The sway of such a sensibility, moreover, reaches well beyond the confines of English departments. When anthropologists unmask the imperialist convictions of their predecessors, when art historians choreograph the stealthy tug of power and domination, when legal scholars assail the neutrality of the law in order to lay bare its hidden agendas, they all subscribe to a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment.

What follows, then, is neither a philosophical meditation nor a historical explanation but a close-up scrutiny of a *thought style* that slices across differences of field and discipline. I duly emphasize rhetoric and form, affect and argument. And while my focus is on literary and cultural studies—with occasional forays into other areas—many arguments in this book have a broader purchase.

My aim is not just to describe but to *redescribe* this style of thinking: to offer a fresh slant on a familiar practice in the hope of getting a clearer sense of how and why critics read. While the hermeneutics of suspicion has been amply discussed in religious studies, philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields, Ricoeur’s phrase never took hold among literary critics, who preferred to think of themselves as engaged in something called “critique.” (Now that scholars are casting a more jaundiced eye on their methods, it is gradually entering the critical conversation.) As we will see, the idea of critique contains varying hues and shades of meaning, but its key elements include the following: a spirit of skeptical questioning or outright condemnation, an emphasis on its precarious position vis-à-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*. In what follows, I seek to reframe, reconsider, and in some cases refute these assumptions.

The act of renaming—of redescribing critique as a hermeneutics of suspicion—is crucial to this reappraisal. Ricoeur’s phrase throws fresh light on a diverse range of practices that are often grouped under

the rubric of critique: symptomatic reading, ideology critique, Foucauldian historicism, various techniques of scanning texts for signs of transgression or resistance. These practices combine, in differing ways, an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*) with identifiable conventions of commentary (*hermeneutics*)—allowing us to see that critique is as much a matter of affect and rhetoric as of philosophy or politics. We mistake our object if we think of critique as consisting simply of a series of propositions or intellectual arguments. Moreover, redescribing critique in this way downgrades its specialness by linking it to a larger history of suspicious interpretation. In what follows, for example, we will encounter the eagle-eyed detective tracking down his criminal quarry as well as the climate-change skeptic who pooh-poohs scientific data by pointing to hidden and questionable motives. In such cases, we can conclude, suspicion is not being harnessed to oppositional or transformative ends. In short, the aim is to de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism—thereby freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument.

At the same time, this book does not claim to offer a general history of suspicious interpretation (perhaps an impossible task!) but focuses on the rhetoric of literary and cultural studies over the last four decades, with an emphasis on developments in the United States. Nor, I should explain up front, is its method the close reading of a few canonical works. We already have many publications that meticulously assess the pros and cons of critique in Marx or Foucault or Butler, while remaining squarely within the horizon of “critical thinking.” The questions that interest me are of a rather different order: Why is critique such a charismatic mode of thought? Why is it so hard to get outside its orbit? To what extent does it rely on an implicit story line? How does it orient the reader in spatial terms? In what ways does it constitute an overall intellectual mood or disposition? Such questions call for an approach that reads across texts as well as into texts, where phrases from an introductory textbook or primer can prove as revelatory as touchstone essays. Rather than summarize the works of individual thinkers, I trace the coils of collective modes of argument as they loop and wind across diverse fields. The emphasis is on

critique as a genre and an ethos—as a transpersonal and widespread phenomenon rather than the brainchild of a few eminent thinkers.

What, then, are the salient differences between “critique” and “the hermeneutics of suspicion”? What intellectual worlds do these specific terms conjure up, and how do these worlds converge or diverge? “The hermeneutics of suspicion” is by no means a pejorative term—Ricoeur’s stance toward the writings of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche is respectful, even admiring. Yet “suspicion” is not a term around which scholars have been eager to rally, worrying, no doubt, that any reference to motive or mind-set will undercut their authority. There is an understandable wariness of being tarred with the brush of subjective or emotional response. To gauge the affective tone of scholarship, however, is not to spurn its substance but to face up to the obvious: modes of thought are also orientations toward the world that are infused with a certain attitude or disposition; arguments are a matter not only of content but also of style and tone. In sticking to the performance of such arguments, moreover, I intentionally refrain from peering into or diagnosing anyone’s state of mind. My focus is on the ethos of argument rather than the hidden workings of consciousness, on rhetorical personae rather than historical persons.

Of course, one risk of focusing on suspicion is that of unduly exaggerating its presence. As I note in chapter 1, critique is a dominant approach, but it is far from being the only one. Helen Small observes that “the work of the humanities is frequently descriptive, or appreciative, or imaginative, or provocative, or speculative, more than it is critical.”<sup>1</sup> This seems exactly right; everyday practices of teaching and writing and thinking span disparate activities and fluctuations of affect and tone. The point is obvious to anyone who has spent half an hour in the undergraduate classroom, where moods shift and slide as students and teacher commune around a chosen text: critical caveats are interspersed with flashes of affinity or sympathy; bursts of romantic hope coexist with the deciphering of ideological subtexts. And yet our language for describing and justifying these various activities remains remarkably underdeveloped. It somehow seems easier—for reasons we shall explore—to defend the value of literary study by asserting that it promotes critical reading or critical thinking. Think, in this context, of the ubiquitous theory course that often provides a con-

ceptual toolkit for the English major, where “introduction to theory” effectively means “introduction to critical theory.” In short, while critique is not the only language of literary studies, it remains the dominant metalanguage.

Let me specify at the start that this book is not conceived as a polemic against critique, a shouting from the rooftops about the obduracy or obtuseness of my fellow critics. My previous writing (in feminist theory and cultural studies, among other topics) owes an extended debt to traditions of critical thinking. I was weaned on the Frankfurt School and still get a kick out of teaching Foucault. I have no desire to reverse the clock and be teleported back to the good old days of New Critical chitchat about irony, paradox, and ambiguity. But it seems increasingly evident that literary scholars are confusing a part of thought with the whole of thought, and that in doing so we are scanting a range of intellectual and expressive possibilities. There is, after all, something perplexing about the ease with which a certain style of reading has settled into the default option. Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue, and take umbrage? What sustains their assurance that a text is withholding something of vital importance, that their task is to ferret out what lies concealed in its recesses and margins? Why is critique so frequently feted as the most serious and scrupulous form of thought? What intellectual and imaginative alternatives does it overshadow, obscure, or overrule? And what are the costs of such ubiquitous criticality?

As I argue in chapter 1, such questions have implications that extend well beyond in-house disputes among literary scholars. Literary studies is currently facing a legitimation crisis, thanks to a sadly depleted language of value that leaves us struggling to find reasons why students should care about Beowulf or Baudelaire. Why is literature worth bothering with? In recent decades, such questions have often been waved away as idealistic or ideological, thanks to the sway of an endemically skeptical mind-set. In the best-case scenario, novels and plays and poems get some respect, but on purely tautological grounds: as critical thinkers, we value literature because it engages in critique! Looking closely at this line of thinking and situating it within a broader history of interpretation, my first chapter develops a line of

argument against the assumption that suspicion is an intrinsic good or a guarantee of rigorous or radical thought.

One of the great merits of Ricoeur's phrase lies in drawing attention to fundamentals of mood and method. Scholars like to think that their claims stand or fall on the merits of their reasoning and the irresistible weight of their evidence, yet they also adopt a low-key affective tone that can bolster or drastically diminish their allure. Critical detachment, in this light, is not an absence of mood but one manifestation of it—a certain orientation toward one's subject, a way of making one's argument matter. It is tied to the cultivation of an intellectual persona that is highly prized in literary studies and beyond: suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hardheaded, tirelessly vigilant. I join Amanda Anderson in contending that "characterological" components—the attribution of character traits such as nonchalance, arrogance, or sentimentality to styles of thought—play a decisive part in intellectual debate, even though these components are rarely given their due.<sup>2</sup> Critique is not only a matter of method but of a certain sensibility—or what I will call "critical mood."

Ricoeur's second word, "hermeneutics," invites us to think about how we read and to what end. The following pages treat suspicious reading as a distinctive and describable habit of thought. While critique is often hailed for puncturing or deflating schemes, it is also an identifiable scheme in its own right. This attention to the rhetoric of critique has two consequences. First, it primes us to look closely *at* current ways of reading rather than through them, taking them seriously in their own terms rather than seeing them as symptoms of more fundamental realities (hidden anxieties, institutional forces). I strive to remain on the same plane as my object of study rather than casting around for a hidden puppeteer who is pulling the strings. At the same time, however, it also levels the playing field. Once we face up to the rhetorical and conventional dimension of critique, it becomes harder to sustain what I will call critique's exceptionalism—its sense of intrinsic advantage vis-à-vis other forms of thinking and writing.

Take, for example, statements such as the following: "Critique's task is to refuse easy answers, to withdraw the dependability and familiarity of the categories with which thought presents itself, so as to give thinking a chance to happen."<sup>3</sup> Variations on this theme, as we

will see, saturate the recent history of criticism. Critique, it is claimed, just is the adventure of serious or proper “thinking,” in contrast to the ossified categories of the already thought. It is at odds with the easy answer, the pat conclusion, the phrasing that lies ready to hand. In looking closely at the gambits of critique—its all too familiar rhetoric of defamiliarization—I question this picture of critique as outside codification. The point is not to deny that new forms of critique may emerge in the future—any form or genre is open to being remade in unexpected ways—but to question its claim to exceptional status, as opposed to or beyond convention.

Chapter 2, for example, details the spatial metaphors that undergird the practice of suspicious reading. It looks closely at the language of the critic-as-archaeologist who “digs deep” into a text in order to retrieve a concealed or camouflaged truth; it then turns to the rhetoric and posture of the critic-as-ironist who “stands back” from a text in order to defamiliarize it via the knowing equanimity of her gaze. These well-entrenched methods are associated with contrasting perspectives and philosophies, yet they partake with equal fervor of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of suspicion. Chapter 3 then proposes that suspicion and storytelling are closely aligned; critique weaves dramatic or melodramatic narratives in which everything is connected. The scholar-turned-sleuth broods over matters of fault and complicity; she pieces together a causal sequence that allows her to identify a crime, impute a motive, interpret clues, and track down a guilty party. (Even the deconstructive critic who clears the literary text of wrongdoing seeks, as we will see, to expose the shameful culpability of criticism.) Rather than being a weightless, disembodied, freewheeling dance of the intellect, critique turns out to be a quite stable repertoire of stories, similes, tropes, verbal gambits, and rhetorical ploys.

Paying close attention to these details of style and sensibility offers a fresh slant on the political and philosophical claims of critique—the subject of chapter 4. Critique is a remarkably contagious and charismatic idea, drawing everything into its field of force, patrolling the boundaries of what counts as serious thought. It is virtually synonymous with intellectual rigor, theoretical sophistication, and intransigent opposition to the status quo. Drawing a sense of philosophical weightiness from its proximity to the tradition of Kant and Marx, it

also retains a cutting-edge sensibility, retooling itself to fit the needs and demands of new fields. For many scholars in the humanities, it is not one good thing but the only imaginable thing. Critique, as I've noted, just is the exercise of thoughtful intelligence and independence of mind. To refuse critique, by the same token, is to sink into the mire of complacency, credulity, and conservatism. Who would want to be associated with the bad smell of the uncritical? The negativity of critique is thus transmuted into a halo effect—an aura of rigor and probity that burnishes its dissident stance with a normative glow.

In querying the entrenchment of this ethos, I join a growing groundswell of voices, including scholars in feminist and queer studies as well as actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and influential strands of political theory.<sup>4</sup> It is becoming ever more risible to conclude that any questioning of critique can only be a reactionary gesture or a conservative conspiracy. Yet it may also be helpful to draw a preliminary distinction between those who harbor reservations about critique *tout court* and those who would condemn critique for not being critical or oppositional enough. The latter stance does not move away from critique but ramps and ratchets it up, lamenting its failure to live up to its radical promise. Its responses thus tend to run along the following lines: “To be sure, critique has its problems, but only because it has strayed from its true path as I define it,” or “The hypercritical has turned hypocritical—let us interrogate its complicity with the status quo!” We are told that critique needs to become more negative (to avoid all risk of co-option) or more positive (so it can be truly dialectical). We are given the blueprint for a future critique that will transcend its current flaws and failings. In short, the disease also turns out to be the only conceivable cure; the insufficiencies of critique demand that it be magnified and multiplied, cranked up a hundredfold, applied with renewed vigor and unflagging zeal. Critique turns out to be, as scholars announce with a hint of satisfaction, an infinite task.

But what if critique were limited, not limitless; if it were finite and fallible; if we conceded that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all? Rather than rushing to patch up every hole and frantically plug each sprouting leak, we might admit that critique is not always the best tool for the job. As such wording suggests, my own

orientation is pragmatic—different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism, and there is no one-size-fits-all form of thinking that can fulfill all these aims simultaneously. And here the choice of terminology becomes crucial. In contrast to the powerfully normative concept of critique (for who, after all, wants to be thought of as uncritical?), the hermeneutics of suspicion does not exclude other possibilities (for Ricoeur, these include a hermeneutics of trust, of restoration, of recollection). Leaving room for differing approaches, it allows us to see critical reading as one possible path rather than the manifest destiny of literary studies.

My objection is not to the existence of norms as such—without which thinking could not take place—but to the relentless grip, in recent years, of what we could call an antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma. There is a growing sense that our intellectual life is out of kilter, that scholars in the humanities are far more fluent in nay-saying than in yay-saying, and that eternal vigilance, unchecked by alternatives, can easily lapse into the complacent cadences of autopilot argument. It is a matter, in short, of diminishing returns, of ways of thinking that no longer surprise us, while closing off other paths as “insufficiently critical.” At a certain point, critique does not get us any further. To ask what comes after the hermeneutics of suspicion is not to demolish but to decenter it, to decline to see it as the be-all and end-all of interpretation, to wonder, with Bruno Latour, whether critique has run out of steam.<sup>5</sup> That any attempt to rein in the ambitions of critique is often misheard as a murderous assault on critique, triggering dire predictions about the imminent demise of serious thought (the sky is falling! the sky is falling!), is a matter to which we will return.

I write this book, moreover, with at least one foot inside the intellectual formation of critique, as someone who has over the years deployed quite a few of its gambits. My hope is to steer clear of the hectoring tone of the convert, the sermonizing of the redeemed sinner with a zealous glint in her eye. The critique of critique only draws us further into a suspicious mind-set, as we find ourselves caught in an endless regress of skeptical questioning. Perhaps we can get the fly out of the fly bottle by choosing to redescribe rather than refute the hermeneutics of suspicion, to gaze at it from several different angles, to capture something of the seductive shimmer and feel of a certain

sensibility. (Critique would not be so successful, after all, if it did not gratify and reward its practitioners.) Rather than an ascetic exercise in demystification, suspicious reading turns out to be a style of thought infused with a range of passions and pleasures, intense engagements and eager commitments. It is a strange and multifaceted creature: mistrust of others, but also merciless excoriation of self; critique of the text, but also fascination with the text as a source of critique, or at least of contradiction. It is negative, but not only or unambiguously negative. In what follows, I seek to be generous as well as censorious, phenomenological as well as historical, seeking to do justice to the allures of a critical style as well as pondering its limits.

This book had the working title “The Demon of Interpretation” — a phrase plucked from Steven Marcus’s dazzling essay on Freud’s method—but it eventually became clear that such a title was sending the wrong message.<sup>6</sup> Interpretation is not always demonic—only sometimes! We should avoid conflating suspicious interpretation with the whole of interpretation, with all the sins of the former being loaded onto the shoulders of the latter. This is to seriously shortchange a rich and many-sided history of engagement with texts of all kinds, sacred as well as secular. What afflicts literary studies is not interpretation as such but the kudzu-like proliferation of a hypercritical style of analysis that has crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life. Interpretation does not have to be a matter of riding roughshod over a text, doing symbolic violence to a text, chastising and castigating a text, stamping a single “metaphysical” truth upon a text. In short, it is a less muscular and macho affair than it is often made out to be. I will not be signing up for the campaign against what Deleuze and Guattari dub “interpretosis” — as if the desire to interpret were akin to an embarrassing disease or a mental pathology.<sup>7</sup> Interpreting just refers to the many possible ways of trying to figure out what something means and why it matters—an activity that is unlikely to come to an end any time soon. We do not need to throw out interpretation but to revitalize and reimagine it.

What form might such a reimagining take? As this book joins an animated conversation about the future of literary studies, it may be helpful to sketch out a few of its guiding premises at the start. Even at the high point of suspicious reading, there has always been a counter-

trend of critics working within a more belletristic tradition, combining detailed, sometimes dazzling, literary commentary and appreciation with a declared animus toward sociological, theoretical, or philosophical argument. My own line of approach is rather different. This book, for example, does not take up arms against social meanings under the stirring banner of a “new formalism,” a “new aestheticism,” or a “new ethics,” commonly heard phrases in the recent reappraisal of critique. I do not champion aesthetics over politics, talk up the wonders of literature’s radical or intransigent otherness, or seek to tear it out of the sticky embrace of naïve or credulous readers. Rather, I propose, it is the false picture created by such dichotomies that is at issue: the belief that the “social” aspects of literature (for virtually everyone concedes it has *some* social aspects) can be peeled away from its “purely literary” ones. No more separate spheres! As the final chapter points out, works of art cannot help being social, sociable, connected, worldly, immanent—and yet they can also be felt, without contradiction, to be incandescent, extraordinary, sublime, utterly special. Their singularity and their sociability are interconnected, not opposed.<sup>8</sup>

It follows that there is no reason to lament the “intrusion” of the social world into art (when was this world ever absent?). Works of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded. We will, however, look quizzically at the intellectual shortcuts and rabbit-out-of-a-hat analogies that can sustain the logic of critique—such as when a critic brandishes a close reading of a literary work as proof of its boldly subverting or cravenly sustaining the status quo. A text is deciphered as a symptom, mirror, index, or antithesis of some larger social structure—as if there were an essential system of correspondences knotting a text into an overarching canopy of domination, akin to those medieval cosmologies in which everything is connected to everything else. And yet political linkages and effects are not immanent, hidden in the convoluted folds of texts, but derive from connections and mediations that must be tracked down and described. Scratching our heads, we look around for detailed accounts of the actors, groupings, assemblies, and networks that would justify such claims. Where is the evidence for causal connections? Where is the

patient piecing together of lines of translation, negotiation, and influence? Politics is a matter of many actors coming together, not just one.

What about the question of mood? Lamenting the disheartening effects of a pervasive cynicism and negativity, some scholars are urging that we make more room for hope, optimism, and positive affect in intellectual life. While I have a qualified sympathy for such arguments, what follows is not a pep talk for the power of positive thinking. There will be no stirring exhortations to put on a happy face and always look on the bright side of life. Academia has often been a haven for the disgruntled and disenchanting, for oddballs and misfits. Let us defend, without hesitation, the rights of the curmudgeonly and cantankerous! Reining in critique is not a matter of trying to impose a single mood upon the critic but of striving for a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts. “Receptivity,” in Nikolas Kompridis’s words, refers to our willingness to become “unclosed” to a text, to allow ourselves to be marked, struck, impressed by what we read.<sup>9</sup> And here the barbed wire of suspicion holds us back and hems us in, as we guard against the risk of being contaminated and animated by the words we encounter. The critic advances holding a shield, scanning the horizon for possible assailants, fearful of being tricked or taken in. Locked into a cycle of punitive scrutiny and self-scrutiny, she cuts herself off from a swathe of intellectual and experiential possibility.

In the final chapter, I sketch out an alternative model of what I call “postcritical reading.” (I too am a little weary of “post” words—but no fitter or more suitable phrase comes to mind for the orientation I propose.) Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen. Along with the indispensable and invigorating work of Bruno Latour, the new criticism emerging from France (Marielle Macé, Yves Citton) offers a fruitful resource in thinking of reading as a coproduction between actors rather than an unraveling of manifest meaning, a form of making rather than unmaking. And once we take on board the dis-

tinctive agency of art works—rather than their imagined role as minions of opaque social forces or heroes of the resistance—we cannot help orienting ourselves differently to the task of criticism. Such a shift is desperately needed if we are to do better justice to what literature does and why such doing matters. The wager, ultimately, is that we can expand our repertoire of critical moods while embracing a richer array of critical methods. Why—even as we extol multiplicity, difference, hybridity—is the affective range of criticism so limited? Why are we so hyperarticulate about our adversaries and so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?