Rhetoric, Cultural Studies,
and the Future of Critical Theory:
A Conversation with J. Hillis Miller

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Who better to discuss the future of literary studies and of the English department itself than J. Hillis Miller, past president of the Modern Language Association, former department chair at Yale and Johns Hopkins, and distinguished literary critic for four decades? Generally, Miller seems pleased with the radical changes the English department is undergoing and is "optimistic" about the directions in which it is evolving. He applauds the increased attention to multiculturalism, cultural studies, critical theory, and rhetoric and composition; such disciplinary forces have had a positive effect on the field. He predicts the English department will continue to undergo substantial change because "within about five years forty percent of the senior faculty will retire and an entirely new set of people will be in charge, with all the power and responsibility to make changes." Because this wave of new faculty will have been trained with a sensitivity to and understanding of "these new interests," even the powerful conservative right will be unable to halt the inexorable tide of change. The challenge for this new generation, says Miller in the interview that follows, will be "to figure out how to deal with the possibilities of change in a responsible way."

Miller identifies cultural studies as the future of English studies: "That's obviously where we're going." He perceives the current preoccupation with cultural studies as an attempt among young faculty "to make what they do have some importance in our society," and he finds this concern "quite natural" in that those now ascending to power in English departments were the first to be "brought up on the mass media." Miller has "certain anxieties" about these developments, however, saying that such interdisciplinarity necessitates "responsible" academic preparation, be it the mastery of appropriate languages or other cross-disciplinary skills, and arguing that we need to establish the kinds of procedures that will "allow people doing cultural studies to do what they want to do in a responsible way."

Miller has much to say about the influence of various critical movements on English studies. Acknowledging the great debt English studies has to feminist theory, Miller points to the fact that most doctoral exams in English
now "have some feminist component," and he suggests that it's difficult today to write a critical work that does not account for gender issues, "So, I think everybody's work has been transformed." Similarly, deconstructionist theory has been "assimilated" by the academy, and the danger he once saw of "dyed-in-the-wool narrow deconstructionists" turning poststructuralist theory into "dogma" or "a rigid set of prescriptions" has "to a considerable degree been by-passed." And he argues that phenomenology has had such a major influence on poststructuralist criticism that anyone "seriously interested" in understanding deconstruction should "make a serious study" of both Heidegger and Husserl. Also, he takes issue with those who attempt to draw a strong relationship between the sophists and the deconstructionists. While "there's no doubt that certain aspects of sophistic thinking do anticipate deconstruction a bit," Miller is "more willing to say that Plato is the founder of deconstruction." Defending this unusual position, Miller says that "the easy reference to Plato as though he were the foundation of Western values" "annoys" him because Plato himself read deconstructively. In addition, Miller argues that the new cultural criticism is a kind of "continuation" of deconstruction in the sense that both share a political and social dimension, seeing a "need to intervene in the institution, the university, and make changes in it" and understanding that you make these changes "by the active work of reading or teaching something." This realization is helping Miller relinquish his earlier antagonism toward new historicism, and he says that "new historicism really owes a tremendous amount to linguistically based procedures like deconstruction, but that we can now learn a lot" from the new historicists.

It was this very need to come to terms with those critical approaches oriented toward culture and society that impelled Miller into his well-known work on the ethics of reading: "For me, the political goes by way of the ethical, and it's easier for me to understand the teaching or writing situation along an ethical model, a model that is of a one-to-one reciprocity of responsibility, than it is to think of it in terms of these larger, more abstract political questions." Miller goes on to imply that we in rhetoric and composition should explore an "ethics of writing."

Hillis Miller has always been interested in rhetoric and composition, even though in the past he hasn't always seemed to understand fully what we in the field do, and this interview reconfirms this commitment. He perceives a "natural alliance" between specialists in critical theory and composition theory. He notes the "real excitement about the methodological and theoretical aspects of the discipline" of composition and maintains, as he has repeatedly in the past, that composition should remain in the English department, not only because such an arrangement is best for the English department but because it is best politically and financially for composition itself. Besides, he argues, the hostility toward composition is fading as he and others join the many voices in support of the discipline.
Miller addresses other aspects of composition theory and pedagogy. He defends writing across the curriculum, and he argues forcefully for combining composition and ESL instruction and for integrating reading and writing pedagogy. Miller is not so receptive to radical pedagogy, however. While he understands that liberatory learning is “an important new direction in teaching,” he nonetheless feels that it carries with it a danger: “that it will free the teacher from one of the teacher’s major responsibilities: the obligation to display a way to do something.”

Regardless of his support for writing and for the discipline of rhetoric and composition, J. Hillis Miller is and always has been the supreme champion of reading. He has devoted his life’s work to careful, close, methodical reading of texts. His numerous essays and books are an impressive collection of detailed explications of major canonical texts. Even his primarily theoretical works are crafted illustrations of theory in praxis: “That’s the objection I have to teaching theory as simply a set of postulates or ideas. . . . Theory is of no use unless it’s used for something.” Perhaps it is in this very integration of theory and praxis that our kinship with Miller lies, for like Miller we in rhetoric and composition have often sought such a balance. In effect, we have supported his project just as he has always been a major supporter of ours.

Q. You’ve written about a dozen books and over one-hundred articles on a multitude of literary figures and theoretical concerns. Do you consider yourself a writer?
A. I never thought of myself as a writer, though, like a lot of teachers of literature, I had the idea when I was a teenager that I was going to write poetry or novels or something but soon found I had no aptitude for that at all. My writing is an adjunct to teaching. Though it’s something I do seriously, I think writer is too big a word for what I do.

Q. Would you describe your writing process?
A. The computer transformed my life. There was a period a long time ago when I wrote on a typewriter and then revised with pen, writing things up and down the margins and on the backs of the pages. Then there was a long period, essentially while I was at Yale, when I wrote longhand in notebooks. That allowed me to revise on the page and on the back of the page. (If you were to see those notebooks, you’d find them totally illegible.) Then I would read the manuscript onto a tape; it would be typed by a secretary; then I would revise it; and it would have to be typed again. With a computer, I shortcut all those procedures. I write a draft on the computer (I use a Macintosh) and revise it myself on the computer very extensively, both as I go along and later on when I come back to it. These revisions are “extensive” in that they’re changes in individual sentences: cutting long sentences into two or three short sentences, rearranging phrases, moving...
them around, and so on. The computer has made my revision process longer and more complicated than it was because I'm not inhibited by the necessity of having it typed over again. Of course, all those stages of revision are completely lost; there's no trace of the earlier stages.

Q. In *Theory Now and Then* you speak of "the myth of the 'Yale School.'" In what way is it a myth?

A. Like all abstractions, it doesn't correspond all that well to reality, and like most abstractions of that sort, like "existentialism" or "deconstruction," it was a product of people talking about it who needed a name for this entity. It's *not* a myth in the sense that there was a group of people at Yale who had a certain role in representing the theoretical side of the faculties there and who were friends and collaborators. By saying it's a "myth" I mean that the differences among those five people are as important as the similarities, and that's easy to see. That's all I mean. To try to say that the Yale School believes such and such is much more difficult or absurd or preposterous than even to say the New Critics all believed such and such; it's much more difficult to find uniformity.

Q. Clifford Geertz mentioned in *JAC* that Kenneth Burke was a great influence on him intellectually, and you often mention Burke, saying that he was one of the "distinguished native grandsires or at least great-uncles" of deconstruction. Was Burke an important influence on you personally? And what is your assessment of Burke's contribution?

A. Yes, Burke was an important influence on me early. When I was in graduate school—I went to Harvard, where theoretical writings were considered to be a waste of time or worse—I somehow found myself interested in theory. I read Burke, William Empson, I.A. Richards, G. Wilson Knight—and all on my own; nobody was teaching those people. I can no longer quite remember how I heard about them. Burke gave one lecture at Harvard, but I'm sure I knew about him before that. I must somehow have been steered in the direction of Burke. My dissertation, which was never published, is very Burkean; it was deeply influenced by Burke. The idea of dramatic action, the notion that a work of literature is a strategy to deal with a situation so that it makes a kind of movement and attempts to move the writer or reader from one place to another, the notion that there's a lot going on under the surface of the language that you can trace in one way or another through implications of the language that are figurative but not just figurative (that is, a tracing that goes beyond simply looking at metaphors or whatever)—all of that I learned first from Burke. I still immensely admire him, and I think he is a major theorist and critic. As I've often said, "If you have Kenneth Burke and can read him wisely, you don't need the French." For me, Burke is still the wisest and subtlest and most intelligent Freudian critic and Marxist critic of his time, certainly among the Americans. At a time when neither Freud nor Marx was being read very intelligently by American academics who claimed to
be Marxists or Freudians, Burke was able to read and make use of them in ways that were very productive. And Burke's general conviction that literature ought to matter to individual human life or to society is something I believed in then and still believe in now. So Mr. Burke is one of my heroes. I was very pleased not too many years ago (I guess he was eighty-nine at that point) to be invited to a celebration of Burke at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, and I got to meet him again, though I know him a little bit also in that we've corresponded. For me he's very important, but it's no secret that he's very important generally in many different fields. It didn't surprise me to hear that Clifford Geertz was deeply influenced by Burke because Burke's had a big influence in the social sciences.

Let me add that Burke is very difficult to appropriate or to teach. I've never really tried to teach him. For example, say someone asks, "You say Kenneth Burke is wonderful. What should I read by Burke?" It's very hard to answer that question, to say, "Here is a representative essay." That makes him different from, let's say, Derrida. You can say, "Here are representative examples of Derrida, and you can really learn something about Derrida's assumptions and procedures by reading these three or four or five essays." Burke is not so simple. You have to say, "Well, you've got to read four or five books by Burke before you begin to get the hang of it." That's curious. I'm not quite sure why that is. There are no essays by Burke that you would call landmark essays on particular authors. There are very interesting essays on Keats, let's say, or one that I immensely admire on Hawthorne's Ethan Brand, but you wouldn't call them masterpieces of literary criticism. They're very provocative, so that you say, "Well, if Burke can do this, I would like to see whether I could do it over here." That's a little different from saying, "What's William Empson about? Read Seven Types of Ambiguity or The Structure of Complex Words and you'll see." I've never quite been able to figure out why that is with Burke. His essays are all wonderfully inventive, provocative, and suggestive. And they're likely to go off in all directions, so there'd be something in there for the social scientist, something for the psychologist, something for the literary critic.

Q. In "The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time," you discuss the discipline of rhetoric and composition, saying it has accumulated "an impressive body of theoretical, empirical, and statistical work." You write, "People involved at the frontier of this exciting new branch of the broader discipline of English language and literature have the air of persons doing something justifiable and good, while teachers of literature sometimes seem to me to have a furtive and guilty air, as though they were doing something not altogether justifiable in the present context." What role do you see this field playing in the English department of the next decade and beyond?

A. I'm inclined to agree to some degree with Stanley Fish when he says in the
JAC interview that the English department as we knew it is undergoing changes and that he's surprised it's still as much like it used to be as it is. These changes take awhile, but I think they really have begun to occur. They certainly have in my department at Irvine. The examination given to Ph.D. candidates these days is radically different, not only because philosophy and theory overtly get into the examination but also because works by women and so-called minority writers are now a regular part of the curriculum, and people are examined on it for their Ph.D. So it's really a different department, and I think the role of composition in such a department will also be different. A lot of the changes in composition have gone along with those changes and will reinforce them in one way or another. That joke about the furtive air of the teachers of literature was meant to refer to the fact that whatever admiration we have for literature, you would have to say that it plays a smaller role in the intellectual and personal life of most Americans than it used to, even among graduate students, whereas the need to be able to write clearly and effectively for a given purpose is going to remain. There's going to be a need to teach composition well in any conceivable university. So, composition is more secure.

The other thing I meant was that among the people I know in composition there is a real excitement about the methodological and theoretical aspects of the discipline. There's something really going on there that's not unrelated to these changes in the makeup of English departments. So, I think composition in particular is going to be there. And something that will be even more important than ever before as we begin to enroll (at Duke and my university, for example) more and more people for whom English is a second language is ESL instruction. I see ESL as a frontier of composition. I know they're often thought of as separate operations—they certainly are at my university—but they seem to me really part of the same thing. One of the criticisms I would make of my own composition group, at least in the theoretical way it's set up, is that there's ESL over here and composition over there, each run by different people. It seems to me that ESL is a large part of the challenge in teaching English composition at a place like Irvine, where forty percent of the undergraduates are Asian American and very large numbers of them have English as a second language; the two problems don't seem to me separable. It's not that people who have English as a first language cannot be very bad writers—they often are—but that if you have a mixed university population like ours some very large part of the problems are ESL problems. I would see combining composition and ESL as a very interesting and challenging thing to do. Irvine is a wonderful laboratory for studying composition and ESL because there's such a mix of people in the undergraduate population. You hear five or six different languages just in crossing the campus. You hear Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Thai,
Cambodian—all spoken by the students. Some of my colleagues and some of the administrators tend to say, “This problem is going to go away. We don’t have to put a lot of money into ESL.” It’s not going to go away. It’s a problem all right, but a very exciting intellectual problem, not an insuperable kind of obstacle to making people able to write.

Q. You argue in many places, including “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure, II,” that the future of literary criticism “involves a return to the explicit study of rhetoric.” You define rhetoric as “the investigation of figures of speech rather than the study of the art of persuasion, though the notion of persuasion is still present.” Stanley Fish recently commented in the JAC interview you just mentioned that eventually “the English department in which we were all educated would be a thing of the past, a museum piece” and that given recent developments “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.” Do you agree, then, that the future of both literary criticism and the English department itself lies in rhetoric?

A. I wouldn’t be prepared to go quite that far because I think departments of English (or, like my department, departments of English and comparative literature) also have other obligations that could only with difficulty be put under the rubric of rhetoric—obligations such as the teaching of literary history. I’m prepared to say that that’s part of rhetoric, but it’s obviously stretching it a little bit. And there’s the obligation to teach an understanding of ethnic communities within the larger community, the teaching of women’s literature, African American literature, Native American literature. To call this rhetoric might unnecessarily limit it. Nevertheless, for me all of those things—women’s literature, African American literature, Native American literature, Hispanic and all ethnic literatures—are best taught by reading, not by generalizations about history or the study of sociology of those peoples (though that has to be done) but, in an English department or a department of English and comparative literature, by reading texts by those people. That’s where rhetoric, a rhetorical approach, is necessary. As I’ve said before, there’s a kind of link between “highfalutin” literary theory which appears to have nothing to do with composition in one direction and composition theory in the other. They often come together, and so there’s often a natural alliance in departments between the young people who do literary theory, who are Lacanians or Derrideans or whatever, and the people who are doing composition theory; and there ought to be a kind of bridge between them, an alliance or coalition. I see that as something a good department would want to enhance. It’s one of the reasons why I would be very anxious about separating composition from literature departments in universities. I know this is an issue; it’s certainly one that we discussed at length recently at Irvine. I’ve been on a task force committee to discuss the status of the
composition program at Irvine, and one of the issues that came up (it almost always does) was the question of whether composition ought to be taken away from the English department and given to some dean, made a cross-school program that was as much the responsibility of the scientists and social scientists as of the humanists. The English department, when they were presented with this possibility, and I was interested in having people consider it, reacted very powerfully and expectedly. They said, "No, no. We can't do this," partly because they do consider teaching composition their responsibility, but also, I think, because they were appalled at the thought of losing all those graduate fellowships. But I think on principled reasons, composition ought to stay in English departments, not to help composition but to help the English departments. It's good for them to have the composition people.

Q. You've made this very point in several forums, including "Composition and Decomposition" and "On Edge." You note that "independent departments or programs in composition are beginning to overshadow the adjacent departments of English literature in size, strength, and funding," and you make an urgent plea that rhetoric and composition not break away from English. Given the utter contempt that many within traditional English department power structures feel for the new discipline, as well as their reluctance to improve the material conditions under which many of us work, why should we take this plea seriously?

A. One answer would be a pragmatic one: to recognize the losses that would probably follow for composition were it separated. It might turn out to be even weaker from the point of view of having clout with the administration, getting money, and so on; it might not, but you would have to make a careful calculation about that. It's a little hard to tell. In other words, composition does gain something from having the strong budgetary support of an English department. That's certainly true at Irvine. On the other hand, we've had conversations about just how this budgetary relationship ought to work. If you had a situation in which the English department chair could move money around, taking it from composition to use, let's say, for other kinds of graduate support or even for other things, I'd be uneasy if I were in composition. We've been talking about the need to have a stated separate budget for composition within the English department to secure the support for composition.

The other thing to say is that in spite of that hostility, I think people in composition with the help of those people like me and my colleague Steve Mailloux (and various other people in my department at Irvine, to speak of that context) do patiently go on trying to explain to the people who have that hostility that they're wrong. I think much is to be gained by that. My own university is an example of how gradually that works. When I first went to Irvine, there were many more of my colleagues who were prepared to say it would be really good if we could get out of composition and who
had this contempt for the research in writing that goes on in the field. That voice has gradually faded a little bit because we had a committee that evaluated the program, and the committee was composed of respectable people who strongly argued the other—I strongly argued the other—and we now have Mailloux there as a result of that. We now, believe it or not, have funding for a tenured person in composition (which has never been the case), another appointment of somebody in the department. I think the program in composition is going to be better for that, better than it would have been had it cut itself off and had that hostility allowed itself to get institutionalized. I think that might be the case in other places. It's a battle that goes on needing to be fought.

Q. In “Composition and Decomposition,” you insist repeatedly that “reading is itself a kind of writing, or writing is a trope for the act of reading,” concluding that “we must make sure we base our rhetoric as reading on the deepest possible knowledge of what good reading would be.” How do you respond to those critics who claim that while this may be true enough in the deconstructive sense, it nonetheless is used as a rationale by those in positions of power within English to appropriate the new re-emergent discipline of rhetoric and composition, to resubsume it under English as reading?

A. That's a good question. That academic/political fact doesn't really change the fact that reading and writing are closely related. The problem is to figure out an institutional way to avoid the danger you mention, and the way, it seems to me, is easy enough to see: you persuade the rest of the English department that it's their responsibility to teach reading. You can't say that composition and reading go together over here and we're doing something else over there. It's got to be an across-the-board understanding that the teaching of reading is the major responsibility of the English department as a whole, say rhetoric generally, and it then has a kind of easy transition to teaching which is primarily oriented toward composition. So the composition people have got to depend to some degree on the people in the English department and other language departments to do some, if not most, of the teaching of reading. But the theoretical point I was making (if you want to call it theoretical) is absolutely true—that students taking beginning composition who can't write are also probably unable to read well, and you could demonstrate that; you can do all the teaching of writing you want, but if they haven't somehow learned to read it's not going to stick. So the composition people have a big stake in making sure that somebody is teaching college students how to read in its broadest sense. Insofar as that's a rhetorical skill, it goes along with Stanley's suggestion that they ought to be called departments of rhetoric.

Q. In one of your President's Columns in the 1986 MLA Newsletter, you argue that “teaching is not primarily an interpersonal transaction oriented
toward an interchange between teacher and students. The teacher is, rather, oriented primarily toward the text, primarily responsible to that, obligated in what he or she says to that. . . . Students are not so much partners in an intersubjective relation as the witnesses or overhearers of an activity of reading that is the teacher's interaction with the text at hand."

Many teachers interested in liberatory learning or radical pedagogy would sharply disagree with this characterization. They would argue that good teaching is first and always an intensely interpersonal, intersubjective transaction. (You may have read Jane Tompkins' "Pedagogy of the Distressed.") What are your thoughts about radical pedagogy?

A. I don't know very much about it in detail, but I know what it is. The statement you cited was meant to be deliberately provocative, but that doesn't mean I didn't mean it. I think the danger I see in libertarian pedagogy is that it will free the teacher from one of the teacher's major responsibilities: the obligation to display a way to do something. If you have a class in which the students all say what they want and the teacher just facilitates this, that display is missing, and that seems to me too bad. By the way, there's nothing new about it. I was told that Yale graduate teaching traditionally (before I went there, but in recent memory) consisted of the professor—the great William Wimsatt, let's say, or whoever was sitting at the end of the table—each week assigning little papers that students prepared from an assigned topic and read in class. Wimsatt didn't have to say anything, and I think that's wrong. I don't see these approaches as absolutely incompatible, but I have some sympathy with Stanley Fish's answer in JAC to a similar question: on the one hand, I see this as an important new direction in teaching; I understand the psychological and political reasons for it, and I'm sure it works. Nevertheless, I think there's still room for the other kind of teaching, not because the teacher is necessarily going to be showing the "right" way to do something, but because the teacher has a kind of responsibility to show how he or she does it. You don't teach a beginning carpenter how to build a building by just saying, "Let's all just get together and see if we can learn to drive nails." What you do is drive some nails, and then you let the person try it, and then you say, "Well, you haven't got the hang of it quite yet." On the one hand, the example of the master carpenter is a fundamental part of the instruction; on the other hand, the apprentice carpenter would never learn how to do it without doing it him or herself, and I think that combination is what's needed.

Q. I think what the liberatory learning person would say is that in the old model you have the master carpenter simply performing as an example and saying, "Follow my example." In the more libertarian model, the students have the opportunity to help shape their own pedagogy, and, yes, the instructor may very well say, "Okay, we're learning to drive nails today. Try your hand at it. See what you can do and let's work at it from there." The
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objectives are the same, but the methodologies are different. It's asking students to participate in their own education and to try something right from the beginning rather than simply to mimic someone else.

A. You might do that with the driving of nails, but you might have to intervene after a while. I worked one summer years ago as a carpenter's helper, and I was taught both ways. First, they taught me how to wheel a wheelbarrow full of cement by saying, "Wheel this over there." I dumped it over, and everybody stood around and laughed. Then they gave me a few pointers, like you've got to keep it absolutely level because a wheelbarrow full of wet cement is pretty heavy and once the weight begins to shift it will turn right over. So I think it was a combination of those two. The other wisdom (I don't have any great wisdom about this) is that in my experience in visiting classes of beginning teachers I've noticed that there's a wide variety of teaching methods that work, and it is a deeply personal thing. Also, teaching has ideological and institutional determinants; that is, you teach in a way you've learned that you ought to. I think this move toward radical pedagogy is not an insignificant one, and I might also report that I've begun a little more to experiment with something like it in my own teaching just this year.

Q. Really, what have you done?
A. Well, there's a little more time for free discussion. It isn't me asking questions, but I'm trying to have free discussion much more (in graduate courses) than had been my instinctive habit, and I must say it worked to some degree. I found it very interesting.

Q. Long ago you renounced your allegiance to phenomenological criticism and the Geneva School with its emphasis on literature as a form of consciousness. Will there be any role for phenomenological principles in our poststructuralist criticism, or will phenomenology simply be relegated to the status of a historical curiosity?
A. The debt of poststructural criticism to phenomenology, often obscure and devious, is so great that certain aspects of phenomenology are perpetuated already in poststructuralist criticism. Therefore, anybody who is seriously interested in understanding Derrida, just to take one example, sooner or later would have to make a serious study not only of Heidegger, which is obvious enough, but also of Husserl. There are certain aspects of Derrida that remain faithful to some Husserlian assumptions. I've learned this just recently from recent work of Derrida that alludes back to Husserl in a way that's quite surprising because you'd think that Husserl was so far behind him and that the early work was so critical of Husserl that there would be no way that you could speak of Derrida as in any way consequent from phenomenology. That's not true. We have to go not by way of the superficial principles of so-called phenomenological criticism, like the "primacy of the self," and so on—those have been put in question. There is a deeper, you might even say "technical," link with phenomenology that
remains very much there. It's most evident in the indebtedness to Heidegger. I was interested to see Stanley Fish asserting the influence on him of Heidegger by way of Hubert Dreyfus' teaching. If you wanted to define Derrida's "field" as a philosopher, Heidegger is the author he keeps coming back to again and again, much more than Hegel, much more than Husserl. In the little essay he wrote when he was being examined for his doctorate, he makes a survey of his intellectual history in which he says, "The question of what is literature was an initial problem for me perhaps even more important than the question of philosophy." The question of what is literature was a Husserlian question. Derrida was on record to be writing a dissertation on the ideality of the literary object, and in some sense you could say that's been his topic all along. So this question has a great deal of import and complexity.

Q. In your 1986 Presidential Address, you commented, "Another example of the triumph of theory is the development of feminist literary studies. This development has had a tremendous and irreversible effect on the way literature is studied and taught, on the curricula and canons of literary studies." Exactly what is the impact of feminist theory on the discipline?

A. There have been many changes. One of them is the larger number of women actually teaching in departments, the larger force that they have, and the fact that women's studies or feminism have liberated women to work in their own ways, to be interested in literature by women and to raise the sorts of questions that women's studies has raised. It's very difficult now for a male member of the English department to ignore this because you're working side by side with women colleagues. I spoke of the difference in the makeup of doctoral examinations lately. There is hardly a one that I participate in that doesn't have some feminist component, even when the candidate is a male, and that's a big transformation. But I think the transformation is even larger. I would agree with Stanley Fish: it goes along with transformations in our society that feminism has initiated that make the whole contextual situation in which literature is studied different. Fish is right: if you measure the value of a theory by the way it becomes effective outside the academy, that has happened very much with feminism. For example, I'm sure it will be a major factor in the 1992 presidential campaign. That doesn't necessarily mean Clinton will win, but I think pro-choice/pro-life is a fundamental issue in the campaign, and that would not have been the case twenty years ago.

Q. So you think that society at large has moved closer to gender equity?

A. Well, these are now issues that everybody is aware of, and they're very difficult issues. The conflicts within feminism itself—between essentialism, on the one hand, and a social-constructionist view of gender, and so on—are very lively. The energy of those debates and their sharpness indicates how much is at stake and how serious matters are. So you can't say, "Feminism holds such and such." It doesn't. It's a very diverse
movement. But everybody has to take those issues seriously and think about them. For example, the paper I gave recently on ideology in *Absalom, Absalom!* has a section on gender in that novel, and I found myself needing to think out two things: first, where I think Faulkner stands on gender in that novel, what the assumptions are about both male and female gender there; and, secondly, what *I* think about it, what my judgment is. It wouldn’t have been too long ago that I could have written about *Absalom, Absalom!* without having to think about gender at all, without thinking that *I had* to think about it. So, I think everybody’s work has been transformed.

Q. In your well-publicized debate with D.A. Miller in *ADE Bulletin*, you state that perhaps the enterprise of the new historicists is threatened by deconstruction. Would you elaborate on what is problematic about the new historicist project and why deconstruction should be a threat to it?

A. I don’t think it needs to be. There’s an obvious tension between the apparent focus of the new historicism on the historical context of works of literature and the sort of intrinsic reading that one associates with deconstruction. On the other hand, it’s easy to exaggerate those differences. The new historicists are or ought to be interested in the reading of literary works as much as in the context, and deconstructionists have always been interested in history and historical context. So it’s a difference of emphasis. I saw a good bit of Stephen Greenblatt about a month ago at Dartmouth’s School of Criticism and Theory; we had a conversation about this, and Greenblatt said something that really sticks in my mind: “For me the end point of all I do is the reading of works of literature, Shakespeare especially.” There’s a kind of statement of allegiance there, and I would agree with Greenblatt on that. So, I think what I meant—I would no longer put it quite the same way—is that it may be that some of the new historicists take a little too much for granted the link between history and the literary work, and that for deconstructionists that relation is extremely problematic and needs itself to be reflected on. Insofar as deconstruction would inhibit the taking for granted that once you’ve established the historical context you have an explanation of the work, then deconstruction would be threatening to the new historicists’ project. But that would certainly not include Stephen Greenblatt or most of the other really sophisticated new historicists. Nevertheless, there’s a difference, and the difference appears to me to be the genuine fascination that somebody like Greenblatt has with the historical context itself. He was teaching a seminar at the Dartmouth School of Criticism and Theory this year on witchcraft, and he is really fascinated by those “non-literary” texts that formed the background of Shakespeare and others. Nevertheless, for him the end point is not the historical documents and understanding them, but Shakespeare. Moreover, Greenblatt would agree with my predisposition, which would be to say that these so-called historical documents should be read just as
carefully and with just as much intelligence and imagination as you would read Shakespeare, and they're going to turn out to be interesting from that point of view. So I'm now changing a little from what I said earlier, not only saying that new historicism really owes a tremendous amount to linguistically based procedures like deconstruction, but that we can now learn a lot from them and that there needn't be any insuperable crevasse between the new historicists and the so-called deconstructionists.

Q. Some theorists in both rhetoric and literary criticism have argued that the sophists were the philosophical precursors to deconstructionists or that they were themselves deconstructionists. For example Howard Felperin writes that "the search for the founder or originator of the discourse of deconstruction" leads to Gorgias and the pre-Socratics: "The first work of thoroughgoing (what I shall later term 'hard-core') deconstruction to come down to us, so striking in its wholesale anticipation of the contemporary project as to demand reconsideration of the cultural and philosophical context that could have conditioned it, is the fifth-century BC treatise On Not Being, or On Nature by Gorgias, the argument of which was summarized by Sextus Empiricus: 'Firstly... nothing exists; secondly... even if anything exists, it is inapprehensible by man; thirdly... even if anything is apprehensible, yet of a surety it is inexpressible and incommunicable to one's neighbour.'" Do you agree that the sophists were deconstruction's forbears?

A. That's Felpie's own winning way of putting things. He was a colleague of mine at Yale and a friend. I don't think he's got it right. I don't think that passage characterizes deconstruction at all. He's accepting there, for no doubt his own purposes, a rather public notion about deconstruction that doesn't correspond very well to what it is. So, I would disagree with that way of talking about it. On the other hand, the relationship of the so-called deconstructionists to the sophists is a complicated one. There's no doubt that certain aspects of sophistic thinking do anticipate deconstruction a bit. It would take a bit more working out than Felperin does in that particular statement. I would put it a slightly different way: Plato not only gives us a good bit of what we know about the sophists in the dialogue called the Sophist, but Plato is a kind of lesson himself in the inextricable relationship between let's say foundationalist and deconstructionist thinking. In other words, Plato's dialogues are for me absolutely fascinating because they contain both of those directions in themselves, not just in the Sophist but in a dialogue like the Protagoras. I would be more willing to say that Plato is the founder of deconstruction than to say the sophists were, partly because we know relatively little about them; we only know about the sophists primarily what the people on the other side have allowed us to learn about them. Moreover, the pre-socratics and the sophists are not at all the same. The relationship of the pre-socratics to modern thought is very complicated. There's a brilliant young scholar at
the University of Colorado, a student of mine from Yale named Paul Gordon, who has written a book about rhetoric that goes back to the sophists (he knows Greek) and all the way up to Nietzsche; this book is in a way really about that complicated continuity.

Q. Does he support the lineage?
A. In the sense of a very twisted and circuitous lineage. It's not an unintelligent question to ask if there's a connection, but the answer is a complicated one and it's not correct to say, "Deconstructionists are like the sophists because the sophists said you can't know anything and everything is based on nothing and it's all language." That bears no relation to what deconstructionists say. That's what I meant when I said I would rather say Plato is the father of deconstruction for the kind of paradoxical sound that has; nevertheless, one can learn a great deal from Plato about how to read. It's not a matter of saying that you can read Plato deconstructively but of saying that he himself read that way. It's not an accident that one of Derrida's early fundamental essays is "La Pharmacie de Platon," which is not a deconstruction of Plato but a demonstration of the complexity in Plato's dialogue. One thing that annoys me is the easy reference to Plato as though he were the foundation of Western values. Go back and read Plato and you'll see that he's not what you've been led to expect. Just as Felperin's definition of deconstruction does not correspond to deconstruction, neither does the characterization of Plato as a set of ideas about the one and the good correspond to what's really in Plato when you sit down and try to read his dialogues.

Q. In Theory Now and Then you talk about the "negotiations between deconstructionisms and the almost universal turn in the 1980s to forms of literary study oriented toward society, toward history, toward ethical questions and questions of institutional organization, toward questions of race, class, and gender." You go on to say, "Though some of these cultural and historical critics have been unable to recognize the fact, their work would have been impossible without 'deconstructionisms.' . . . These recent forms of 'cultural critique' are more the continuation of deconstruction than its cancellation." We've already discussed the tension between deconstruction and new historicism. What accounts for the tension between deconstruction and those critical approaches oriented toward culture and society? And in what way is cultural critique a "continuation" of deconstruction?
A. I think the tension is to be expected when you have a younger generation that needs to think of itself as doing something new, something that's different from what people that came before did; nevertheless, there really are differences and they shouldn't be minimized. I think the connection lies (often these younger critics are not aware of these similarities) both in the political dimension of cultural criticism and of deconstruction (they are only apparently opposed to one another in this area), and also in
assumptions about what you'd call in a broad sense "reading" or "interpretation." First, I think that cultural criticism like deconstruction assumes that quite a lot is at stake in the choice of what you study in a course, in what you write about, and in how you do it; so there is a political dimension, a social dimension. Both approaches see the need to intervene in the institution, the university, and make changes in it, not by changing the committee system and so on, but by changing what's actually taught in the classroom. They're alike in that way, and I think they've both succeeded. That is, what is actually taught now is to a considerable degree different, but they agree in seeing the teaching and writing about literature and culture as being an active intervention that goes by way of changing the university. That's why people who want things to remain the same are right to see this as threatening. As a matter of fact, I think those people who see cultural criticism as something assimilable, who say, "Well, this is really something we can make use of," are probably underestimating the degree to which it will change the university. The ease with which departments of ethnic studies and departments of African American studies have been generated in universities suggests to me that some administrators are probably underestimating the power it will have to make things different, just as they probably see deconstruction as just another mode of literary study that won't in the long run make much difference. The other way in which they are similar and one inherits the other is an understanding that the way you make these changes is not by abstract political pronouncements but by the active work of reading or teaching something. Both deconstruction and cultural criticism would agree on that sense of how you do it, which is to say, and it sounds paradoxical, there's an anti-theoretical bias in both of them: both of them see theory itself, abstract theory, as being relatively ineffective. It's like the passage in *As I Lay Dying*: language goes off like smoke and doing goes along the ground. Reading or interpretation of works and passing them on to other people as read is where the real work is effected. Using a speech act distinction, you might distinguish then between theory as being at least apparently knowledge, that is constative, simply giving knowledge—that's what the word sounds like it ought to mean—and reading as being performative, as really making something happen. I think the two approaches are in agreement on that, but maybe part of the reason why there is some tension and hostility between them is that the directions they want to go in are not necessarily the same, or they have to be adjudicated. You can't be sure that just because somebody is a deconstructionist that he or she is going to care about African American literature, so the relationship let's say between theory in African American literature and deconstruction is an uneasy one. One knows about these debates: theory is white, elitist, Eurocentric, and if we use it we're going to be betraying cultural identity; at the same time there's a recognition that these are the best instruments around for
doing what we want to do, so we have to transform them rather than repudiate them.

One of the things that interests me is the question of the transformation of theory when it moves from one domain into another, both within the academy and also from one country to another. I've been involved with the translation of Western theory into various languages, especially Chinese. A colleague at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Fengzhen Wang, and I are co-editors of a very ambitious program of translation of Western theory into Chinese for publication in the People's Republic of China. Although Tiananmen Square slowed us down a bit, the project hasn't, to my surprise, been stopped. The idea is ultimately to have as many as fifty volumes (initially about twelve or fourteen) containing ten or twelve essays each—essays by Stanley Fish, Harold Bloom, Georges Poulet, Fred Jameson, and so on—translated into Chinese by good translators. Ask yourself what will happen in mainland China when they read Stanley Fish or Fred Jameson or me or Geoffrey Hartman or Harold Bloom. You can be certain that they will be transformed, that they will be assimilated and used for different purposes, that they will have an effect, but an effect that's unpredictable. In the same way, you can say that though deconstruction was not developed for the use it might be to people doing cultural criticism, it nevertheless will have a use there. Edward Said's work will be included in our series. Said has written a new essay (I don't know whether it's been published yet) which he gave as a lecture at Irvine last year, a follow-up on the traveling theory lecture. In this essay he talks about the influence, according to him, of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* on Fanon, the African writer. He makes a double point. On the one hand, Lukács didn't write the *History and Class Consciousness* with any idea that it would be useful to somebody in Algeria in aiding the liberation of Algeria. On the other hand, it could be used by Fanon to aid that and to aid his thinking in writing what according to Said is his most important book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. But that could only happen if Fanon *did* something to Lukács; Lukács is not any longer the same. I think that's the general way to think of theory as being useful, even in a personal way. What I made of Kenneth Burke was something that involved transforming Burke in order to write a dissertation about Charles Dickens. Burke had no idea of helping me do that, and it involved certain changes. This is illustrative of the usefulness of theory. That's the objection I have to teaching theory as simply a set of postulates or ideas that you learn and pass an examination on. Theory is of no use unless it's used for something, and using it means changing it.

Q. In discussing how you yourself have used theory, William Cain writes, “Miller over-rates the degree of innovation that his theory introduces into literary studies, and he fails to perceive the conservative impulses that keep its subversive forces in check. He believes that he is drawing on
Jacques Derrida and translating this French theorist’s ‘deconstructive’ program for an American audience, and this is certainly true up to a point. But Miller safeguards and hedges in the ‘radical’ theory that he presents, so much so that to connect him with Derrida comes to feel inaccurate and misleading.” What is your response to this oft-repeated charge?

A. What I’ve done with Derrida and other Europeans is an example of what I was talking about: it’s a transformation, just as I transformed Burke. There’s no doubt that that transformation has been an assimilation into my own American concerns and interests. It would be quite true to say that there are certain issues that are very important to Derrida that are not so important to me, even though I share with Derrida an interest in both Husserl and Heidegger. (Heidegger has always been very interesting to me.) It’s a little difficult to answer that question because it’s hard for me to get outside myself, but I’d be perfectly willing to admit that my concerns have always been somehow presupposing that literature was a good thing to study, that it could have a positive effect. Derrida, I think, would agree with me on that. A much more uneasy area for me now is to try to think of my relation to Paul de Man on this subject. I have the feeling that I differ more from de Man than from Derrida. There are many places in Derrida, particularly recently, where he, like me, wants to use deconstructive thinking as a way to imagine the possible movement toward a better form of democracy. That aspect of Derrida I find fascinating and much more positive than the normal picture of Derrida as destroying the Western tradition. And that I find much more akin to my thinking. I’ve only recently begun to realize that there are certain statements of de Man that influenced me greatly but that are very dark; he speaks of the impossibility of reading, of the impossibility of foreseeing what the performative effect will be of what you do, of wanting to shift the notion of responsibility away entirely and say, “What happens happens; it’s all a linguistic matter.” I find in myself some resistance to that. I feel a little uneasy about it because I have so much respect for the rigor of de Man’s thinking, but I draw some comfort from the fact that I think that that’s Derrida’s direction too. But I would make no claim to having carried all of Derrida over, to be a Derrida purist, nor would I in any way deny that my use of Derrida has been determined and limited by things like the American New Criticism. This is often said. Nevertheless, there are certain principles of the New Criticism that I think my own work is not consonant with—for example, the valuing of organic unity and the political conservatism of the New Critics, which I’ve always been uneasy about. I would be happy if one would say, “That’s the New Criticism all right, but for Miller it was Empson and Burke rather than Brooks and Warren.” Long before I’d read any Derrida at all, I had made that choice; that is, the Anglo-Americans that I was spontaneously attracted to were Empson and Richards and Burke and “wild man” G. Wilson Knight. By the way, I was emphasizing
the differences among the Yale Critics; that's something I would share with Harold Bloom, for whom G. Wilson Knight and Burke were also very important, though probably not Empson so much. (I found Empson terrific and I still do; he's just wonderful.)

Q. In discussing the future of deconstruction, you've said that now that poststructuralist modes of criticism have been assimilated into college and university curricula, the danger is "that deconstruction might petrify, harden into dogma, or into a rigid set of prescriptions for reading, become some kind of fixed method rather than a set of examples, very different from one another, of good reading." Some believe this is already occurring. Do you agree?

A. Since I said that, things have changed quite a lot, at least at my university, so that it would be hard to find a dyed-in-the-wool narrow deconstructionist who said, "All I do is derived directly from those people." I think the danger I saw has to a considerable degree been by-passed because now the challenges are to do things that are so different—like cultural studies and so on—that if you're going to do them at all, a good bit of nimbleness is required; that will keep deconstruction from being petrified in any particular person, and I think that's all to the good. It's been transformed and assimilated. I don't see it any longer as the danger (what did happen with Northrop Frye or New Criticism or F.R. Leavis in Australia and other places) of a whole set of people entrenched in departments who are teaching the dogma of deconstruction year after year. It certainly is not happening in my university. People read Derrida or de Man but in connection with a lot of other things, and I don't think there's as much danger of reducing it to a set of recipes as I once thought, certainly not in the students that I see.

Q. You've said that Edward Said's *Beginnings* is "a major work of creative humanistic scholarship, a splendid demonstration of the way it might be possible, after all, to go 'beyond deconstruction,' though without wholly forgetting its insights." What do you predict will be the future of criticism beyond deconstruction?

A. Well, I think it's already happening. I think we're already seeing something that's beyond deconstruction in any kind of narrow sense of a codified dogma; it's been assimilated and transformed, "translated." I happen to feel very positive about the direction cultural studies has now taken and the move in that direction. That's obviously where we're going. The first half of my *Illustration* book is an attempt to talk about cultural studies. I have various things to say about it. Why has this happened? I think one answer would be that especially the young people teaching literature now are anxious to make what they do have some importance in our society, so they've begun to think about how that might happen. Secondly, they are the first generation of people, now taking over departments of English, who were brought up on the mass media, who've been
watching television since they were small children and going to the movies and listening to popular music; it's quite natural that they should be interested in this, to try to understand it and figure out ways to talk about it. I see this not only as natural but as all to the good. I live in the city of Irvine, which is essentially an upper middle class part of Orange County, and someone did a little questionnaire in the grade schools (I think among first graders or kindergarten kids) and found that there's something like twenty-six different languages spoken at home—not just five or six but twenty-six different languages. Well, if you live in a culture like that, it's natural that you're going to take an interest in some of these other than purely Anglo-Saxon American cultures as they are active in the United States. So I see this ethnic multiculturalism as natural and good. And as the various forms of communication around the world make it much more difficult to forget that there's an Africa, an India, the Far East, and so on, it's natural that we should begin to think in terms of global history questions, such as Francophone African literature being part of French literature generally. I have certain anxieties about this subject, but I've also got some answers. We were talking about "department of rhetoric" as a name; my feeling as a "comparative literature imperialist" is that what should happen is the disappearance of the separate study of national literatures. More and more the necessity is to study literature in more than one language, even if you're an Americanist. American studies I think is in the midst of a radical transformation. Originally, American studies meant primarily New England and was primarily Perry Miller and that kind of thing. Now a new kind of American studies is emerging that involves literature of ethnic minorities. It involves literature in several languages: you have Chicano literature, and so you have to know Spanish, and then once you start doing that you have to get interested in Latin American Spanish literature, and so on. Pretty soon those who began as American studies specialists, like my colleague John Rowe, have turned into comparatists. There's a natural affinity in my department between the American literature people and the comparative literature people. We tend to have the same ideas about what appointments should be made, and there's an actual overlap. For example, a colleague of mine in comparative literature, Lilian Manzor-Coates, who does Chicano literature is also an Americanist; she's in both fields. I see this as the real direction that literary studies is taking. (And composition then will be part of that; that's why I resist calling it a department of rhetoric.) The major requirement for doing this respectfully or honestly or responsibly is knowing the languages. The small anxiety I sometimes have about the cultural studies people is that they undertake very laudable projects without having had the training either in languages or in social science methodology that is necessary for doing this work well. In other words, you still have Ph.D. programs, in spite of all the changes say at Irvine, that are relatively Eurocentric,
English-language centered. You now get people with a Ph.D. from an English department and what they want to do requires training in the protocols of social science research; doing film studies requires the knowledge of several languages, sometimes very exotic, difficult languages. Nobody has really institutionalized the procedures whereby you would know you were capable of doing one of those projects. Say you want to do a great project, a big comparative study of the novel which would involve the English novel, French novel, Arabic fiction, and African works. You can’t really do this well without knowing Arabic and one or two African languages. Even if the African novels were written in English, they were written by people whose first language was an African language. Those languages are very difficult. Anthropologists know how to deal with this problem. The last time I ran into Clifford Geertz, he told me how horribly difficult it was for him at the age of forty or forty-five to learn Arabic, but he had to learn Arabic. He was in Chicago then and went to an undergraduate class. It’s harder to learn languages when you’re older. He knew that he had to learn Arabic in order to do the research he wanted to do. I think we need to get in place procedures like those in anthropology and certain other disciplines that allow people doing cultural studies to do what they want to do in a responsible way. I notice, by the way, that Gayatri Spivak is learning Arabic, clearly for just that reason. To do what she wants to do she needs to know Arabic.

Q. This question of intellectual border crossings is a difficult one, especially when it comes to disciplinary borders. Several scholars, such as philosopher Beverly Brown writing in *The Oxford Literary Review* and, more recently, H.P. Rickman in *Philosophy and Literature*, have criticized your “reading” of Kant in *The Ethics of Reading*. In “Making a Mess of Kant,” Rickman characterizes your reading as “disastrously misunderstanding a great and frequently discussed philosopher,” and he attributes this misreading to “the mistaken assumptions behind the belief that philosophy can be treated as ‘just literature.’” Do you agree with the implication that academics should not cross disciplinary boundaries, deferring instead to scholars trained in a particular area; or do you believe that deconstruction allows us to dissolve such borders?

A. I don’t think deconstruction particularly allows for dissolving those borders, nor would I want to dissolve them absolutely. Different disciplines have their own traditions and communities (to refer back to Stanley Fish), their own ideas about the kinds of questions it’s proper to ask and the things that you can and cannot say. They have their values. There has to be a kind of community that moves forward gradually and so on, so you can’t say all these borders ought always to be crossed; there ought to be these communities that develop their own ways of reading and writing. But that doesn’t mean a non-philosopher can’t read philosophy. Surely, Rickman doesn’t mean to say that. I haven’t read the Rickman essay and
so I can only comment on your citations from him and your characterization of what he says. If he really means that because Kant has been “frequently discussed” it is impossible to do anything more than agree with what the specialists in philosophy have already said about him, he’s an idiot, and certain to make a mess of Kant. If he means that it’s inappropriate to pay attention to figures of speech, the choice of examples, narrative elements, and other minutiae of language in a philosophical text, he’s even more certain to make a mess. Presumably he’s not an idiot, so he can’t mean either of those things. Certainly, literature is one thing, philosophy another. We have different expectations of the two kinds of texts. Nevertheless, it is as true of philosophy as of literature that a given text often turns out to mean something substantially different from what the secondary authorities have led you to expect. It’s the first rule in reading either kind of text, or any other kind, to be prepared for that. It may happen or it may not happen, but it happens pretty often. Figures of speech, choice of examples, and so on are just as important in a philosophical text as in a literary one. Good reading of any text is rhetorical reading. To say that is not to treat philosophy as “just literature.” It affirms what is a primary rule in reading any sort of text, however different the protocols of philosophy are from those of literature. Philosophy is by no means “just literature,” but it is, one might say, contaminated by literature in never succeeding in being no more than a set of interlocked abstract propositions. The figures of speech and choice of narrative examples tie the philosophical text to time, place, and history. They cannot be eliminated as adventitious. Kant’s little story of the man who makes a promise intending not to keep it is an example of that. Since he uses it as a basic proof of one of his propositions about morals, the proposition cannot be detached from the example that is essential to making us understand it and persuading us to accept it.

One of the things we haven’t talked about in the area of composition is my strong commitment to the notion that good writing differs not only for different purposes but in different professional areas. The justification for having writing across the curriculum is that assumptions about what constitutes, say, a good and effective engineering report differ from those about a good essay in art history or anthropology. Good writing goes beyond getting the grammar right. Somebody in an English department really doesn’t know what the rules are about writing in the different fields; it’s hard to learn these because there are built-in conventions and so on. Nevertheless, one could say that ought not to prohibit somebody trained in one discipline from, however modestly and tentatively, dealing with texts in another discipline, and often that person will see some things that wouldn’t be seen within the conventions of the primary discipline. So the answer to your question about border crossing is yes and no. I think I was a good reader of Kant, but I’m not surprised that somebody trained within
the protocols of a certain way of reading Kant would have found what I said to be troubling.

Q. What you're saying relates to the distinction you've made on numerous occasions between “good” and “bad” readings, good and bad readers. In another interview you said, “You can't give the same validity to every act of reading. Some people are better readers than others. Some people are better readers at some times than at others. I find the distinction between good and bad reading pragmatically valid. But the distinction is also polemical in the sense that I want to be able to say that one reading is better than another.” Against what standards or criteria can we make such distinctions?

A. The easy answer (and the true answer) is to say “against the standard of the text.” This is an area where I differ from Fish. For Fish, if I understand him, the text is absolutely nothing in itself without some community of readers to give it meaning. For me the text contains so strong an inherited way of being read, which is carried from generation to generation in spite of all the changes in the community, that there are certain things that the language allows you to say and other things that you can demonstrate are very implausible. I think I would have to come back on something like that with a full awareness of the difficulties in claiming it. I see that Fish in the *JAC* interview talks about how a certain way of reading a given text can persist for a long long time. For me the time is even longer than it is for him. He sees a more radical possibility of changing the way of reading a text as one generational community substitutes for another than I do. I would say that there are certain readings which are (I'm thinking of how Stanley would respond to this) so unlikely to be useful that you could say that they are bad readings. Or to put this another way, I think that Fish's example of his daughter's ability to substitute one context after another in order to make a given sentence mean something entirely different is a very powerful argument for his position, but for me there are limits to that in a given piece of language. So I would be prepared to say that a good or bad reading is determined in complex ways by the oversaturated, overdetermined context for that particular act of reading, but that one would nevertheless want to be able to appeal back to the text for support. And I'm aware that's a somewhat contradictory answer.

Q. You've applied these same standards to deconstructive reading. You once commented that the only effective way to “attack” you or other deconstructionists would be to demonstrate that details of your readings are “false.” As an example, you cite Derrida's reading of Plato and say, “The only way to refute it, I think, is not to say that deconstruction is nonsense, or it's immoral and is going to lead to the end of the western world, but to show that's not what Plato's text means. Now one might be able to do that, but nobody ever really tried.” How do you respond to critics who argue that it's incongruous to appeal to what a text “means”
and "true" or "false" readings as a defense of deconstructive reading?
A. I don't think it's incongruous. I see the notion of truth and falsehood as absolutely indispensable; there's no way to do without them. The same is true with good and bad readings; I wouldn't be willing to throw those away. These concepts are necessary, but I would see them not as solutions so much as in themselves problems that require a lot of definition and thoughtful consideration. I think that's true in general about so-called deconstructionists, that they would want to claim a kind of authority for their readings as being better than other people's readings, far from saying this is just a reading put forward within a certain circumstance. And I think that has to be somehow recognized and thought through in the same way that I was trying to do by way of thinking of how I differ from Fish. It's not that I feel that Fish's position leads to anarchy or chaos. I think it's very principled in his case. The position he takes is very plausible; one would want to disagree with him only in a thoughtful way. Nevertheless, I find myself feeling that the text gives more as a basis for the reading than Fish is willing to allow. That goes along for me with a sense of the recalcitrance and conservatism of language, so that when you learn a language you learn not only a way to use it or read it but, even more than that, something is carried in the signs themselves that comes down from a long long long time ago (I put in one more "long" than Fish).

Q. You've commented that Harold Bloom is "perhaps the most dazzlingly creative and provocative of critics writing in English today." Similarly, Richard Rorty has said in JAC that Bloom is "strikingly original" and one of those few "people whose individual voice is so distinctive that one feels immediately attracted." What do you believe to be Bloom's important contribution?
A. I hadn't encountered Rorty's statement, but he's put his finger on a feature of Bloom's work. It's not any theoretical presuppositions in Bloom that I like; for me it's the wonderful exuberance and enthusiasm and an admiration and love for literature that's very infectious. You might even say it goes along with a—taste is an old-fashioned word—remarkable ability he has to show you, persuade you, that you ought to like something and you ought to read it, even when you disagree with what he says about a given work. I owe Bloom a lot. One of the things I owe to him is a better understanding and admiration for the Pre-Raphaelites and for people like Pater and Ruskin. Ruskin had always seemed to me a rather dull, moralistic writer until I read Bloom's preface to the Anchor edition of Ruskin's literary criticism. It's wacky Bloom, and it gives you the idea, a quite correct idea, that Ruskin himself is kind of wacky and wonderful; it makes you want to read Ruskin—and I did. The same thing goes for Meredith and Swinburne and all these out-of-fashion people that Bloom is very good on. We both share an admiration for Pater. "Ah," he says, "the divine Walter." So that's what I would emphasize about Bloom, and it's
certainly true of his teaching. He’s a remarkably good dissertation director, not because the dissertations are Bloomian in the sense of using Bloomian revisionary ratios and so on, but because he somehow has a remarkable ability to bring out the best in graduate students and to allow them to be themselves. Even though he no longer officially directs dissertations in the English department at Yale, he’s kind of a shadow director of a lot of dissertations, and they are among the best dissertations I’ve had anything to do with.

Q. You argue in *The Ethics of Reading* that “there is a necessary ethical movement in that act of reading as such, a moment neither cognitive, nor political, nor social, nor interpersonal, but properly and independently ethical.” Would you elaborate on your notion of the “ethical” and your attempt to shift the focus of literary study from political, historical, and social concerns to ethical considerations?

A. It was, you might say, a political move on my part to try to come to terms with the new interest in politics and society on the part of literary people. I’ve always been willing to admit that there’s a political dimension to teaching; you don’t enter a classroom exempt from political responsibility and exempt from actually making political and social changes, however small. Nevertheless, it always seemed to me rather distant and abstract to figure out how that could be, whereas the ethical dimension seemed a little more concrete and specific and a little easier to think about. For me, the political goes by way of the ethical, and it’s easier for me to understand the teaching or writing situation along an ethical model, a model that is of a one-to-one reciprocity of responsibility, than it is to think of it in terms of these larger, more abstract political questions. But I think that’s less true for me now than it was when I got started. For that reason I was motivated to ask myself initially the question, “Is there an ethical dimension to teaching and writing about literature?” I became interested in trying to work that out. But the ethical was for me defined as a more manageable, face-to-face, person-to-person relation, and one that seemed to me to have a little more to do with what goes on in works of literature, for example, novels. It’s not that there are not political novels or that there’s not a political dimension in all novels but that the good political novels dramatize that in terms of ethical or even family relations. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a good example; it’s a great novel about southern history, but southern history is expressed in that novel in terms of the Sutpen saga, in terms of a very personal story that involves ethical responsibility and decision; one is expressed in terms of the other. Therefore, I asked myself what seem to me not all that transparent questions: “What ethical responsibility, if any, do I have to students when I’m teaching? What’s my ethical responsibility to the text? What about the institution I teach for? The institution hired me; don’t I have certain responsibilities to it?” Those questions led me to explore literature from that point of view.
Q. Since elsewhere you have argued that writing is a form of reading, would you then argue that there is an ethics of writing?
A. Oh sure. I think that's a way of naming the notion that writing is always "in a situation." That's a very Kenneth Burkean idea that I would fully agree with. The key to teaching writing probably is to convince students that in some way they're in some kind of situation that they've got to write their way out of. That's ethical; it involves an ethical dimension. That's not its only dimension, but it has continuously an ethical dimension. I would define the ethical situation now as—this is why I was interested in the side of Kant that appears to be not what Kant is supposed to be saying—one in which in the end you have no real help from ethical norms or preexisting codes of ethics. That is, an ethical decision is not one in which you say, "The Ten Commandments say such and such, and so I'll apply this rule and I'll know how I should act." Far from that. It's a situation in which in some way you have to innovate, and therefore it's very uncomfortable being in a real ethical situation, a situation of ethical responsibility and decision. I think that the novels I study demonstrate that. It's a theme that recurs again and again, not only in radical novels like, let's say, those of Henry James where you might expect that kind of thing, but even in what appear to be more conventional novels like those of Trollope. The lesson about ethical choice that Trollope's novels teach you is that in the end all of the advice of your family and friends and the whole community is of no help; you have to decide for yourself. I think one of the reasons students have difficulty putting pen to paper and writing is that they're confronting a situation in which all the teaching you can give them doesn't really tell them what words to put down on the page; it's a kind of paradigm of the ethical situation. I don't know that saying this, however, will help at all in teaching writing.

Q. In Victorian Subjects, you discuss "the present state of humanistic studies in America," saying, "The concrete situation of teachers of the humanities is changing at the moment with unusual rapidity. More even than usual it seems as if we stand within the instant of a crisis, a dividing point, a 'parting hour.' Aspects of the change include the increasing emphasis on the teaching of writing (which may be all to the good if it does not involve the imposition of narrow notions of clarity and logic), the decline of enrollments in traditional courses in literature and other humanities, the catastrophic reduction of the number of positions open to younger humanists, and a conservative reaction in the universities." Given this "crisis," what directions do you predict the humanities, particularly English departments, will take in the next few decades?
A. A lot has changed since I wrote that essay. One thing that's changed, at least in my university, is that the enrollments are not going down anymore; they're going up. We still have the conservative reaction, and we have what appears to me to be the possibility of a major change in American higher
education. It's an interesting question, but I don't know the answer: Are the current cutbacks all across the country, both in private and public universities, simply part of a temporary recession, or are they part of a larger change that won't really go away? I don't know the answer to that, but it's conceivable that for various complicated reasons it might happen in the United States that there will be a change in the assumption about what percentage of the population ought to get a higher education. The United States is quite unique in the West in this; a much smaller percentage of the population goes to the university in Germany or England. Relatively speaking, you still have to be chosen, and not as many people are chosen. We've decided to make higher education almost universally accessible. We think of it as part of democracy, but England, France, and Germany are democratic countries too, and they don't give the same access to the university. It's a democratic access, but not as many people are chosen. Whether that will be the case in this country or not, I don't know. It would be a major change. I hope not. But there's no doubt at the moment that there is both a conservative attack on the universities and a reduction in funding that gives people an opportunity to begin eliminating things, especially in the humanities. It's already being used for that purpose, particularly with the so-called peripheral programs, the ones that are precisely the interdisciplinary ones. You say, "We've got to have an English department, but it's not so clear that we have to have women's studies," and so you just sort of phase women's studies out. Lack of money can always be used as an excuse for making political and ideological decisions, and one is made very uneasy about that; nor can one deny that this might happen. I hope it doesn't happen. Moreover, I think the transformation of the goals and purposes of teaching, particularly in the people who are going to be doing it, will occur especially within a few years when so many older people will have retired. The younger professors, trained as they have been with these new interests, will for better or worse be all there is to hire, and their ideas of what you do with an English department are going to be different enough so that the changes will happen in spite of attacks from the conservative right. I think that's why the right is worried; they see this change as something that's really going to happen and is already happening. So I'm very optimistic. I think there will be a lot of interesting transformations. I'm sorry I'm not going to be around another thirty years or so because I think it's going to be very exciting to try to figure out how to deal with the possibilities of change in a responsible way. That is, in many cases you'll have an English department where within about five years forty percent of the senior faculty will retire and an entirely new set of people will be in charge, with all the power and responsibility to make changes; it's going to be both exciting and interesting but also a challenge to do that responsibly.

Q. Over the years you've certainly had your share of intellectual disagree-
ments with other scholars, and you've even complained of "a phase of irrational polemic, sometimes by distinguished older scholars who apparently feel so threatened by these new directions of literary study that they are willing to abandon all traditions of scholarly accuracy and responsibility in order blindly to attack what they appear to have made no attempt to understand." Are there any misunderstandings of your recent work that you'd like to address now?

A. Sometimes in reviews people have cited things I have said that were intended as ironic or as the miming of somebody else's position as though they were my opinions. Sometimes this is done disingenuously. You take a passage out of context. Miller says this and you quote it. However, if you look back at the context, Miller wasn't really saying this at all; he was saying something like, "People say" or "This is a position"—and that ought to be clear. On the one hand, you point out that this sentence does appear in that essay or in that book; on the other hand, I thought I was making it clear that I was simply saying what my author said: it was Thomas Hardy who was saying this or George Eliot or somebody else, not me. So, I have two exhortations for my readers. First, try to notice whether I might conceivably not be speaking for myself but doing what any literary critic has to do: trying to speak for the author that I'm discussing or even for some imagined position which I'm then going to differ from.

The other exhortation would be to stress again the fact that for me, and I think for my colleagues like Derrida, those theoretical formulations that can be detached and are not ironical, that are straight, nevertheless have their meaning only in the context of a reading. The relationship between theory and reading is the really fundamental one, not the detachable theory that you can make into a system. The theoretical statement should always be put back in the context of the reading which—the relationship is a very complicated and uneasy one—both facilitated the theoretical formulation but at the same time isn't quite congruent with it; they're not quite symmetrical, and it's that asymmetry between reading and theory that seems to me fundamental to the nature and function of literary theory. Theory is never fully sponsored or generated or supported or confirmed by the reading; far from it: the reading always does something to the theoretical formulation and at the same time generates new theoretical formulations which have to be modified then in their turn. So a theory is never something that's fixed once and for all, and the thing that alters it is more reading. I think that's often forgotten, perhaps inevitably, in the attempt to reduce my work or somebody else's work to a handy set of theoretical formulations. That's certainly true with Derrida. People will say that Derrida talks about "the free play of language in the void" or something, and you go back and find he's really talking about Lévi-Strauss in that passage and the formulation is only made possible by the reading of the particular author. I think it's often forgotten in what you might call
pedagogical accounts of Derrida, accounts used in teaching him, that almost all his work is the reading of some text or other. That's certainly true of my own work.

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