The postcritical turn: unravelling the meaning of ‘post’ and ‘turn’

Paul, H.J.

Published in *Writing the History of the Humanities: Questions, Themes and Approaches*, ed. Herman Paul (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 305-324.

14. The Postcritical Turn: Unravelling the Meaning of "Post" and "Turn"

Herman Paul

Introduction

What Napoleon Bonaparte and postmodernism have in common, a Marxist film critic once quipped, is that they ruled their empires through a throng of loyal relatives. Like the French emperor, who appointed siblings to thrones across Europe, postmodernism conquered the humanities with help of various "discursive uncles, brothers-in-law, and cousins," such as post-capitalism, post-Marxism, post-feminism, and post-theory.[1] Clearly, this Napoleonic analogy, with its depiction of postmodernism as a foreign invader, conveyed a sense of unease about the rise to popularity of "post-concepts" (post-ideology, poststructuralism, postcolonialism) in the late twentieth-century humanities. In addition, however, the analogy hints at something of historical interest: intellectual affinities or even kinship relations between post-terms that entered academic parlance with so much force that already by the late 1980s, several commentators had the impression that they were living in an "era of posts."[2] This raises some intriguing questions: Where did post-concepts like postmodernism come from? What made them so irresistible that scholars could not stop inventing new ones, from post-political and post-traditional to post-racist and post-sexual? What kind of aspirations did the prefix express? And if it is true, as this chapter will argue, that "post" was malleable enough to denote a range of different things – intellectual debt and independency, individual self-

[1] Andrew Britton, "The Myth of Postmodernism: The Bourgeois Intelligentsia in the Age of Reagan," *CineAction* 13/14 (1988): 3–17, at 3.

[2] Richard J. Bernstein, *Philosophical Profiles: Essays in a Pragmatic Mode* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 9; Allan Megill, "The Identity of American Neo-Pragmatism; or, Why Vico Now?" *New Vico Studies* 5 (1987): 99–116, at 110.

fashioning and broad societal change, progress and regression – what was the point of bringing all this together under a single heading?

This chapter explores these questions through a recent case study: the rise of "post-criticism" as a rallying cry in, most notably, the field of literary studies. Although the term goes back to the 1950s, post-criticism or "postcritique," as some prefer to say, became a household term only by the second decade of the 21st century. To no small degree, this was due to Rita Felski, an American literary scholar whose provocative musings on the limitations of the "critical" paradigm in literary studies were enthusiastically welcomed by colleagues who dreamt of new directions in the study of literature. At the same time, Felski met with bitter opposition from scholars who feared that postcritique would amount to a sell-out of critical thinking in a neoliberal age. This caused large numbers of especially American literary scholars to engage in spirited debate. Was Felski right to argue that literary studies had become too much embroiled in critique, too much intent on exposing ideological complicity, and therefore too negative? Was it true that critical theory as practiced by Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson, or Judith Butler had been insufficiently responsive to the affective appeals of literary texts? And how fair was it to argue that critique, sometimes even caricatured as *crrritique*,[3] did not allow for attitudes other than the suspicious, interrogative stance of a critic interested only in unearthing hidden assumptions?

What is notable about these questions is that they touch not only on the ethos of humanities scholars – on dispositions, attitudes, and virtues characteristic of the persona of the scholar – but also on how academics do or do not wish to carry on approaches inherited from the past. This is perhaps the most important reason why post-concepts are so much *en vogue* these days. Like the equally popular trope of a "turn" – the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the practice turn, and so on – post-concepts allow scholars to articulate in highly condensed form how they want to relate to their discipline's past. Both "post" and "turn," therefore, show what scholars identify with, what they seek to get rid of, to what or whom they feel indebted, and what they regard as obstacles to progress. To illustrate how historians of the humanities might approach such "posts" and "turns," this chapter analyzes the "postcritical turn" through three different lenses. It starts with a brief exercise in *conceptual history* (where did the adjective "postcritical" come from?), continues with a *rhetorical*

[3] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 120.

analysis (what gave the term its rhetorical power?), and concludes with an attempt to unravel the *temporalities* implied in "post" and "turn."

A concise history of the term

Tracing a concept's origins, spread, and changing meanings over time is what historians call "conceptual history" (*Begriffsgeschichte*). In the case of "post-critical," conceptual historical analysis shows that, in English at least, the term established itself shortly after the Second World War, perhaps not coincidentally at a time that also saw the rise to prominence of other post-concepts, such as post-Christian, post-secular, and post-industrial.[4] Philosophers were among the earliest adopters of the term. Although, prior to the 1950s, the adjective post-critical had already been applied to thinkers who tried to break the spell of Immanuel Kant's critical heritage,[5] it was Michael Polanyi who, in 1958, firmly put the term on the agenda. Dissociating himself from critical rationalism as practiced by Karl Popper, among others, Polanyi argued that all knowledge rests on idioms, attitudes, and impulses that "shape our vision of the nature of things."[6] The subtitle of his book, *Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*, pointed out what a recovery of this "non-rational" element would entail: a philosophy freed from the illusion that the world could be rationally mastered.

Meanwhile, in the 1950s and 1960s, post-criticism got currency among theologians, too. Almost without exception, the term was applied to Karl Barth and other "neo-orthodox" theologians who tried to get beyond the legacy of nineteenth-century Biblical criticism by emphasizing that, in spite of its historical materiality, Scripture was chiefly a locus of divine

---

[4] Herman Paul, "Introduction: Post-Concepts in Historical Perspective," in *Post-Everything: An Intellectual History of Post-Concepts*, ed. Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 1–14.

[5] E.g., Arthur E. Murphy, review of *Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect* by Alfred North Whitehead, *The Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 18 (1929): 489–98, at 493; John Leard, review of *Intuition* by K. W. Wild, *Philosophy* 13, no. 51 (1938): 371–2, at 371.

[6] Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), 266.

revelation.[7] Although Barth himself did not like the label,[8] the term post-critical stuck, especially in the United States, where Barth-inspired theologians like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck would develop a "postliberal" school at Yale Divinity School that was explicitly committed to post-critical Biblical hermeneutics.[9] Interestingly, this project also drew on the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose 1960s explorations into the possibilities of "post-critical faith" tried to develop an alternative to what the author called a "hermeneutics of suspicion."[10]

For two or three decades, philosophers and theologians had a near-monopoly on post-critical theorizing.[11] Only by the late 1980s, this began to change, partly through the influence of a widely discussed essay by literary theorist Gregory Ulmer. This piece was not about Biblical interpretation, but about artistic techniques of collage and montage as advocated by a host of twentieth-century avant-gardists, from Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht to Jacques Derrida. Taking his cue from Roland Barthes, Ulmer argued that the rise to

---

[7] E.g., Charles T. Harrison, "A Post-Critical Guide to the Bible," *The Sewanee Review* 58, no. 4 (1950): 738–40; David Wesley Soper, *Major Voices in American Theology: Six Contemporary Leaders* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 71–105. See also, in German, Rudolf Smend, "Nachkritische Schriftauslegung," in *ΠΑΡΡΗΣΙΑ: Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1966*, ed. Eberhard Busch, Jürgen Fangmeier, and Max Geiger (Zurich: EVZ, 1966), 215–37, at 218–9.

[8] Eberhard Jüngel, "Theologie als Metakritik: Zur Hermeneutik theologischer Exegese," in Jüngel, *Barth-Studien* (Zürich: Benziger; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1982), 83–98, at 88.

[9] Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naïveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1990); Paul J. DeHardt*, The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

[10] Paul Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1965), 37, 40.

[11] See, e.g., Jeffrey Kay, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Post-Critical Theologian?" *Concilium* 141 (1981): 84–9; Edward Joseph Echeverria, *Criticism and Commitment: Major Themes in Contemporary "Post-Critical" Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1981); William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985).

prominence of these techniques revealed the collapse of an age-old distinction between literature and criticism. Instead of seeing criticism as a realm of second-order reflection on the first-order discourse of literature, Ulmer followed Barthes in thinking that the reflective stances that literature allows for can be as "meta" as those associated with criticism. Consequently, for Ulmer, post-criticism denoted a situation in which critics could no longer claim a privileged position vis-à-vis literature: they had all become "writers."[12] This implied that, for Ulmer, post-criticism was not an emerging possibility, as it had been for Polanyi, but a *fait accompli*: most twentieth-century avant-gardists had already become post-critical.

Although Ulmer occupies a relatively minor place in the history of the humanities, citation patterns reveal that his article helped introduce post-criticism to fields other than philosophy and theology. (In that respect, Ulmer resembles Ihab Hassan, the American literary critic who contributed much to postmodernism and posthumanism entering academic parlance.)[13] In the late 1980s and 1990s, the idea of a postcritical move began to circulate, initially in fields were "critical" was understood to denote a specific school or approach. Critical pedagogy is a case in point: the adjective referred to a type of pedagogy inspired by Paulo Freire and the Frankfurt School. Consequently, the term postcritical appealed to feminists like Patti Lather, who took her lead from Ulmer in arguing that "postmodern" attentiveness to difference and otherness could help feminist pedagogues move beyond the "largely male inscribed liberation models of critical pedagogy."[14] Similarly, post-criticism could

---

[12] Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 83–110, at 86. See also Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Post-Age," *Diacritics*, 11 (1981): 39–56.

[13] Hans Bertens, "The 'Post' in Literary Postmodernism: A History," in Paul and Van Veldhuizen, *Post-Everything*, 135–54; Yolande Jansen, Jasmijn Leeuwenkamp, and Leire Urricelqui, "Posthumanism and the 'Posterizing Impulse,'" ibid., 215–33.

[14] Patti Lather, "Post-Critical Pedagogies: A Feminist Reading," *Education and Society* 9, no. 1-2 (1991): 100–11, at 106. See also, in the same field, Ellen Schwartz, "Emancipating Pedagogy: A Postcritical Response to 'Standard' School Knowledge," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 28, no. 4 (1996): 397–418 and Bill Green, "Teaching for Difference: Learning Theory and Post-Critical Pedagogy," in *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*, ed. David Buckingham (London: UCL Press, 1998), 177–97.

be envisioned as challenging the reign of critical theory, as literary scholar R. Lane Kauffmann did in response to Derrida-inspired deconstructionism as practiced at Yale by Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller.[15]

Whereas in these cases the word "critical" had a rather clearly identifiable referent, post-criticism increasingly also found its way into debates where such tangible referents did not exist. For instance, in the early 1990s, Elizabeth Lester used post-criticism ("a concept developed by Gregory Ulmer") to challenge the hegemony of a scientifically oriented research culture in media and communication studies.[16] A few years later, cultural theorist Sari Thomas used the label for a type of study that "both follows from and disengages with traditional critical perspectives." Notably, Thomas did not specify what she regarded as traditional, while the contours of her post-critical alternative also remained shrouded: "Included as postcritical theory is much of what is called poststructuralism, postmodernism and . . . cultural studies" – to which Thomas added names as varied as those of Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard.[17] Apparently, post-criticism did not always serve a well-defined purpose. The term could also be invoked as a sign of the times or be mentioned in one breath with other post-concepts (postmodernism, postconstructivism, postcolonialism) that hinted at some fundamental changes being in the air. This explains why English professor Rob Latham could equate "what Ulmer calls 'postcriticism'" with "postmodern theory" in general and why, by the turn of the century, "postcritical theories" could be lumped together with deconstructionism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism as "major new theories" to which cultural studies had to relate.[18]

---

[15] R. Lane Kauffmann, "Post-Criticism, or the Limits of Avant-Garde Theory," *Telos* 67 (1986): 186–95.

[16] Elli Lester-Massman, "The Dark Side of Comparative Research," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1991): 92–106, at 100, 103.

[17] Sari Thomas, "Dominance and Ideology in Culture and Cultural Studies," in *Cultural Studies in Question*, ed. Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (London: SAGE, 1997), 74–85, at 79, 78.

[18] Rob Latham, "Coda: Criticism in the Age of Borges," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 1, no. 4 (1988): 87–94, at 92; Kathleen S. Berry, *The Dramatic Arts and Cultural Studies: Acting Against the Grain* (New York: Falmer, 2000), 35.

The early years of the 21st century witnessed a further spread of the term, increasingly in its adjective form, "postcritical." In addition to ongoing discussions on postcritical pedagogy and Biblical hermeneutics, ethnographers and political economists began to search for avenues beyond a type of critique that they perceived as indebted to colonial thinking ("ethnography is the ultimate colonialist project and critical theory the ultimate modernist project").[19] Janet Wolff proposed a "postcritical aesthetics," intent on rescuing the concept of beauty from decades of feminist critique, while art curators found themselves discussing post-critical museology, characterized by a greater diversity of agents than customary in academic museum criticism.[20] In the early 2010s, even "postcritical social science" entered the conversation, premised on the idea that research is not only a methodologically controlled investigation, but also a human activity fraught with tensions and imbued with relational meaning.[21] Clearly, these ventures into postcritical territory did not have a common agenda. If they shared anything at all, it was an interest in exploring hitherto neglected elements of interpretation – personal, emotional, affective dimensions in particular – or, negatively, a sense of fatigue with academics who always seem to "hide" behind theories and methods.

Although the late 1990s and early 2000s also saw the publication of texts that have been identified retrospectively as foundational for Felski's postcritical movement – Eve Sedgwick's "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," Bruno Latour's "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" and Stephen Best's and Sharon Marcus's plea for "surface reading" – none of these celebrated essays actually spent a single word on post-criticism.[22] They became known

---

[19] *Postcritical Ethnography: Reinscribing Critique*, ed. George W. Noblit, Susanna Y. Flores, and Enrique G. Murillo (Creskill, NJ: Hampton, 2004) (quote from the back cover); Gary Browning and Andrew Kilmister, *Critical and Post-Critical Political Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[20] Janet Wolff, *The Aesthetics of Uncertainty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa, and Victoria Walsh, *Post-Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[21] Casper Bruun Jensen, "Experiments in Good Faith and Hopefulness: Toward a Postcritical Social Science," *Common Knowledge* 20, no. 2 (2014): 337–62.

[22] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in*

as postcritical only after 2013, when Felski proposed "postcritical reading" as an umbrella term for a broad assortment of attempts at fostering non-suspicious readerly attitudes.[23]

> Like others, I find the vagueness of the term to be also its singular strength, allowing it to serve as a placeholder for emerging ideas and barely glimpsed possibilities. It is a term that is gaining traction in various fields to denote pragmatic and experimental modes of engagement that are not prefortified by general theories. The role of the term "postcritical," then, is neither to prescribe the forms that reading should take nor to dictate the attitudes that critics must adopt; it is to steer us away from the kinds of arguments we know how to conduct in our sleep.[24]

Notably, in these lines, Felski not only continued her long-time advocacy for modes of reading that merge "analysis and attachment, criticism and love."[25] She also strategically aligned this project to a range of other intellectual pursuits, in and outside of the field of literary studies, all of which she called postcritical. Accordingly, like Ulmer twenty years before, Felksi used the term for bringing a variety of trends together under one rubric. What lent additional force to this "act of seeing things together" was that Felski depicted the postcritical brigade as a scholarly vanguard, bored by a type of criticism that most scholars still experienced as "normal

---

Fiction, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1–37; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

[23] Rita Felski, "Digging Down and Standing Back," *English Language Notes* 51, no. 2 (2013): 7–23, at 22. Four years earlier, she had still preferred "reflective reading" over "postcritical reading": Rita Felski, "After Suspicion," *Profession* (2009): 28–35, at 34. Felski's analysis of "suspicious reading" as a preeminent mood in literary studies shows some affinity with Peter Baehr's diagnosis of "unmasking" as a dominant style of thought in the social sciences: Peter Baehr, *The Unmasking Style in Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[24] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 173.

[25] Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 22.

science." By moving beyond the critical paradigm, this academic avant-garde would pave the way for "a new era of 'postcritique.'"[26]

Four features of the term

What does this little exercise in conceptual history reveal? Clearly, it does not offer a Whiggish genealogy of the postcritical movement around Felski – one that identifies "forerunners," "contributors," or "sources of inspiration."[27] Instead, I have sketched how the term post-criticism entered the humanities as a tool that allowed scholars in and outside of the field of literary studies to negotiate their relations with existing paradigms in their disciplines, while opening up spaces for conceptual, methodological, or attitudinal reorientation. To understand how post-criticism made this possible, it is worth highlighting four features of the term.

First, the story of how post-criticism found its way into the humanities clearly shows that the term had different meanings in different fields. Post-critical philosophy as envisioned by Polanyi showed only little overlap with post-critical pedagogy as promoted by Lather. Even within fields, the "multivalent character of the 'post-critical' trend" was frequently noted.[28] As a Biblical scholar observed in 1995: "Postcritical exegesis can be poststructuralist exegesis, for example, and can amount to a critique of traditional historical criticism for being insufficiently critical. Such exegesis, in the New Testament context, also tends to be post-Christian. Then again, postcritical exegesis can be confessional . . . , unabashedly taking its inspiration from precritical exegesis."[29] According to sociologist-ethnographer George Noblit, this heterogeneity implied that the quest for an unequivocal definition of post-criticism was

---

[26] Gila Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis of Critique," *Criticism* 61, no. 2 (2019): 191–217, at 192.

[27] The standard arguments against such Whiggish history writing are laid out in Stefan Collini, "'Discipline History' and 'Intellectual History': Reflections on the Historiography of the Social Sciences in Britain and France," *Revue de Synthèse* 109 (1988): 387–99.

[28] Echeverria, *Criticism and Commitment*, 11.

[29] Stephen D. Moore, review of *The Good Wine: Reading John from the Center* by Bruno Barnhart, *Interpretation* 49, no. 4 (1995): 426.

doomed to fail from the outset: "Postcritical ethnography is not one thing, rather it is a critical *space* where many things can go on simultaneously."[30]

Secondly, in this realm of academic reflexivity, post-criticism did not roam alone: it almost always shared this space with other post-concepts. Polanyi's post-critical philosophy, for instance, was also dubbed post-rationalist,[31] whereas the Yale theologians who advocated post-critical hermeneutics became known as post-liberals. When in the 1980s postmodernism came to dominate the intellectual agenda, post-criticism was habitually associated with the buzzwords of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (not to mention post-Marxism and post-feminism). From this it follows that the appeal of post-criticism as a tool for negotiating intellectual debts and aspirations can only be explained in the context of an entire "world of 'posts'" – a world that a somewhat skeptical historian in 1994 described as one "that knows where it has been and needs to assert that it is no longer there."[32]

Clearly, however, not everyone used post-criticism as a call to arms. The case of Ulmer shows that the term could also be used descriptively, as label for a gradual dissolving of the literature-criticism divide that had already started with Benjamin and Brecht. Likewise, the American art critic Hal Foster – perhaps not coincidentally the editor of the volume in which Ulmer's piece appeared – used post-criticism as designator for an era in which neither curators nor art critics still seemed to give a dime for criticism: "Bullied by conservative commentators, most academics no longer stress the importance of critical thinking for an engaged citizenry, and, dependent on corporate sponsors, most curators no longer promote the critical debate once deemed essential to the public reception of advanced art."[33] As his tone betrayed, Foster did not exactly applaud this silencing of critical thinking. In a time when, politically speaking, states of emergency seem to become the rule instead of the exception, "it is a bad time to go post-critical."[34] What this shows is that *first-order* uses of the term, by authors dreaming of a

---

[30] George W. Noblit, "The Possibilities of Postcritical Ethnographies: An Introduction to This Issue," *Educational Foundations* 13, no. 1 (1999): 3–6, at 5.

[31] Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), 23.

[32] Joyce Appleby, "Introduction: Jefferson and His Complex Legacy," in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 1–16, at 14.

[33] Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October* 139 (2012): 3–8, at 3.

[34] Ibid., 8.

postcritical future, and *second-order* uses, by academics analyzing postcritical trends in the present, could have different evaluative connotations. Whereas first-order uses were almost always affirmative, second-order discourse could also be outspokenly dismissive.[35]

Finally, in terms of its ability to provoke debate and stimulate fresh thinking, post-criticism was most successful when authors used it to bring a broad range of existing trends, developments, or perspectives together under a single heading. Just as Ulmer's text resonated widely because it depicted figures as diverse as Derrida, Marshall McLuhan (the media theorist) and John Cage (the composer) as engaged in one postcritical project, so Felski's post-criticism stuck because it identified a single "mood" among intellectuals as diverse as Franco Moretti, Eve Sedgwick, and Amanda Anderson.[36] Sari Thomas therefore hit the nail on its head when she interpreted the term "as a rubric-of-convenience in which to collapse a number of extant movements."[37] The strength of post-criticism, or any other post-concept for that matter, lay in its ability to serve as a "colligatory concept" – a concept that identifies a common denominator in what seems a heterogeneous variety of trends.[38]

Past-present relations

Still, this "lumping together" did not prevent authors from using post-criticism for a variety of purposes, to the point of challenging the very unity in diversity that the concept was supposed to identify. Take the volume *Critique and Postcritique* (2017) that Felski co-edited with Elizabeth Anker. It contains eleven chapters by authors who are all broadly sympathetic to postcritical reading. What they find appealing, however, differs considerably. Some authors feel attracted to the *aesthetic* possibilities that postcritique seems to offer. They envision a

---

[35] As illustrated also by the case of Bruce M. Knauft, "Pushing Anthropology Past the Posts: Critical Notes on Cultural Anthropology and Cultural Studies as Influenced by Postmodernism and Existentialism," *Critique of Anthropology* 14, no. 2 (1994): 117–52, at 132–3.

[36] On "mood," see Felksi, *Limits of Critique*, 20–2.

[37] Thomas, "Dominance and Ideology," 78.

[38] W. H. Walsh, "Colligatory Concepts in History," in *Studies in the Nature and Teaching of History*, ed. W. H. Burston and D. Thompson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 65–84. On post-concepts as colligatory concepts, see also Adriaan van Veldhuizen, "Epilogue: Lessons for Future Posts," in Paul and Van Veldhuizen, *Post-Everything*, 235–49.

rehabilitation of "pleasurable engagement with artistic works for their own sake" or "for the sake of feelings" that works of art can evoke.[39] Others are intrigued by the *political* aspirations of post-critical criticism an in age when faith in a better future – a premise on which the classic aims of liberation and emancipation were based – has become difficult to sustain.[40] Christopher Castiglia, in his turn, speaks in an *ethical* register about hopefulness, idealism, and imagination as values central to postcritical reading, as do the editors in highlighting interpretative virtues like "respect, care, and attention."[41]

How different the angles are from which scholars approach postcritical criticism is even more apparent from reviews of *Critique and Postcritique* and Felski's earlier book, *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Unsurprisingly, *aesthetic* considerations loomed large in responses to an author who asked provocatively: "Why are we . . . so excruciatingly tongue-tied about our loves?"[42] Although most reviewers agreed that love of literature and identification with literary characters have a legitimate place in literary criticism, some feared that Felski's almost unreserved endorsement of readers' affections runs the risk of "fetishization."[43] *Ethical* questions were raised by reviewers who did not see Anker and Felski practice the virtues they preached. Andrew Lyndon Knighton, for instance, lamented their "reckless oppositional swashbuckling," while Bruce Robbins took issue with the editors' style of reasoning, which he described as "aggressive" and "arrogant" despite its rhetoric of humility.[44] At another

---

[39] Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism," in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 99–126, at 101.

[40] John Michael, "Tragedy and Translation: A Future for Critique in a Secular Age," ibid., 252–78.

[41] Christopher Castiglia, "Hope for Critique?" ibid., 211–29; Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, "Introduction," ibid., 1–28, at 16. Castiglia elaborates his argument in his *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

[42] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 13.

[43] Foster, "Post-Critical," 7.

[44] Andrew Lyndon Knighton, review of *Critique and Postcritique* by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, *American Literary History Online Review* 12 (2017): 1–4, at 2; Bruce Robbins, "Fashion Conscious Phenomenon," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 5–6, at 6.

occasion, Robbins even went so far as to say that Felski personified the very "holier-than-thou self-righteousness" that she said to find objectionable in suspicious reading.[45] Thirdly, in a country where the outcome of the 2016 presidential election caused a shock throughout the humanities, *political* considerations were not far away either. One reviewer argued that privileging "affects" over "arguments" might bring postcritique in dangerously close proximity to post-truth, while another said that its fashionable bashing of critical theory reminded him of "political correctness-baiting" on the right end of the political spectrum.[46]

Crucially, however, regardless whether commentators privileged aesthetic, ethical, or political considerations (not to mention religious ones),[47] the key issue for all of them was how 21st-century academics could or should relate to an established tradition of critical reading. Even though both authors and reviewers adopted different perspectives and spoke in different idioms, what they had in common was that they explored, each from their own point of view, to what extent "critique" or "criticism" was a project worthy of being continued in the 21st century. Sympathizers and critics alike thus positioned themselves in a "now" that they distinguished from a "then" when critique, however defined, was still in its heyday. This move, in its turn, allowed them to assess the continuity or discontinuity between what literary scholars did back then and what their successors here and now should do. Even though this continuity, or lack thereof, was obviously not a matter of black and white – which explains why authors felt a need to distinguish between aesthetic, ethical, and political aspects – the

[45] Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 371–6, at 371.

[46] Robert Cashin Ryan, review of *The Limits of Critique* by Rita Felski, *Victoriographies* 7, no. 3 (2017): 271–4, at 273; Robbins, "Fashion Conscious Phenomenon," 5. See also Esther Peeren, "Suspicious Minds: Critique as Symptomatic Reading," in *The Ends of Critique: Methods, Institutions, Politics*, ed. Kathrin Thiele, Birgit M. Kaiser, and Timothy O'Leary (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 97–116, at 104 ("an uncannily accurate description of the hermeneutical stance taken by hardcore Trump supporters").

[47] Religious motifs abounded in a forum section that *Religion and Literature* 48, no. 2 (2016) devoted to *The Limits of Critique*.

red thread running through their exchanges was a negotiating of "past-present relations": modes of relating one's activities in the present to those of predecessors in the past.[48]

In this negotiating of part-present relations, four major moments can be distinguished. First, the past at stake had to be defined: What was "criticism" or "critique"? Did it denote something as broad as aesthetic criticism since the eighteenth century or, more specifically, the legacy of Frankfurt School-style critical theory?[49] Secondly, how accurate was Felski's portrayal of this tradition? To what extent did someone like Jürgen Habermas, with his strong commitment to communicative action, fit Felski's picture of critique as adversarial?[50] Thirdly, in what sense, if any, could critique be classified as "past"? Was its ethos of suspicion indebted to Cold War rationality or did ideology critique depend on narratives of modernization that were no longer seen as plausible?[51] Finally, taking a stance vis-à-vis the past as defined in step three required a normative assessment. How fruitful, compelling, important, or inspiring was this past according to present-day readers? If scholars seek to move beyond the critical past (however defined), what should they leave behind and what should they take forward?

Interestingly, while commentators seldom tried to solve definitional issues, they spent a lot of energy on the second issue: the fairness of Felski's accusations. Wasn't it ungenerous to argue that "critique sounds unmistakably foreign, in a sexy, mysterious, pan-European kind of way, conjuring up tableaus of intellectuals gesturing wildly in some-wreathed Parisian cafes"?[52] Did such images do any justice to critique in its various historical incarnations? "Is againstness really an accurate description of Marx? Freud? Derrida? Foucault? Judith

---

[48] Herman Paul, "Relations to the Past: A Research Agenda for Historical Theorists," *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (2015): 450–8; Mark Day, "Our Relations with the Past," *Philosophia* 36, no. 4 (2008): 417–7.

[49] Nathan Lee, "Postcritique and the Form of the Question: Whose Critique Has Run Out of Steam?" *Cultural Critique* 108 (2020): 150–76.

[50] Amanda Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 101.

[51] Castiglia, "Hope for Critique," 215–7; Michael, "Tragedy and Translation," 255–6.

[52] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 120; Ryan, review in *Victoriographies*, 273.

Butler?"[53] And how convincing was it to depict Jameson as a suspicious reader, given that he had also welcomed Ricoeur's "positive hermeneutics" as a corrective to the "negative dialectic" of Marxist ideology critique?[54] The fourth moment elicited much commentary, too. Even scholars firmly committed to defending critique had to admit that feminist or anticolonial criticism as practiced in the postwar decades no longer fitted the present moment, if only because, for many people across the globe, its promise to bring justice and equality had not been fulfilled. Although not all of them shared Daniel Scott's diagnosis of critique having developed from "romance" (a project based on utopian hope) into "tragedy" (a mode of diagnosis that leaves the critic in the position of a spectator, without much transformative capacity),[55] several authors recommended a toning down of expectations, a "trimming" of grand gestures, or a rearticulation of critique "in a minor key."[56] Even Felski's opponents agreed that "a change of tactic" was needed.[57] As the editors of a broadly anti-postcritical volume voiced the challenge: "What sort of critical thinking is needed in a time when its very

---

[53] Robbins, "Fashion Conscious Phenomenon," 5. See also Diana Fuss, "But What about Love?" *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 352–5, at 354: "Might not many of the modes and moods of postcritique – 'joy, hope, love, optimism' – already be found inside critique, if we only cared to look?"

[54] Knighton, review in *American Literary History Online Review*, 3; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 285.

[55] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 10–11, 20–21. Transformative capacity ("the capability to intervene in a given set of events so as in some way to alter them") is a term borrowed from Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 7.

[56] Ayşe Parla, "Critique Without a Politics of Hope?" in *A Time for Critique*, ed. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 52–70, at 52, 62; Fadi A. Bardawil, "Critical Theory in a Minor Key to Take Stock of the Syrian Revolution," ibid., 174–92, at 176.

[57] Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 107.

existence seems threatened? . . . To be faithful to its core principle, critique must involve its self-critique. That is the only way, in these critical times, to move forward."[58]

One may wonder: Doesn't all this heterogeneity – the aesthetic, ethical, and political aspects of the debate, the different definitions of critique, the multiple positions from which scholars contributed to the conversation, and their lack of agreement on how critique should adapt to the times – warrant the conclusion that the colligation achieved by "postcritical" is merely illusionary? As long as we expect the phrase to operate *descriptively*, as representing a reality "out there," some dose of skepticism is justified indeed. As a descriptive term, postcritique has something potentially misleading. There is no cohort of postcritical readers united by a common sense of where they come from and where they want to go. Arguably, however, the strength of the term does not lie in its descriptive potential. Instead of *representing* reality, it does the performative work of *creating* its own reality. Postcritique is "real" to the extent that literary scholars engage in lively debate on "where they come from" and "where they want to go." Postcritique consists of book reviews, journal articles, special issues, forum sections, and blog posts that all, in one way or another, reflect on what criticism entails and whether or how scholars should move beyond its supposed limitations. Seen in this light – "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"[59] – postcritique is best understood as a realm of reflection in which scholars try to relate to the past, assess the current state of their field, and dream about routes to the future.

Post-prefixes and turn talk

This eventually enables us to address the question with which this chapter started: What is the meaning of "post" and "turn" in "postcritical turn"? Clearly, the post-prefix not only conveys that change is in the air, but also that this change should be welcomed as a step towards a more self-reflective, socially relevant type of critical activity. Even if the temporality

---

[58] Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt, "Introduction," in Fassin and Harcourt, *Time for Critique*, 1–10, at 2, 3. Similarly: Birgit M. Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele, and Timothy O'Leary, "Introduction," in Thiele, Kaiser, and O'Leary, *Ends of Critique*, 1–16.

[59] This is the so-called "Thomas theorem," formulated by William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas in *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 572.

implied in the "post" is not straightforwardly progressive, it does depict postcritique as inaugurating a new era in literary criticism. This, in its turn, draws on an understanding of time that can be described as "a unidirectional chronology, where things and phenomena succeed each other along a metaphorical line of time."[60] Arguably, this notion of time accounts for much of the concept's rhetorical power. The strength of the "post" lies in its ability to make the postcritical vanguard appear as more up to date, more attuned to the present, more responsive to the demands of the time than its predecessor, the critical paradigm that is no longer at the cutting edge of things.

To see more clearly what this does and does not mean, it is helpful to distinguish the kind of transition implied here from two related, but different understandings of change. First, the "post" in postcritical does not imply an epochal transformation of the kind that "post-industrial" and "post-Christian" once denoted. In the decades following the Second World War, these two post-terms were used to convey that mechanical industry would not have much of a future in the United States and that Europe was no longer a Christian continent. Both post-terms thus hinted at broad societal changes.[61] What distinguishes postcritique from these older concepts is not only its more limited scope – the term refers exclusively to academic work done in the humanities and social sciences – but also its focus on individuals intentionally changing their minds. Even if authors invoke the concept of an era ("This is where we are: in what can be viewed as a post-critical era"),[62] this doesn't refer to scholars involuntarily entering a new stage of history. It rather denotes a moment when a conversation about the limits of critique is perceived as more "advanced" than simple continuation of the critical enterprise.

---

[60] Dan Karlholm, "Postcritical or Acritical? Twelve Steps for Art History Writing in the Anthropocene," *Journal of Art History* 89, no. 2 (2020): 150–164, at 152.

[61] Howard Brick, "Optimism of the Mind: Imagining Postindustrial Society in the 1960s and 1970s," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1992): 348–80; Herman Paul, "'Our Post-Christian Age': Historicist-Inspired Diagnoses of Modernity, 1935–70," in Paul and Van Veldhuizen, *Post-Everything*, 17–39.

[62] Antoine Hennion and Line Grenier, "Sociology of Art: New Stakes in a Post-Critical Time," in *The International Handbook of Sociology*, ed. Stella R. Quah and Arnaud Sales (London: SAGE, 2000), 341–55, at 345.

Second, the "post" in postcritical does by no means imply a rupture with the past. It should rather be interpreted as denoting a realm of reflection where scholars can "clear their throat" to indicate disagreement, doubt, or a desire to do things differently. As such, it resembles the "post" in postmodern and postcolonial, of which Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued that it served as a "space-clearing gesture," aimed at broadening a conversation rather than abandoning it.[63] Nonetheless, this space-clearing gesture is always imbued with temporal meaning. It points to something *beyond* the current state of affairs, *beyond* the way we do things now. The post-prefix thus invokes a notion of temporality that, despite its resistance to supersessionary schemes of periodization, does assume that raising new questions and exploring new avenues is better than continuing with existing ones.

If this already implies a state of "restless movement,"[64] the metaphor of a postcritical "turn" even stronger suggests that *mobilitas loci* rather than *stabilitas loci* is the norm of our time.[65] Turns are, of course, related to posts (not to mention "waves" in feminist studies and "new" or "neo" prefixes as in New Historicism and Neo-Victorianism).[66] Turns, however, carry more explicit connotations of either-or, judging by the fact that they are typically visualized by road junctions or described in terms of vehicles turning right or left. As Judith Surkis observes in a study of American historians debating the linguistic turn: "The 'turn' was increasingly described as something that historians should or should not take, as if it were a road or a means of transport."[67] Just how little room the image left for continued negotiation

---

[63] Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 2 (1991): 336–57, at 348.

[64] Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

[65] The phrase "postcritical turn" already enjoyed some popularity among architects before it founds its way into literary studies. See, e.g., George Baird, "Criticality and Its Discontents," *Harvard Design Magazine* 21 (2004): 16–21 and Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, "Interpretation, 1980 and 1880," *Victorian Studies* 55, no. 4 (2013): 615–28, at 615.

[66] Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Modern, Anti, Post, and Neo: How Social Theories Have Tried to Understand the 'New World' of 'Our Time,'" *Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 23 (1994): 165–97.

[67] Judith Surkis, "When Was the Linguistic Turn? A Genealogy," *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 700–22, at 710.

of past-present relations, is apparent from Joyce Appleby's not exactly flattering description of the linguistic turn:

> After historians made that last turn marked "linguistic," they ran into some dangerous curves. Scholarly vehicles were totaled; avenues of inquiry left in disrepair. The timid got out their maps to look for alternative routes to the past; die-hards demanded that the dividers be repainted. Some who managed to drive beyond the curves recommended ditching the cars for buses. Fueled by renewable verbal meanings, these buses, they said, add *jouissance* to the trip, even if they never take you where you want to go.[68]

Even if others were more excited about the journey and its destination, the image of a turn, whether used positively or negatively, always seems to imply movement through space: travel from one location to another. This makes "turn talk" potentially more radical in its implications than post-prefixes. While "post" still allows for continuity amid change, the image of a turn implies a more rigid either-or: "It logically prohibits further co-habitation between what you turn to and thereby turn away from."[69] Against this background, one may wonder whether David Sessions was right in characterizing the postcritical turn "as the latest instance of a scholarly phenomenon in which expansive constellations of philosophical ideas and methodological approaches are reduced and consolidated into a single object for the purposes of establishing a supersession narrative."[70] Even if Anker and Felski explicitly denied the charge of abandoning the critical tradition,[71] didn't their invocation of the "turn" metaphor imply, unintentionally perhaps, that colleagues less receptive to the idea of exploring affective dimensions of literary reading were stuck in the past? Would it at all be possible to propose a

---

[68] Joyce Appleby, "One Good Turn Deserves Another: Moving Beyond the Linguistic; A Response to David Harlan," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (1989): 1326–32, at 1326.

[69] Karlholm, "Postcritical or Acritical," 152.

[70] David Sessions, "Intellectual History and the Postcritical Turn," at https://sites.bc.edu/davidsessions/2016/11/29/ (consulted 13 January 2022).

[71] Anker and Felski, "Introduction," 1.

"turn" without suggesting, however subtly, the arrival of a new era that will turn existing paradigms into anachronisms?[72]

Conclusion

This chapter has explored three ways of approaching "posts" and "turns" in the history of the humanities. First, it has shown the importance of *conceptual history* for tracing how concepts travel across time, space, and disciplines. In the case of post-criticism, this exercise managed to challenge Whiggish narratives of the kind that depict Polanyi and Ricoeur as "forerunners" of Felski, while leaving Biblical scholars out of the picture. Secondly, a *rhetorical analysis* of post-terms as "colligatory concepts," intent on creating unity in diversity, revealed that the strength of these concepts typically lies in their ability to connect a heterogeneous set of ideas and trends. This explains why post-terms have the habit of generating ever new meanings instead of acquiring stable definitions. Thirdly, an analysis of *temporalities* and *past-present relations* brought to light a deep ambiguity in how postcritique relates to critique. Even if the post-prefix is not intended to imply a rupture with the past, the suggestion of supersession is hard to avoid, especially when spatial images of a "turn" are paired with temporal notions of an era "beyond" critique. Finally, throughout the chapter, it became evident that each of these three modes of analysis can benefit from comparison with other "posts" and "turns" in the humanities, if only because the terms are often entangled in various ways.

Clearly, the analysis provided in this chapter is not exhaustive. In addition, one might engage in *reception history*, for instance by tracing how Felksi's proposal has been received in other disciplines, such as history and art history. More importantly, perhaps, one might probe deeper into an *academic market economy* that puts a premium on restless innovation.[73] What does the proliferation of post-prefixes – think of post-feminism being superseded by post-

[72] Gary Wilder, "From Optic to Topic: The Foreclosure Effect of Historiographic Turns," *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (2012): 723–45.

[73] As illustrated by the introduction to a recent special issue on post-criticism: "While discussing the topic for this special issue . . . we were told to *hurry*. Suggesting alternatives to critique, we were further told, is already yesterday's news." Sara Callahan, Anna-Maria Hällgren, and Charlotte Krispinsson, "A Farewell to Critique? Reconsidering Critique as Art Historical Method," *Journal of Art History* 89, no. 2 (2020): 61–5, at 61.

postfeminism and even post-post-postfeminism[74] – tell us about the forces that shape contemporary academic life? An examination of what Jameson calls the "cultural logic of late capitalism" might well reveal that post-terms, instead of being loyal siblings of a Napoleonic emperor, are signs of the power of a regime that forces even humanities scholars to innovate at ever-accelerating speed.[75]

[74] Stéphanie Genz, "Busting the 'Post'? Postfeminist Genealogies in Millennial Culture," in Paul and van Veldhuizen, *Post-Everything*, 195–214.

[75] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, trans. Jonathan Trejo-Mathys (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Funding for this chapter was generously provided by the Dutch Research Council (NWO).