theories and methodologies

Situating the Method Debates

AMANDA ANDERSON

WHAT WE MIGHT CALL THE LITERARY METHOD DEBATES HAVE TAKEN ON A LIFE OF THEIR OWN OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES. THESE DEBATES in no way reflect the full scope of new methods in the literary field, however, and have tended to focus on generalized discussions of ways to read, both formally and affectively. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay on paranoid and reparative reading, "Paranoid Reading," is often seen as the starting point for these debates, especially given their central concern with the limitations of suspicion as both method and mood, reading posture and affect (Best and Marcus; Felski, *Limits*). Other key contributors to the discussion about method have been less interested in the mood or ethos of the practitioner than in the object of study and the techniques required to capture it, as in the case of arguments for distant reading (Moretti), descriptive or "thin" reading (Love), and the new formalism (Levine; Kramnick and Nersessian). There are problems, of course, with assuming that these debates over method capture the energies and commitments of the field, especially given new work on race and ethnicity, queer and trans theory, the environmental humanities, and disability studies, all of which have transformed method and stance in their own right. And yet the method debates are generating a wide discussion over the conditions and direction of the field, for reasons that don't all concern questions of method.

Of special note in Pardis Dabashi's recent contribution to the debate is her insistence on the category of class or economic status, in this case the position of new scholars writing under conditions of professional precarity. For Dabashi this context is determining of what she calls the "broad, generational dialectic of the post-critical debate" (1). Hers, then, is an attempt to mark the debates on method in generational and sociological terms; it is premised on the idea that newer scholars in the field value forms of argument that differ from those that have governed the field for the previous generation at least. According to Dabashi, critical practice is for scholars of her generation "heterogeneous" and "syncretic," accommodating a combina-

AMANDA ANDERSON is Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and English and director of the Cogut Institute for the Humanities at Brown University. Her most recent books include *Psyche and Ethos* (Oxford UP, 2018) and *Bleak Liberalism* (U of Chicago P, 2016).

© 2020 AMANDA ANDERSON
PMLA 135.5 (2020), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tion of critique and postcritique (3). Beyond this broad inclusiveness, Dabashi stresses two further elements of the type of argumentation she wishes to juxtapose to prevalent modes of claim staking in the field: an avowed modesty and a collaborative, dialogic stance vis-à-vis other scholars. Instead of simply positioning themselves over and against the object or text, or as lone intellects engaged in fog-clearing interventions, scholars employing this mode of argumentation (or, better, inquiry) orient themselves toward a wide community of fellow critics and proceed speculatively and tentatively. Such a mode is explicitly opposed to arguments that rely on forms of conflict, refutation, and competition to advance their claims to distinctiveness and originality.

Dabashi's talk relies on the pronoun *we* to invoke a community of scholars assumed to be united by stage of career, professional precarity, and intellectual ethos. This rhetorical feature raises an important question: Can generations within disciplines be seen to have a commonly held attitude or stance, one that recognizably marks the methods and arguments they adopt? Generational characterology is certainly a feature of contemporary cultural analysis outside the academy, as pervasive media references to baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and Generation Z attest. While we may view the stereotypes associated with these labels skeptically, especially when they are applied to large, undifferentiated populations, scholars have created an important body of work on intellectual generations, largely in the fields of intellectual history (Sirinelli) and sociology of knowledge (Collins). The warrant for this work, and the possible relevance of its claims, rests on the key role that intergenerational relations play in scholarly institutions through systems of training and mentoring. Randall Collins, in his extensive sociological study of philosophical thought, foregrounds just the sort of competitive forms of argument (based on sharply defined intellectual controversies and advance through negation) that Dabashi criticizes; he also highlights the key role played by institutional locations, scholar networks, and attentional economies focused on a limited number of factions and positions. In so doing, he does not negate ways in which the broader social, political, and economic milieu may affect forms of intellectual life but rather advances a theory about the complex overdetermination of scholarly cultures and the significant role played by conditions internal to academic networks and institutions. Collins's writing on the field of philosophy covers a vast temporal span and stretches across the globe. All the same, many of his arguments extend beyond field-specific aspects, and some of the field-specific aspects of philosophy, it so happens, are shared by literary studies in the era of theory, to which the method debates fundamentally belong. And, indeed, certain influences in the literary field, and in particular the avant-gardism it shares with modernism and postmodernism, heighten tendencies toward radical claims of method reversal.

Beyond their formation by conditions internal to academic institutions, according to Collins, generational responses often result from a major societal stressor or crisis, which typically has an impact both on larger economic and social conditions in the culture and on more immediately felt institutional circumstances.[1] Such a crisis situation, ramifying through several levels, arguably obtains in literary studies. Most immediately, the profession faces an existential threat to its own reproducibility, at least in its historically recent forms of institutional support and job security through the expectation of a minimum availability of tenure-track positions and the graduate-training cultures they help to maintain. Beyond this there are increasing challenges facing the humanities and universities more generally, largely in the form of dropping enrollments and diminished public faith in the cost-to-value ratio of university education and of humanities education in

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular. In analyzing the method debates, then, as well as the larger landscape of scholarly innovations or redirections taking place in the field, it is worth considering not only the debates themselves but also the wider landscape of new subfields, the changing conditions of university work, and the larger set of challenges, both economic and cultural, facing the humanities. This is especially important given that literary studies, and English in particular, often serves as a symbolic representative of, if not outright scapegoat for, larger structural problems. This has been the case for quite some time, even as many English departments have remained relatively well resourced in the larger economy of humanities departments within the university: when programs and departments are shut down, it is typically foreign languages and smaller departments that suffer most. But in the symbolic realm, English often takes the strongest hit. For example, in the context of the 1996 Sokal affair, when a scientist successfully placed a hoax science studies article in the journal *Social Text*, the situation caused embarrassment not, as John Guillory pointed out, to science studies itself, or to the larger academic left, but "to the *literary* academy and . . . a number of humanistically oriented enterprises in other disciplines such as philosophy and anthropology" (473).

More recently, a special supplement published this year by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled *Endgame* carried the subtitle *Can Literary Studies Survive?* even though several of the articles in the supplement address general university conditions (especially defunding at state universities) or the humanities more broadly. More than half the articles are on the dire state of the academic job market in English, it is true, but there is a reason for that: of the thirteen authors represented in the supplement, ten are scholars in the field of English literature and one is a scholar in literary and cultural studies. The remaining two are staff reporters for the *Chronicle*. Of the eleven scholars of literary studies, one is a PhD who did not get a job in academe, one is an assistant professor, and the rest, including one university president, hold tenured positions. How did these articles come to be selected and then presented as telling a story about the decline of literary studies, when they address a constellation of problems facing English literature PhDs, the humanities, and the university more generally? To suggest, as this curated evidence does, that a complex social problem is above all a problem for literary studies seems misguided. One might just as easily infer that English professors are among the most active and engaged institutional citizens in the university, the most active among the scholars seeking to write for wider audiences about the multilayered challenges facing the university and the humanities. The *Chronicle*'s distorted presentation easily gets replicated in more mainstream media communications: the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, for instance, published an opinion piece commenting on *Endgame*, collapsing the larger problems into a problem "for literature especially" and cherrypicking claims from different essays to support his conclusion that humanistic study is experiencing a crisis of faith and has relinquished any coherent claims for itself.

I mention this situation because it shows how far the field's internal method debates take place from the larger, more public-facing debates on the condition of the humanities. But a forced encounter between the two sheds light on the recent history of the field, as Dabashi's intervention reveals. Taking this larger context into account, we might consider the method debates, at least in part, as crucial forms of heightened field reflexivity occurring as structural field conditions are becoming more challenging, though typically without more than passing reference to these conditions, and not in any notable way in direct response to these conditions. Instead, the idea is proposed that a certain method

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

has exhausted itself, or does not do justice to the objects under study or the investments of scholars and readers. This does not mean that such claims are forms of displacement from the real issues or are otherwise merely symptomatic. And yet there is arguably a mediated relation at play between the significant threats to the continued strength of the humanities and the plea for a new method.

There is another sociological feature of the method debates that Dabashi's generational perspective invites us to notice: key players in the method debates are mid-to-late-career scholars engaged in significant methodological shifts, or even turns. This element reveals dynamics in the field beyond the forms of argument emphasized by Dabashi, exposing the ways concentrated forms of charismatic authority have underwritten the polemical reach of the method debates. It is no accident that Sedgwick was so pivotal in the turn away from paranoid reading, given her prominence among the generation of scholars that creatively reworked the role that theory had been playing in the profession beginning with the influence of deconstruction and poststructuralism. Before her, Michel Foucault's own turn from suspicion to practices of the self laid the groundwork for such radical reorientations (Anderson, *Way*). These field-internal dynamics show the ways in which intragenerational and even intrapersonal developments have been highly consequential.

Moving away from this model of strong reversal of position, and the forms of argument by authority that propelled it, Dabashi invites us to consider what it means when emergent scholars, who don't have the luxury to contemplate an assured future in the profession, become self-reflexive about method under conditions of professional precarity. This must of course be seen as part of a larger picture, since other forms of response to the current crisis are also taking place, as some scholars are moved to write either about precarity more generally (Berlant) or about the structural conditions facing the profession (Newfield). And while Dabashi may seem unique in tying method to the context of professional precarity, there are other instances of overlap between scholarship addressing the institutional context and that which takes up the question of method. Often, writings that address institutional conditions more generally—writings that are thus more public-facing than internal to the field—fault the field for somehow failing to practice the humanities in a way that will make their value more easily felt and justified. Relatedly, in criticizing specific methods such as suspicion or apodictic argument, scholars who more directly position themselves within the method debates often include gestural arguments (those "passing references" mentioned above) about the likelihood that alternative methods will draw in a wider audience of ordinary readers or potential students, or otherwise better advance the cause of the humanities.

Across the range of responses within and beyond the method debates, then, several elements are in play: influential scholars reconsidering their methods, general conditions of conflict and claim staking in the field, variously felt societal pressures on the university, societal and institutional pressures on the humanities, specific pressures on scholars at early stages of their careers in humanities fields, and the repeated way in which literary studies often finds itself unduly singled out as the problem child of the humanities. In this broader context, Dabashi's arguments can be seen as related to larger trends even as they propose new practices. The call for more horizontal forms of engagement with the work of colleagues is in step with institutional trends toward collaborative models of research and teaching in the humanities, which are variously motivated by attempts to promote a more central role for the humanities in cross-disciplinary research models, especially with respect to societal challenges, and to advance forms of graduate training that will expand

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the skills and resources new PhDs may carry into their future working lives. As with many aspects of institutional life, these developments are overdetermined, and they are driven by both principles and practicalities, by forces external to university departments and by scholars within them.

Dabashi seeks to characterize her proposed countermethod by means of one guiding intellectual virtue: modesty. This emphasis on ethos is, as noted at the outset, a key characteristic of the method debates: in both their diagnostic critiques and their alternative proposals, many advocates of postcritique highlight not only methodological practices but also accompanying affective or temperamental orientations. Such an emphasis was already in play in Sedgwick's early piece, where the paranoid mood gave way to a reparative orientation toward objects and people. How tightly ethos is yoked to method varies. For Rita Felski, for example, suspicious reading is characterized both as a method and as a stance, an attitude, so much so that personification appears frequently in her treatment of this particular method. Interestingly, responses to postcritical literature have often characterized postcritique as advocating modesty (Williams; Robbins), though Felski herself has strongly rejected this characterization of her own work. It is true that modesty is not among her counterterms, which include rather reenchantment, love, and attachment (Felski, "Response"). All the same, it is not really surprising that the term *mode y* has repeatedly appeared in descriptions of postcritique, since it easily comes to mind to describe an attitude that has relinquished the forms of assurance or even hubris seen to characterize suspicion. This certainly seems to be part of what has governed Dabashi's focus on the term, though her critique much more broadly assails what she characterizes as the fundamentally conflict-driven forms of argument in the academy.

One should be careful in assigning an ethos to a theoretical or methodological position. While characterological figurations often make their presence felt in theoretical and methodological writings, especially those that as practical philosophies hope to situate themselves as potentially transformative orientations toward the world, the attempt prescriptively to fuse ethos and method imposes a potentially stifling constraint, and an unreal expectation, given the strongly individuating and indeed idiosyncratic elements of creative and critical work, and given the range of attitudes one might hold toward any given theoretical proposition or grounding belief. An acknowledgment of this complexity was central to *The Way We Argue Now*, which sought to balance an interpretive analysis of how ethos informs different theoretical frameworks with a caution about attempts to elevate ethos above argument (as was evident in the debates over the relative merits of Foucault and Jürgen Habermas) or to fuse the two together too tightly (as occurred in certain versions of neopragmatism [Anderson, *Way*]).

While Dabashi is making a critical point about the ways in which professional position can affect one's reception of and response to various methodological debates, her reliance on a shared generational ethos risks occluding the importance of individual intellectual temperament. It is my conviction, in fact, that individual intellectual temperament is one of the underacknowledged forms of diversity and difference today. Part of what drives writing in the field of literary studies is the endless opportunity to characterize and recharacterize the tone, style, form, and value commitments of individual works (including the work of critics and theorists). To adapt Sedgwick's axiom 1 from *Epistemology of the Closet*: People's intellectual temperaments are different from each other (22). Intellectual cultures and prevailing disciplinary practices certainly do affect how people communicate their scholarly arguments and claims, but individual personality, style, and temperament also play a role, as do various other contexts

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and communities that one inhabits. All these elements contribute to the vitality and diversity of academic debate. Consequently, any number of different forms of curiosity, modes of attention, and orienting commitments prompt intellectual work, so much so that it becomes quixotic to characterize or promote any guiding temperament or ethos. This does not mean that analysis of intellectual cultures is not possible or valuable, but it does mean that certain overly generalized claims are problematic. Put another way, while ethos is an ineluctable aspect of self-reflexive discussions of methods in conjunction with value commitments, overly narrow prescriptions of ethos are neither desirable nor sustainable. A distinction should be made between a reflective relation to the existential and ethical dimensions of one's avowed methods and theories, and an attempt to impose a singular ethos on a pluralistic and evolving field.

In some ways, the emphasis on ethos reflects the humanities' broader emphasis on questions of *Bildung*, just as the conjoining of questions of ethos and of method reflects the field's preoccupation with these two forms of justifying its practices. Ideally, an orientation toward *Bildung* presupposes not that specific values must be taught but rather that a more general practice of promoting reflection on value characterizes teaching in the humanities (Anderson, "Way" and *Psyche*). At the same time, individual writers and critics necessarily convey their own values, and those can carry a rich range of distinguishing moods, modes, and concepts. Of course this is not to imply that teaching somehow can or must remain stringently value-neutral, but there is a key difference between the forms of open discussion one ideally promotes in the classroom and the often more focused avowal of position that drives individual work.[2] This distinction is critical for scholars who are committed to advancing the case for the humanities, on the one hand, and to making a difference through their own teaching and scholarship, on the other. While larger structural problems facing the humanities, including job precarity, require separate institutional and political work, the forms of self-understanding the profession advances matter deeply as well.

Notes

1. Collins himself has advanced a somewhat controversial argument about the rise of German idealism in the context of institutional crises in the Germany university system (618–86).

2. Recently, Clune has advocated the direct avowal of literary judgment by scholars and teachers of literature, something that he characterizes as a form of expertise. By contrast, I focus here on the role the humanities has always played in promoting clarification of value by engaging powerful works across a range of disciplines and genres. Judgment about the value of these works can and should be avowed, but humanities judgment extends beyond a narrowly literary or aesthetic sphere of expertise and is inextricable from judgments about how powerfully the work addresses moral, existential, and political questions, among others.

Works Cited

Anderson, Amanda. *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology*. Oxford UP, 2018.

———. *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. Princeton UP, 2006.

———. "The Way We Talk about the Way We Teach Now." *Profession*, 2009, pp. 19–27.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *The Way We Read Now*, special issues of *Representations*, edited by Best and Marcus, vol. 108, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 1–21.

Clune, Michael. "The Humanities' Fear of Judgment." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 26 Aug. 2019, www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190826-CluneJudgement.

Collins, Randall. *The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*. Harvard UP, 1998.

Dabashi, Pardis. "The Pressure to Intervene: A Case for the Modest (Young) Critic." Post-critique and the Profession. MLA Annual Convention, 4 Jan. 2019, Hyatt Regency, Chicago.

Douthat, Ross. "The Academic Apocalypse." *The New York Times*, 11 Jan. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/01/

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press

11/opinion/sunday/academics-humanities-literature-canon.html.

Endgame: Can Literary Studies Survive? The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020, connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/ChronicleReview_Endgame.pdf.

Felski, Rita. *The Limits of Critique*. U of Chicago P, 2015.

———. "Response." *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 384–91.

Guillory, John. "The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, 2002, pp. 470–508.

Kramnick, Jonathan, and Anahid Nersessian. "Form and Explanation." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 43, 2017, pp. 650–59.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Love, Heather. "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2010, pp. 371–91.

Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. Verso, 2007.

Newfield, Christopher. *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2018.

Robbins, Bruce. "Not So Well Attached." *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 371–76.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Epistemology of the Closet*. U of California P, 1990.

———. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You." *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, edited by Sedgwick, Duke UP, 1997, pp. 1–38.

Sirinelli, Jean-François. "The Concept of an Intellectual Generation." *Intellectuals in Twentieth-Century France: Mandarins and Samurais*, edited by Jeremy Jennings, St. Martin's Press, 1993, pp. 82–93.

Williams, Jeffrey J. "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 Jan. 2015, www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-in-Literary/150993.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2020.135.5.1002 Published online by Cambridge University Press