

Fish Tales: A Conversation with “The Contemporary Sophist”

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Perhaps one reason why Stanley Fish influences so many of us in rhetoric and composition is that he has always insisted that rhetoric is *central*, that it's the “necessary center,” that “substantial realities are products of rhetorical, persuasive, political efforts.” As Fish says in the interview that follows, once you “begin with a sense of the constructed nature of human reality,” then rhetoric is “reconceived as the medium in which certainties become established.” It's no wonder, then, that Fish feels comfortable being called a social constructionist. Nor is it surprising that he finds “perfectly appropriate” Roger Kimball's label for him: “the contemporary sophist.” In fact, Fish sees an affinity between sophism and the anti-foundationalist project he has so long championed. He credits his work with Milton, his first love and still a driving passion in his intellectual life, as the genesis of his struggle against essentialist, foundationalist philosophies: as an antinomian Christian and an “absolutely severe anti-formalist,” Milton was “rather far down the anti-foundationalist road.”

Another reason for Fish's influence in rhetoric and composition is his continued interest in and support of composition. He remains conversant with the discipline's intellectual developments, and he even goes so far as to say that much of his thinking about theory and anti-foundationalism was formed in the early 1960s when he taught composition classes using Walker Gibson's *The Limits of Language*: “The essays in that book were perhaps the most powerful influence on me.” As always, Fish is outspoken about intellectual trends he disapproves of, and certain developments in composition are no exception. He is skeptical of attempts to “teach people that situational experience is in fact always primary” because he believes this “theoretical” lesson will not produce any generalizable result. On the other hand, he favors training in which composition students are placed in realistic scenarios and are asked to write to the scenario. The difference, in Fish's view, is that the first is an attempt to teach students a “theoretical” perspective in the hopes that they can then apply that perspective to particular situations—something that just cannot happen, according to Fish. The second, however, is experience or practice in specific contexts—for Fish the

only “real” kind of knowledge. He repeats, “The practice of training students to be able to adjust their verbal performances to different registers of social life requires no theoretical assumptions whatsoever.”

Clearly, this position is consistent with his larger campaign over the years “against theory.” Says Fish, “I’m a localist. . . . I believe in rules of thumb.” That is, he believes intensely in here-and-now situationality; to believe otherwise would be to subscribe to “the fetishization of the unified self and a whole lot of other things that as ‘postmodernists’ we are supposedly abandoning.” Thus, he discounts attempts to cultivate critical self-consciousness, another type of *theoretical* capacity: “Insofar as critical self-consciousness is a possible human achievement, it requires no special ability and cannot be cultivated as an independent value apart from particular situations.”

Fish also comments on other issues in composition scholarship. Retreating somewhat from his earlier criticism of Kenneth Bruffee, Fish acknowledges that collaborative learning *can* be productive. But we must not assume, he cautions, that somehow it is inherently superior to other modes of instruction; it is simply “different,” each pedagogical strategy having its own “gains and losses.” And while he refuses to embrace radical pedagogy, he sees it as “*a* wave of the future.” He himself prefers a more traditional arrangement: perceiving the classroom as “a performance occasion,” he enjoys “orchestrating the class,” noting that no one would ever mistake one of his classes for “a participatory democracy.” He quips that he would never adopt liberatory techniques for two very good reasons: “too much egocentrism, too much of a long career as a professional theatrical academic.”

In addition, Fish expresses genuine respect for feminism and the influence it has exerted on the intellectual life of society because, for Fish, it has passed the key test that indicates the “true power of a form of inquiry”: when “the assumptions encoded in the vocabulary of a form of thought become inescapable in the larger society.” He believes that the questions raised by feminism “have energized more thought and social action than any other ‘ism’ in the past twenty or thirty years.” Nevertheless, he does not support feminists “who rely in their arguments on a distinction between male and female epistemologies.” Such feminists, he feels, fall prey to the same epistemological difficulties as those who champion critical self-consciousness: a belief that “you can in some way step back from, rise above, get to the side of your beliefs and convictions so that they will have less of a hold on you.”

Fish addresses numerous other issues, such as the nature of “intentional structures” and “forceful interpretive acts,” the bankruptcy of the liberal intellectual agenda, and the obligation of academics to engage in what Noam Chomsky has called “more socially useful activities.” He is particularly concerned about how the larger societal turn toward conservatism is affecting higher education, and he predicts a period of curtailment and purges so

long as the well-financed neo-conservative political agenda continues to be “backed by huge amounts of right-wing foundation money.” The solution is for academics to speak out to audiences beyond the academy, to help explain intellectual developments to the general public in order to counter narrow conservative perspectives: “I think we *must* talk back.”

It may seem something of a paradox that Stanley Fish, who argues so vociferously *against* theory, is becoming more influential in composition studies precisely at a time when the field, or at least part of it, is busily engaged in *theory building*. Yet while the role of theory in rhetoric and composition may still be uncertain, it *is* clear that Fish is in many ways an ally. Especially as more compositionists explore social construction and the role of rhetoric in epistemology, Fish’s work becomes increasingly relevant. Responding to criticism from both the intellectual right and left, Fish insists that harkening to him will not “lead to the decay of civilization,” nor will it “lead to the canonization of the status quo.” Harkening to Fish, however, *may* well lead to productive avenues of inquiry for many of us in composition.

- Q. In *Doing What Comes Naturally*, you speak of this as the age of rhetoric and the “world of *homo rhetoricus*.” You yourself are frequently called a rhetorician *par excellence*. But do you consider yourself a writer?
- A. I do in some ways. Last night at the Milton Society of America banquet I spoke of the influence on me of C.S. Lewis. I think of C.S. Lewis and J.L. Austin as the two stylists I’ve tried to imitate in a variety of ways, and so I’m very self-conscious about the way I craft sentences. I always feel that once I get a particular sentence right I can go on to the next, and I don’t go on to the next until I think it’s right. In the sense that this is not just superficially but centrally a concern, I consider myself a writer. In other senses—for example, whether I expect people to be studying my works long after my demise—the answer is that I do *not* consider myself a writer. But the craft I think of myself as practicing is the craft of writing, and my obsession there is a very old-fashioned one, a canonical one, a traditional one—and that is clarity.
- Q. What you describe is exactly how Clifford Geertz described *his* writing process recently in *JAC*. Would you tell us more about your writing process? Do you revise frequently? Use a computer?
- A. I do not use a computer and I do not revise. I now use one of those small electronic typewriters that you can move around and take on so-called vacations. That’s about as far as I’ve advanced in the age of mechanical reproduction. Since my writing practices are as I just described, I don’t tend to revise. I go back occasionally and reposition an adverb, and I often go through my manuscripts and cross out what I know to be some of my

tics. For example, I use the phrase *of course* too much, I often double nouns and verbs for no particular reason, and I have other little favorite mannerisms that I've learned to recognize and eliminate. But very rarely do I ever restructure an essay or even a paragraph.

Q. That's surprising considering your polished style. I should have thought you spent countless hours revising.

A. Well, I write slowly. My pace is two pages a day when I'm writing well, when I have a sense of where the particular essay is or should be going. That's often when I sit for six to eight hours and am continually engaged in the process of thinking through the essay. Also, I do this often (not always, but often) while watching television. This is a very old habit. Actually, this is a talent (if it is a talent) that more people of the younger generation have today than people of my generation. But I've always been able to do it. To this day when I reread something I've written I can remember what television program I was watching when I wrote it. I remember once when I was in Madrid and went to the bullfights, I wrote a passage about Book Six of *Paradise Lost*; every time I look at it I remember that I was watching the bullfights when I wrote it.

Q. As an English department chair, what are your thoughts about the future of rhetoric and composition as a discipline? What role will it (or should it) play in the modern English department?

A. I don't know because I don't know whether there will be something called "the modern English department" in the next twenty years. I had thought, in fact, that there would be a more accelerated transformation of the traditional English department than there has yet been. My prediction ten years ago had been that by the year 2000 the English department in which we were all educated would be a thing of the past, a museum piece, represented certainly in some places but supplanted in most others by departments of literature, departments of cultural studies, departments of humanistic interrogation, or departments of literacy. That hasn't happened in the rapid way I thought it would; there are *some* places, like the Syracuse University, and earlier modes of experimentation, like the University of California at San Diego, Rensselaer Polytech, and others, but not as many as I thought there would be. If the change, when it comes, goes in the same direction that Syracuse has pioneered, then it might be just as accurate to call the department "the department of rhetoric," with a new understanding of the old scope of the subject and province of rhetoric. That's a possibility, but I'm less confident now than I was ten years ago about such predictions. For one thing, the economic difficulties we've been experiencing lately have had a great effect on the academy. Two years ago the job market looked extraordinarily promising, and certain kinds of pressures that departments had always felt seemed to be lessening. There would therefore have been an atmosphere in which experimentation and transformation might have been more possible. But now that we have had

a return of a sense of constricted economy and constricted possibilities and everybody is talking retrenchment (an awful word, but one that you hear more and more), it may be that the current departmental sense of the university structure may continue because the protection of interests that are now in place becomes a strong motive once a threat to the entire structure is perceived. And certainly many people are now perceiving a threat to the entire structure.

Q. So for progress, we need prosperity.

A. Absolutely, and especially in the humanities. Two or five or ten years ago, none of us would have predicted the current *political* assault on humanities education and the attempt to—and this is perhaps the least plausible scapegoating effort in the history of scapegoating, which is a very long history—blame all the country's ills on what is being done in a few classrooms by teachers of English and French. It is truly incredible that this story of why the moral fiber of the United States has been weakened has found such acceptance, but it has and now these consequences are ones we have to deal with in some way.

Q. During a talk at the University of South Florida, you repeated on several occasions that you are a “very traditional” teacher who uses “very traditional methods.” In *JAC*, Derrida characterized his own teaching in much the same way. Yet in English studies now, especially in rhetoric and composition, there's a movement toward “liberatory learning,” radicalizing the classroom and breaking down its traditional power structures by attempting to disperse authority among all participants. What are your thoughts about radical pedagogy in general and its altering of the teacher-student hierarchy specifically?

A. Well, my thoughts about radical pedagogy are complicated by the fact that my wife, Jane Tompkins, is a radical pedagogue and moves more and more in that direction; she writes essays and gives talks that command what I would almost call a cult following. I've seen some of these performances. *That* at least tells me that there's something out there to which she and others are appealing. I have *some* sense—which one might call an anthropological sense—of what that something is. But I'm simply too deeply embedded in and too much a product of my own education and practices to make or even to want to make that turn. I would first have to feel some dissatisfaction with my current mode of teaching or with the experiences of my classroom, and I don't feel that. For me the classroom is still what she has formally renounced: a performance occasion. And I enjoy the performances; I enjoy orchestrating the class in ways that involve students in the performances, but no one is under any illusion that this is a participatory (or any other kind) of democracy in a class of mine. However, having said this I should hasten to add that my own disinclination to turn in that direction does not lead me to label that direction as evil, wayward, irresponsible, unsound, or any of the usual adjectives that

follow. It seems to me quite clear that this is, if not *the* wave of the future, *a* wave of the future. In fact, I listened to some of the interviews for our assistant director of composition position yesterday, and every one of the interviewees I talked to identified himself or herself as a person interested in just this new kind of liberatory, new age, holistic, collaborative teaching. So I think it is the wave of the future, and I would certainly welcome those who are dedicated. But I'm sure that I would never do it myself—too much egocentrism, too much of a long career as a professional theatrical academic.

- Q. You disagree with Patricia Bizzell and those who encourage us to teach students the “discourse conventions” of their disciplines, arguing that “being told that you are in a situation will help you neither to dwell in it more perfectly nor to *write* within it more successfully.” Surely, though, you don't really advise compositionists *not* to teach students that there are numerous discourse communities, each with characteristic discourse conventions? Wouldn't we be remiss to ignore such considerations in our pedagogies?
- A. Of course, I quite agree. My objection in that essay—an objection I make in other essays in slightly different terms—is to the assumption that if we teach people that situational experience is in fact always primary and that one never reasons from a set of portable and invariant theses or propositions to specific situations (that is, one is always within a situation in relation to which some propositions seem relevant and others seem out in left field), if you just teach that as a theoretical lesson and walk away from the class and expect something to happen, the only thing that will happen is that the next time you ask that particular question, you'll get that particular answer. However, I do believe in training of a kind familiar to students of classical and medieval rhetoric—training, let's say, of the Senecan kind, in which one is placed by one's instructor in a situation: you are attempting to cross a river; there is only one ferry; you have to persuade the ferryman to do this or that, and he is disinclined to do so for a number of given reasons—what do you then do? That kind of training, transposed into a modern mode, is essential. I don't think it need be accompanied by any epistemological rap. What I was objecting to in Pat's essay—and I was to some extent being captious because in general I am an admirer of her work—was the suggestion that the theoretical perspective on situationality itself could do work if transmitted to a group of students. I think that one could teach that way, and many have—that is, they've taught situational performance and the pressures and obligations that go with being in situations—without ever having been within a thousand miles of a theoretical thought.
- Q. But isn't this inconsistent with everything you say about rhetoric in the larger sense, that to be a good rhetorician is to know situatedness?
- A. It depends on what you mean by “to know situatedness.” There's one sense

in which to know situatedness is to be on one side of a debate about the origins of knowledge, to be on the side that locates knowledge or finds the location of knowledge in the temporal structure of particular situations. That's to know situatedness in the sense that one might call either theoretical or philosophical. Now to know situatedness in the sense of being able to code switch, to operate successfully in different registers, is something else, and you don't even have to use the vocabulary that accompanies most theoretical discussions of these points. I was a teacher of composition long ago (relatively—thirty years ago) before any of us in the world of literary studies knew the word *theory* (Ah, for those days! Bliss was it in those times to be alive!), and many people taught what we would now call situational performance; and there were many routes to that teaching. So again, my point always is that the practice of training students to be able to adjust their verbal performances to different registers of social life requires no theoretical assumptions whatsoever. They are required neither of the instructor, and certainly not of the student.

- Q. Kenneth Bruffee draws heavily on you and Richard Rorty to formulate his version of collaborative learning theory. Rorty has already distanced himself from Bruffee's project, and you criticize it because it "becomes a new and fashionable version of democratic liberalism, a political vision that has at its center the goal of disinterestedly viewing contending partisan perspectives which are then either reconciled or subsumed in some higher or more general synthesis, in a larger and larger *consensus*." Given one of the major (and typical) alternatives—a teacher-dominated classroom and an information-transfer model of education—and given the fact that much of your own life's work has been devoted to illustrating how interpretive communities work, wouldn't you agree that Bruffee's collaborative learning is productive despite his own naive liberalism?
- A. Yes, it could be. I think that's an excellent point. I don't know whether it is, but there's nothing to prevent it from being productive. That is, collaborative learning is a mode of knowledge production *different* from other modes of knowledge production. In my view, differences are always real; however, differences should never be ranked on a scale of more or less real. So to refine what might be a point of contest between Bruffee and me, I would agree with him that if we move into a mode of collaborative learning, *different* things will happen, things which probably would not have been available under other modes. Also, *some* possibilities will be lost. I tend to think of pedagogical strategies as strategies each of which has its gains and losses. I also believe that there are times in the history of a culture or a discipline when it's time to switch strategies, not because a teleology pulls us in the direction of this or that one, but because the one in which we've been operating has at the moment taken us about as far as we can go and so perhaps we ought to try something else—which, as you will have recognized, has a kind of Rortian ring to it.

Q. Yes, it does. In fact, let me ask you a related question. Your essay “Change” is a detailed discussion of how interpretive communities change their beliefs and assumptions, and in making the argument that “no theory can compel change” you say that we should think of the community not as an “object” of change but as “an engine of change.” Although you don’t use Rorty’s vocabulary of “normal” and “abnormal discourse,” like Rorty you seem to be arguing against the notion that substantive disciplinary or intellectual change transpires as a result of persuasive abnormal discourse. What are your thoughts on the role of abnormal discourse as a catalyst of change?

A. I think that abnormal discourse *can* be a catalyst of change, and that’s because I think that *anything* can be a catalyst of change. This goes back to a series of points I’ve been making “against theory” for a number of years now. One of my arguments is that strong-theory proponents attribute to theory a unique capacity for producing change and often believe (and this is perhaps a parody) that if we can only get our epistemology straight, or get straight our account of the subject, then important political and material things will follow. It’s that sense of the kind of change that will follow from a new theoretical argument that I reject. However, theory—or as I sometimes say tentatively in these essays, “theory talk”—can like anything else be the catalyst of change, but it’s a contingent and historical matter; it depends on the history of the particular community, the kinds of talk or vocabularies that have prestige or cachet or are likely to trump other kinds of talk. And if in a certain community the sense of what is at stake is highly intermixed with a history of theoretical discourse, then in *that* community at *that* time a change in practices may be produced by a change in theory.

Of course, “abnormal” discourse comes in a variety of forms. For example, if one takes the term “discourse” in its larger senses, one can think that a recession is an abnormal form of discourse, that suddenly one’s ordinary ways of conceiving of one’s situation are complicated by facts that a year or two ago would have seemed to belong in another realm. Abnormal discourse can always erupt into the routine structures of an interpretive community, but there’s no way to predict in advance which ones will in fact erupt and with what effects.

Q. Well, Rorty claimed in *JAC* that abnormal discourse is “a gift of God,” while Geertz prefers a less grandiose notion he calls “nonstandard discourse.” For Rorty this happens rarely; for Geertz it occurs all the time. Obviously, these are two different conceptions of abnormal discourse. Does either one seem more useful than the other?

A. Not really. I’m not sure whether Rorty and Geertz are making this assumption, but it could be that one or both of them is assuming that abnormal discourse is itself a stable category, and it seems to me that what is or is not abnormal in relation to a discourse history will itself be

contingent. For example, in some literary communities that I know about and that I'm a participant in, it now becomes "abnormal" to begin a class by saying, "Today we will explicate Donne's 'The Good-Morrow.'" That would be, at least in some classrooms at Duke, a *dazzling* move—not, I hasten to add, in *mine*, because that's a practice I've never ceased to engage in.

- Q. Both you and Rorty have been cited as two of the principal intellectual sources of social construction; however, when I asked Rorty in an earlier interview if he considered himself a social constructionist he seemed baffled by the appellation. Despite your understandable resistance to limiting categories, and given your continual insistence that everything is rhetorical and situated, would you consider *yourself* a social constructionist?
- A. In a certain sense I would say, "Sure." If I were to be asked a series of questions relevant to a tradition of inquiry in which several accounts of the origin of knowledge or facticity were given, I would come out on the side that could reasonably be labeled "social constructionism." I myself have not made elaborate arguments for a social constructionist view—though I've used such arguments at points in my writing—but I have no problem being identified as someone who would support that view.
- Q. In the essay "Rhetoric" you examine the history of anti-rhetorical thought and the unchanging "status of rhetoric in relation to a foundational vision of truth and meaning." You state, "Whether the center of that vision is a personalized deity or an abstract geometric reason, rhetoric is the force that pulls us away from the center and into its own world of ever-shifting shapes and shimmering surfaces." You contrast this mainstream tradition with a counter tradition, represented in classical times by the sophists and today by the anti-foundationalists, whom you credit with helping to move "rhetoric from the disreputable periphery to the necessary center." First, in establishing rhetoric as a kind of master category, don't you run the risk of what Derrida has warned of in *JAC* and elsewhere: rhetoricism, "thinking that everything depends on rhetoric"?
- A. What is his point? What's the risk?
- Q. He claims that rhetoricism leads us down an essentialist path. His definition is literally that rhetoricism is "thinking that everything depends on rhetoric." It seems to me very different from what you say.
- A. I'm surprised to hear that answer from Derrida because it seems to buy back into a view of the rhetorical that would oppose it to something more substantial, whereas in my view substantial realities are products of rhetorical, persuasive, political efforts. When discussing these matters with committed foundationalists, of whom there are still huge numbers, one always is aware that for them the notion of rhetoric only makes sense as a category of inferiority in relation to something more substantial. For someone who listens with a certain set of ears, the assertion of the primacy

of rhetoric can only be heard either as an evil gesture in which “the real” is being overwhelmed, or as a gesture of despair in which either a hedonistic amorality or paralysis must follow. All of these responses to the notion of the persuasiveness of rhetoric are, of course, holding on for dear life to a paradigm in which the rhetorical only enters as the evil shadow of the real. If, on the other hand, you begin with a sense of the constructed nature of human reality (one leaves the ontological question aside if one has half a brain), then the notion of the rhetorical is no longer identified with the ephemeral, the outside, but is reconceived as the medium in which certainties become established, in which formidable traditions emerge, are solidified, and become obstacles (not insurmountable ones, but nevertheless obstacles) to the force of counter-rhetorical movements. So I would give an answer like that to what might seem to be one reading of Derrida’s warning, though I am loathe to put *him* anywhere near the camp of those whose thoughts I was describing, since he’s a man, as everyone knows, of extraordinary power of intelligence.

Q. Then do you conceive of the project of the anti-foundationalists as an extension or resurgence of sophism?

A. I think that’s one helpful way of conceiving of it, and it’s helpful in a rhetorical sense. Roger Kimball, in *The New Criterion*, wrote an essay that I think later became part of *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. I don’t know what the title of the essay is in *Tenured Radicals*, but in *The New Criterion* the essay on me was entitled “The Contemporary Sophist.” He meant that as a derogatory label, but I thought it was perfectly appropriate. To call oneself a sophist is rhetorically effective at the moment because you seem to be confessing to a crime. If you begin by saying, “I am a sophist,” and then begin unashamedly to explain why for you this is not a declaration of moral guilt, it’s a nice effective move; it catches your audience’s attention. So I think that right now there’s some mileage (although it’s mileage that’s attended by danger, too) in identifying the new emphasis on rhetoric with the older tradition of the sophists.

Q. Recently in *JAC* Clifford Geertz said that Kenneth Burke was one of two thinkers who had the most influence on him intellectually, the other being Wittgenstein. You yourself have referred to Burke’s work from time to time. What is your assessment of Burke’s contribution to our ways of thinking about language and rhetoric?

A. I don’t have a strong assessment. I’ve read Burke only sporadically and only occasionally and have never made a sustained study of his work and therefore could not say that I have been influenced by it directly. I’m sure that I’ve been influenced by it in all kinds of ways of which I am unaware because of the persons that I’ve read or talked to who have themselves been strong Burkeans. I can think of two such people that I’ve talked to and read a great deal: my old friend Richard Lanham at UCLA and Frank

Lentricchia, my colleague at Duke, both of whom are committed Burkeans. No doubt lots of things that they have said to me over the years have passed on a heritage of Burke to me, but I've never myself studied him in an intensive way.

Q. Who *has* had a major influence on you?

A. Well, that's difficult to say. Of course, Milton has been a major influence on me. That would be inescapable having spent thirty years studying his work.

Q. Milton, the anti-foundationalist?

A. Yes, in a way. Milton is an antinomian Christian. That is, he's an absolutely severe anti-formalist. Everyone has always known that about Milton. He is continually rejecting the authority of external forms and even the shape of external forms independently of the spirit or intentional orientation of the believer. In his prose tract called *The Christian Doctrine*, which was only discovered many years after his death, Milton begins the second book, which is devoted to daily life, to works in the world, by asking the obvious question, "What is a good work?" He comes up with the answer that a good work is one that is informed by the working of the Holy Spirit in you. That definition, which I've given you imperfectly, does several things. It takes away the possibility of answering the question "What is a good work?" by producing a list of good works, such as founding hospitals or helping old ladies cross the street. It also takes away the possibility of identifying from the outside whether or not the work a person is doing is good or bad, since goodness or badness would be a function of the Holy Spirit's operation, which is internal and invisible. Milton then seals the point by saying a paragraph or so later that in answer to the question "What is a good work?" some people would say the ten commandments, and therefore give a list. Milton then says, "However, I read in the Bible that *faith* is the obligation of the true Christian, not the ten commandments; therefore, if any one of the commandments is contradictory to my inner sense of what is required, then my obedience to the ten commandments becomes an act of sin." Now, if within two or three paragraphs of your discussion of ethics, which is what the second book of *The Christian Doctrine* is, you have dislodged the ten commandments as the repository of ethical obligation, you are rather far down the anti-foundationalist road. And Milton is a strong antinomian, by which I mean he refuses to flinch in the face of the extraordinary existential anxiety produced by antinomianism. So, much of my thinking about a great many things stems from my study of Milton.

Also, I've been strongly influenced as a prose stylist, as I've already mentioned, by C.S. Lewis and J.L. Austin. In fact, I've been very much influenced by J.L. Austin in my thinking about a great many things in addition to my thinking about how to write certain kinds of English sentences. I've also been influenced by Augustine. It's a curious question

to answer because many of the people whom I now regularly cite in essays are people that I read *after* most of the views that found my work were already formed. That is, I hadn't read Kuhn before 1979. I'm fond of citing Kuhn, as a great many other people are. I have found support again and again in the pages of Wittgenstein, but I cannot say that it was a study of Wittgenstein that led me to certain questions or answers.

Let me say one more thing. When I was first starting out as a teacher, I gave the same exam in every course, no matter what the subject matter. The exam was very simple: I asked the students to relate two sentences to each other and to the materials of the course. The first sentence was from J. Robert Oppenheimer: "Style is the deference that action pays to uncertainty." I took that to mean that in a world without certain foundations for action you avoid the Scylla of prideful self-assertion, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of paralysis, on the other hand, by stepping out provisionally, with a sense of limitation, with a sense of style. The other quotation, which I matched and asked the students to consider, is from the first verse of Hebrews Eleven: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." I take that to be the classically theological version of Oppenheimer's statement, and so the question of the relationship between style and faith, or between interpretation and action and certainty, has been the obsessive concern of my thinking since the first time I gave this test back in 1962 or 1963. I think there is *nothing* in my work that couldn't be generated from those two assertions and their interactions. They came from a book I used in my composition teaching from the very beginning, and I don't even know how I came to use it. The essays in that book were perhaps the most powerful influence on me. It's a book edited by Walker Gibson, and it's called *The Limits of Language*. It had this essay by Oppenheimer; essays by Whitehead, Conant, and Percy Bridgman, the Nobel Prize winning physicist; Gertrude Stein's essay on punctuation (which is fantastic); and several others that I used in my classes and that informed my early questionings and giving of answers. That book was an extraordinarily powerful influence. Of course, the quotation from Hebrews Eleven came in from my Milton work.

- Q. You just mentioned finding support in the pages of Wittgenstein. In "Accounting for the Changing Certainties of Interpretive Communities," Reed Way Dasenbrock suggests that your debt to Wittgenstein is far greater than you have yet acknowledged. Do you think Wittgenstein was a major influence on your work?
- A. No I don't, because I don't know him well enough. Reed was a student of mine. I have a bunch of students out in the world who make what I hope is a very good living writing essays that point out my limitations and flaws, and he's one of them. He no doubt knows Wittgenstein much better than I do and has learned a great deal from him; he therefore probably assumes that I *must* have been influenced by him. Now it *is* true that back in about

1977 or 1978 I was for a semester in a reading group with two or three philosophers from Johns Hopkins: David Sachs, George Wilson, and my friend the art historian, Michael Fried. We read Wittgenstein and talked about him for a period of months. Somewhat earlier—and here’s another influence that I’d forgotten to acknowledge but should have acknowledged—there’s probably a larger influence from Heidegger as transmitted to me in a series of courses I attended given by Hubert Dreyfus, a philosopher at Berkeley whose notes on *Being and Time* have just been published and have been long awaited, and whose early book *What Computers Can’t Do* was another strong and powerful influence on me. That’s a great book, both in its first and second editions. Through my friendship with Dreyfus, who is a magnificent teacher, and because of the pleasure and illumination I gained from his courses, there is probably some kind of Heidegger-Wittgensteinian circuit (there *is* a relationship, though a tortured one, between Heidegger and Wittgenstein) that has had more power in my work than I consciously acknowledge. Therefore, I guess I end up saying that in a way Reed may be right.

- Q. Last October, over dinner, you and I discussed various issues with Dinesh D’Souza, and I remember your eloquent and impassioned plea for him to believe that feminism is “the real thing,” that significant and substantial developments are occurring within and because of feminism. Exactly what of importance is happening in feminism?
- A. I couldn’t answer that question because feminism has become as a discipline and a series of disciplines so complicated, such a map with so many different city-states or nation-states, that it would be foolish of me to start pronouncing. What I was trying to convey to Dinesh (the question of whether or not one conveys *anything* to Dinesh is an interesting one) is that the questions raised by feminism, because they were questions raised not in the academy but in the larger world and that then made their way into the academy, have energized more thought and social action than any other “ism” in the past twenty or thirty years, including Marxism, which may have been in that position in an earlier period but is in our present culture no longer in that position. Now what is that position? It is the position that in my view marks the true power of a form of inquiry or thought: when the assumptions encoded in the vocabulary of a form of thought become inescapable in the larger society. For example, people who have never read a feminist tract and would be alarmed at the thought of reading one are nevertheless being influenced by feminist thinking in ways of which they are unaware or are to some extent uncomfortably aware. Such influence often exhibits itself in the form of resistance: “I’m not going to fall in with any of that feminist crap,” thereby falling in headfirst as it were. My benchmark comparison here is with Freudianism. Freudianism’s influence on our society is absolutely enormous and in the same way. People who have never read Freud, and who would not think

of reading Freud, nevertheless have a ready store of Freudian concepts about the unconscious, repression, slips of the tongue, a vague sense that there's something called the "Oedipus Complex," and so on. *That's* when a form of thought has genuine power; it becomes unavoidable in our society. Feminism, I think, has that status and will continue to have that status (especially if there are more things like the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings).

Q. You have argued that "feminists who rely in their arguments on a distinction between male and female epistemologies are wrong, but, nevertheless, it may not be wrong (in the sense of unproductive) for them to rely on it." Currently, the most influential version of feminism in composition is concerned primarily with such a distinction. Would you explain, first, why such a distinction is problematic, and also how it nonetheless might be productive?

A. Well, it's problematic in relation to my own notion of the way belief and conviction work. My stricture on that particular piece of feminist theory follows from my general position on critical self-consciousness. Critical self-consciousness, which was my main object of attack for a number of years (now I see that the true object of attack all along was liberalism in general) is the idea that you can in some way step back from, rise above, get to the side of your beliefs and convictions so that they will have less of a hold on you than they would had you not performed this distancing action, thereby enabling you to survey the field of possibilities relatively unencumbered by the beliefs and convictions whose hold has been relaxed. This seems to me to be *zany* because it simply assumes but never explains an ability to perform that distancing act, never pausing to identify that ability and to link the possession of that ability with the thesis that usually begins discussions that lead to this point—the thesis of the general historicity of all human efforts. That is, most people who come to the point of talking about critical self-consciousness or reflective equilibrium or being aware of the status of one's own discourse are also persons who believe strongly in the historical and socially constructed nature of reality; but somehow, at a certain moment in the argument, they are able to marry this belief in social constructedness with a belief in the possibility of stepping back from what has been socially constructed or stepping back from one's own self. I don't know how they manage this. I think, in fact, that they manage it by not recognizing the contradiction.

The feminist version of this, at least in the strain of feminism to which you were referring, is to identify the ability to step back and not be gripped in a strong and almost military way by one's convictions, to identify that softer relationship to one's beliefs as "feminine" while perceiving the aggressive assertion of one's beliefs as "masculine." Well, if I'm right about the impossibility in a strong sense of that stepping back, then there could not be such a distinction between ways of knowing. There could be,

however, as I do go on to say in that essay, different *styles* in relation to which one's beliefs are held and urged and introduced to others. And those different styles will have different effects, although, again, contingent on particular situations. It's not always the case that proceeding in a soft and relatively mild way to forward a point of view will produce effect *X* while a brusque and peremptory declaration of one's point of view will produce effect *Y*. It depends. I like to think of these not so much as a difference in female and male ways of knowing but a difference in modes of aggression. So, finally, it's whether or not you favor or at the moment find useful garden-variety aggressiveness, or whether you take refuge in passive aggressiveness—which can often be the most aggressive form of aggressiveness. This is the difference often at the root of these discussions, and it also gets into discussions of collaborative learning and of attempts to decenter classroom authority.

Q. You just mentioned your distaste for liberalism . . .

A. Yes, I never tire of it.

Q. I remember your saying not long ago that you see conservatives today as behaving “like a bunch of thugs” and liberals as “foolish and silly,” but given a choice between the two, you'd side with silliness over thuggishness. You've been openly contemptuous of liberals, both within the field and in society at large. What is it about the liberal intellectual agenda that you find so repugnant?

A. What distresses me about liberalism is that it is basically a brief against belief and conviction. I understand its historical origins in a weariness with theological battles that were in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and earlier (and still today in parts of the world) real battles: people bled, died, mutilated one another, and so on. As every historian has told us for many years, the passions of seventeenth-century sectarian wars, especially in England, led to a sense of weariness, to a lack of faith in the ability of persons ever to be reconciled on these points, and therefore to a desire to diminish their centrality to one's life. That's one of the sources, not the only source, of liberalism's appeal. Liberalism takes the inescapable reality of contending agendas or of points of view or, as we would now say in a shorthand way, of “difference” and tries to find an overarching procedural structure which will accommodate difference and will at least defer the pressure to decide in a final way between strongly differing points of view. Liberalism is a way not so much to avoid conflict (because liberalism is born out of the unhappy insight that conflict cannot be avoided) but to contain it, to manage it, and therefore to find some form of human association in which difference can be accommodated and persons can be allowed the practice and even cultivation of their points of view, but in which the machinery of the state will not prefer one point of view to another but will in fact produce structures that will ensure that contending points of view can coexist in the same space without coming to

a final conflict.

The difficulty with this view is that it assumes that structures of a kind that are neutral between contending agendas can in fact be fashioned. What I wish to say, and I'm certainly not the only one or by any means the first one to say it, is that *any* structure put in place is *necessarily* one that favors some agendas, usually by acts of recognition or nonrecognition, at the expense of others. That is, any organization that one sets up already is based on some implicit ordering of possible courses of action that have been identified or recognized as being within the pale. Then there are other kinds of actions that are simply not recognized and are therefore, as it were, written out of the program before the beginning. Now, this has not been a *conscious* act because for it to have been a conscious act it would have to have been produced in the very realm of reflective self-consciousness that I am always denying. Nevertheless, it is an inescapable fact about organization, from my point of view. So what liberalism does in the *guise* of devising structures that are neutral between contending agendas is to produce a structure that is far from neutral but then, by virtue of a political success, has claimed the right to think of itself as neutral. What this then means is that in the vocabulary of liberalism certain kinds of words mark the zone of suspicion—words like *conviction*, *belief*, *passion*, all of which are for the liberal mentality very close to fanaticism.

You could have noted a nice instance of this in the Gulf War frenzy of 1990 and 1991 when the charge that was made again and again about Saddam Hussein and his followers was that they *believed* something so strongly that they wouldn't "listen to reason." The February 1991 issue of *The New Republic* was devoted largely to the situation on campus but had three or four essays on the still-evolving Gulf War situation, and it became quite clear that for the editors and writers of *The New Republic* the danger represented by Saddam Hussein and the danger represented by multiculturalism or ethnic studies were exactly the same danger. This was the danger of persons passionately committed to an agenda, a set of assumptions—on the one hand a bunch of nutty Iraqis and on the other hand a bunch of nutty English teachers. In both cases, the obvious and compelling power of reason and rationality somehow had been overwhelmed by passion and conviction. In a way, liberalism, under this description, could be seen as a post-eighteenth-century variation of an old Judeo-Christian account of the nature of man in which man is composed of two parts: willful, irrational passion on the one hand and on the other hand something still residing in the breast, that spark of true intuition left us after the fall. So in many Christian homiletic traditions, human life is imagined as a battleground between the carnal self controlled by its appetites and something else, often called "conscience" or the "word of God," within. Now what happens in the Enlightenment is that the theological moorings of this view are detached, and in place of things like

the conscience or the memory of God or the image of God's love, one has Reason. But in the older tradition (and here's the big difference), that which was contending with the carnal, because it was identified with the divine, had an obvious teleological valance to it. You take away that and substitute for it Reason and then you have something as your supposed lodestar which, by the Enlightenment's definition of Reason, is independent of value. It seems to me that out of this many of the problems of liberalism, as described by a great many people, arise. So I think that liberalism is an incoherent notion born out of a correct insight that we'll never see an end to these squabbles and that therefore we must do something, and the doing something is somehow to find a way to rise above the world of conviction, belief, passion. I simply don't think that's possible.

Q. What would be an intellectual agenda that is *not* silly or thuggish?

A. I'm a localist, which is already almost a dangerous thing to say. By that I mean I don't have an intellectual agenda in any strong sense, or to put it in deliberately provocative terms: I don't have any principles. If I believe in anything, I believe in rules of thumb, in the sense that in any tradition there are certain kinds of aphorisms or axioms which encode that tradition's values, purposes, and goals; and people who are deeply embedded in that tradition are in some sense, often below the threshold of self-consciousness, committed to those values, purposes, and goals which, however, *can* in the course of the history of a tradition or profession, change. Therefore, as I say quite often (and it's true) my forward time span is generally two hours. By that I mean I tend not to think about or worry about anything more in the future than two hours hence. From a negative point of view, one might characterize my vision, therefore, as severely constrained and limited. I walk into a situation and there's something wrong sometimes, but my sense of what is wrong is very much attached to the local moment, the resources within that moment that might be available to remedy the wrong, and the possibility that my own actions might in some way contribute to that remedy. Then if someone starts commenting, "You act this way in situation *A* and three weeks ago in situation *B* I saw you act in ways that would under a general philosophical description be thought of as a contradiction," I answer, "Don't bother me. Give me a break. I am not in the business of organizing my successive actions so that they all conform to or are available to a coherent philosophical account." A lot of people assume that this is what action in the world should be: you strive from some mode of action that, if viewed from outside over a period of time, would be seen as consistent in philosophical terms. Again, I don't see that. That seems to me to go along with the fetishization of the unified self and a whole lot of other things that as "postmodernists" we are supposedly abandoning but that keep returning with a vengeance.

Q. In *Doing What Comes Naturally*, you discuss at length the role of "inten-

tion” in the production and reception of discourse. As a check on both those who “ignore” authorial intention as well as those who defer to it, you explain that “there is only one way to read or interpret, and that is the way of intention. But to read intentionally is not to be constrained relative to some other (nonexistent) way of reading.” You say this is so because any meaning is “thinkable only in the light of an intentional structure already assumed.” Would you elaborate on the nature and role of “intentional structure”?

A. Sure. I would back off for a moment and consider what the alternative picture would be. The alternative picture would be intention as something added on to a meaningful structure. In other words, those people who wish either to avoid or ignore intention believe that it is possible to speak of the meaning of something independently of a purposeful human action. I do not so believe. Another way to put this is that linguists (some linguists, not all) often talk about what words mean “in the language” as opposed to what they might mean in particular situations. I don’t believe that the category “in the language” has any content whatsoever. I do believe, of course, in dictionaries and in grammars or accounts of grammar, but I always assume that dictionaries and accounts of grammar are being written from within the assumption of a range of possible human intentions as realized in particular situations, and that the fact that this range of possible human intentions as realized in particular situations is not on the surface, is not a part of the surface accounts of words given in a dictionary or in a grammar, is simply to be explained by the deep assumption of intentionality which is so deeply assumed that some people think they can in some particular situations get along without it. I always say to my students, “Just try to imagine uttering a sentence that is meaningful and, not as an afterthought but already in the act of thinking up such a sentence, imagine some intentional situation—that is, a situation with an agent with a purpose in relation to the configurations of the world that he or she wishes in some way to alter or announce—imagine doing without that and I say that you won’t be able to.” It’s always the case that when you’re attempting to determine what something means, what you are attempting to do is to penetrate to, to identify the intention of, some purposeful agent.

Now having said that, what methodological consequences follow? The answer is “none whatsoever,” because (this is usually my favorite answer to almost any question) having now been persuaded that to construe meaning is also to identify intentional behavior, you are in no better position to go forward than you were before because all the problems remain. You must yourself decide what you mean by an “agent.” Are you talking about the “liberal individual” formulating thoughts in his or her mind? Are you talking about the agency of a “community,” of a group in *my* sense, or of a paradigm member, in Kuhn’s sense? Are you talking, in

an older intellectual tradition of the history of ideas, of the *Zeitgeist*—the spirit of an age within whose intentional structure everyone writes? Or in theological terms are you talking of a tradition in which my hand held the pen but it was the spirit of the Lord that moved me—a tradition I myself in no way denigrate? These are not decisions to which you will be helped by having decided that the construal of meaning is inseparable from the stipulation of intention. You then will also have to decide what is evidence for the intention that you finally stipulate, and that too is a question that was as wide open and as difficult before you came upon the gospel of intentionalism as it is now that you *have* come upon the gospel of intentionalism. So for shorthand purposes and in terms that most of your readers and mine would recognize, E.D. Hirsch was right when he asserted the primacy of intention back in 1960 and 1967, and he was simply wrong to think that having done so he had provided a methodological key or any kind of method whatsoever. This is also the argument, made brilliantly in my view, of Knapp and Michaels' essay "Against Theory."

- Q. In "Going Down the Anti-Formalist Road" you write, "There is no such thing as literal meaning, if by literal meaning one means a meaning that is perspicuous no matter what the context and no matter what is in the speaker's or hearer's mind, a meaning that because it is prior to interpretation can serve as a constraint on interpretation." You conclude, "Meanings that seem perspicuous and literal are rendered so by forceful interpretive acts and not by the properties of language." Exactly what is a "forceful interpretive act"? What lends it its "force"?
- A. A forceful interpretive act needn't be committed or performed by any one person; in fact, usually it is not, except in extraordinary cases. The forceful interpretive act takes place over time, and the agencies involved in it are multiple. Its effects are more easily identified than the process that leads to them. The effects are the production of a situation in which for all competent members of a community the utterance of certain words will be understood in an absolutely uniform way. That *does* happen. It is a possible historical contingent experience. When that happens you have, as far as I'm concerned, a linguistic condition that it might be perfectly appropriate to characterize as the condition of literalism. That is, at that moment you can with some justice say that these words, when uttered in this community, will mean only this one thing. The mistake is to think that it is the property of the words that produces this rather than a set of uniform interpretive assumptions that so fill the minds and consciousness of members that they will, upon receiving a certain set of words, immediately hear them in a certain way. Of course, that can always be upset by a variety of mechanisms, but it need not be upset; this condition can last a long, long, long time.

I'll tell you a story I've told many times. When my daughter was six years old, we were sitting at the dinner table one evening. We then had two

small black dachshunds. My daughter Susan was doing something with the dachshunds under the table, and it was experienced at least by me as disruptive. So I said to her, “Susan, stop playing with the dachshunds.” She held up her hands in a kind of “Look, Dad, no hands” gesture and said, “I’m not *playing* with the dachshunds.” So I said, “Susan, stop *kicking* the dachshunds.” She turned my attention to the soft motions of her feet and said, “I’m not *kicking* the dachshunds.” So I said, forgetting every lesson I had ever learned as a so-called philosopher of language, “Susan don’t do *anything* with the dachshunds!” She replied, “You mean I don’t have to feed them anymore?” At that moment I knew several things. First, I knew I was in a drama called “the philosopher and the dupe” and that she was the philosopher and I was the dupe. I also knew that this was a game that she could continue to play indefinitely because she could always recontextualize what she understood to be the context of my question in such a way as to destabilize the literalness on which I had been depending, which she too—within the situation of the dinner table, our relationship, our house—recognized in as literal a way as I did. That story, which can be unfolded endlessly, encapsulates for me this set of issues that you were asking about.

- Q. In your essay on critical self-consciousness, you take issue first with Stephen Toulmin because he “advocates self-conscious reflection on one’s own beliefs as a way to neutralize bias immediately after having asserted the unavailability of the ‘objective standpoint’ that would make such reflection a possible achievement.” Then you criticize the tradition of critical self-consciousness on the left as being “frankly political,” as “rigorously and relentlessly negative, intent always on exposing or unmasking those arrangements of power that present themselves in reason’s garb.” Finally, you pronounce the critical project “a failure.” Granting your argument that we are never free of constraints and therefore there never are truly free actions, would you not agree that the project of critical self-consciousness—whether conservative or radical—is nonetheless productive and beneficial, that we’d be poorer without it?
- A. No. I do not agree because I sense you venturing into the regulative ideal territory—that is, we can never do this but it’s a good thing to try. The bad poetic version of this is given in a line (that’s even bad for him) by Browning (in my view the worst major poet): “A man’s reach should exceed his grasp or what’s a heaven for?” That is really the philosophy or point of view behind regulative ideal arguments, whether they’re Kantian or Habermasian or any other “ian.” I have no truck with them; I just don’t see their point. It’s just a form of idealism.
- Q. Sure, it’s idealistic to think that we can be truly self-conscious in a critical way, but doesn’t the process of trying to get there turn out to be productive?
- A. It depends on what you mean by “the process of trying to get there.” You

may be surprised or even distressed to hear this, but there is about to be published another Fish/Dworkin debate. I participated last year in a conference at Virginia, Pragmatism in Law and Society, which was in some ways appropriately centered on the work of Richard Rorty. The organizer, a professor of political science, assembled a really interesting cast of characters to speak about these questions. A few weeks before the conference, I received what I thought was a strange call from the convener of the conference who said that Ronald Dworkin wished to know which of the participants in the conference were going to write about him and what they were going to say. I said *I* wasn't going to write about him, that I was writing about Posner and Rorty, which I did. What I didn't know at the time is that for some reason Dworkin had been asked to be a commentator on the proceedings. His idea of being a commentator was to find out what essays would be directed either wholly or partly at him so that he could in the G.E. Moore tradition write a reply to his critics yet again. I would have seemed to have, at least with respect to me, foiled this intention because I didn't say *anything* about Dworkin. But when Dworkin came to write his commentary on the conference papers, he ignored this small difficulty and simply picked up the threads of earlier quarrels as if I *had* written my paper on him. When I saw that, I became distressed, and so I wrote a reply to Dworkin.

Now, Dworkin was arguing against the “theory has no consequences” position and for critical self-consciousness and for critically reflective stances on one's own assumptions—for a strong relationship, in short, between critical theory and practice. He chose as his example (this was a huge mistake) Ted Williams. Ted Williams was my hero as a boy. I had carried a picture of him around in my wallet for many years until it just fell apart. What Dworkin said was, as a kind of knock-down argument in his view, “The greatest hitter of modern baseball built a theory before every pitch.” His source for this was Ted's book, *The Science of Hitting*. I got the latest edition of *The Science of Hitting*, read it carefully, annotated it, and pointed out several things. First of all, in *The Science of Hitting* Ted has an account of Ty Cobb's theory of hitting which he examines in detail—Cobb thought this and thought that in relation to velocity, to the way the foot moved, what you did with the bat, and so forth. Then after doing this, Ted absolutely demolishes it. He says, in effect, that what Cobb was advising is not possible for the human body to perform. Five pages later, Ted describes Cobb quite reasonably as the greatest hitter in baseball history. The conclusion is inescapable: the greatest hitter in baseball history had a theory of how he did it which had no relationship whatsoever, and could not have had any relationship, to what he did. Ted then goes on in another section of the book to describe what he thinks of as the mode of action of a great hitter. He goes on to hypothetical (but not really hypothetical; you have a sense that he's reconstructing moments in his own career) accounts

of what a good hitter is doing as he stands up at the plate. What a good hitter is doing, according to Ted, is thinking things like this: “Well, last time he threw me a fast ball and there were two men on base and it was the fourth inning; now it’s the eighth inning and there’s no one on base but the score is four to three; I know that he doesn’t like to rely on his fast ball so much in the later innings, and so forth and so on.” Now what can one say about thoughts like that? First, one wants to say that they’re highly self-conscious. They’re self-conscious in the sense that there is a definite reflection not only on the present moment of activity but on the relationship between the present moment of activity and past moments which are now being “self-consciously” recalled. However, my point is that this self-consciousness really is not another level of practice but in fact is, how shall I describe it, itself a component in practice and that what Ted was saying to the would-be hitter was something like, “Be attentive to all dimensions of the situation.” Now, is there a separate capacity called the “being attentive capacity” or what we might call the “critically reflective capacity”? Answer: No. Is it the case that you can develop a muscle or a pineal gland or something such that you could in any variety of different situations involving different forms of action activate that muscle? The answer is no. What you in fact do, when you do it well, is become *attentive* to the situation. The shape of your attentiveness is situation specific and dependent, so that—returning to your question—inssofar as one is ever critically reflective, one is critically reflective *within* the routines of a practice. One’s critical reflectiveness is in fact a function of, its shape is a function of, the routines of the practice. What most people want from critical reflectiveness is precisely a distance on the practice rather than what we might call a heightened degree of attention while performing in the practice. I haven’t given you the argument as elegantly as I gave it in my reply to Dworkin. I guess in the end what I would want to say is that inssofar as critical self-consciousness is a possible human achievement, it requires no special ability and cannot be cultivated as an independent value apart from particular situations: it’s simply being normally reflective. It’s not an abnormal, special—that is, *theoretical*—capacity. Inssofar as the demand is for it to be such—that is, special, abnormal—it is a demand that can never be fulfilled.

- Q. In “Profession Despise Thyself” you say that we in literary studies have made ourselves “fair game” to criticism “by subscribing to views of our enterprise in relation to which our activities can only be either superfluous or immoral (“How can you study Milton while the Third World starves?”).” Noam Chomsky has said in *JAC* that he does not find most academic questions “humanly significant,” suggesting that to be humanly useful academics should devote some of their time to social activism. Do you believe we in English studies should turn our attention to more socially useful activities?

- A. I think it depends. English studies cannot itself be made into a branch of inquiry that has direct and immediate social and political payoffs, at least not in the way the United States is now structured. In other countries and other traditions, it would have been more possible for there to be a direct connection between literary activity and social and political activity, and perhaps in some transformation of our society that has not yet occurred it could be the case that the kinds of analyses we're performing in class could have an immediate impact on the larger social and economic questions being debated in society. As for the question (which I now will understand in a way that Chomsky would probably find trivial), "Should English teachers devote their energies to social causes?" my answer is, "Why not?" It's like *pro bono* work in the legal world: you decide what it is you're interested in doing, working in political ways, in social ways, and you volunteer. In a way, what Chomsky is saying is very congenial to the academic mentality—a mentality that has a deep interest in diminishing its own value. Just why this is so is worthy of many pages of analysis. The academic generally participates in the devaluation of his or her own activities to a much greater degree than the practitioners in other fields do. It seems to me that academic activity is a human activity. As a human activity, like any other activity, it has its constraints and therefore its areas of possible effectivity as well as many areas in which it will not be effective because it will not touch them. This makes it no better or no worse on some absolute scale (that doesn't exist) than any other human activity. However, at a particular moment in history a legitimate question is, "Do we want to put our energies in this human activity that has this structure of plus and minus in terms of gains and losses and opportunities, or this one?" That's a perfectly reasonable question to ask as long as one doesn't think that one is asking a question that has a Platonic structure, in the old sense, or a surface/deep structure opposition, in the Chomskian sense. I'm temperamentally opposed to those who wish to regard the academic life as an inferior, unauthentic form of human activity. It's *another* form of human activity. It should neither be privileged—as some romantic humanists privilege it so that only those who "live the life of the mind" are really living—nor should it be denigrated as the area of the trivial in relation to which getting one's hands authentically dirty is the true counterweight. I think both of those characterizations are bankrupt.
- Q. In *Doing What Comes Naturally*, you speculate that the immense popularity of books like E.D. Hirsch's and Allan Bloom's signal that "the public fortunes of rationalist-foundationalist thought have taken a favorable turn": "One can expect administrators and legislators to propose reforms (and perhaps even purges) based on Bloom's arguments (the rhetorical force of anti-rhetoricalism is always being revived)." Do you predict massive (and counterproductive) state intervention in the educational system?

A. The current political situation (by “current” I mean at this moment) suggests that that would be an unhappily canny prediction. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander is poised to implement some of the ideas he inherited from William Bennett and which are being given continuing vitality in the administration’s thinking by Lynne Cheney, as advised by people like Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch, among others. In all of these instances, the tendency is to label as disruptive and subversive—almost in a sense that returns us to the 1950s—all forms of thought that question the availability of transcendental standards and objective lines of measurement so that these forms of thought are regarded by the persons that I have named not as possible contenders in an arena of philosophical discussion but as Trojan horses of evil, decay, destruction of community, and so on. So long as these persons hold important positions in the government, positions connected to the administration of the educational world and the dispensation of funds, I think we do face a period in which there will be (at least on the national level, and in some cases on local levels) moves to curtail and purge. We’re already seeing this in the activities of organizations like the National Association of Scholars and in the extensive network of student journalism that began with the *Dartmouth Review* but that has now extended far beyond the confines of Hanover, New Hampshire, allied with a number of prominently placed journalists in the national news media: people like Dorothy Rabinowitz and David Brooks of the *Wall Street Journal*; Jonathan Yardley at the *Post*; Charles Krauthammer and John Leo; political/popular writers like Dinesh D’Souza, Roger Kimball, and Charles Sykes; Nat Hentoff at the *Village Voice*—a whole series of people who can be relied upon to be mouthpieces for this very neo-conservative political agenda which is backed by huge amounts of right-wing foundation money provided by William Simon and others. I think that’s a real force at the moment and a force to which many in the academy are only just now waking up.

Q. You said we should be socially active. What measures can we take to prevent such reactionary trends?

A. The MLA panel I’m about to attend is entitled “Answering Back.” Though I’m not a member of the panel, I’ll be in the audience and I think we *must* talk back. I think that academics too often disdain communication with people outside the academic world and believe that attempting to speak to the public must necessarily be a diminution of our normal mode of discourse and that in order to speak to the public we must gear down and simplify our usual nuanced perspectives. In fact, I know from experience that speaking to the general public is indeed a task equally complex and difficult, but *differently* complex and difficult, as speaking to one’s peers in learned journals or at conferences. There is a set of problems of translation and rhetorical accommodation that one comes upon when attempting to talk to audiences outside the academy which is

absolutely fascinating and difficult. So unless we set our mind to this task, the capturing of the media pages and airwaves will continue as it has continued in the past year and a half so that up until four or five months ago it was difficult to find a view widely published *other* than the view being put forward by what we might call “Cheney and Company.”

- Q. Certainly you have had your share of critics and detractors from both the left and the right. Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you’d like to take issue with at this time? Anything to set straight?
- A. No, not in any sense that hasn’t been attempted before. As I say in *Doing What Comes Naturally* and elsewhere, there are basically two criticisms of my work; they come from the right and the left. The criticism from the right is that in arguing for notions like interpretive communities, the inescapability of interpretation, the infinite revisability of interpretive structures, I am undoing the fabric of civilization and opening the way to nihilist anarchy. The objection from the left is that I’m *not* doing that sufficiently. My argument to both is that on the one hand the fear that animates right-wing attacks on me is an unrealizable fear because one can never be divested of certainties and programs for action unless one believed that the mind itself could function as a calculating agent independently of the beliefs and convictions which supposedly we’re going to lose; and on the other hand (or on the same hand), therefore, a program in which our first task is to divest ourselves of all our old and hegemonically imposed convictions in order to move forward to some new and braver world is an impossible task. On the one hand, hearkening to me will not lead to the decay of civilization, and on the other hand hearkening to me will not lead to the canonization of the status quo. In fact, on *these* kinds of points—and this is what most of my critics find most difficult to understand—hearkening to me will lead to *nothing*. Hearkening to me, from my point of view, is *supposed* to lead to nothing. As I say in *Doing What Comes Naturally* in answer to the question “What is the point?” the point is that there *is* no point, no yield of a positive programmatic kind to be carried away from these analyses. Nevertheless, *that* point (that there is no point) *is* the point because it’s the promise of such a yield—either in the form of some finally successful identification of a foundational set of standards or some program by which we can move away from standards to ever-expanding liberation—it’s the unavailability of such a yield that *is* my point, and therefore it would be contradictory for me to have a point beyond *that* point. People absolutely go bonkers when they hear that, but that’s the way it is.