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Response to “The Philosophical Bases of Feminist Literary Criticisms”

Gerald Graff

IT IS HARD not to be sympathetic with Ellen Messer-Davidow’s arguments for a more contextual and theoretically self-reflective kind of literary and cultural studies. The “traditional” academic study of the humanities that is frequently invoked by current educational conservatives has never really worked effectively, even in the eyes of most earlier traditionalists. The current notion that in the 1960s the academic humanities underwent an abrupt falling away from a previous state of humanistic integrity and coherence rests on a fanciful rewriting of history, though one that is useful for making scapegoats of literary theorists.

Having had disagreements with some literary theorists, I have become accustomed to seeing myself praised or attacked for being anti-theory. But criticizing particular theories should not be confused with opposition to theory. In my view, it is not theory, but the systematic neglect of it, resulting in the stranding of students without a context, that has created most of the perennial and still current problems in the teaching of the humanities—certainly more than any regression from a supposed state of traditional humanism. The educational incoherence about which conservatives justifiably complain is only another term for a poverty of theoretical discussion and debate.

I also find attractive Messer-Davidow’s suggestion that the subject of feminist literary criticism is “not literature but the feminist study of ideas about sex and gender that people express in literary and critical media.” If I understand her point correctly, it is that the proper concern of feminist criticism is not with texts but contexts, not with the gender aspect of literary works considered as distinct entities, but with the construction of gender by literary and critical discourses. Such a conception would correspond accurately with the direction of the feminist critical work Messer-Davidow surveys in her essay.

Though she does not quite put it in these terms, then, Messer-Davidow seems to me to have presented a defense of the current trend toward “theory” in literary and humanistic studies. More specifically, her case is for those forms of theory that seek to historicize and contextualize the disciplines, to make them reflective about the

historically constructed nature of their own standpoints, and to shift the attention of literary criticism from texts viewed as objects to the discursive conditions of textual production, reception, and cultural dissemination.

What puzzles me, however, is how all this comes to be equated with "feminism." Why does Messer-Davidow use the label "feminist" to characterize a trend that, though it certainly includes feminism, is obviously not restricted to it? Feminism is an important branch of the new movement of theory and methodology that has challenged the orthodox definitions of the disciplines, but Messer-Davidow treats this branch as if it is or could be the whole. Messer-Davidow seems to have been pushed into this strange position by her view that "feminist criticisms" must establish "philosophical bases" of their own instead of borrowing from nonfeminist or prefeminist traditions.

The question arises whether "feminist criticisms" could claim the kind of philosophical bases Messer-Davidow furnishes for them without reinstating the exclusionary postures that she recognizes have been self-defeating for the movement. Though Messer-Davidow wants to get beyond the Us versus Them thinking that has marred some feminist discussions, she ends up falling back on such thinking herself. Messer-Davidow rejects the notion that gender traits can "rightfully characterize literary forms and language," and she argues that the French feminist project of delineating an exclusively feminine mode of writing only succeeds in reinstating sexist stereotypes in an inverted form. But though gender traits do not characterize *literature* in Messer-Davidow's scheme, they do characterize epistemologies, philosophies, and ways of looking at the world. If epistemologies were as gender-specific as Messer-Davidow makes them out to have been, it would be hard for literary forms not to follow suit. So there ends up being less distance between Messer-Davidow and the *écriture féminine* people than she wants there to be.

The contrast between traditional and feminist thought that runs throughout Messer-Davidow's essay is greatly overdrawn. Even if one granted that the unitary set of philosophical premises she describes has governed "traditional" thought and literary study, it would not be clear why the alternative to it should be called "feminist." Perhaps all feminists are by definition antitraditional in some sense, but not all opponents of tradition are feminists.

To complicate a confusing situation further, Messer-Davidow identifies "two-category systems" with the male-traditionalist pole while advancing a relentlessly two-category argument herself: "Counterpoised, then, to the traditional literary subject and methods are the feminist ones: the framing of literature as discrete, objectified entities

versus the framing of gender ideologies and culture (including literature) as a dynamic system; the use of methods that abstract and universalize details versus the use of methods that approximate a system; and a normatively imposed awareness versus self-reflexive, collectively attained ones." Abstracting from this and other passages in her essay, we could map Messer-Davidow's oppositions as follows:

MALE-TRADITIONALIST	FEMINIST
detached knower, vanishes into anonymous objectivity, concealing the knower's own stance	"rehumanized epistemology," self-reflexive about one's own methodology
"subjectifies the self and objectifies the other"	does not "embrace the self/other dichotomy"
disinterested, impartial spectators	"interactive," participatory
defines an independent, compartmentalized reality apart from self	sees reality as dynamic, relational
objectifies texts as "bounded literary entities"	sees texts as part of contextual field
sharp distinction between representation and reality	perspectivism
truth seen as universal, predictive "dominance and submission"	truth as relational, <i>bricolage</i> "reciprocal empowerment"
two-category systems	flexible categorization

What Messer-Davidow has done is take two paradigmatically opposed "world-hypotheses" (in Stephen Pepper's term) and assign honorific and derogatory gender labels to them. The more common name for what Messer-Davidow subsumes under "male-traditional" is positivism, or, more broadly, empiricism. (Since positivism is a radically antitraditional philosophy which substitutes empirical rationality for traditional custom, the word "traditional" is something of a misnomer here.) Male-traditional has simply been made synonymous with the technological or instrumental rationality that has been a target of social critics from the early Romantics to the Frankfurt School. The dispositions Messer-Davidow classifies as feminist do not correspond so clearly with a single preestablished term, but they are generally reminiscent of the world view which has been called "contextualism" (in Pepper's typology) or "historicism," and is exemplified in such tendencies as modern pragmatism, existentialism, and post-structuralism. In short, what Messer-Davidow puts forth as a uniquely feminist basis is a critique of positivist functional rationality that

had been developed by innumerable philosophers and poets long before feminism became a cultural force.

Curiously, it is where Messer-Davidow's argument is most borrowed that it is put forth as most exclusive, and thus comes to resemble the stereotypical reverse-sexism to which Messer-Davidow justifiably objects. Consigned to the male-traditional side of Messer-Davidow's dichotomy are all the executive dispositions—objective mastery, linearity, and orientation toward power—leaving the feminist side to be negatively defined by those “humane” virtues that have historically always been the consolation prize awarded to the dispossessed. Under the guise of contravening established convention, her scheme perpetuates the stereotype of the male as hard, rational, objective, performance-principle driven, and therefore qualified to run the world, and of the female as softer, less subject/object oriented, and hence better qualified to be a victim.

Perhaps Messer-Davidow will object that her aim was to transcend these established political-gender distinctions, not to reinforce them. In that case, my response is that her overly dichotomized scheme has prevented her from doing so.

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