Suspicious Minds

Rita Felski
University of Virginia, English

Abstract The *hermeneutics of suspicion* is a term coined by Paul Ricoeur to describe the practice of reading texts against the grain to expose their repressed or hidden meanings. This essay examines the distinctive features of such a hermeneutics as they have shaped literary theory and criticism in recent decades. Suspicious reading, it proposes, is not only an intellectual exercise in demystification, but also a critical style and scholarly sensibility that offers specific pleasures. These pleasures include the aesthetic and ethical satisfactions of fashioning detective-fiction-style plots. The literary critic, like the detective, interprets clues, establishes causal connections, and identifies a guilty party: namely, the literary work accused of whitewashing or concealing social oppression. Deconstructionist critics like Shoshana Felman seek to expose the dangers of such a suspicious hermeneutics but remain thoroughly entangled in the very method they seek to repudiate. The goal of the essay, then, is not to critique and be suspicious of suspicion. Rather, it seeks to take the hermeneutics of suspicion seriously and to understand why it has proved so attractive to contemporary scholars. At the same time, it also suggests that the present-day ubiquity and predictability of this critical method makes its claims to intellectual novelty or political boldness ever harder to sustain.

Recent discussions of affect (Radway 1997; Thrailkill 2007) have emphasized literary criticism's distrust of emotion, but there is little acknowledgment of criticism's own affective registers. How are method and mood, argument and attitude intertwined? The typical Introduction to Criticism and Theory course in the United States or United Kingdom classifies its content according to intellectual tenets or political convictions (decon-

Poetics Today 32:2 (Summer 2011) DOI 10.1215/03335372-1261208

struction, queer theory, psychoanalysis, postcolonial studies). Yet styles of academic reading are affective as well as cognitive, inviting us to adopt attitudes of trust, impatience, reverence, or wariness toward the texts we read. Academic criticism contains its own structures of pre-evaluation (Smith 1995), encouraging readers to adopt a certain disposition and to approach texts in a specific frame of mind. In present-day literary studies, this frame of mind is frequently one of wariness, vigilance, and distrust. Drawing on Suzanne Keen's invitation to think of genre as an "affect-producing template," I apply this idea to contemporary academic genres of suspicious reading. What are the distinctive formal devices and rhetorical strategies of a hermeneutic of suspicion? And how do these features help establish an affect-laden as well as analytic relation to texts? Suspicious reading, I argue, is not just an intellectual exercise in demystification but also a distinctive style and sensibility with its own specific pleasures.[1]

The *hermeneutics of suspicion* is a phrase coined by Paul Ricoeur, who famously identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the founders of a "school of suspicion," the primary architects of a distinctively modern style of interpretation that is driven by a desire to demystify, an adamant refusal to take words at face value. In spite of their many differences, Ricoeur (1970: 32) argues, these thinkers share a common commitment to reducing "the illusions and lies of consciousness." What drives such a hermeneutic is the conviction that appearances are deceptive, that texts do not gracefully relinquish their meanings, that manifest content shrouds darker, more unpalatable truths. It is a mode of interpretation that adopts a distrustful attitude toward texts in order to draw out meanings or implications that are not intended and that remain inaccessible to their authors as well as to ordinary readers. In his argument, Ricoeur develops a key distinction between a hermeneutics of trust, which is driven by a sense of reverence and goes deeper into the text in search of revelation, and a hermeneutics of suspicion, which adopts an adversarial sensibility to probe for concealed, repressed, or disavowed meanings (ibid.: 9). The difference between these approaches, we might say, is the difference between unveiling and unmasking.

Ricoeur's model of a suspicious hermeneutics offers a valuable reference point for assessing the recent history of literary studies in the wake of several waves of literary and cultural criticism that have encouraged styles of vigilant and mistrustful reading. Here we can point to the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist modes of thought, with their built-in

1. This essay focuses on the suspicious dimensions of contemporary styles of criticism. It does not address the related issue of how works of literature encourage suspicion in readers via the use of techniques such as unreliable narrators.

wariness of commonsense or everyday meaning; the impact of an identity politics of race, gender, and sexuality that encouraged readings of canonical texts against the grain in order to expose their hidden biases; the influence of Marxism via the models of symptomatic reading developed by Macherey (1975), Jameson (1981), and others, and, finally, the taken-for-granted nature of Freudian schemata, which made it easy for scholars to transfer such schemata to the study of literature and culture via analogies such as the political unconscious. The hermeneutics of suspicion, in other words, is a term applicable to a diverse range of critical frameworks. While psychoanalytical feminism, New Historicism, and postcolonial criticism, to name just a few current approaches, are characterized by obvious differences in focus and method, they share the conviction that the most rigorous reading is one that is performed against the grain, that the primary rationale for reading a text is to critique it by underscoring what it does not know and cannot understand. The influence of such approaches, moreover, reaches well beyond the confines of literature departments; when anthropologists unmask the covert imperialist convictions of their predecessors, when sociologists read the texts of Weber, Marx, or Durkheim against the grain, when legal scholars challenge the purported neutrality of the law to lay bare its hidden agendas, they all subscribe to a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment.

To be sure, not all literary theory manifests an adversarial and distrustful attitude to the literary work. Indeed, quite a few voices—often those associated with deconstruction or with recent Lévinas-inspired work on the ethics of reading—extol the alterity of literary texts, testifying to their radical singularity and enigmatic strangeness. And yet suspicion is not so much dissipated in such arguments as it is displaced. We do not need to be suspicious of the text, in other words, because it is already doing the work of suspicion for us, because it is engaged in the negative work of subverting the self-evident, challenging the commonplace, relentlessly questioning idées fixes and idées recus. The literary text thus matches and exceeds the critic's own vigilance, performing a metacommentary on the traps of interpretation, a knowing anticipation and exposure of all possible hermeneutic blunders. Critic and work are bound together in an alliance of heightened mistrust vis-à-vis commonsensical forms of language and thought (Felski 2009).

While the term *hermeneutics of suspicion* with its obligatory footnote to Ricoeur, is often invoked in current literary debates, the features of such a hermeneutics have, until recently, received attention mainly from scholars working in religious studies, intellectual history, legal theory, and related fields (Stewart 1989; Thiele 1991; Bermann 2001; Josselson 2004; Farmer

2007). In the current climate of retrospection, however, as critics reflect on the intellectual legacy of recent decades and reassess methods of reading that have come to seem stale and unsurprising, the hermeneutics of suspicion is shifting from a mode of analysis to an object of analysis within literary studies. A style of interpretation that once seemed entirely self-evident and self-explanatory now finds itself squirming under the spotlight (Sedgwick 1997; Latour 2004; Strowick 2005; Best and Marcus 2009; Felski 2009; Love 2010). Why do so many scholars feel impelled to unmask and demystify the works that they read? What sustains their certainty that a text is withholding some vital information, that they must authorize their commentary by highlighting what is concealed, repressed, unsaid?

Such convictions owe much, as I have noted, to contemporary styles of intellectual politics that, following the reception of Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault and others, have largely relinquished affirmative or utopian projects of world-building in favor of the rhetoric of subversion, estrangement, and critique. The U.S. reception of French theory, François Cusset (2008: 83) observes, helped to encourage a "suspicion without limits" in which scholars increasingly edged away from any espousal of positive values or norms, preferring to present themselves as "champions of subversion." The pervasiveness of this mindset also testifies to the increasing pressures of professionalization and the scramble to shore up academic authority: the hermeneutics of suspicion, after all, assigns a unique depth of understanding to the trained reader or theorist, equipped to see through the illusions in which others are immersed. According to John Farrell (2006: 4), this radical mistrust of apparent or commonsense meaning characteristic of post-1960s literary criticism has engendered a mode of interpretation and argument that is quintessentially paranoid in tone.

What leads the reader to pause, however, is the extent to which Farrell's own account replicates, even intensifies, the very method of interpretation that it is eager to repudiate. As Sedgwick (1997) shows in her virtuoso meditation on this issue, paranoia reveals an uncanny ability to reproduce itself indefinitely by latching onto a variety of hosts—to accuse others of paranoia is itself a paranoid move. The doubting of doubt underscores the critic's entrapment within a suspicious sensibility and the mentality of critique, as she finds herself caught in an infinite regress of skeptical questioning. As will become evident in the course of this essay, it is hard to see how any objections to suspicion, my own included, can entirely escape the snarls of this contradiction. Nevertheless, "paranoia," in my view, proves an especially unhelpful concept in grappling with the significance of a suspicious hermeneutic; even if critics insist that they are using the term in a

metaphorical rather than a strictly diagnostic sense, its effect is to pathologize the entire process of critical interpretation.

It is also noteworthy, in this context, that while the hermeneutics of suspicion is by no means a pejorative term—Ricoeur's own stance, for example, is entirely respectful, even admiring—the phrase is rarely claimed by its practitioners. The reason, no doubt, is that scholars tend to bristle at any perceived personalization of their academic work, assuming that any reference to motive or disposition will diminish their scholarship by undermining its intellectual credibility. To acknowledge the affective dimensions of argument, however, is not necessarily to invalidate its intellectual or analytical components, but merely to acknowledge the obvious: modes of critical thought are also forms of orientation toward the world, shaped by sensibility, attitude, and affective style. Yet the role of such factors in the shaping of contemporary scholarship is rarely acknowledged.

My goal, then, is to redescribe rather than simply refute the hermeneutics of suspicion, to examine it from various angles, to treat it not just as an error to be rectified but as a style of thought more multiform and mysterious than it first appears. Such an approach strives to be generous as well as censorious, phenomenological as well as historical, seeking to do justice to the allures of a critical sensibility as well as tracing its limits. It conceives of the hermeneutics of suspicion as not just a cognitive exercise but an orientation infused with a mélange of affective and characterological components. In short, suspiciousness constitutes a distinct sensibility or disposition whose parameters exceed the specifics of its intellectual content. It serves as a defining feature of an exemplary persona often invoked in contemporary theory: the critic who strives to avoid or suspend normative commitments in favor of an ethos of restless questioning and self-questioning (Anderson 2006; Hunter 2007).

While this model of the literary critic is a recently established one, I dissent from Ricoeur's larger account of suspicious reading as a uniquely modern intellectual phenomenon that originates with Descartes. In an extended argument that reaches beyond the bounds of this essay (Felski, forthcoming), I question this view by tracing a history of suspicious interpretation back to the medieval heresy trial. Heresy presented a hermeneutic problem of the first order and the transcripts of religious inquisitions reveal an acute awareness on the part of inquisitors that truth is not self-evident, that language conceals, distorts, and contains traps for the unwary, that words should be treated cautiously and with suspicion (Peters 1988; Arnold 2001). In this context, it is also necessary to supplement Ricoeur's presentation of the hermeneutics of suspicion as an inter-

nal development within the history of ideas, as the brainchild of a few exceptional thinkers. In reality, suspicious reading has a larger, more variegated and more mundane history. As Elizabeth Strowick (2005) remarks, suspicion becomes a widely diffused interpretative method in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, manifested in various forms of knowledge that are organized around the mistrust of surface appearance and the reading of clues, such as criminology, psychoanalysis, and literature. While Ricoeur's (1970: 33) account of the hermeneutics of suspicion stresses its heroic, oppositional, nay-saying qualities ("these three masters of suspicion are . . . assuredly, three great 'destroyers'"), attending to this larger cultural history underscores that suspicious reading is part of the world rather than opposed to the world, not just the inspired invention of a few theorists and philosophers but an interpretative practice embedded in a variety of institutional structures, tacit conventions, and local norms.

We can think of suspicion, in this context, as a curiously non-emotional emotion, a quasi-invisible affective state that overlaps with, and builds upon, the stance of detachment that became synonymous with professional culture. The rise of the professions was to promote the sense of a tight fit between technical competence and affective neutrality, with the expertise of doctors or lawyers requiring a dispassionate performance of allotted tasks, a refusal to be distracted by motives, moods, or judgments deemed irrelevant to the task at hand. Detachment served as a vital confirmation of the ability to rise above personal or political allegiances, to devote oneself wholeheartedly to perfecting the procedures and practices that define particular types of expert knowledge. A similar sangfroid pervaded much of New Criticism, with its strictures against affective fallacies that threatened to pull literary studies back into the impressionistic judgments and gut reactions of lay reading (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954). A Kantian tradition that stressed the disinterested nature of aesthetic response found common cause with a newly professionalized literary field that equated intellectual rigor with dispassionate scholarship.

To be sure, scholarly detachment overlaps with, but is not synonymous with, suspicious interpretation, which, in assuming the worst about its object, conjures up a negatively weighted rather than purely impartial attitude. In what remains one of the most suggestive essays on the phenomenology of suspicion, Alexander Shand (1922–23) argues that it involves a sense of vigilant preparedness for attack, rooted in biological mandates to watch for possible predators, its intensity rising as we feel ourselves or our loved ones to be under attack. This view of the aggressiveness of suspicion as a response to perceived threat has been frequently echoed in past decades: the literary scholar's adversarial stance is justified as a necessary

defense against the ideological designs of the literary work, which require a self-refashioning as a resisting reader (Fetterley 1978). According to Shand, while the consequences of suspicion for the individual are often beneficial, its implications for communal life can be catastrophic. An elusive emotion that combines elements of fear, anger, and curiosity, suspicion constitutes an asocial form of affect that sows the seeds of division and conflict. Writing in 1916, Shand expounds on the effects of suspicion as an emotion that destroys what he calls "harmonious co-operation between classes," inspiring restless and revolutionary tendencies across Europe, generating dissatisfaction and mistrust, and serving as a powerful catalyst for political upheaval.

While stressing suspicion's links to political dissent, Shand fails to consider its equally salient role in sustaining social order and its intimate connection to structures of modern surveillance. The detective serves as the prototype of a science of suspicion that developed in the nineteenth century, functioning as an expert reader uniquely able to decipher hidden strata of criminal activity or intent, to translate clues back to causes (Pyrhonen 1999; Moretti 2005). Older models of religious inquisition, with their built-in mistrust of surface meanings, melded with new forms of scientific method based on the patient deciphering of details. During the nineteenth century, medical and legal professionals collaborated in developing a science of criminology based on interpretation, classification, and forensic evidence, resulting in a culture of experts able to discern secrets invisible to the ordinary human eye, to turn the suspect body into a readable text (Thomas 2000: 24). The interrogation of suspects assumed a key role in police work, requiring finely tuned skills in reading involuntary gestures or fleeting changes in facial expression. What distinguished such acts of suspicious reading from a broader culture of professional detachment was a mindset of mistrust combined with a morally inflected presumption of guilt, a conviction that surface appearances were not only misleading, but deliberately deceptive.

Thanks to this proximity to scientific method, the emotional aspects of suspicious interpretation were muffled; such interpretation was now, after all, an institutionally mandated attitude, rather the expression of a buried psychological impulse or an abnormally mistrustful mind. Indeed, the professional suspicion of the detective or the literary critic may be of low-grade intensity, one of a very different order, say, to the feelings of anguish or uncertainty likely to be triggered by fear of a lover's betrayal (see, for example, the lyrics of Elvis Presley's 1969 classic "Suspicious Minds": "So, if an old friend I know/Drops by to say hello/ Would I still see suspicion in your eyes?"). And yet, as a regularly rehearsed attitude, it cannot help

seeping into the minds of its practitioners. Suspicious reading inscribes itself in the psyche as a particular mode of thought and feeling, a mindset equipped with distinct qualities: distance rather than closeness; guardedness rather than openness; aggression rather than submission; superiority rather than reverence; attentiveness rather than distraction; exposure rather than tact. It constitutes an orientation in the phenomenological sense; a matrix of feelings, attitudes, and beliefs that expresses itself in a particular manner of turning toward its object, of leaning toward or recoiling away from a text, of engaging in close—yet also critical and therefore distanced—reading. Like any repeated practice, it eases into the state of second nature; no longer an alien or obtrusive activity, but an internalized, habitual, and self-evident aspect of one's identity as a reader.

This critical ethos manifests itself, among other things, in an interest in plotting. In the process of reading texts against the grain to discover their hidden meanings, critics fashion causal connections, imagine personae engaging in purposeful activity, assign responsibility, and often attribute guilt. In this sense, suspicious interpretation is an exercise not just in meaning-making, but in moral-making. To be sure, the narratives that literary critics construct are constrained by the status of their writing as interpretation and commentary; when they are "interrogating" works of literature, they are not at liberty to invent stories at will but must refer back to these works from time to time and anchor their claims in textual evidence if they are to inspire confidence in and consent from other readers. The role of these source texts is to offer a plentitude of traces, clues, or symptoms; the job of the suspicious critic is to interpret these clues by situating them within larger structures of social or linguistic determination (a procedure that is refined, but, as we will see, by no means abolished in deconstructive readings). Suspicious criticism, in this sense, asks the same questions as the whodunit; both partake of what Ginzburg (1989) calls a conjectural paradigm, poring over signs, moving from an effect to the reconstruction of a cause, from observation to interpretation, from establishing what has been done to the identification of a doer—whether a guilty individual, as in the case of the whodunit, or a culpable text or social structure, as in the case of criticism.

Doers, that is to say, need not be persons, and a suspicious hermeneutic often professes a lack of interest in the category of authorship as a means of explaining the ideological workings of texts. We see this lack of interest, for example, in the type of suspicious interpretation known as symptomatic reading, an influential blend of Freudian, semiotic, and political (often Marxist) theory developed by Macherey (1975), Jameson (1981), and others. Here psychoanalytical categories such as repression and the unconscious

are applied to the relationship between a literary text and a larger social world; the text is held to be symptomatic of social conditions that it seeks to repress but to which it nevertheless unwittingly testifies. Like the hysterical patient, the text is not fully in control of its own discourse; it reveals, to the expert eye, semiotic contradictions that are at odds with its ostensible meaning and that can be traced back to hidden, subtextual dominations and exclusions. The role of the critic, then, is to read the text against the grain in order to draw out what it refuses to own up to. Any truth to be gained must be wrested rather than gleaned from the page, derived not from what the text says, but in spite of what it says. Appearance is no longer a gateway to a deeper reality, but a tactic for screening that reality from view.

In her influential *Critical Practice* (1980), for example, Catherine Belsey reassigns agency from the writer to the text, which is described as akin to a Lacanian subject, forever split between its conscious intentions and a textual unconscious that is not, she insists, that of the writer. In descriptions such as the following, we see literary works being endowed with will and purposefulness: "The realist text is a determinate representation, an intelligible structure which claims to convey intelligible relationships between its elements. In its attempt to create a coherent and internally consistent fictive world, the text, in spite of itself, exposes incoherences, omissions, absences and transgressions" (ibid.: 107). On the one hand, Belsey charges the nineteenth-century realist text with acts of fraudulence; like the dream censor, it seeks to conceal disruptive desires, to efface contradiction by "masquerading as coherence and plenitude" (ibid.: 104). Realism "offers itself as transparent"; reading the realist work is a reassuring and conservative experience because this work seeks to efface its own textuality, its existence as discourse (ibid.: 51). Here we see the critic imputing qualities of agency and purpose to the text, treating it as a quasi-person equipped with an intent to deceive.

On the other hand, this deception is doomed to fail, because the ideology of the text invariably turns out, against the text's ostensible wishes, to be "inconsistent, limited, contradictory" (ibid.: 104). Thus, for example, we discover that Jules Verne's *The Secret Island* contains an "unpredicted and contradictory element disrupting the colonialist ideology which informs the conscious project of the work" (ibid.: 108). In a similar manner, Belsey argues that even though "the project of the Sherlock Holmes stories is to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis" (ibid.: 111), these stories cannot help but "display the limits of their own project"; they are "compelled to manifest the inadequacy of a bourgeois scientificity which, working within the constraints of

ideology, is thus unable to challenge it" (ibid.: 116). The chasm between intention and effects, between surface and depth meanings, between what the text says and what it cannot admit or face up to, means that the ideologies of Conan Doyle's work—its overt commitment to an ideal of rationalist detection and deciphering of clues—are persistently unraveled by its internal fissures, inconsistencies, and contradictions.

The narrative of suspicious reading thus assumes not just a political but also a moral cast in identifying acts of subterfuge for which texts are held accountable. The critic fashions a sequence of cause and effect that correlates textual clues with underlying systems of political inequality or oppression (colonialism, in the case of Verne; bourgeois ideology and patriarchy, in the case of Conan Doyle); disavowed social forces speak indirectly via clues and traces, symptomatic evasions and determinate absences. It is a central claim of *Critical Practice* that realist texts do not represent the world but can only testify to their own inevitable failure to represent, as flawed artifacts and agents of ideology. In Belsey's words, the truth contained in Sherlock Holmes is not any truth about social relations but "the truth about ideology, the truth which ideology represses, its own existence as ideology itself" (ibid.: 117). In this regard, the text's culpability, its power to conceal or corrupt is acknowledged yet also qualified; the individual work does not act alone, as it were, but is subject to political or discursive forces working behind the scenes—a domain of ideology, in the case of Belsey. The scenario conjured up by the critic's plotting and naming of guilty parties is thus closer to the world of hard-boiled crime fiction or film noir than the classic whodunit; behind the single miscreant—the mystifying intent of the individual work of fiction—are arraigned a host of murkier, more menacing structural forces that leave a spreading stain on the social body.

In Belsey's text, as in a number of other influential examples of criticism—D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1989) comes to mind—we see the proliferation and self-replication of suspicious interpretation, as academic readers mimic, whether knowingly or unwittingly, the same policing techniques that are portrayed in the texts they are criticizing. The critic, like the detective, refuses to take surface meanings at face value; the text, like the criminal suspect, must be scrutinized, interrogated, and made to yield its hidden secrets. Interpretation pivots on a skeptical and adversarial relationship to its object; the text, in George Levine's (1994: 3) memorable phrase, is treated "as a kind of enemy to be arrested." While ordinary readers, just like the hapless Watson, are easily deceived by the evidence of their eyes, the professional reader, whether critic or detective, presses below distracting surfaces to the deeper meanings of signs. Such a reader

is the one who knows, whose expert knowledge allows him to penetrate obfuscations and see through false rationalizations. In its adherence to a depth hermeneutic, a skeptical sensibility, and a specialized vocabulary that subsumes and recategorizes its object, contemporary criticism thus reveals its debt to prior scenes of suspicious interpretation.

Drawing parallels between suspicious reading and detective fiction underscores their mutual reliance on the double plot. The classic detective novel, as we know, depends on such a double plot, telling the story of a crime via the story of its investigation; in Todorov's (1977: 46) words, the former is absent but real, the latter present but insignificant. In the opening pages of the novel, the reader is confronted with the enigma of an unsolved crime, and the subsequent unfolding of the text is geared toward recreating the sequence of actions surrounding this original transgression. The story of the investigation thus frames, yet also depends on, a prior sequence of events that must be reconstructed and articulated; when the two plots finally converge in the detective's explanation of the crime and naming of the criminal, the work of the text is complete. The hermeneutics of suspicion employed in literary studies hinges on a similar double structure. The critic shares the detective's desire to track down and bring to light obscured patterns of causality—in this context, the social forces that underpin and motivate the symptomatic tensions and contradictions of the literary text. Through this process of investigation, the critic solves an intellectual puzzle, enlightens the reader, and enacts a movement from obfuscation to understanding. In both criticism and crime fiction, the interpretation and piecing together of clues creates knowledge in the present via the reconstruction of the past.

There are, to be sure, key differences between these two forms of exegesis. The detective novel, in its classic form, withholds crucial information from the reader, refusing access to the detective's mental processes, and delaying the revelation of the criminal's identity until the closing pages. Critical commentary, by contrast, often reveals its cards at the start by pointing its finger at an established, de-personalized, agent such as bourgeois humanism or patriarchal ideology. Because the figure who deciphers clues and the figure who writes are the same, the reader is often privy to the critic's reasoning and deduction as it takes place. In this sense, the key question posed by the typical scholarly exercise in suspicious reading is less whodunit than *how* it was done. The interest of the reader is sustained, not by the anticipated unveiling of an unexpected villain, but by the ingenuity and inventiveness of the critic's interpretations, the artfulness with which she weaves surprising yet plausible connections between text and world.

These parallels between literary criticism and detection have been seized

on by deconstructive critics to impugn the very project of interpretation, as in Shoshana Felman's (1982) virtuoso reading of prior readings of *The Turn of the Screw*. Taking as her point of departure the well-known Freudian analysis of James's story by Edmund Wilson, Felman identifies this analysis as an exemplary staging of the pitfalls of a hermeneutics of suspicion. In explaining the text's ghosts as projections of the governess's own desires, she proposes, Wilson engages in a triumphalist exercise of diagnosis and demystification. Whereas earlier critics had taken these supernatural dimensions at face value, slotting the text into the genre of the ghost story, Wilson recasts the meaning of the story in one stroke, transforming *The Turn of the Screw* into an allegory of female neurosis and sexual repression. What we see in this gambit, Felman argues, is the attempt of psychoanalysis to gain mastery over literature by translating it into the authoritative categories of its own hermeneutic code. The psychoanalytical critic, like the detective, is intent on solving a mystery, nailing down answers, explaining away ambiguity through the interpretation of clues.

Felman demonstrates, over and over again, how this attempt to gain hermeneutic mastery over the text is likely to fail, how literature can dupe the traditional Freudian critic who prides himself on not being duped. "*The Turn of the Screw*," she writes, "constitutes a trap for psychoanalytical interpretation to the extent that it constructs a trap, precisely, for suspicion" (ibid.: 189). That is to say, the sophisticated reader who reads against the grain of the text, who spurns its surface blandishments in order to ferret out occluded meanings, is outflanked by James's novella, which offers a prescient commentary on the dangers of such acts of decoding. Its own protagonist, after all, is the quintessential suspicious reader; the governess seeks frantically to make sense of the enigmatic events happening around her, unleashing a frenzy of interpretation that ends catastrophically with the death of Miles, one of her charges. For Felman, this death serves as an allegory of the destructive consequences of a suspicious hermeneutic. Children, it seems, can be killed by the very act of understanding, annihilated by an overriding urge to know. Wilson's interpretation of the governess's behavior as a symptom of repressed female sexuality unknowingly replicates the very desire for certainty that is persistently questioned and undermined in the text he is reading. Suspicious reading turns out to be a destructive, even deadly, enterprise. Countering this hermeneutic hubris, Felman allies herself with a Lacanian recasting of psychoanalysis in terms of desire rather than truth. Sexuality, in other words, is not a secret to be discovered, a mystery to be solved; rather—like literature itself—it exposes the folly of any such pursuit of certainty, underscoring "*the division and divisiveness of meaning*; it is meaning *as* division, meaning as conflict" (ibid.: 112).

What we see in Felman's analysis, however, is not the elimination of a suspicious hermeneutic, but its relocation. It is no longer the story of the crime that attracts the accusations of the critic, but the story of the investigation; it is not the text that is guilty, but the critic's exegesis of the text. In Felman's words, "it is nothing other than the *very process of detection* which *constitutes the crime*" (ibid.: 176). In her reading of *The Turn of the Screw*, she assumes the role of defense rather than prosecution, bending over backward to do justice to the vertiginous richness and many-layered ambiguities of James's story. She shows again and again that *The Turn of the Screw* is a conundrum that cannot be solved, a marvelous artifact of writing that exceeds rational analysis and conceptual mastery, a labyrinthian hall of mirrors in which readers can only lose their bearings.

Yet Felman does not accord the same benevolence to criticism, whose hidden motives are elucidated and laid bare with assurance. Psychoanalytical criticism is charged with seeking to "'explain' and *master* literature," censured for "killing in literature that which makes it literature" (ibid.: 193). In pressing the text to confess its secrets, she suggests, Edmund Wilson commits an act of egregious violence. "Would it not be possible to maintain," writes Felman, "that Wilson, in pressing the text to confess, in forcing it to 'surrender' its *proper* name, its explicit literal meaning, himself in fact commits a *murder* . . . by suppressing within language the very silence which supports and underlies it, the silence *out of which* the text precisely speaks?" (ibid.). The causal structures and ethical categories that are undone in the deconstructive reading of literature reassert themselves ever more forcefully in the deconstructive exposé of criticism as a willful annihilation of the otherness of the text. Indeed, Felman's essay, beyond its dazzling rhetoric and its many-layered techniques of self-questioning, remains fixated on the fundamental questions of detective fiction: whodunit, and who is guilty? (Pyrhonen 1999). It engages in a frenzy of hermeneutic activity, plumbing the depths of the scholarly commentary on James's novel in order to bring to light a hidden drama of conflict, exclusion, and misrecognition. Freudian analysis, Felman leads us to believe, is not merely insufficient but intrusive, imperious, even murderous; in its fantasy of mastery, its resolute blindness to the textuality of the text, it engages in a full-scale reduction and destruction of the literary work. Even as suspicion of literature is abjured, it resurfaces in the guise of what we can call *metasuspicion* in Felman's stringent reckoning with the very project of critical interpretation.

As we see here, the hermeneutics of suspicion seems exceptionally resilient and impervious to direct attack, infiltrating the words of its most implacable opponents, sprouting new heads as quickly as we lop them off.

As I noted earlier, Ricoeur distinguishes between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of trust, between a reading which tears off masks and one which seeks to restore and recollect meaning. Perhaps, in this light we can gain a better handle on suspicious interpretation by treating it with a degree of generosity, bestowing upon it a measure of the sympathy it withholds from others. Phenomenology, Ricoeur (1970: 28) observes, is a method well suited to such a restorative reading, expressing itself in a care for phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness. To engage in a phenomenological description is not to expose a subterfuge or puncture an illusion but to explicate the irreducible, meaning-bearing, and value-laden elements of our everyday practices.

Viewed in this light, the hermeneutics of suspicion is not just political but also aesthetic: it offers not only a kind of knowledge but also a form of pleasure. Critical reading is not, as is often assumed, a purely abstemious or ascetic practice, a gesture of insurrection voided of positive content or value (see, for example, Stephen Ross's [2009: 10] definition of critique as a "fundamentally negative energy, a process of incessant disruption and challenge"). Rather, it offers its own substantive pleasures: the satisfaction of detecting figures and designs below the text's surface, fashioning new plots out of old, joining together the disparate and seemingly unconnected, acts of forging, patterning, and linking. It constitutes an art rather than a science, an inventive piecing together of signs to create new constellations of meaning; a patient untangling and reweaving of textual threads. Its conjectures owe much to inventiveness, leaps of faith, and inspired hunches; suspicious reading, at its best, is not an arid analytical exercise, but an inspired blend of intuition and imagination. Conjecture, remarks Ginzburg (1989), is not so far from divination, and the deciphering of clues blurs the line between reason and irrationality. When Edmund Wilson suggests that a story about ghosts is really an allegory of thwarted female eroticism, when D. A. Miller insists that heartwarming stories of Victorian domestic life are intent on disciplining and punishing their readers, it is the bravura of such claims that helps ensure their impact. The effect is that of a Gestalt switch, a sudden flash of illumination or jolt in perspective that allows previously unsuspected layers of meaning to come into view.

In rereading and rewriting the literary text, critics enact a temporary triumph over the sovereignty of authors, take on the role of poachers making raids on property they do not own (Barthes 1977; de Certeau 2002). Without unduly romanticizing the renegade or insurrectionary nature of such appropriations, we can acknowledge the powerful satisfactions that they offer. Refusing obligations of reverence and fidelity, critics assert their right to fashion something new out of the words on the page, to reframe

them in the light of their own concerns and commitments. Such rewriting is never entirely free of hubris in its claim to know the text better than it knows itself; but it also offers the possibility of a creative remaking that allows unexpected insights and fresh perspectives to unfold. Suspicious interpretation enables a new purchase on old texts, an especially appealing strategy for feminists, postcolonial critics, queer theorists, and other latecomers to the academy, whose relationship to the literary tradition is often fraught and ambivalent.

Yet the appeal of such a hermeneutics extends beyond the political urgencies that are commonly cited as its sole rationale. It is not just a political or professional mandate but also an avocation, an irresistible occupation, an all-absorbing game between text and reader that tests one's wits and challenges one's interpretative skills. Like the detective novel, such a practice of reading embodies the pleasures of ratiocination, exercising mental agility and inventiveness. Many critics have had the experience of puzzling over a recalcitrant piece of writing, testing and discarding various hypotheses and interpretative models, only to suddenly experience a flash of insight that makes previously invisible connections fall into place. Suspicious reading, in other words, is a language game in quite a literal sense of "game." As such, it combines rules and expectations with the possibility of unexpected moves and inventive calculations, enabling a form of carefully controlled play. The critic competes against an imagined textual opponent, engages in determinate and precise calculations of strategy, adopts a specific role that comes equipped with certain requirements. This game-like quality of interpretation does not necessarily void or negate other dimensions of reading, but it often proves especially prominent in an academic context, where scholars are rewarded for ingenious forms of puzzle-making and puzzle-solving. Elisabeth Bruss expounds on the features of such an approach:

> In a gaming situation, communication must be viewed as a tactic, an attempt to constrain another player's expectations. One must then respond to it tactically, with guarded skepticism, treating narrative devices or the total range of reference in a work as evidence of an opponent/collaborator's resources. . . . One becomes engrossed in a literary game without "believing" in it. Its excitement does not depend on empathy or illusion but on the challenge of strategic dilemmas: when to trust, what to trust, whether to trust at all, and how to proceed with reading in the light of such risk and uncertainty. (Bruss 1977: 162)

Postmodern works of metafiction often advertise and revel in these game-like features of interpretation (see, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan's [2003] discussion of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), but all texts can be

read along similar lines, treated as imaginary opponents to be maneuvered against and bested rather than as voices to be trusted. The payoff of such an approach includes the pleasure of deploying skills and plotting strategy, devising intellectual moves that conform to the basic principles of academic reading while offering new ways of outwitting or outflanking a literary object. Discussing the element of play in scholarly interpretation, Calinescu (1993: 138–56) describes the critic engaging in a series of moves that fuse convention and innovation, striving to become an ever more sophisticated and skillful player, to outfox not only the text but also other critics.

Game theory, however, is flawed by its tendency to conceive of players as purely rational actors. In a recent analysis of trends in Victorian criticism, Anna Maria Jones (2007) offers an alternative view by arguing that a hermeneutics of suspicion is simultaneously a hermeneutics of sensation. The critic's sifting of textual clues and ferreting out of hidden truths offers pleasures that are not only intellectual but also emotional; a mode of interpretation generates a gripping storyline in which the experience of suspense is followed by the ultimate pleasures of revelation and explanation. Here criticism borrows not only from detective fiction but also from the Victorian sensation novel, a genre devoted to exposing the hidden mysteries of the mundane that inspired visceral responses and intense attachments in its readers. Foucauldian criticism, like the nineteenth-century texts it analyzes, is built around the revelation of shocking secrets, the pursuit of guilty parties, and the detection of hidden crimes. In each case, the most obvious answer is never the right one and the counterintuitive explanation is the one most highly rewarded. Uncovering the hidden import of seemingly inconsequential clues drives the pleasure of both fiction and criticism (Jones 2007).

There is, to be sure, an undeniable kernel of antagonism in suspicious interpretation, as critics arm themselves against imagined opponents to whom they impute malicious or hostile intent. Scholarly prose can easily take on a triumphalist cast, as readers take pride in casting off their former naïveté, congratulate themselves on their perspicacity, feel sharper, shrewder, more knowing, less vulnerable. Suspicious reading, Sedgwick (1997) remarks, pivots on a sense of righteous self-vindication, a trust in the inherent merits of critical exposure. And yet the adversarial structure of such reading also contains a tacit tribute to its object, an admission that it contains more than meets the eye. There is little intellectual satisfaction to be found, after all, in simply rehearsing the prejudices of an obviously prejudiced text. Critics often prefer to pit their wits against a worthy opponent, to dig out cunningly concealed rather than self-evident truths, to engage in a strenuous battle of wills from which they hope to emerge tri-

umphant. A skillful suspicious reading is, in this sense, also a close reading, requiring an intimate familiarity with its object. Indeed, the words that are being dissected may be the words that once seduced and entranced the same reader. This reader must inhabit the text, come to know it thoroughly, explore its every nook and cranny, in order to draw out its hidden secrets. Suspicion, in other words, may not be so very far removed from love.

In this context, the overheated accusations that are heaped upon suspicious reading by Felman and other critics—that it does untold violence to literature, destroys its otherness, exercises an egregious and imperious will to power—should be taken with a grain of salt. Not even the most ruthless or reductive analysis can destroy a text that survives unscathed, thanks to its condition of infinite reproducibility, to be read anew by other readers. What drives such charges, to be sure, is the concern that critical reading has an adverse effect on our appreciation of literary texts, blinding us to beauty and complex design, consigning challenging and unsettling works to the dustbin of history. Yet here, too, a suspicious hermeneutic does not automatically remove a text from circulation but may also endow it with fresh vitality by hooking up to new agendas, debates, and audiences. Animus, after all, can inspire a fervid and concentrated attention, an exceptionally diligent focus on the object that is being critiqued. Edward Said's (1994) reading of *Mansfield Park* as an allegory of imperialism, for example, made the work of Jane Austen newly intriguing to a community of postcolonial critics who might otherwise have paid her writing scant heed (Park and Rajan 2000).

The danger that shadows suspicious interpretation is less its potential brutality than the threat of banality. For several decades it has served as the default option, business as usual, the taken-for-granted methodological norm in literary studies. Its gestures of demystification and exposure are no longer oppositional, but obligatory, their claims to intellectual novelty or political boldness ever harder to countenance. For younger scholars, especially, the critical paradigm is the major paradigm in which they have been trained; even as it continues to present itself as a challenge to the intellectual mainstream, it is the mainstream (Billig 2000). Unchecked by counterforces, locked into a complacent and self-confirming circle of argumentation, a hermeneutics of suspicion dissipates its problem-solving powers and loses much of its allure. It no longer tells us what we do not know; it singularly fails to surprise.

Suspicious reading is also, I have argued, a style of interpretation that has paid little attention to its own style and sensibility, imagining itself as a purely intellectual exercise in demystification and negative thinking.

Once suspicious interpretation is acknowledged to be not only analytical but affective, not just a critique of narrative but also a type of narrative—once we realize, in short, that it has much in common with the literary texts it seeks to diagnose and expose—its status as a vehicle for radical critique is necessarily diminished. To some critics, such a downsizing of oppositional thought will seem like a loss. Yet this diminution may turn out to be a liberation, authorizing us to look anew at other styles of criticism, to explore other modes of interpretation and argument that are less tightly bound to exposure, demystification, and the lure of the negative (Berman 2001). How else might we venture to read, if we were not ordained to read suspiciously?

References

Anderson, Amanda
2006 *The Way We Argue Now* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
Arnold, John H.
2001 *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).
Barthes, Roland
1977 "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, 142–48 (New York: Hill and Wang).
Belsey, Catherine
1980 *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen).
Berman, Paul Schiff
2001 "Telling a Less Suspicious Story: Notes toward a Non-Skeptical Approach to Legal/Cultural Analysis," University of Connecticut School of Law Articles and Working Papers, Paper 11.
Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus, eds.
2009 "The Way We Read Now." Special issue, *Representations* 108.
Billig, Michael
2000 "Toward a Critique of the Critical," *Discourse and Society* 11(3): 291–92.
Bruss, Elisabeth
1977 "The Game of Literature and Some Literary Games," *New Literary History* 9: 153–72.
Calinescu, Matei
1993 *Rereading* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
Cusset, François
2008 *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, translated by Jeff Fort with Josephine Berganza and Marlon Jones (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
de Certeau, Michel
2002 "Reading as Poaching," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 165–76 (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
Farmer, Lindsay
2007 "Arthur and Oscar (and Sherlock): The Reconstructive Trial and the 'Hermeneutics of Suspicion,'" *International Commentary on Evidence* vol. 5, 1, article 4.
Farrell, John
2006 *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).

Felman, Shoshana
1982 "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, edited by Shoshana Felman, 94–207 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Felski, Rita
2009 "After Suspicion," *Profession* 8: 28–35. Forthcoming. "The Demon of Interpretation."
Fetterley, Judith
1978 *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
Ginzburg, Carlo
1989 "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi, 96–125 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Hunter, Ian
2007 "The Time of Theory," *Postcolonial Studies* 10(1): 5–22.
Jameson, Fredric
1981 *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Jones, Anna Marie
2007 *Problem Novels: Victorian Fiction Theorizes the Sensational Self* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press).
Josselson, Ruthellen
2004 "The Hermeneutics of Faith and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Narrrative Inquiry* 14(1): 1–28.
Latour, Bruno
2004 "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30(2): 225–48.
Levine, George
1994 "Introduction: Reclaiming the Aesthetic," in *Aesthetics and Ideology*, edited by George Levine, 1–30 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press).
Love, Heather
2010 "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41(2): 371–92.
Macherey, Pierre
1975 *A Theory of Literary Production* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).
Miller, D. A.
1989 *The Novel and the Police* (Los Angeles: University of California Press).
Moretti, Franco
2005 "Clues," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms*, 130–56 (London: Verso).
Park, You-me, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan
2000 *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (London: Routledge).
Peters, Edward
1988 *Inquisition* (New York: Free Press).
Pyrhonen, Heta
1999 *Mayhem and Murder: Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
Radway, Janice
1997 *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).
Ricoeur, Paul
1970 *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).

Ross, Stephen
2009 "Introduction: The Missing Link," in *Modernism and Theory*, edited by Stephen Ross (New York: Routledge).
Ryan, Marie-Laure
2003 *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Said, Edward
1994 *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage).
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky
1997 "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1–37 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
Shand, Alexander F.
1922–23 "Suspicion," *British Journal of Psychology* 13: 195–214.
Smith, Barbara Herrnstein
1995 *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Stewart, David.
1989 "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 4(3): 296–307.
Strowick, Elisabeth
2005 "Comparative Epistemology of Suspicion: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and the Human Sciences," *Science in Context* 18(4): 649–69.
Thiele, Leslie Paul
1991 "Reading Nietzsche and Foucault: A Hermeneutics of Suspicion?" *American Political Science Review* 85(2): 581–92.
Thomas, Ronald R.
2000 *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Thrailkill, Jane F.
2007 *Affecting Fictions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
Todorov, Tzetvan
1977 *The Poetics of Prose*, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
Wimsatt, William K., and Monroe C. Beardsley
1954 "The Affective Fallacy," in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, by William K. Wimsatt, 21–39 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky).