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# EMPLOYING ENGLISH



## ENGLISH FOR EMPLOYMENT

I hope thus far to have made a few convincing proposals about the relation of contemporary literature to departments of English, and about the importance of maintaining ethical working conditions for graduate students and faculty in the humanities. I am not claiming that these two topics are intimately related; on the contrary, I admit that ethical working conditions for faculty and graduate students need not facilitate the teaching of literature any more than the teaching of literature guarantees ethical working conditions for teachers. And yet there may well be a nontrivial connection between the relative autonomy of the “aesthetic” and the relative autonomy necessary to the functioning of any critical institution in civil society, including universities. In this



chapter I want to explore this connection, but I do not want to do so in a mechanical way: I will not argue, for instance, that academic freedom depends on the idea of disinterestedness, whether that idea is tied to aesthetics (as “purposive purposelessness”) or to politics (as “neutrality”). And I will definitely not argue that the academic freedom of faculty should depend on whether we read literature “as literature” rather than as evidence about the broader culture that produces and consumes (oh, all right, *writes* and *reads*) literary works. Yet I do want to suggest that there is something necessarily indeterminate about the work we do in English, and that this indeterminacy may be not only useful to the discipline (in a social-pragmatic sense) but also constitutive of the very means by which we address our subject matter, regardless of whether that subject matter is Shakespeare or *The Simpsons*.

At the same time, I do not want to make a fetish of indeterminacy. As a writer on the independent Left, I cannot *not* be interested in the question of whether the knowledges produced in my discipline might be of any use at all in fostering a critical culture in which progressive political change is thinkable (and therefore possible). I argued in *Public Access* that the institution of academic literary criticism is constitutionally engaged in the project of enhancing what I call “advanced literacy,” that is, the training of students in the possibilities and varieties of interpretation; the question continually before us, then, is whether training in the subtleties of interpretation can serve the purposes of democratic renewal. Is advanced literacy as necessary to a democratic polity as is basic literacy, and does advanced literacy have anything to do with the cause of social justice?

The discipline of English is perhaps one of the most vexing and problematic places from which to ask this question. In his foreword to Jerry Herron’s strangely neglected but very engaging book, *Universities and the Myth of Cultural Decline*, Gerald Graff summarizes one of Herron’s central arguments by writing,

It is interesting to look at the way the official publicity of humanities departments tends to hedge on this question. English departments, for example, characteristically tell students that if

they major in English they will learn to become independent thinkers who will fearlessly question the established beliefs and institutions of their society—but that, additionally, they will acquire the skills that will qualify them for the professions. If you study English, you will learn how to see through corporate capitalism while qualifying for a job at IBM! (5)

Here Graff captures nicely what I call the “reversibility” of the knowledges we circulate in the humanities, a reversibility that not only serves us well when it comes to training students (whereby we try to come to terms with the fact that advanced literacy can be used for progressive or reactionary ends), but also seems somehow bound up with the specific material of our field, since for the past few centuries, “literature” and “the aesthetic” have been understood to exceed any determinate political use. In other words, just as a major in English can teach you to see through corporate capitalism while working for IBM, so too, somehow, can the study of Shakespeare serve revolutionary and conservative social forces at the same time.

I do not see any way of making Shakespeare—or literary study—into a unidirectional vehicle for political change; I do see numerous ways textual study can make students more critical (and self-critical) readers of the texts that compose their world. I said something to this effect at the close of *Public Access*, anticipating, at the time, that my conclusion would sound too wishy-washy and defeatist for those of my colleagues on the Left who speak as if they had the formula for ensuring that their students would never again read or act in a reactionary way. Curiously, however, the closing pages of *Public Access* were promptly fileted not by the Maoist Literary Group Standing Committee on Counterrevolutionary Criticism, but by the nimblest sushi chef in the business, Stanley Fish—who, in his most recent book, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, took issue with my work not for its modesty but for its “hubris” (125). Apparently, what makes me so inviting a target is my belief that interpretations can matter to the world, a belief that runs afoul of Fish’s claim (and we shall see whether it is anything more than a claim) that criticism and theory, like poetry, make nothing happen. “What Bérubé never seems to realize,” writes Fish, “is that although, as

he puts it, ‘the “textual” or the “discursive” is . . . a crucial site of social contestation’ (264), the people who *study* that site are not crucial players in the contest” (124).

It is hard to see how Fish can maintain this position, since among the people who “study” the site of the discursive are people with the power to write laws, allocate resources, and distribute social and material goods; indeed, Fish himself would not be able to travel so freely between the realms of law and literature if there were not interpretive protocols common to both. Interestingly, Fish proceeds from this point to credit me with recognizing my own “immodest” tendency to overreach—adding quickly, however, that my moment of self-recognition is as evanescent as a blush:

For a moment, in the closing pages of his book, Bérubé seems close to seeing this [i.e., his point about people who study the site of the discursive] as he retreats from his larger claims and imagines a relatively humble role for academic literary work. “The work of literary critics,” he acknowledges, “just is the work of interpretation, and the teaching and training of literary critics is the teaching of and training in varieties and possibilities of interpretation” (263). This is so reasonable and mild that we might think we were hearing the voice of Frank Kermode when he describes our task as creating readers “who will want to join us as people who speak with the past and know something of reading as an art to be mastered” and rejects as “immodest” the notion that by teaching such persons to read “we are improving them, ethically or civilly” (*An Appetite for Poetry*, Cambridge, Mass., 1989, 58–56). But immodesty, along with the hope and the claim, immediately returns when Bérubé lists the rewards awaiting those who enroll in his classes: “We make the promise that if you do these things, if you practice the fine arts of textual interpretation, you will ‘get more out of’ your readings, in terms of your own symbolic economy: you will learn the process of constructing analogies, drawing inferences, making finer and firmer intertextual connections among the texts you’ve read, and the texts that compose your world” (263).

I had not actually written that passage as an advertisement for my own courses, but now that I think of it, perhaps I should; certainly the passage

is too long to fit on a T-shirt or a bumper sticker, and even quoting Fish's citation of it has taken up an ungainly amount of space in this book. But as a matter of fact, I don't actually use such language in advertising my courses—not because I am modest, but because I think this language is so generic, so thoroughly part of the “common sense” of the discipline, that it would not distinguish the goals of my courses from the goals of anyone else's, with the possible exception of Stanley Fish. The “we” in the passage, after all, does not denote “me and my ideological compatriots”; it was, or at least I hoped it would be, capacious enough to include anyone who thinks that literary study might serve any purpose other than the enhancement of literary study.

What Fish takes exception to in this passage is not my claim that literary study helps you “get more out of” your reading; he seems instead to assume that I have proposed interpretive theory as a means to self-improvement. But in fact the only way in which I suggest that literary study “improves” anyone is that it makes people into more careful readers, and I drew on this language of “getting more out of” reading precisely because this is how literary study is commonly spoken of in the culture Fish and I inhabit (and, following Wittgenstein, I think ordinary language is the “site” at which people describe their lives). How often, dear reader and colleague (if colleague you be), has a nonacademic friend said to you, “I really enjoyed [book X] or [film Y], but you probably ‘got more out of it’ than I did”? Among people who know better than to think that English professors scour other people's utterances for grammatical missteps, this is the most widely understood function of interpretive study: it helps you notice textual detail, read for subplots, place texts in generic or historical contexts, or make something coherent out of seemingly random features of a text. It leads you, in a phrase, to get more out of what you read; and in recent decades, as the procedures of literary criticism have been applied increasingly to ostensibly “nonliterary” phenomena, just as theorists have denied that there is in principle any difference between the interpretation of signs inside and outside literary texts, the discipline of English has begun to make the promise, implicitly and explicitly, that if you can learn to “get more out of” your reading of Jane Austen, you will also learn to get more out of your

reading of other texts, discourses, and rhetorics, be they magazine articles, conversations, Supreme Court decisions, rhetorics of empire, or books by Stanley Fish.

And there is every reason for people to become better readers of books by Stanley Fish; Fish is an entertaining writer who manages, at the conclusion of his treatment of *Public Access*, to nail me down almost perfectly. After citing the passage in which I write of “making finer and firmer intertextual connections among the texts you’ve read, and the texts that compose your world,” Fish summarizes my position as fairly as anyone has done to date:

Up until that last clause this is a thoroughly conventional, even Keatsian-Arnoldian, celebration of the aesthetic sensibility and its pleasures; but with “and the texts that compose your world” another “promise” is made, at least implicitly: the promise that if you learn to read in the appropriate manner and teach that way of reading to others, you and they will read the text of the world differently and thereby produce a different, and better, world. (124)

The composite picture Fish draws of me here is that of a kind of Keatsian-Arnoldian Frank Kermode on steroids—a picture, I think, that would positively identify me in any police precinct in the profession. For I *do* believe that there are texts that compose our world (even if I don’t think that all the world’s a text), and I do think that if you learn a few things about how texts work, you will be able to apply your knowledge not only to manifestos but to minstrel shows, not only to *Lycidas* but to law.<sup>1</sup> In the passage of *Public Access* under scrutiny here, I did tend to emphasize the interpretation of written texts: “Historicizing a text, speaking its silences, making manifest its ‘latencies,’ reading its rhetorics, interrogating its implicit assumptions or explicit propositions about race or gender or nation or sexuality or ‘culture’—this is what we do and what we try to interest our students in doing” (263). But I never claimed that the kinds of reading performed and taught in literary study were so specific to literary study that they could not be learned elsewhere; in fact, if I *had* made such a claim, I would have wound up in the same dilemma Stanley Fish finds himself in (a dilemma I will explore shortly)—unable to account for, and thus com-

pelled to deny or minimize, the influence of interpretive theory on extraliterary phenomena. Rather, my claim was that

in theory, you can do this [i.e., learn to read the texts of the world] in nearly any field of human endeavor, from astrophysics to sports commentary, but you can probably do it best in those fields that give the widest possible latitude to understanding the formative and “productive” aspects of language, where the interpretation of discourses and rhetorics necessarily involves interpretation of the discursive and nondiscursive work that “discourses and rhetorics” have done in the world. (263)

My claim, in other words, is not that my courses will make you a better person, but that literary study, like many other fields of endeavor, will make you a better interpreter of the world—and that *unlike* many fields of endeavor, it will attempt to do so by way of understanding the discursive and nondiscursive work that discourses and rhetorics have done in the world.

Fish’s argument against my position, like *Professional Correctness* in general, depends on a network of ancillary arguments about disciplinarity, public justification, antifoundationalism, and the function of “critical thinking” (which, as we shall see, has for Fish no function at all, since he does not believe in its existence). And because I largely agree with Fish with respect to disciplinarity, public justification, and antifoundationalism, I think it is all the more urgent for me to take up his challenge and find some worthy worldly work for “critical thinking” to do.

I will not purchase my argument on the cheap: to wit, I will not argue that because Fish himself is a quasi-public figure outside the academy, or that because my own most recent book, *Life As We Know It*, spoke to numerous audiences outside my field, Fish and I between us have demolished his argument that literary critics cannot travel outside the discipline without ceasing to be literary critics. But I will say that when it comes to discussing what kind of people and what kind of knowledges *can* travel outside the discipline (perhaps to have some effect on the world, or perhaps just to go sightseeing), Fish’s argument is characteristically sinuous and elusive. If you can imagine a sushi chef applying his manual talents to three-card monte, you’ll have a fair idea of what I’m grappling with.

In his critique of *Public Access*, Fish's position on cultural studies rested largely on the proposition that the academy's objects of study, even when they include "the work that rhetorics and discourses have done in the world," have no need for the academy itself. Even if it is true that nonacademic constituencies are relevant to the disciplines of cultural studies, writes Fish, "and that it is so is, after all, the *thesis* of cultural studies, then it follows that these constituencies don't need our help; and, more importantly, there is no reason for them to help *us* even though we may be the theorists of their activity" (122–23). Fish here insists that the objects of cultural studies are in fact blithely ignorant of cultural studies: "after all, they don't do what they do because they read Stuart Hall or Judith Butler or Dick Hebdige" (123). This may be true for many "subcultural" groups, but then again, it is hardly true of them all: Judith Butler's work has in fact been influential for "queer" political activists; Stuart Hall's work has intersected time and again with the films of Isaac Julien; and Dick Hebdige's influence on British subculture should by now be as well documented as his scholarly work on British subculture (although perhaps that's more obvious to someone of my generation and tastes, someone who still listens to the Gang of Four, than to someone like Fish). And although it is insufferably immodest, I myself hope (if for nothing else in the world) eventually to have some impact on the social meaning of Down syndrome, not merely by being a parent of a child with Down syndrome but by having written about it in a way that brings the concerns of literary theory to bear on the understanding of human disability. If Fish argues that academics are structurally and substantively irrelevant to the extra-academic phenomena they study, I believe that the burden of proof is on him, and that he has not met it.

Fish's position, however, is not so simple as this. At one point in *Professional Correctness*, Fish cites an example of a work of literary criticism that tried to have a material effect on the world, and the example is G. Wilson Knight's *The Chariot of Wrath: The Message of John Milton to Democracy at War* (1942). Knight's book, it would seem, was a work not of criticism but of wartime exhortation; according to Fish, "the subtitle telegraphs Knight's intention: he is going to search Milton's poetry for

passages and images that will provide comfort and inspiration to a nation beleaguered by evil forces; he is *not* going to claim that the meanings he finds are meanings Milton intended: only that the meanings he finds are helpful to the British people in a moment of present crisis” (66). This, then, argues Fish, is not literary criticism at all “and has had no lasting effect on Milton criticism” (67). Fair enough; I would not want to counterclaim that Lauren Berlant’s reading of Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House” in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* was or could have been the crucial text that led to the passage of NAFTA in 1993. But that wasn’t the issue on the table. The question before us was not “can books about literature have an impact on national policy?” but “can the knowledges circulated and produced in English have an impact on national policy?” To that question, Fish has a slightly different answer, one that does not depend on the wartime aspirations of G. Wilson Knight:

I am not saying that specifically literary skills cannot be applied to extra-literary contexts, just that those contexts will be unaffected by the application. The rhetorical analysis of diplomatic communiqués, political statements, legal documents, presidential addresses, advertising, popular culture, television news, billboards, restaurant menus, movie marquees, and almost anything else one can think of has been an industry for a long time, but in almost no case have State Department officials or the members of the judiciary or even the publishers of Harlequin romances changed their way of doing things as a result of having read—if any of them ever did read—a brilliantly intricate deconstruction of their practices. Think about it. You are about to open a new business or introduce a bill in Congress or initiate an advertising campaign, but you pause to ask yourself, “What would the readers of *Diacritics* say?” (90–91)

This is rather witty—but did you watch the red card? Look again: it’s one thing to say “in almost no case have State Department officials . . . changed their way of doing things” because of (in this case) deconstruction. That kind of claim, like Fish’s claims about Stuart Hall et al., seems contestable on its face, thanks to the advent of critical legal studies, which is influenced by deconstruction and which does seek to change the



way law is taught and practiced (as Fish himself well knows). But it's quite another thing to suppose that deconstruction can change things only if policy makers and ad execs read its former house journal, *Diacritics*. If we are tempted here to prove Fish wrong by sending free trial copies of *Diacritics* to the State Department or the advertising offices of J. Walter Thompson, I have to think Fish will have led us down the garden path.

So far, this is the terrain according to *Professional Correctness*: books of literary criticism do not change the world, and even if we apply the techniques of literary criticism to cultural phenomena, those phenomena will turn out not to have any need of our criticism. Similarly, Fish admits that “specifically literary skills” *can* be “applied to extra-literary contexts,” but insists nonetheless, and a priori, that “those contexts *will* remain unaffected by the application” (my emphasis). It would seem, then, that the interpretation of literature is not relevant to anything but literature. From here, Fish needs to dispose of the next obvious objection: doesn't it sometimes happen that ideas take hold on influential people, and that those who profess those ideas can therefore be said to have had some impact on the world? If academic humanists themselves are not the unacknowledged legislators of the world, might they not still have some effect on actual legislators? Fish's response to this possibility bears close attention. Citing “the exception that proves the rule,” he writes,

In the years of the Reagan Administration a number of government officials had links to a network of Straussians, students and followers of the late Leo Strauss, a political philosopher who strongly attacked what he saw as the corrosive relativism of modern thought and urged a return to the normative thinking of the ancients. Strauss's views or versions of them were alive and well in the persons of William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch, and Quayle's Chief of Staff, William Kristol, and it is at least arguable that these and others close to the administration were at least able to influence its policies especially in matters of education, the arts, and civil rights. It would seem, then, that this was an instance in which intellectuals had a direct impact on the political life of the nation. (96–97)

For a moment, it looks as if Fish has made a serious misstep: having started from the premise that literary studies cannot contribute to political change, he now seems to be arguing that it is rare for intellectuals in *any* discipline to have an impact on the political life of the nation. Unfortunately, the New Right knows better, which is why it has spent the past generation creating think tanks, foundations, institutes, and sinecures for reactionary intellectuals to produce study after study alleging that welfare causes a “culture of dependency”; and to its credit, the New Right has been right to believe that intellectuals can matter to the world, insofar as they can eventually lead a nominally Democratic president to eviscerate social services for the poor, the elderly, and the disabled.<sup>2</sup>

But Fish’s claim here is of a piece with his arguments elsewhere in the book: yes, ideas do travel, he occasionally admits, but if they do it is not because of the ideas themselves. As for the Reagan-era Straussians, Fish writes,

If these men and women were influential it was not because of their teachings and writings but because they managed through non-academic connections to secure positions that gave their teachings and writings a force they would not have had if they had remained in the academy where they would have had to wait for some accidental meeting between their “great thoughts” and the powers that be. Absent such an accident or an appointment to public office only contingently related to those thoughts (government officials don’t say, “He wrote a great book on the English novel; let’s make him Secretary of Education”), there are no regular routes by which the accomplishments of academics in general and literary academics in particular can be transformed into the currency of politics. (97)

For those of you who have not played three-card monte, this must be somewhat dizzying. At first the argument had to do with the study of literature, and the *reductio* was G. Wilson Knight; then the argument was about the influence of theory, and the *reductio* was the idea of State Department officials reading *Diacritics*; here the argument is about the political influence of intellectuals, and the *reductio* is the hypothetical

appointment of Michael McKeon or D. A. Miller as secretary of education. Where Fish had claimed earlier that “in almost no case” has academic work had any influence on the polity, now he is claiming merely that “there are no regular routes” by which this influence can travel.<sup>3</sup>

And just as I cannot testify to the influence of deconstruction by pointing to elected officials’ citation of *Diacritics*, so too can I not rebut Fish by pointing to the regular, well-traveled routes by which ideas take on material force. But why should that be necessary? Why do “irregular routes” not suffice? Fish’s position would seem to entail two rather different answers: (1) such irregular routes do not exist; and (2) even if they do exist, they (a) do not affect the extraliterary contexts to which they lead, (b) depend on “accidental meetings” between thinkers and powers that be, or (c) irrevocably change the goods that travel on them. For a succinct formulation of alternative (c), we need look only at the opening paragraph of Fish’s book, which lays out this branch of the thesis. Asking whether literary criticism can address “issues of oppression, racism, terrorism, violence against women and homosexuals, cultural imperialism, and so on,” Fish insists that it can do so only if it changes so that it is no longer literary criticism:

It is not so much that literary critics have nothing to say about these issues, but that so long as they say it *as* literary critics no one but a few of their friends will be listening, and, conversely, if they say it in ways unrelated to the practices of literary criticism, and thereby manage to give it a political effectiveness, they will no longer be literary critics, although they will still be something and we may regard the something they will then be as more valuable. (1)

The circularity is inescapable: literary criticism is that which pertains only to literary critics and their friends. If literary critics acquire any political effectiveness, they can do so only “in ways unrelated to the practices of literary criticism,” and therefore will no longer be literary critics, because literary criticism is that which pertains only to literary critics and their friends. The crucial phrase, however, is “unrelated to”: how do we know when literary critics are gaining influence in ways

unrelated to (or insufficiently related to) the practices of literary criticism? I would have thought, for instance, that my treatment of “delayed” language acquisition in *Life As We Know It* owed something to my training in literary theory (particularly my reading of Wittgenstein), just as my concern with the representation of people with Down syndrome owed something to my reading in cultural criticism. But if my work has any impact on people other than my academic friends, according to Fish, it will be only to the extent that I have written about such things in ways “unrelated” to the practices of literary criticism.

I trust I have managed to make the case that there are uneasy moments and crafty maneuvers in Fish’s argument—or, at the very least, so many competing arguments within that argument that it is difficult to know what will count as a “rebuttal” of it. But I do not presume to have made the case that Fish’s argument is incoherent. Far from it; the argument is internally consistent at all points, for all of its points depend on an axiom that is central to Fish’s work: there is no such thing as “critical thinking.” The reason the skills we teach in literary criticism cannot have any impact on the world at large is only tangentially related to the question of whether literary criticism can be unlitrary or whether it can travel “regular routes” to state power; the real reason that our skills have no purchase on the world is that there is no possibility of enhancing anyone’s capacity for reflection and self-critical analysis.

The idea that the study of textuality might perhaps lead people to envision the world differently, then, is in principle deluded, because the protocols of interpretation (and what Fish calls “reflection in general”) do not admit such effects. Hence Fish’s especial skepticism with respect to cultural studies, since cultural studies promises precisely to bring skeptical self-scrutiny to bear on academic protocols of interpretation:

What is true of cultural studies is true of reflection in general, that mode of mental activity of which cultural studies is supposedly the institutional form. It is not that reflection is impossible—most of us engage in it every day; it is just that rather than floating above the practices that are its object and providing a

vantage-point from which those practices can be assessed and reformed, reflection is either (a) an activity *within* a practice and therefore finally not distanced from that practice's normative assumptions or (b) an activity grounded in its own normative assumptions and therefore one whose operations will reveal more about itself than about any practice viewed through its lens. (106)

There's an excluded middle in this formulation, and it's buried so deep that only critical thinking can exhume it: either we're "floating above" our practices (an utter impossibility), or we're resolutely embedded in them, "finally not distanced from that practice's normative assumptions." Like the claim that literary criticism can have extraliterary effects only if it is "unrelated to" literary criticism, Fish's characterization of critical thinking depends on a deliberately fuzzy idea of "distance." Whereas earlier, the question was, "how unrelated do you have to be to be unrelated to literary criticism?" now the question is, "how undistanced do you have to be to be undistanced from your normative practices?"

There are two ways of getting at this problem. The first is to suggest that there are some normative practices, literary criticism and interpretive theory among them, that *entail* scrutiny of one's normative practices. The second is to suggest, less recursively, that the excluded middle is the realm in which we humans actually live whenever we're unsure about what we feel or think. For Fish, you're either in a practice or out of it; and since you cannot scrutinize your practice from outside, you must be doing it from inside, Q.E.D. But perhaps there's a good reason James Joyce, in trying to revive the etymological sense of doubleness in the word "doubt," coined the term "of twosome twiminds" in *Finnegans Wake*. If we are ever to change our minds (or our practices) in any substantial sense whatsoever, there must be some mechanism by which we examine our practices—perhaps even a mechanism by which we try to take the parallax view of seeing the world through two sets of practices, in doubt as to which is the more compelling, of twosome twiminds about what to think or to do.<sup>4</sup> And perhaps, just perhaps, training in the varieties and possibilities of interpretation can enhance one's ability to think of the world through twosome twiminds, to inhabit or at least

entertain the possibility of inhabiting more than one practice at a time—and perhaps, if this training travels some irregular routes out of the academy, it might make its way to someplace where it might do some good. Or evil.

This much seems hardly debatable to me (immersed uncritically, as I am, in my Keatsian-Arnoldian practices), but before I move on I have to point out that there's something strangely metaphysical about Fish's polemic against critical thinking, something deeply antipragmatist. I call it "the metaphysics of stasis," and I take it as a canny—but finally unsatisfying—theoretical attempt to distinguish between mere appearance (where it looks as if critical thinking is possible) and bedrock reality (where we can see once and for all that all thinking is an activity *within* and not detached from a practice). It is because Fish is so uncritically embedded in this metaphysics of stasis (indeed, it would seem impossible to be self-critical of it and yet practice it, so Fish's account of thinking, again, has the virtue of being internally consistent) that, as we shall see in chapter 8, his description of "change" is so unconvincing; it is also, incidentally, why his career is distinguished by (among other more notable things) the repeated insistence that he has not substantially changed his mind—as when he directs the reader of *Professional Correctness* not to read the book "as evidence that I have changed my mind or my politics" (x).

I do not want to ask metaphysical questions of Fish's metaphysics of stasis in return; I do not want to reply to his account of thinking, "is it true?" Instead, I want to ask the appropriately pragmatic questions, "does it work?" and "is it useful for us to believe?" And to those questions, there is a wealth of evidence that the proper pragmatist answer is no. The answer is no, I propose, for two reasons—retrospective and prospective. The retrospective reason appeals merely to the historical record, to the fact that there is a vast weight of human testimony to the proposition that transformative reflection *is* possible, that normative assumptions can be changed even by internal normative procedures of scrutiny, that interpretation can modify its object. The prospective reason suggests that if we have any investment whatsoever in the possibility of progressive political change, it would probably be best for us to believe (and therefore

“true” in a pragmatist sense) that human practices can be altered by critical reflection. In this case, then, the mere appearance that people change their minds, that ideas spark revolutions, or that reflection can have material force is sufficient in itself, even if it is “really” only an appearance, to allow us to imagine that there is some potential purpose to the interpretive work we do in the humanities.

What makes my position so reasonable, sane, and ultimately *right*, I think (“right” in a pragmatist sense, of course), is that, unlike many of the academic leftists Fish brilliantly skewers in *Professional Correctness*, I do not maintain that critical work in the humanities *necessarily* enhances the material or intellectual conditions for a more just society. But where Fish catches any number of his colleagues saying preposterous things about how their readings of Shakespeare will be the end of global capitalism, Fish himself produces a mirror image of their political determinism: where they insist that the application of literary-critical skills to extraliterary contexts *will* have political force, Fish insists simply that (to quote the passage again) “those contexts *will* remain unaffected by the application.” By contrast, I contend merely that our skills *may* have political force, and that we should proceed (if “we” are progressive-left educators) as if they will. Critical thinking, like the domain of the aesthetic, is “reversible,” in Jerry Herron’s terms; it can be deployed by William Kristol in the service of a deeper, more searching reading of von Hayek just as it can be deployed by Richard Rorty in a profound reading of John Dewey. As John Guillory writes, with a keen eye on the ambiguousness of the institution (and practice) he inhabits,

If progressive teachers have a considerable stake in disseminating the kind of knowledge (the study of cultural works as a practice of reading and writing) that is the vehicle for critical thinking, this knowledge is nevertheless only the vehicle for critical thought, not its realization. As cultural capital it is always also the object of appropriation by the dominant classes. (54–55)

Or, in other words, to return yet once more to the issue of employment, if you study English, you will learn how to see through corporate capitalism while qualifying for a job at IBM.

There is one final point on which I find *Professional Correctness* to be an engaging but self-contradictory text, and it has to do with the rhetoric of public justification. On one hand, having studied and written about the history of professionalism, I agree entirely with Fish's claim that "it is a requirement for the respectability of an enterprise that it be, or at least be able to present itself as, *distinctive*" (17). Literary criticism, in other words, must have an identity distinct from history, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, communications, law, and so forth, *not* because literary criticism is intrinsically unrelated to those fields, but because as a matter of bureaucratic and professional procedure, literary criticism must demarcate some sphere of attention—even under so broad a heading as "textuality"—if it is to survive as an academic discipline. (This was perhaps the signal professional achievement of the generation of critics running from John Crowe Ransom and "Criticism, Inc." to Northrop Frye and *The Anatomy of Criticism*: they had a definite and convincing account of what made literary study distinctive and therefore justifiable as an institutional enterprise.) There are any number of people who believe that the study of literature should not be an academic discipline at all, but, of course, it is not for those people that I write; I write instead for anyone who thinks that literary study might have a purpose for which it could profitably (cough) be "institutionalized" in schools and universities. Institutionalized literary study, as an academic subject and as a profession, simply will not exist very much longer if it does not demarcate, for its potential clients, its domain and procedures, however loosely these might be defined. The alternative is the option I sketched out in chapter 1, namely, the future in which cost-cutting administrators wake up to find that eight different departments are claiming to study "culture," and that therefore six of them can be eliminated and the other two amalgamated.

It is a real surprise, then, that Fish, who is so savvy when it comes to the protocols of professionalism, would close his discussion of "public justification" by declaring, in effect, that literary criticism has no basis—and perhaps no need—for public justification:

Literary interpretation, like virtue, is its own reward. I do it because I like the way I feel when I'm doing it. I like being



brought up short by an effect I have experienced but do not yet understand analytically. I like trying to describe in flatly prosaic words the achievement of words that are anything but flat and prosaic. I like savouring the physical “taste” of language at the same time that I work to lay bare its physics. I like uncovering the incredibly dense pyrotechnics of a master artificer, not least because in praising the artifice I can claim a share in it. And when those pleasures have been (temporarily) exhausted, I like linking one moment in a poem to others and then to moments in other works, works by the same author or by his predecessors or contemporaries or successors. It doesn’t finally matter which, so long as I can *keep going*, reaping the cognitive and tactile harvest of an activity as self-reflexive as I become when I engage in it. (110)

I could criticize this passage pragmatically on its face, by noting that it will probably avail English departments very little to compose official publicity documents that advertise literary study as a discipline that will allow Stanley Fish the opportunity to continue feeling good. But I’d rather ask about the function of “self-reflexivity” in Fish’s description of criticism. If indeed literature is a self-reflexive activity that leads its devotees, theorists, and explicators to become self-reflexive in turn, might not this self-reflexivity serve some social purpose with regard to the composition of civil society?

We will recall from chapter 4 that George Levine has made a strong case for “the aesthetic” as that which must provide us with our necessary legitimation “if English, as a profession sustained by publicly and privately endowed institutions, is to survive” (43–44). The aesthetic, in this sense, is that nebulous thing on which we base our distinctiveness as a profession, our necessary difference and distance from communications, history, advertising, and so forth. But in his introduction to *Aesthetics and Ideology*, which I examined in chapter 1, there is yet another defense of “the aesthetic” that relies not on the discipline’s professional need to declare the formal uses of language as its domain, but on the possibility, as I phrased it at the outset of this chapter, that there is a nontrivial connection between the relative autonomy of “the aesthetic” and the

relative autonomy necessary to the functioning of any critical institution in civil society, including universities. Levine writes,

[Edward] Said clearly believes—despite his heavily political orientation—in a kind of intellectual free space that might be associated with the realm of the aesthetic. He speaks, at the start of *Culture and Imperialism*, of how, in writing the book, “I have availed myself of the utopian space still provided by the university, which I believe must remain a place where such vital issues are investigated, discussed, reflected on. For it to become a site where social and political issues are actually either imposed or resolved would be to remove the university’s function and make it into an adjunct to whatever political party is in power” (xxvi). . . . The aesthetic offers, distinctly, something like the space of the university implied by Said. . . . The aesthetic remains a rare if not unique place for almost free play, a place where the very real connections with the political and the ideological are at least partly short circuited. (15, 16, 17)

This is an altogether different set of claims from the pragmatic Levine/Fish insistence that “the aesthetic” might legitimate the profession of literary study; in this part of his introduction, Levine argues that the aesthetic is an agent of self-reflexivity both for individuals and for whole societies. It may be, moreover, that there are intimate historical linkages between the category of civil society and the category of the aesthetic as it has been understood since Kant. Levine seems, at least, to be gesturing toward the possibility that the social forces of the eighteenth century, which bequeathed us various forms of nonauthoritarian government and plural public spheres, also created the conditions for a noninstrumental understanding of art as that which serves neither church nor state. Are, then, the autonomies of the aesthetic and of civil society mutually defining and interdependent? This would seem to be the direction in which Levine’s argument wants to lead us, but no sooner does Levine speak of “the aesthetic” in terms of relatively autonomous, utopian space than he refigures that space as a large-scale political salve for interpersonal wounds: “As the aesthetic provides a space where the immediate pressures of ethical and political decisions are deferred, so it allows sympathy

for, and potential understanding of people, events, things otherwise threatening” (17).

The aesthetic, then, is not a space where sociopolitical concerns are bracketed but a place where sociopolitical hinges are forged:

I value literature, as whole cultures often do, because—in spite of its endless diversity and refusals to make things comfortable—it is one means to some larger sense of community, to an awareness of the necessity of personal compromise and social accommodation, civilization entailing always its discontents. Part of the value of the aesthetic is in the way it can provide spaces and strategies for exploring the possibility of conciliations between the idiosyncratic and the communal. (19–20)

This would be a remarkably wishful passage in any context, and though I am drawn to its utopian vision of a link between aesthetics, intersubjectivity, and collectivity (that’s peace, love, and understanding for you Elvis Costello/Nick Lowe fans), I also know that it has been some decades now since George Steiner and Thomas Pynchon reflected, in their different ways, on the phenomenon of Nazi officers with a fine appreciation of aesthetic excellence. Wishful or not, however, such a passage is simply unfathomable in an essay that questions the legitimacy of drawing broad cultural conclusions from literary texts *and* that asks whether it’s worth reading literature if we’re reading it for knowledge that “can be discovered through other materials.” Why, indeed, if we want to foster harmony, charity, and compromise, should we turn to aesthetic rather than didactic uses of language? And why should we ask the aesthetic to do the work of leading us to some larger sense of community, if indeed we should be asking the aesthetic to do cultural work of any kind?

The simple ugly fact is that if “the aesthetic” is truly (relatively) autonomous from instrumental uses of language, and if the university is truly (relatively) autonomous from state power, then we cannot predict whether the knowledges produced in these precincts will be put to laudatory or regrettable ends. They—the knowledges and their uses—will be constitutionally reversible, capable of contributing to the making of better managers *and* better anticapitalist critics of IBM.

It is possible to read the reversibility of the aesthetic in a more cynical, suspicious fashion. Tony Bennett and Ian Hunter, for example, have turned quite volubly against the aesthetic as a realm of human endeavor, on the grounds that the nebulousness of the aesthetic has historically made it an ideal vehicle for the inculcation of ruling class beliefs. For Bennett and Hunter, in other words, the very indeterminacy of the aesthetic makes it something that can always be redefined to meet the interests of school examiners (or pedagogical authorities elsewhere in civil society), and thus an instrument of mystification—perhaps the very *means* of mystification. As Hunter writes in “Setting Limits to Culture,” Romantic aesthetics since Schiller have provided “an *aesthetico-ethical enterprise*,” which we should understand in terms of “the loci of an instituted practice aimed at producing a person possessing a certain aesthetico-ethical capacity and standing on which, it is alleged, knowledge depends” (109). For Hunter, accordingly, the project of cultural studies should be “to *restrict* this concept of culture to the specialized practice of aesthetico-ethical self-shaping in which it has pertinence and to begin to chart the limited *degree* of generality it has achieved as a technique of person-formation in the educational apparatus” (115; see also Hunter, *Culture and Government*; Bennett, *Outside Literature*). As a critique of Schillerian-Leavisite aesthetic education, perhaps, this is a plausible (if somewhat sterile and technocratic) description of how aesthetics came to be made into a discipline and a means of discipline; it certainly suffices to explain the pedagogical-professional narrative of *Educating Rita* (1983), in which Michael Caine tells his female working-class student, Rita (who has just handed in her first paper—on Forster’s *Howards End*, of all things, since Rita is in some ways an echo of Leonard Bast), “if you’re going to learn criticism, you have to begin to discipline that mind of yours.” Literary criticism in this film is not just a regime of technical training but also a question of personal perfectability: what Rita enters into is very precisely a discipline of person formation, and it’s by no means irrelevant that Rita’s course of study eventually earns her fulfilling employment, independence (from a loutish husband), and a better life with some promise of class mobility (and “better songs to sing”). And yet to read “the aesthetic” as if it has *always* been coercive,

or always in the business of making better people, is to misconstrue its reversibility, its elasticity—just as, in emphasizing the F. R. Leavis tradition of English letters (or the pedagogical scenario of *Educating Rita*), it is possible to overlook Frank Kermode’s comparatively mild and reasonable counterclaim that it is immodest to believe or propose that by training students in literature and criticism we are “improving them, ethically or civilly.”

All this reversibility is well and good, you say, and perhaps the aesthetic can be put to liberatory and oppressive ends simultaneously, but—to return to the question with which we started—is it employable? The knowledges, their uses, their users—do they travel in the economy as even Stanley Fish admits they travel (by irregular routes) into the general culture? What, as so many of my undergraduates have asked me over the past decade, can I do with a degree in English?

In chapter 1 I hinted at one answer, when I pointed out that the liberal arts may well be invoked as the best ground for training people who will have to change jobs and careers repeatedly throughout their lives in a post-Fordist economy. As Joseph Urgo, among others, has pointed out, that rationale for the liberal arts is quickly becoming part of the new common sense of American business. Noting that the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) has enunciated new accreditation standards that mandate “fewer credit hours in business and more credit hours in the liberal arts” (135), Urgo writes that the fungibility of a liberal arts education is what makes it so available for this kind of long-term support—or this kind of long-term exploitation:

AACSB requirements that increase the liberal arts component at business colleges are responding to developments in the business world, to what might be called a postjob environment. As William Bridges argues in *Jobshift: How to Prosper in a Workplace Without Jobs*, the era of lifetime employment is passing rapidly. In a postjob world, workers prepare themselves for a succession of task-oriented term assignments within multiple career paths. The assumption behind the latest AACSB educational requirements is that, while a business education will ensure competency in the present environment, an engagement with the liberal arts

will prepare students for the obscure destinies of a jobless world.  
(137)

Unfortunately, Urgo is not quite as skeptical of this development as he might be: it takes little imagination, in this “postjob world,” to imagine that the liberal arts are being proposed here as the best college training regime for a new workforce that will have to jump from task to task or from layoff to layoff, without the hope of lifetime employment or employment benefits like health insurance and retirement pensions. In this dystopian scenario, the liberal arts become the social glue that accommodates future workers to a post-Fordist economy in which corporate capitalism no longer provides even minimal guarantees of job security or a living wage. This, I have to admit, is not precisely the kind of “reversibility” I have in mind when I speak of possible rhetorics of public justification for literary study.

In the 1993 conference that was the basis for *Higher Education under Fire*, Gregory Jay asked education analyst Michael Apple a long question that, to my mind, got to the heart of one of the definitive ambivalences not only of that conference and book, but also of the academic Left in general: the ambivalence over the idea of English—or education—for employment. Addressing himself to a number of critiques of the purpose of higher education, Jay asked Apple the following question:

On the one hand, we get a critique that says that what’s wrong today is that more and more students are not being given access to higher education, and that this is a class-based and race-based exclusion, which will keep them in poverty and prevent them from attaining the economic mobility and the economic development they have a right to. On the other hand, you provide a critique of vocationalism that argues against seeing the university as a place primarily devoted to training workers. . . . If we’re going to negotiate in public with the powers that be, with state legislators, with parents, and with students, we certainly can’t do it on the basis of a position . . . that seems to reject out of hand the relationship between work, education, and economic advancement. So how do we negotiate between these two positions of training for citizenship and training for work, without selling ourselves out in one way or another? (165–66)

Apple's answer starts off winningly—"it's an easy question," he bluffs (166)—but goes on to address the function of the university in the context of commodity exchange that places a premium on specific kinds of knowledge that can be sold; the class composition of his own students; and the meaning of what we refer to as "work." It's an interesting reply, but I'm not reproducing it here because it doesn't, finally, answer the question. And the reason it doesn't address the question is that Jay had put his finger on the major structural contradiction that haunts all academic progressives, but especially those who work in the humanities: when it comes to thinking about underprivileged student populations, we want the university to behave as a social force for equal opportunity, a democratic corrective to the inequalities of capitalism; we want many things for such students, no doubt, but among the things we want are good jobs. But when it comes to thinking about training the professional-managerial class (PMC) and the elite, we would rather emphasize our capacity for helping people deconstruct corporate capitalism than stress our utility for helping our future-PMC students find some well-paying jobs at IBM.

I have no ready-to-hand resolution to this dilemma. If Gregory Jay were to ask me in 1997 the question he asked Michael Apple in 1993 I would probably have no direct answer either, even after having witnessed, edited, and reread the exchange many times. But I can make one more modest proposal, the counterpart to the public legitimation proposal I made at the end of chapter 1 with regard to the competing imperatives of "literature" and "culture": among the kinds of employment we should keep foremost in mind for our students, and among the institutions with which we should be most concerned as progressive intellectuals, high schools—our public and private systems of secondary education—seem to me to be the salient missing term in the discussion as it has been conducted thus far.

In saying this I do not mean to neglect other careers that have long been considered appropriate to the skills of English majors. When I speak to undergraduates on this topic (as I do at every opportunity), I usually emphasize the fields in which I myself have worked—journalism, law, advertising, and publishing. One of the reasons I take such exception

to Fish's argument is simply that I believe that literary study can prepare a student for a career anywhere in media—and for a wider variety of media (particularly print media) than majors like communications. But I stress secondary education for institutional reasons. In chapter 3 I foregrounded high school teaching as a career path for graduate students partly because the topic is usually so off limits. Here, by contrast, I want to address secondary education as a career path not for M.A.s and Ph.D.s so much as for our undergraduate students who may take other routes to teacher certification after their B.A. Fully one-quarter of the undergraduates I teach at Illinois are future high school teachers, and I have been teaching undergraduate surveys and writing-intensive literature courses for most of my career. Some of those students are English majors; some major in rhetoric or English education. Almost all are residents of Illinois who plan to go on to careers in Illinois high schools. Teaching those students the skills of interpretation—and offering them a multicultural curriculum that may, *pace* Guillory and Bourdieu, affect the constitution of cultural capital in the K–12 schools—seems to me one of the more important functions I have as a professional critic and as an employee of the State of Illinois. It was no surprise, in fact (though it *was* something of a coincidence), that even as I was completing work on this chapter, my office phone rang and I wound up in a pleasant half-hour conversation with one of my most talented former undergraduates, who was calling me from Chicago to ask whether I would write her a recommendation for her application to teach in Chicago-area high schools.

There are many reasons we theorists in universities undervalue the cultural work of literary study in secondary schools, and I will not dwell on them here; for now, I am less interested in the reasons for the undervaluation than in proposals and practices that can redress this long-standing neglect of our employment relations to the K–12 system. (This is one of the key reasons that I have become, along with my like-minded colleagues, active in the National Council of Teachers of English.) It is true that secondary education is not considered one of the profession's more glamorous constituencies; but then it is also true that there are few constituencies more important to the long-term health of the humanities in the United States. And it is true, as I have stressed throughout this



book, that colleges are part of the credentializing apparatus for the professional-managerial class; but it is also true that we are part of a larger educational apparatus to which all social classes have varying levels of access. And, last, it is true, as Andrew Ross has recently said with regard to maintaining or expanding student enrollments in graduate programs in the humanities, that if we are progressive educators we should seek “to seed all kinds of institutions” with “progressive intellectuals” (82); but then it is also true that among the institutions with which we should be most concerned is the vast educational enterprise in which “English” and the “language arts” are still widely—and, both for better and for worse social purposes—gainfully employed. (For that matter, it is not clear why, if Ross is concerned with the production of progressive intellectuals, he should be so narrowly focused on doctoral programs to the exclusion of the rest of the educational apparatus.) There are many places “literary skills” can travel, by regular and irregular routes. Publishing, journalism, law, and media are among those places—and so is the secondary school system which, according to NCTE estimates, currently employs approximately two hundred thousand English teachers.

## NOTES

1. In keeping with my traditionalist tendencies, let me cite as a rigorous analysis of interpretation in law, classical theory, and hermeneutics Kathy Eden’s recent study, *Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition*. For close critical readings of manifestos and minstrel shows, see, respectively, Janet Lyon, “Transforming Manifestoes”; and Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*. For an interesting reading of *Lycidas*, see, among other things, Stanley Fish, *Professional Correctness*.
2. This is not gestural. As I write these words, the *New York Times* reports that new federal regulations will prevent legal immigrants with disabilities from becoming naturalized citizens if they are deemed too mentally incompetent to understand the oath of citizenship (see Dugger). This measure took effect, of course, *after* legal immigrants with disabilities were denied federal aid by the Clinton welfare “reform” bill in 1996. In response to that bill, many legal immigrants with disabilities (or their guardians) considered becoming U.S. citizens; admirably, however, the United States will have none of it—at least not for those especially vulnerable people with disabilities (severe

mental retardation, Alzheimer's, and the like) who may not understand all the obligations of citizenship. As Representative E. Clay Shaw (R.-Florida), sponsor of the measure, said, "proposals to restore benefits [to legal immigrants with disabilities] are simply too costly" (A12). Shaw proposes instead a two- to three-year "block grant" program for the states, after which mentally impaired legal immigrants will be cut from the rolls. Fortunately, according to Shaw, this punitive measure will not have long-term negative effects on people with disabilities, because "the death rate will see that that population shrinks in those two to three years" (A12). At last, someone who knows exactly who Scrooge's "surplus population" is, and when—and why—they should die.

3. Elsewhere, Fish admits that there are plenty of regular routes by which intellectuals can have influence on policy; see, for instance, his treatment of libertarian law professor Richard Epstein for a counterexample. Oddly, however, Fish maintains that Epstein has been influential on the Right not "because Epstein's arguments can be mapped directly onto questions of public policy" (this is exactly what I would say, and I will expand on this premise in chapter 10). The reason Fish does not want to tie Epstein's influence to his work's potential for policy making is that doing so would open precisely the door Fish is trying to close: for in this respect what is true of Epstein's arguments "is often true too of literary arguments, especially of the kind new historicists like to make" (52–53). "Rather," Fish writes, Epstein's importance is due to the fact that "in various corners of our society individuals and groups are searching for ways to pursue certain ends and Epstein belongs to a class of people, law professors, to which anyone interested in effecting immediate change is likely to turn" (53). It seems not to occur to Fish, for the moment, that people might turn to academics in order to "pursue certain ends" precisely because the academics' arguments can be mapped directly onto public policy (in this case, right-wing efforts to eviscerate environmental protection laws and employment discrimination laws; Epstein is, for example, cited by Dinesh D'Souza in the course of his proposal to repeal the 1964 Civil Rights Act—for which see chapter 9).
4. For a brilliant discussion of how Fish (and other neo-pragmatists) elide the question of how to account for doubt, see Jules David Law, "Uncertain Grounds."