

The Art of Judgment: Postcritique and the Particular Case

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Abstract

The present article critiques the so-called postcritical position for refusing to acknowledge the literariness of literature. As a case in point, it considers Toril Moi's *Revolution of the ordinary: literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell*, which has been greeted as a pivotal specimen of postcritique. Like other practitioners of postcritique, Moi would replace literary theory with an art of judgment, based upon good faith in, rather than suspicion of, the literary text. In theory, all that is needed to practice this art of judgment is a willingness to pay close attention to the specifics of the particular case. In practice, however, the postcritical claim to go beyond 'the hermeneutics of suspicion' is compromised by its refusal to confront the literariness of literary text, as the present essay demonstrates by subjecting Moi's own reading of the particular cases of Paul de Man and Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik to rhetorical analysis.

Keywords: postcritique; rhetoric; hermeneutics; political correctness

A peculiar feature of the postcritical attempt to valorize literature is that it habitually comes at the expense of literary theory. The hermeneutics of suspicion is particularly prone to be castigated as reductively ideological, but pretty much any kind of interpretation is looked at with suspicion in the postcritical camp. Not that interpretation is outright rejected—one of the great pretenses of postcritique is that it is not so much a dismissal of previous hermeneutical strategies as an attempt to find 'richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts' (Felski 2008: 11). Yet as adept readers have had no problem discerning (see Holmgaard 2017: 18), the postcritical call for an affirmative mode of reading habitually takes a negative form, such as lists of 'the things that a postcritical reading will *decline* to do,' including 'subject[ing] a text to interrogation,' and 'brood[ing] over the gap that separates word from world' (Felski 2015: 173; my emphasis).

On the face of it, Toril Moi's *Revolution of the ordinary: literary studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (2017) would seem to initiate a more positive phase of postcritique, insofar as it claims to show

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‘that ordinary language philosophy has the power to transform the prevailing understanding of language, theory, and reading in literary studies today’ (1). Widely reviewed, the study has been greeted by many as ‘a spectacular book’ that makes ‘a case for a new way of doing literary criticism, a new way of approaching and reading texts’ (Filby 2018). Sealing the impression that we are dealing with a truly revolutionary piece of criticism, *Nonsite.org*, perhaps the most prestigious online literary journal in the Anglophone world right now, dedicated a 32,000-word forum to the book, in which six out of eight readers sang its praises. Even critics who have felt the book’s discussion of Saussure as well as of Derrida to be unfair (Forsberg 2019: 554–55), have found Moi ‘strikingly convincing when she shows how to read without theory’ (Forsberg 2019: 556), and have lauded her because ‘she is prepared to approach the difficult fabrics that make up our lives without fleeing into theory’ (Forsberg 2019: 560). As with postcritique more generally, then, the attraction of Moi’s book clearly is that it would seem to restore to the literary text the ability to mean without the intervention of this or that theoretical perspective, and hence to deliver literature from the ideological grasp of the latter.

According to Moi, established practices of critical theory deriving from Saussure, deconstruction, and the Frankfurt school, such as Derridean deconstruction and feminist theories of intersectionality, are marked by a ‘craving for generality’ (1) that she contrasts with a Wittgensteinian attitude of attentiveness to ‘the particular case’ (93).¹ In an itinerary by now familiar to postcritical arguments, Moi makes a case for moving ‘Beyond the Hermeneutics of Suspicion’ (175), toward a mode of ‘Reading as a Practice of Acknowledgement’ (196) that would enable us to grapple with literature as an ethical reality wrapped up in the world, rather than as ‘in some fundamental way disconnected from reality’ (223). In this view, ordinary language philosophy is tantamount to a theoretical ascesis that reduces literary studies to its only real method, namely ‘just reading’ (193), a phrase Moi borrows from Marcus (2007), emphasizing its ethical import. “There is nothing special about our reading,” she insists, “except the attention, judgment, and knowledge we bring to the task” (5). Much like other practitioners of postcritique,

¹ All unspecified page-references in the text are to Moi 2017a.

then, Moi would replace literary theory with an art of judgment based upon good faith in, rather than suspicion of, the literary text.

But advocating attentiveness in theory is one thing, demonstrating it in practice is another. In what follows I will examine the postcritical insistence that '[p]ostcritique is not anti-theory' but simply a practice that 'leavens theoretical reflections with the messiness of examples and close attention to the differing ways texts and persons connect' (Felski 2017: 4), by looking closer at how Moi's supposedly exemplary postcritical study deals with two particular cases in practice: Paul de Man's famous example of the rhetorical question in 'Semiology and Rhetoric,' and Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik's notorious compendium. As my discussion will make evident, Moi's case for replacing literary theory with ordinary language philosophy rests on a refusal to acknowledge the *literariness* of literature, that is, 'that which makes of a given work a work of literature' (Jakobson 1997: 179). Bypassing the rhetorical constitution of literature, Moi can make a case for literature as a form of practical philosophy that trains readers in the art of making ethical judgments, but only at the price of confusing 'linguistic with natural reality' (de Man 1986: 11).

I shall seek to offset this confusion by modelling my own practice on the example of rhetorical analysis. In a highly attentive study of Philip Sidney, Åke Bergvall reminds us that "the Renaissance humanists promulgated a new textual rhetoric, an Art of Judgment" (Bergvall 1989: 81), which sought to teach readers to "discerne betweene trueth and truthlikenes, betweene showes and substance" (Sidney 1590; cited after Bergvall 1989: 86). This art of judgment was built on "a narrative technique modelled on the Socratic method, in which the reader has to judge both the character of the speakers and their differing, sometimes conflicting, testimonies," so that the true character of the "protagonists are thereby exposed as word is measured against deed" (Bergvall 1989, 124), making for a poetics that called for readers to approach the text with caution long before Paul Ricoeur dubbed the interpretive strategies of Freud and Marx the hermeneutics of suspicion. As will be seen, measuring word against deed remains a viable method to expose self-contradictions, including those of postcritique.

Attention in Theory and Practice: The Case of de Man

At the heart of the postcritical endeavor to find ‘alternatives to a suspicious hermeneutics’ is its ‘dissatisfaction with critique’s frequent rendering of the thoughts and actions of ordinary social actors as insufficiently self-aware or critical’ (Anker & Felski 2017: 1 and 14). Indeed, the postcritical valorization of the literary text is specifically connected to “the ordinary reader ... who takes the text at face value” (Felski 2015: 66), and is therefore seen as a more reliable conduit to “the values that drew [readers] to the literary work of art in the first place” (Best 2017: 338).

For Moi, too, the best judge of literature is the critic who ‘reads as ordinary readers do,’ and will ‘bring to the text a certain quality of attention, a willingness to participate in the adventure offered by the text’ (220). Her partiality for the ordinary reader comes to the fore especially in her long discussion of Paul de Man’s famous example of an everyday scene of reading, that he culls from an episode of the 1970s American sit-com *All in the family*. In the scene in question, grumpy and domineering Archie, sometimes described as a ‘lovable bigot,’ expects his doting wife Edith to tie his bowling shoes. Eager to please, she asks him if he wants them tied over or under, and as Archie could not care less, he scoffs ‘What’s the difference?’ At which Edith, instead of getting on with the job as Archie evidently had hoped she would, enters into a detailed explanation about what the differences of tying the laces over or under actually are, enraging her husband even more.

De Man offers Archie’s malfunctioning rhetorical question as a first, simple example of an often unrecognized tension between “grammatical structures” and “figures of rhetoric” (de Man 1979: 7). Literary critics, he points out, tend to proceed as if the rhetorical aspect of language could in principle be reconciled with its grammatical aspect, so that the figural potential of language could be made subservient to a general template specifying the rules for how figural language works, just as one can with its grammatical aspect. De Man points out that this does not always work in practice, and his first example is the rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is a statement which takes the form of a question, but with the intent of denying the question. If rhetoric worked the same way grammar does, one should always be able to judge when a question is used this way, but as the example de Man advances demonstrates, this is not the case—Archie’s wife Edith does not understand that Archie’s

question is not meant literally as a question, but figuratively as the assertion that he does not care whether she laces his bowling shoes over or under. Hence the example makes evident that there cannot be, as it were, a grammar of rhetoric, as many literary theorists working in narratology, structuralism, and speech act theory have assumed, but that the rhetorical functionality of language must be determined on a case by case basis.

Moi finds de Man's discussion deeply dissatisfying, charging him with failing to appreciate the subtlety of 'ordinary language spoken by ordinary men and women' (141) such as Archie and Edith Bunker. To an attentive reader, however, it quickly becomes apparent that despite her insistence that attentiveness is the only true method of literary criticism, in practice, she blatantly misrepresents de Man's argument. Consider the following paragraph:

... I should say that I find most of de Man's specific claims about the relationship between grammar, logic, and reference opaque. I simply don't understand why any belief I might have about the relationship between grammar and rhetoric (even the rather strange belief that they always go hand in hand, in perfect continuity) would make me either assert or deny anything about logic or reference. ... In fact I don't even understand why de Man assumes that grammar and rhetoric constitute a binary opposition. Above all, however, I don't see why grammar and logic are always aligned (as if one can't be illogical in perfectly grammatical sentences), or why de Man believes that there is a logical connection between grammatical sentences and a belief in the referential powers of language. (139–40)

Moi comes remarkably close here to saying that while she does not understand the first thing about Paul de Man's critical project, she is sure there is something wrong with it. More importantly, the paragraph shows how limited her attention is to what de Man's text actually says. She claims not to understand why de Man thinks that grammar and rhetoric form a binary opposition, even though he explicitly states that *they do not*: 'The couple grammar/rhetoric, *certainly not a binary opposition* since they in no way exclude each other, disrupts and confuses the neat antithesis of the inside/outside pattern' (de Man 1979: 12; my emphasis). Similarly, she ascribes to de Man 'the rather strange belief that they [grammar and rhetoric] always go hand in hand' even though he insists throughout the article that his whole point is that *they do not*, and that it

is a problem that literary criticism fails to realize as much: ‘One of the most striking characteristics of literary semiology as it is practiced today, in France and elsewhere, is the use of grammatical (especially syntactical) structures conjointly with rhetorical structures, *without* apparent awareness of a possible discrepancy between them’ (de Man 1979: 6; my emphasis).

This inability of Moi to see what de Man really says runs throughout her discussion. According to Moi, ‘de Man sees nothing in Edith, whom he dismisses as a “reader of divine simplicity”’ (141); his admittedly poor pun about Derrida as ‘an archie Debunker’ (de Man 1979: 9), meanwhile, to Moi is ‘condescending in a way that I find slightly distasteful’ (146). But the issue here is not de Man’s attitude ‘toward ordinary speakers of the language’ (146), but his and Moi’s contrasting attitudes to literature. When de Man talks about Archie and Edith, he is not thinking of them as ‘ordinary men and women’ (141) but as comic characters in a sit-com. In *All About the Family*, Edith Bunker acts the part of a ‘reader of divine simplicity,’ just as her husband acts the part of ‘loveable bigot’—if anyone should be held accountable for characterizing them in this way, it is the series’ writers and producers, not Paul de Man. Throughout the series, Edith’s naivety is a constant source of comic effect. Thus she states that she favors capital punishment, ‘as long as it ain’t too severe,’ and wonders, on learning that women go through menopause, if men go through ‘women-o-pause’ (‘All in the family TV show Wiki/Edith Bunker’).

Equally importantly, in the two examples from Yeats and Proust that de Man goes on to discuss, he follows Edith’s example by insisting on reading the text literally even when it seems to call out for a figurative reading, noting that ‘it is not necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one’ (de Man 1979: 11). Moi mentions these later examples only in passing on her way to pointing out that de Man’s essay ‘concludes that a rigorous reading will always uncover “the impossibility of knowing what [language] might be up to,”’ always land the serious reader in a state of “suspended ignorance”’ (138). But this again is to obfuscate de Man’s point. Moi would have us believe that de Man says that readings *always* end up in confusion. What he actually says is: ‘Any question about the rhetorical mode of a literary text is always a rhetorical question which does not even know whether it is really questioning’ (de Man 1979: 19). In other words, de Man is making

a general point about a *specific* kind of question (*about the rhetorical mode*) that can be put to a *specific* kind of text (*a literary text*); it is only questions of this specific order that he claims are always rhetorical.

Moi's failure to register this crucial delimitation of de Man's discussion to literary language echoes her cavalier dismissal of Ricoeur's observation that the functionality of the written act differs essentially from that of speech, in that the former is dependent upon being *interpreted* to come into being at all. Moi comments that Ricoeur's reasoning 'seems forced,' and suggests that it rests on 'reduc[ing] speech to cartoonish simplicity' (199), when in fact his key point is simply that '[w]riting calls for reading in a way that' calls for the introduction of 'the concept of interpretation' (Ricoeur 1991: 107). This is precisely the point de Man insists on as well when he reminds us that for Charles Sanders Peirce, the 'interpretation of the sign is not ... a meaning but another sign; it is a [perpetually repeatable] reading,' which Peirce calls 'pure rhetoric' (de Man 1979: 9). The literary act is, to speak with Austin, perlocutionary through and through, in that its performance is dependent upon it being understood as such, that is, as an act that does *not* present itself as a transparent comment on the world, but as a sign that asks to be interpreted. It is only by ignoring this crucial aspect of the literary text that Moi can equate the scripted dialogue of Archie and Edith Bunker with 'ordinary language spoken by ordinary men and women' (141).

The difference between Moi and de Man then is not, as Moi claims, that de Man practices theory while Moi rests content with being attentive to how language is used in the particular situation; the difference is that de Man offers a considerably more sophisticated account of how literature is related to the world (and vice versa), than does Moi herself. In fact, de Man no less than Moi seeks to overcome a false picture of how language works, namely the 'metaphorical model of literature as a kind of box that separates an inside from an outside, and the reader or critic as the person who opens the lid in order to release in the open what was secreted but inaccessible inside' (de Man 1979: 5). In place of this picture of literature consisting of an inside (form) and an outside (content/referent), de Man advances the couple grammar/rhetoric, 'perhaps less simple in their differential relationship than the strictly polar, binary opposition between inside and outside and therefore less likely to enter into the easy play of chiasmic reversals' (de Man 1979: 5). The non-binary relation of grammar and rhetoric, in effect suggests the

image of language as a kind of Möbius strip that turns the self inside-out: language is the connecting tissue that lets consciousness become part of the external world so that the self is not just a bundle of experiences, but something that can reflect upon its own activity. In offering this image of language as something simultaneously internal and external, de Man is forestalling one of Moi's principal moves, namely, her refusal 'to posit a gap between word and world' (63).

Moi's strategy for challenging the prevalent picture of how literature and reality are related, meanwhile, is simply to refuse to look at literature *as* literature, and to look at it instead *as if* it were reality, the way 'ordinary readers' who allow themselves 'to be immersed in the world of a novel' (220) supposedly do. In this view, the unity of world and word can be achieved without complication, because if language is use, as ordinary language philosophy insists, it is always already part of the world it talks about. The notion that there is 'an unbridgeable gap between language and reality' (122), is simply a misunderstanding brought about by the post-Saussurean picture of language.

From such a perspective, it is perhaps understandable that de Man's claim that '[r]hetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration' (144), comes across as 'a willful imposition of melodrama on an ordinary phenomenon' (145). As Moi does not recognize that the line between reality and literature is precarious—or to use de Man's term, rhetorical—she can see 'no reason to believe his claims about grammar, rhetoric, logic, and literature' (144). As we have seen, however, this is not because de Man does not provide any such reason, but because Moi fails to acknowledge that the fictionality of the literary statement requires that we treat it first and foremost as a statement that calls for recognition of its literary nature, and only secondarily as a statement about reality. While Moi does her best to dismiss this complication as inconsequential, her refusal to acknowledge the literariness of literature has far-reaching consequences, as becomes most apparent in her treatment of Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik.

Evading Literature: The Case of Breivik

Whereas de Man's account of what can be accomplished by means of reading leaves us with an unresolved complication, Moi's account gestures rather towards reading as an ethical practice that teaches us to

view the world with a ‘just and loving gaze’ (227). To underscore what is at stake, she frames her concluding chapter on the ethical implications of reading with a discussion of the horrific acts of Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik, who murdered 77 people on 22 July, 2011. Noting that Breivik talks about his murderous acts as a ‘marketing operation’ in the 1500-page tome he distributed online just hours before his attacks, she presents him as someone whose ‘relationship to language was as alienated as his relationship to reality’ (222). The implication is clear: Breivik’s deed was a consequence of a more general postmodern alienation from reality, the ultimate source of which is the post-Saussurean tradition of literary theory Moi critiques. This suggestion is brought out even more clearly in the postscript to the Swedish translation of the Norwegian essay that the chapter in question is largely based upon. In the wake of the Utøya massacre, Moi writes,

[i]t dawned on me that I had lived large parts of my intellectual life in a society in which it had become increasingly difficult to make a case for literature’s—for good writing’s—value. It was no coincidence that this period coincided with the golden age of the postmodern view of language. The belief that language is disconnected from reality, the conviction that it makes no difference who speaks, made it easy to understand literature—‘literariness’—as sheer form. Thus it became well-nigh impossible to argue that literature can be a source of insight into anything except the always self-referential essence of language.

(Moi 2017b: 78; my translation)

Ordinary language philosophy, Moi now argues, provides an alternative to ‘the idea that language is in some fundamental way disconnected from reality,’ and she consequently sets out to demonstrate ‘how literature—good writing—can teach us to see the world with greater clarity’ (223).

The way she goes about doing this is of some interest, given her claim to supplant method no less than theory with ‘just reading’ (193). She begins by repeating that Wittgenstein and Cavell emphasize that a precondition for understanding is a shared sense of what the world is like—that you can see what I see, and vice versa—taking special care to highlight Cavell’s emphasis of ‘the concept of *voice*,’ which she connects ‘to the inescapable element of subjectivity in every human utterance’ (225). Voice, it is important to remember, is a concept Moi has earlier suggested that Cavell offers instead of ‘a “theory of the subject”’ (61), so following her logic, she is not presenting us with a

theory here. She then introduces ‘three women philosophers’ (223) she thinks bring out the ethical implications of ordinary language philosophy, Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Cora Diamond, each of whom figures as an exemplary attentive reader to Moi. From Murdoch, she picks up the phrase ‘just and loving gaze’ as a definition of *attention*, a concept that Murdoch claims to have borrowed from Weil, but that Moi herself right from the outset associates with the ordinary language position of Wittgenstein: “‘Attention to particulars!’ could be Wittgenstein’s slogan’ (6).

Having thus first established the (non-)theoretical framework of her discussion, Moi then moves on to discuss a series of literary examples culled from Ibsen, Rilke, Woolf, and contemporary Norwegian novelist Vigdis Hjort. These writers, too, Moi suggests, promote the kind of attention she finds in ordinary language philosophy; equally importantly, they do so by affirming what Moi takes to be its (non-)theoretical starting point, namely that there is an ‘inescapable element of subjectivity in every human utterance,’ so that seeing the world with a ‘just and loving gaze’ in effect is tantamount to giving voice to how one’s inner self sees the world: ‘to get an inner life,’ she takes Rilke to suggest, ‘we need to learn to see’ (237). On this view, we in effect discover ourselves by discovering reality. As Moi puts it, discussing Woolf: ‘For Woolf, each woman has to find her voice, focus her attention on the world, and find a language in which to express her vision’ (239).

There are several things to be said here. To begin with, one could point out with Henry Staten that Moi’s outspokenly expressionist conception of literature (‘Writing is expression, in the most literal sense of the word, for it turns the inner into something outer’ [236]), seems to miss entirely the essential point of the later Wittgenstein’s writings, namely ‘that the conception of mind as a ‘queer’ *inner* medium is the major target at which it takes aim’ (Staten, in Beckwith et al. 2019). Secondly, one should note that the article of de Man that Moi would have us dismiss as inconsequential, ends by pointing out that ‘[t]he term *voice*, even when used in a grammatical terminology as when we speak of the passive or interrogative voice, is, of course, a metaphor inferring by analogy the intent of the subject from the structure of the predicate’ (de Man 1979: 18). We are reminded yet again, then, that Moi presents as a cure to theory precisely the figurality that de Man takes to be the cancer. Thirdly, it should be evident that Moi’s way of reading does in fact rely

upon a theoretical framework, and that even if Moi says her particular theoretical duck is a non-theoretical one, it sure seems to walk and talk just like any other.

But even more important is what Moi does not do: consider Breivik's literary attempt to make us see the world from his point of view. In her discussion of de Man, Moi takes him to task for 'sound[ing] as if he is holding his nose' (141) when introducing the Archie Bunker-example. Yet as we saw above, de Man demonstrably models his own reading practice upon the literal-mindedness of Edith. Moi, in contrast, does not even mention the title of Breivik's tome, *2083: a declaration of European independence*, and what little she has to say of it is largely incorrect: she consistently refers to it as a *manifesto*, even though Breivik himself consistently calls it a *compendium*, suggesting its pedagogical aim; and she claims it 'contained hardly a word of his own' (222), even though some 700 pages of the third and longest part of document are in fact Breivik's very own words. Indeed, she goes so far as to suggest that Breivik's horrendous acts are beyond fictional treatment: 'To read about Utøya we must turn to nonfiction, to Åge Borchgrevink and Åsne Seierstad' (240). Even so, she feels confident to suggest in a different text (that she refers to in a footnote) that Breivik decided to kill the young Social Democrats on Utøya because he was envious of their greater intellectual status, or in her words, because '[h]e suspects that the 'cultural Marxists' find him ridiculous' (Moi 2012: 30; my translation).

Given Moi's claim to have learnt from Wittgenstein that 'to figure out what the meaning is we have to look at the use—the specific use in the particular case' (36), one would otherwise have expected her to approach Breivik's compendium the way she says she thinks one should approach all literary texts: be attentive, find the main concepts the text provides us with. Had Moi practiced this strategy when reading *2083* she might have noted two important features: that it singles out *political correctness* (or *PC* for short) as an ideology that needs to be fought, and that its author presents the third and longest of its three parts as something of an autobiographical novel. Large chunks of it, he says, are to be seen as 'a fictional description regarding how it could be like if Islam would be dominant in Europe.' Being 'a sci-fi enthusiast,' he continues, he 'wanted to bring and create a complete new writing style that has the potential to shock the reader with an incredibly credible fictional plot.' But despite attesting to the fictional nature of the book, he

is also at pains to underscore that it is true: ‘the book was created to try to explain to the European political elites how the continuation of given political doctrines could result in similar manifestations (radicalisation of certain groups/individuals), as history has already proven, if they continue with their current policies’ (Breivik 2011: ‘Legal disclaimer’).² ‘History’ here of course refers to the very terrorist attacks that had yet to be performed when the compendium was being written, but had already taken place by the time that it was read. While it is evident that this recourse to fiction is in part a smoke-screen to ensure that ‘the content in its current form will not incriminate anyone, the author or any distributor,’ these statements still make evident that Breivik has a much better understanding of the paradoxical temporality of fiction than does Moi, who looks to literature as any other kind of language game, as ‘already *over*’ (84). For Breivik, in contrast, the statements in the compendium are set in a performative rather than a constative register: they are to be read as propositions designed to create the very situation they claim to warn us of, in which a violent conflict is inevitable (Ullén 2013: 350). But to accomplish that he needs to negate the interpretive openness that Peirce, Ricoeur, and de Man agree is a distinctive trait of literariness, which is why he needs to ‘create a complete new writing style,’ that manages to be fiction and fact all at once, implanting his imaginative vision as an indisputable historical reality.

In that respect, the compendium so far has been uncannily successful. While the evidence suggests that the PCCTS—the Knights Templar organization Breivik claims to have been part of—existed only in Breivik’s imagination, and was in that sense a fiction, this has not prevented others from joining the organization *ex officio*, as it were. *The Washington Post* reports that Christopher Paul Hasson, a ‘U.S. Coast Guard lieutenant accused of plotting to kill politicians and journalists in a quest for a “white homeland,”’ was demonstrably inspired by Breivik, and lists no less than eight other individuals who have been so as well (Stanley-Becker 2019). This list does not include the most notorious Breivik-copycat, the Christchurch shooter who killed 51 people in March 2019, and said he ‘took true inspiration from Knight Justiciar Breivik’ in

² Breivik made 2083 available as an unpaginated Word-document; I refer to it by numerical subdivision, or, when unnumbered, by section title.

a 74-page document he posted on Twitter just before the attack (*TheLocal.no*, 16 March 2019).

All of which but makes it more problematic that Moi fails to reflect on the irony that the intellectual movements Breivik casts as his enemies to a considerable extent are the same ones she critiques. The compendium notably is instigated by an attack on contemporary higher education in general and literary theory in particular. Under headings such as ‘Political Correctness: deconstruction and literature,’ ‘Radical Feminism and Political Correctness,’ and ‘Further readings on the Frankfurt School,’ this introduction claims to explain how so called ‘Political Correctness’ is the product of what Breivik like other people on the extreme right have come to term ‘Cultural Marxism.’ Anyone active in these fields will recognize the critique as the familiar complaint that the humanities and social sciences have undergone a theoretical sea change since the 1960s: ‘The Frankfurt School blended Marx with Freud, and later influences ... added linguistics to create “Critical Theory” and “deconstruction”,’ which “in turn greatly influenced education theory, and through institutions of higher education gave birth to what we now call “Political Correctness”” (Breivik 2011: ‘How it all began—Political Correctness is Cultural Marxism’).

Like most of the material in the first two books of the compendium, this 27-page introduction was not written by Breivik himself, but copied from a different source, in this case a pamphlet edited by William S. Lind, an American self-styled expert on military affairs connected to a think-tank called the Center for Cultural Conservatism. Nevertheless, the fact that it begins the compendium is significant, for it presents the type of speech that need to be silenced for Breivik’s extremist right wing program to be heard: interpretive speech, speech which refuses to subject itself to the principles of what Breivik calls ‘common sense’—which is not that far away from what Moi calls ‘the ordinary.’ Indeed, if one takes the time to trace the history of the concept of PC, one can see that for all her disgust with Breivik’s acts, the postcritical rejection of the hermeneutics of suspicion is much closer intellectually to Breivik’s revolt against PC than Moi probably realizes.

Historicizing the Suspicion of Suspicion: The Case of Political Correctness

The roots of the concept of PC have yet to be properly accounted for, but even the anecdotal accounts that exist acknowledge that it originated in left-wing circles, especially feminist ones. At the height of the first uproar against PC, an article in radical feminist journal *Off Our Backs* pointed out that

“politically correct” is not a new term. Feminists began using it in the 1970s and 1980s but with a different meaning than the scorn that greets it today. Then it meant, and still does for some of us, that we were personally responsible for our words and deeds. It meant that we must be considerate of other people beyond ourselves; people whose culture and traditions were not our own. It meant we must seek to be inclusive rather than exclusive and we had a responsibility as white women to learn about others and to act upon what we had learned. Most of all, it meant we must be ethical in our behaviors. (Post and Free-woman 1994: 20).

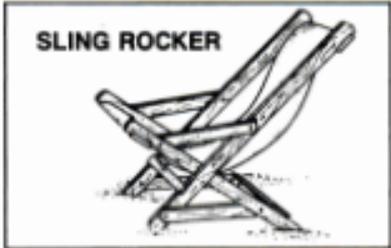
As originally used within the feminist movement, then, the concept of PC was a means to promote precisely the kind of attentiveness to the particular case that Moi herself advocates.

This original use of PC as a positive term for an inclusive attitude, however, was quickly turned on its head so as to denote instead the exclusionary stance of some feminists who were unwilling to recognize in non-normative sexual practices, such as lesbian sadomasochism, anything but a twisted enactment of patriarchy. In the controversy following the ninth Scholar and the Feminist Conference, held at the women’s center at Barnard College on 24 April 1982, PC was associated with the anti-pornography camp of the women’s movement, and equated with ‘McCarthyite tactics to silence other voices’ (Abraham et. al. 1982). Even so, many people of a liberal persuasion held on to the positive conception of PC, to the point of coffee-houses taking pride in selling ‘politically-correct coffee beans made by workers in Nicaragua’ (Vogel 1987) and progressive lifestyle magazine *Mother Jones* advertising chairs that were declared to be ‘politically correct’ (see fig. 1), while their classifieds offered badges declaring ‘I am politically correct.’

MOTHER JONES
WAYS & MEANS

THIS CHAIR IS POLITICALLY CORRECT

- MACUELIZO (tropical white oak) OR MAHOGANY
- ROCKS ON ANY SURFACE
- FOLDS FLAT
- REMOVABLE 100% COTTON DUCK COVER
- COOPERATIVELY PRODUCED IN CENTRAL AMERICA
- SATISFACTION GUARANTEED



SLING ROCKER

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Fig.1 From *Mother Jones* Aug/Sept 1985.

But just as had happened within the feminist movement, in academia more generally efforts to promote an inclusive PC attitude provoked growing concerns that PC amounted to a censorious position in practice, no matter how well-intended in principle. When Richard Bernstein reported on 'The rising hegemony of Political Correctness' in October

1990, his key characterizations of PC sprung from papers presented at a Western Humanities Conference at UC Berkeley. In the wake of Bernstein's article, media coverage of PC quickly snowballed. During the entire 1980s, the *Washington Post* carried a total of 64 articles using the expression 'politically correct' or variants thereof; in 1991 alone, 313 articles did so; two years later the number had risen to 449.

As usage of the concept of PC expanded, its meanings shifted. If in the 1970s the expression was generally used as a shorthand for an ethics of attentiveness in radical feminist circles, in 1990 *Newsweek* presented PC as 'THOUGHT POLICE' (in capitals), establishing the mainstream understanding of the term. While this equation of PC with the dystopian vision of Orwell was still clearly metaphorical, in the ensuing years it was readily enough literalized. In the early 2000s, the already mentioned Lind did not hesitate to declare that "'Political Correctness" is in fact cultural Marxism' (Lind 2004: 5), a term that in Breivik's version of the text is further specified as 'a European hate ideology with the goal of destroying Western civilization' (Breivik 2011: 'Radical Feminism and Political Correctness'), suggesting that Breivik simply acts out the horrific consequences of his conviction that Europe is at the point of committing cultural suicide. To understand Breivik's deed, then, no amount of psychologizing will cut it, for it is in some ways simply the culmination of the 'vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration' opened up by the concept of PC, and as such involves a whole history of complex relations.

An important if as yet rarely noted aspect of this history is the family resemblance between the reaction against political correctness and the postcritical discontent with the hermeneutics of suspicion that Moi's book is such a prominent example of. 'It used to go without saying that the purpose of literary studies was to produce critique, and that to do so one had to practice some form of the "hermeneutics of suspicion",' Moi writes, adding: 'In the late 1990s Eve Sedgwick observed that the hermeneutics of suspicion had become "nearly synonymous with criticism itself"' (175). Sedgwick, however, was not the first critic to voice suspicions about the hermeneutics of suspicion. Four years earlier, Morris Dickstein published an article on the 'Decay of reading,' which prefigures not only Sedgwick's critique but the overall argument of Moi's book. Dickstein begins by deploring the 'gap between ordinary reading and critical reading' (Dickstein 1993: 34) that he feels has arisen

between ‘ordinary readers’ and those ‘academic readers’ that ‘deliberately read against the grain of the text, against common sense, against most people’s way of reading.’ For Dickstein, this gap suggests that ‘the “hermeneutics of suspicion” has become a primary feature of academic criticism, which aims above all to disclose the institutional pressures and ideological formations that speak through texts and influence us as we read’ (Dickstein 1993: 36). This ‘alienation of criticism from literature,’ Dickstein holds, has resulted in academics losing touch with ‘the public sphere,’ as witness the fact that ‘in the recent debate over political correctness, when literature professors were chastised, often unfairly, for their political orthodoxy and intolerance, they had no effective public vocabulary for their reply.’ Dickstein’s principal examples of such abstruse critical readers are Paul de Man and New Historicist Marjorie Levinson, both of whom are accused of having ‘turned [their] back on the common reader and common sense’ (Dickstein 1993: 39). Like Moi, Dickstein traces the roots of this ‘adversarial way of reading’ to the New Critics who “spoke of ‘the “intentional fallacy”” and ‘looked for the subtext in every text’ (Dickstein 1993: 37); and much like Moi is eager to promote the notion of reading as an adventure, Dickstein suggests a childlike ‘sense of wonder may yet provide critics some basis for reconciling the popular reader and the serious reader and help restore criticism to its place in the public sphere, where cultural commentary meets political and civic discourse’ (Dickstein 1993: 40). For Dickstein, too, the ‘role of the critic is ... to raise ordinary reading to its highest power—to make it more insightful, more acute, without losing touch with our deepest personal responses’ (Dickstein 1993: 39–40).

In short, Dickstein’s article reads like a condensed version of Moi’s book even though it was written some two years before she discovered Cavell. Only, Dickstein of course reaches virtually the same conclusion as Moi without the aid of either Cavell or Wittgenstein, suggesting that the only real critical work that ordinary language philosophy does in her book is to veil the fact that the revolution she would announce is better described as a *return* to the liberal ideology of someone like Lionel Trilling, or indeed to that of Louise Rosenblatt, who was not just an avid supporter of the notion of literature as exploration, but was also always critical of the New Critical taboo on referring to authorial intentions.

Equally importantly, Dickstein's article suggests that the backlash against the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' that Moi's book exemplifies, is best described as an unwitting version of the very argument against PC that is at the heart of Breivik's compendium as well. While Dickstein is a liberal who carefully points out that the conservative uproar against political correctness was often unfair, the fact that he nevertheless explicitly brings the concept into his discussion suggests that he concurs with the sentiment if not the politics of the anti-PC camp.³ Equally importantly, just as the invocation of PC is often a means to summarily dismiss any and all critique without having to consider its substance, for Dickstein (as for Sedgwick and Moi), the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' function precisely as a blanket rejection of theory, subsuming the particulars of a multitude of quite distinct critical perspectives under the undiversified category of suspicion.

Which brings me to an overall historicist point, namely that whereas de Man's critical practice, no less than the feminist movement of the 1970s that Moi at times waxes nostalgic about, springs from the welfare society that Western countries moved towards in the decades after the Second World War, Moi's current attempt to revolutionize the way we read by means of ordinary language philosophy springs from the very different social situation brought about by decades of neoliberalism. De Man's critique of the institutional conception of literature and the radical feminist critique of leftwing politics are parallel events. Both stem from a social situation in which progressive politics are the norm, allowing older dogma to be questioned. Moi's writings on Cavell and Wittgenstein, in contrast, reflect a social situation in which economic disparity has been growing for the better part of three decades. It is also a period in which higher education in general, and the humanities in particular, have been under pressure to conform to the organizational ideas of new public management, even while the latter's stress on utility rather than on *Bildung* is directly at odds with the humanities' view of education as process rather than as product.

It is thus perhaps understandable that Moi and many with her long for a social situation that preceded the moment of deconstruction, and for a mode of literary criticism predating 'concepts such as

³ For further examples of critics associating the hermeneutics of suspicion with PC, see Fox-Genovese & Scanlon (1995: 11); and Goodheart (1997: 167–69).

poststructuralism, postmodernism, and/or deconstruction,' all of which 'represent philosophical skepticism' (Moi 1995: 145). As we have seen, however, Moi's call to replace theory with ethical attitudinizing has already been tried with depressing results. The pioneering feminist formula that the personal is political rests on an unresolved tension between its supposedly singular foundation in the experience of each individual woman, and its universalizing claim to speak for all women. As originally used within the feminist movement, the concept of political correctness was a means to pacify this contradiction by deflecting the epistemological opposition into a question of ethical attitude. Yet it was only a matter of years, as we saw above, before this attempt to circumvent the contradiction resulted in the reinterpretation of PC as 'McCarthyite tactics to silence other voices.' That this reinterpretation took place within the feminist movement before it was disseminated by conservative forces suggests that any political movement that would avoid becoming a victim to such vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration would do well to pay much closer attention to the lesson of literary theory than Moi does.

For contrary to what Moi suggests, literary theory, as conceived by de Man, is not an extension or version of any kind of critical theory that derives from philosophy, but an alternative to all such procedures. It does not offer any theory about language, but simply assumes as a methodological postulate that literature is not a subspecies of language, but rather that language in its entirety is a subspecies of literature. The paradoxical upshot of this view is that there is no particular thing such as literature, and that therefore literature cannot be taught, and that the same goes for the history of literature. There of course exists something we *call* literature that can be described and classified; only, since the features that supposedly distinguish literature—most importantly, its figural dimension—turn out to inform other uses of language as well, we can no longer insist that literature is a different kind of language than other types of discourses, such as criticism or philosophy. If we are willing to take this challenge of literary theory to heart, we must reconsider the way we teach literature; so that rather than teach literature, we should teach the way it has been taught. Methodologically, that would mean teaching literature very much in the spirit of Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, the penultimate paragraph of which famously explains that the reader who understands the propositions of that work 'finally

recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it)' (6.54). The history of literature would then be a history of how the concept of literature has been misread, but one would still need the discarded idea of literature to understand what literature is not. Literary history would still be taught, in other words, but one would teach it in a different way than has become the norm. And since literary history has in fact not been taught that long—it is best described as a nineteenth century invention (Graff 1987)—it could mean ceasing to teach it the way it has been taught since its inception in the Romantic era, and reverting to older ways of teaching literature: as an Art of Judgment, if you will, but an art founded on the recognition rather than repression of the essentially rhetorical nature of literature.

One of the many benefits of such move is that it would entail replacing the evaluative conception of literature as 'good writing' with a neutral conception of literature as a mode of textuality, demanding that 'the sub-literature of the mass-media' as well as terrorist manifestoes plagiarized 'from reactionary and racist websites' (222) be treated with the same rigor as canonical works of philosophy and refined works of literature that 'teach us to see the world with greater clarity' (223). That way we are also reminded that rhetorical analysis as well as historical contextualization remain methods for literary studies that can be taught, and will always be preferable to the shoddy philosophizing of a postcritique that preaches attentiveness in theory, but proves blind in practice.

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