theories and methodologies

An Audacious Argument for Modesty

MICHAEL BÉRUBÉ

IT IS NOTABLE THAT PARDIS DABASHI'S PAPER AT THE 2019 MLA CONVENTION, "THE PRESSURE TO INTERVENE: A CASE FOR THE MODEST (Young) Critic," caused such a stir—insofar as it mounted a gentle argument against ritual stir-causing, and the gentleness of the argument was central to its point. As Dabashi wrote, "the language of the scholarly intervention—that is, the articulation of the stakes of one's argument—has a way of ossifying hunches into convictions" (4). The idea, clearly, was to ratchet down the level of agon and hubris in scholarly debate and to foreground the perspectives of younger scholars making their first forays into the fray: "since thus far the post-critical debates held in widely circulated and visible academic forums have mostly been conducted among professionally secure, mid-late career scholars, we've not yet had the chance to discuss the kind of epistemic modesty that matters very deeply to early-career-stage scholars now, that is, scholars entering graduate programs in or around 2008" (2). Dabashi suspects, at least as this professionally secure, mid-to-late-career scholar hears her, that the cohort entering the desiccated post-2008 (and especially post-2015) job market does not see the profession in the terms that have dominated debate about the purpose of criticism over the past ten or twelve years:

> The field of critical production for us is deeply heterogenous, syncretic: the mixing of critical and (at least some) postcritical methods has become something we take for granted. And early-career scholars of this generation—who don't really have a horse in the race of re-orientating ourselves vis-à-vis the text—would advocate instead, it seems to me, for re-orienting ourselves vis-à-vis each other—that is, laterally, scholar to scholar. (3)

This aspiration potentially aligns Dabashi with people like Lisa Ruddick and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, in calling for more generous and less abusive forms of scholarly engagement. But precisely because Dabashi refused to take a position on the various debates over the hermeneutics of suspicion and the hermeneutics of trust (which pit

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paranoid reading against reparative reading, symptomatic reading against surface reading, and so on), her refusal was read (inevitably) as a position in those debates. It is also notable that at the time she delivered her paper, Dabashi was a graduate student interviewing for tenure-track jobs.

I had remained silent on these debates, but when I was invited by Jeffrey DiLeo to participate in a panel at the 2020 MLA convention—with the leading title Has Postcritique Run Out of Steam?—I decided to respond to Dabashi by way of a response to the growing (and emphatically stir-causing) debate about Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*. First, I objected to the title of the panel. If we were being invited to revisit Bruno Latour's famous and very squirrelly essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," we should be asking not *whether* postcritique has run out of steam but *why*. That way, we could start from the assumption that it has, just as Latour did when he realized to his surprise that critical theory and science studies can be put to a variety of purposes, some of which he found odious. And I only half-facetiously suggested that the reason why postcritique has run out of steam is that it never had much steam to begin with; in some versions, it was actively antisteam.

And yet the backlash against critique is still with us, and will likely always be with us. It seems to be a permanent feature of the profession; over the course of my thirty-five years in this business, I have never known a time when there wasn't some form of theory that was against theory. I am not talking about know-nothing antitheorists, the kind of people who say, "The author is not dead; I just spoke to her this morning" or "You know, I don't believe the sign is arbitrary after all"—though they have been around for a long time, too. I'm talking about people who are against theory in ways that lead them to write essays titled "Against Theory." I refer of course to the notorious 1982 essay by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, which argued that "once it is seen that the meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning, the project of *grounding* meaning in intention becomes incoherent. Since the project itself is incoherent, it can neither succeed nor fail, hence both theoretical attitudes toward intention are irrelevant" (724). *The meaning of a text is simply identical to the author's intended meaning*. You have to wonder just what in the world Knapp and Michaels really meant by that. Did they seriously think they were going to get literary critics and theorists to give up on the idea of unintended meanings? Or were they just trolling us, many years before trolling became a thing?

Needless to say, few people found Knapp and Michaels convincing, though some found it amusing to see E. D. Hirsch's idea of validity in interpretation attacked from an even more theoretically conservative position. But nothing much happened. There was a *Critical Inquiry* forum, later published as a book (*Against Theory*, edited by W. J. T. Mitchell), and everybody went home happy. By the end of the 1980s, however, there was a growing sense, owing nothing to the Knapp and Michaels intervention, that maybe we were doing too much debunking and demystifying and not enough affirming, which is why in 1990 the Society for Critical Exchange launched a project titled The Problem of Affirmation in Critical Theory. Perhaps the problem was that the Frankfurt school had given affirmation a bad name.

Eve Sedgwick's celebrated essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" should be seen in this larger intellectual context of uncertainty about the value of critique, to which I would add two more elements. First, Leo Bersani's brilliant essay on *Gravity's Rainbow*, "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature," published in 1989 (just in time for me to cite it in my dissertation!) and surely one of the inspirations for Sedgwick's essay. Riffing on Pynchon's definition of paranoia as "the reflex

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of seeking other orders behind the visible" (Pynchon 219), Bersani notes that "the theoretician distrusts the theorizing activity *of* paranoia—as if the 'truth' of paranoia might turn out to be that theory is always a paranoid symptom" (100–01). In this reading, "paranoia" becomes a name for sensing that there is something more at work than meets the eye. In the practice of reading we call it "interpretation," and any literary criticism that goes beyond pointing out the words on the page engages in it to some extent. As Bersani points out, it would actually be worse—"scarier," he writes (103)—to live in a world where we never sought hidden orders behind the visible.

Second, we should also recall the extent to which, by 1997, when Sedgwick published her essay, two of the major options in critical theory seemed to have boiled down to the Foucauldian Unveiling and the Gramscian Reversal, through new historicism and cultural studies: on the one hand, you could take an ostensibly progressive cultural artifact and show that, unbeknownst to itself, it actually reinforced the hierarchies it claimed to contest and extended the reach of the disciplinary and the carceral; on the other hand, you could take an ostensibly reactionary cultural artifact and show that, unbeknownst to itself, it contained hidden liberatory or subversive potential, which was usually unlocked by a savvy fan base devoted to critical *détournement*. Both options participated in a hermeneutics of suspicion, both gave you clever ways of reading texts and events against the grain, and you could practice them in the comfort of your own home. When the Foucauldian Unveiling and the Gramscian Reversal became routine and predictable and kind of tedious, it was time for something new, and Sedgwick provided it, mostly by pushing back on the Foucauldian option: she reminded the people who needed reminding that "the paranoid trust in exposure seemingly depends . . . on an infinite reservoir of naivete in those who make up the audience for these unveilings" (19), and she introduced everyone to Silvan Tomkins and reparative reading. Nonetheless, as Amanda Anderson has pointed out, the paranoid mode retains precedence and the reparative leavens it and renders it vulnerable to surprise.[1]

Exactly how pervasive were these drearily paranoid readings—what Sedgwick called "derivative rephrasings" of D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (15)? Sedgwick opens her introduction by noting that the essays in *Novel Gazing* "will show how the reservoir of practices *already in use* crucially exceeds the theorizations of a consensual hermeneutic of suspicion" (3; my emphasis), but two pages later she worries that "to apply a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is, I believe, widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities" (5), and much later she suggests that "these infinitely doable and teachable protocols of unveiling have become the common currency of cultural and historicist studies" (21). (That, by the way, is the only time cultural studies is named as such in the essay.) What has happened to the reservoir of other practices already in use that we read about back on page 3?

Another decade passes, and we get Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's call for "surface reading" in their introduction to the special issue of *Representations* that they edited, yet another warning that we might be reading too much into things or, in other words, engaging in "symptomatic reading" (1). Bruce Robbins has objected to their essay for what he rightly considers its crabbed reading of Fredric Jameson ("Critical Correctness"); I object to it for its strange assumption that everybody who wasn't taking texts at face value over the previous thirty years was following a playbook set down in *The Political Unconscious*. Nor am I persuaded of the need for so sweeping a book as *The Limits of Critique*. I simply have never understood the complaints of people who claim that suspicious, symptomatic, paranoid, demystify-

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ing reading is the only or even the dominant thing we've been doing—as Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood do when they write, in the afterword to the special issue edited by Best and Marcus, that "thirty years of plumbing textual depths has returned us to the surface" (139). I don't believe that we have all been plumbing textual depths for thirty years. For example, in addition to the suspicious version of cultural studies, there was an equally influential version that tried to wallow in popular pleasures and take fandom seriously—to the point of deferring to fans. For that matter, when I hear that we were all in thrall to Jameson I wonder whether I simply hallucinated the entire career of Stuart Hall. Nor do I understand the epiphanies of people who discover suddenly that unjust and oppressive and murderous practices can survive their exposure—and indeed can operate just fine in broad daylight. (I could claim here that I have uncovered the hidden truth of the Trump era, except of course that it hasn't been hidden at all.) The paranoid mode might depend on an infinite reservoir of naivete in its audience, but the postcritical critique of demystification apparently requires it of its proponents.

My point is that critiques of critique are a recurring, stir-causing feature of academic literary criticism. I was going to add that what Jeff Williams called "the new modesty" of postcritique is neither modest nor new, but then I remembered to my chagrin that Robbins has already said that—twice ("Not So Well Attached"; "Critical Correctness"). So I think I should pivot and criticize him for something for a change. "The alternative to critique," Felski writes in her closing pages, "does not have to take the form of 'belle-lettrism' or mindless effusion" (188). In his most recent riposte to postcritique, Robbins writes, "Postcritique, were it ever to be widely embraced, seems likely to produce a criticism that is closer to fandom. . . . 'Criticism' in *The New York Times Book Review* tends to look 'positive,' by academic standards, not because it always says the book is good but because it offers market advice as to whether you should buy it" ("Critical Correctness"). I think this is seriously mistaken. For one thing, it unfortunately confirms Felski's argument that the proponents of critique like to cast noncritiquey criticism as jejeune and uncritical and (shudder) affirmative. Worse, it confirms Felski's argument needlessly. Think of famously contentious nonacademic reviewers like Dale Peck or Armond White or Stanley Crouch. Or, before them, Mary McCarthy or Dwight MacDonald. There is a long and vibrant tradition, in the world of professional nonacademic literary critics, of aspiring to write the definitive "takedown" review that will destroy a writer's reputation (and make a critic's reputation) forever. It's true that academe can be a viper pit full of smug critiquiness, and I think we've all been bitten once or twice. It does not follow that the nonacademic literary and art worlds are full of neoliberal puppies and dolphins. The world out there, like the world in here, contains a greater variety of critical practices than this debate has acknowledged.[2]

It may be objected here that takedown reviews—also known in the business as "hatchet jobs"—are not the kind of critiques that mount social critiques. That is true, and it leads me to my closing point: there is way too much conflation going on here. Modes of argument, social protest, individual behaviors—all are being collapsed into each other. I want to make what I think are some necessary distinctions.

For the record, I am not dead set against everything Felski writes in *The Limits of Critique*; I share her (and Sedgwick's) weariness with derivative, tendentious Foucauldian readings of texts, and I could not possibly be more impatient, at this point in history, with predictable ultra-leftist complaints that reforms are bad because they forestall revolution. And I would have been happy to see Felski develop her work on Paul Ricoeur and hermeneutics into a stand-alone book,

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because I agree that "the neglect of the hermeneutic tradition in Anglo-American literary theory is little short of scandalous" (33). I also think Felski is right about the culprits for this neglect: "thanks to a lingering aura of Teutonic fustiness, not to mention its longstanding links with biblical interpretation, hermeneutics was never able to muster the high-wattage excitement that radiated from poststructuralism" (32). No doubt the identification of hermeneutics with Hans-Georg Gadamer, filtered still further through E. D. Hirsch, led too many Anglo-American critics to think the practice was all about fusing horizons, closing circles, and achieving the proper interpretation of a text. Hermeneutics, too, encompasses a greater variety of critical practices than this debate has acknowledged.

But where Felski goes wrong, I think (and I will try to say this modestly and generously), is in conflating a hermeneutics of suspicion and the project of social critique. Some of her critics, including Robbins, have reinforced that conflation, arguing that giving up on suspicious reading means foregoing social protest and caving in to neoliberalism. I can't see how this conflation makes any sense for (say) the project of disability studies, which, like many other fields, avails itself of both paranoid and reparative modes of reading but would never describe its project as Everything Right Now Is Basically OK Studies.[3] And as I've noted above, you can be a suspicious, ungenerous reader and reviewer without articulating your textual critique to any social critique whatsoever.

Making matters worse, Felski then adds yet another layer to the conflation, by adapting Anderson's work on the characterology of criticism and writing an extended account of the suspicious critic as detective. This triple-decker conflation gives us a critic who (a) habitually reads between the lines or against the grain in a *gotcha!* manner, thereby (b) mounting a ruthless criticism of everything existing while (c) aggressively dismissing the insights of every other working critic. Can we please disentangle all these characterizations before they ossify into convictions? For here is where Dabashi's call for more tentative and "hunch-like" critical interventions runs the greatest risk of being misunderstood. As I hear her, she is not saying that we all need to get along, be nicer to texts, and stop finding fault with the world (as some people in the question-and-answer period seemed to think). She is saying, if I may paraphrase her argument a bit emphatically, that you can be a paranoid reader and a trenchant social critic without being such an arrogant jerk. A little epistemic modesty would be nice, thank you.

There is, after all, such a thing as a toxic-masculinity mode of debate in academe. This is not breaking news, but perhaps a few more professionally secure, mid-to-late-career male scholars should acknowledge it—and refuse to participate in it. Arguably the culture of intellectual aggression is worse in philosophy than it is in literary studies, not least because philosophy is by far the most male-dominated field in the humanities. But literary studies, especially the branch of literary studies that has been going under the name "theory" for the past forty years, often borrows both ideas and demeanors from philosophy. All too often, the result is the kind of sanctioned intellectual nastiness that Ruddick has decried for many years ("Professional Harassment"; "Near Enemy"; "Unnamed Work") and that leads Fitzpatrick to issue a call for more generous thinking. Generous thinking does not mean complacent thinking; on the contrary, Fitzpatrick mounts a substantial critique (you can see what I did there) of academic business as usual. For her part, Dabashi is right—painfully, obviously right—to call attention to the generational issue at stake here, as young scholars and graduate students find themselves pitted against each other (and their elders) in a profession that has effectively deprofessionalized itself over those past forty years (deprofessionalization being synony-

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mous with adjunctification). I hope Professor Dabashi—for that is now her title—will not mind if I add that there is a gender issue here as well, and that her status as a young female scholar of color is not irrelevant to the force of her argument for more modest forms of scholarly engagement. It is a paradoxically audacious argument, and I plan to keep it in mind for however many years remain to me.

Notes

1 . Anderson writes that "the reparative attitude or action is entirely dependent upon, and secondary to, the destructive primacy of the paranoid attitude or action" (64).

2 . Patrick Jagoda makes a similar point in response to Felski: "in 2017, one is as likely to come across a feminist or Marxist reading in a leading academic journal such as *PMLA* as in an online film or television review that might appear either in specialized publications such as *Jezebel* or *Jacobin* or on comparatively mainstream sources such as *Slate*, *Huffington Post*, or *BuzzFeed*" (360).

3. Fuss's response to Felski extends this argument to the point at which it becomes an admirable statement of principle: "It seems to me vital to refuse any simple opposition between critique and postcritique. Postcritique will not have an easy time keeping its hands clean (of ideology, of prescription, or of just bad temper). And classic works of critique," Fuss suggests, quoting Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, "have never been afraid of 'attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling.' Nor have they been devoid of positive affect. 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?" (354).

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