The Emergence of Cultural Studies
and the Crisis of the Humanities

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If I address the crisis of the humanities in the face of the problem of social technology, I want to do so first of all from the point of view of the United Kingdom, and more particularly from the perspective of the growth and development of cultural studies such as it is in Britain. Specifically, this will be from my own experience at the Centre for Cultural Studies, where, if one believes in origins, the term *cultural studies* first appeared in its modern manifestation.

But this is neither a search for origins nor a suggestion that Birmingham was the only way to do cultural studies. Cultural studies was then, and has been ever since, an adaptation to its terrain; it has been a conjunctural practice. It has always developed from a different matrix of interdisciplinary studies and disciplines. Even in Britain, the three or four places bold enough to say they are offering courses in cultural studies have different disciplinary roots, both in the humanities and the social sciences. There should be no implication in my remarks that Birmingham did it the right way or even that there was any one Birmingham position; indeed, there is no such thing as the Birmingham School. (To hear "the Birmingham School" evoked is, for me, to confront a model of alienation in which something one took part in producing returns to greet one as thing, in all its inevitable facticity.)

My own memories of Birmingham are mainly of rows, debates, arguments, of people walking out of rooms. It was always in a critical relation to the very theoretical paradigms out of which it grew and to the concrete studies and practices it was attempting to transform. So, in that sense, cultural studies is not one thing; it has never been one thing.

In trying to sight the problem of the humanities and social technology from the standpoint of cultural studies a particular sense of irony takes over insofar as cultural studies in Britain emerged precisely from a *crisis* in the humanities. Many of us were formed in the humanities; my own degrees are in literature rather than in sociology. When I was offered a chair in sociology, I said, "Now that sociology does not exist as a discipline, I am happy to profess it." But the truth is that most of us had to leave the humanities in order to do serious work in

it. For, at the birth of cultural studies, the humanities were relentlessly hostile to its appearance, deeply suspicious of it, and anxious to strangle, as it were, the cuckoo that had appeared in its nest. So I want to begin by saying something about the project of cultural studies in the face of that hostility, to speculate on where I think that hostility came from, why I think it was present, and why I think it continues to make itself felt. In so doing, I want to question the self-presentation of the humanities as an ongoing, integral, integrated exercise. For those of us in cultural studies, the humanities have never been or can no longer be that integral formation. It is for this reason that in Britain cultural studies was not conceptualized as an academic discipline at all.

For me, cultural studies really begins with the debate about the nature of social and cultural change in postwar Britain. An attempt to address the manifest break-up of traditional culture, especially traditional class cultures, it set about registering the impact of the new forms of affluence and consumer society on the very hierarchical and pyramidal structure of British society. Trying to come to terms with the fluidity and the undermining impact of the mass media and of an emerging mass society on this old European class society, it registered the cultural impact of the long-delayed entry of the United Kingdom into the modern world.

The attempt to describe and understand how British society was changing was at the center of the political debate in the 1950s, and cultural studies was at this time identified with the first New Left. The first New Left, dated not 1968 but 1956, was founded around such books as *The Uses of Literacy* by Richard Hoggart (himself not a university professor of English at all, but a teacher of adult working-class students in what was called the extramural department of the university); *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams (who was teaching as an extramural tutor in the south of England); and *The Making of the English Working Class* by Edward P. Thompson (who was an extramural teacher in Leeds). I myself was working as an extramural teacher, once I left the University of Oxford, in and around London. We thus came from a tradition entirely marginal to the centers of English academic life, and our engagement in the questions of cultural change — how to understand them, how to describe them, and how to theorize them, what their impact and consequences were to be, socially — were first reckoned within the dirty outside world. The Center for Cultural Studies was the locus to which we *retreated* when that conversation in the open world could no longer be continued: it was politics by other means. Some of us — me, especially — had always planned never to return to the university, indeed, never to darken its doors again. But, then, one always has to make pragmatic adjustments to where real work, important work, can be done.

The attempt to found the Center for Cultural Studies was originally Richard Hoggart's project. Once he was named a professor of English and brought inside the University at Birmingham, what he said, in effect, was that he would like to continue the work he was doing in *The Uses of Literacy*, in which he

had written about his own working-class background and the way in which working-class culture was being transformed by the new forces of mass culture. The department responded with disbelief and dismay. Having appointed him, they couldn't say he couldn't do it; but they certainly did say they weren't going to give him any money with which to do it. For that he would have to go outside the university. Having raised a very small amount of money, he was able to hire me as a Research Fellow to tend the cultural studies pasture, as it were, while the mainstream work of the department went on. I had to pay my dues by doing my lectures on Henry James to undergraduates, lecturing on the American novel, which was my own area of research, and running the gauntlet of the University.

Now, with the appearance of the Centre for Cultural Studies, this gauntlet was an *enfilade* fire from both sides. On the day of our opening, we received letters from members of the English department saying that they couldn't really welcome us; they knew we were there, but they hoped we'd keep out of their way while they got on with the work they had to do. We received another, rather sharper letter from the sociologists saying, in effect, "We have read *The Uses of Literacy* and we hope you don't think you're doing sociology, because that's not what you're doing at all."

Having entered this very tiny space we asked ourselves questions like: What shall we call ourselves? Shall it be an *institute*? On looking around, we clearly weren't institutionalized in any way, so that name wouldn't do. We thought we'd call ourselves a *center* because that might rally some troops and make us look a bit more impressive on the academic campus. But we were clearly far from any center. Throughout the 1960s, in fact, we were moved from one temporary residence to another, in and out of a series of Quonset huts, provisional structures built during the war and intended to last about six months — until the German bombers came. But they never hit the Quonset huts on the Birmingham campus, and we occupied them all in sequence. In case we had any doubts about our marginal status in the field, this physical displacement and the space in which we operated symbolized it for us daily.

To understand this dubious reception is to realize that in the English context the humanities, insofar as they were ever illuminated by a general statement about program or intentions, were conducted in the light, or in the wake, of the Arnoldian project. What they were handling in literary work and history were the histories and touchstones of the national culture, transmitted to a select number of people.

The archetypal figure who inherited that project and who lived it for us in my undergraduate years was, of course, F. R. Leavis. Leavis is ambiguously placed in relation to this project because the establishment at Cambridge did not receive him to its bosom; he too lived a marginal kind of existence there. Nevertheless, Leavis saw himself committed to the project of tending the health of the language and the national culture, of nurturing the refined sensibilities of that small company of scholars who alone could maintain the vigor of culture and

cultural life; it was in their keeping, the keeping of a particular literary elite. Leavis himself gives an account of what the conversation of those attending to the cultural life of a nation is like in pedagogic terms: "It is an exchange of conversation in which one speaker says to the other, 'This is so, it is not?'"

The question "This is so, is it not?" has to do with at what exact page in *The Portrait of a Lady* Henry James stops being part of the great tradition and begins to be part of something else. That is what the question means. And such a question appears to invite comment as to whether, in fact, the contention is so. Yet, to picture Leavis asking this question, imagine the archetypal Lawrencian, the nonconformist scholar, who, whenever he visited Oxford, always unbuttoned his shirt, baring his chest as it were to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune from the Oxford establishment, and imagine Leavis turning his beady, parrot-like eyes on him and saying "This is so, is it not?" The idea of his having the temerity to say "No, it's not," is unthinkable. It was a very controlled conversation among a very controlled number of people. Only five or ten people at Downing College were admitted to the circle of those who were sufficiently attentive to what Leavis called "these words on the page; these words in this order on the page," and had the sensibility to care for and nurture it.

This is a caricature, of course; yet it is also a paradox, because nearly all of us who entered the cultural studies project were actually formed in the Leavisite ethos. Raymond Williams, for instance, does a chapter on Leavis in *Culture and Society*. Or, Hoggart, in his *Uses of Literacy*, writes about working-class culture as though he were reading a text in a Leavisite way. Having no other sociological method, he uses that of practical criticism, applied, as it were, to real life. What is more, there was an educational project deeply lodged in the Leavis project because Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group paid careful attention to winning over and transforming English teachers in the schools. In fact, some of the finest work of the *Scrutiny* group was accomplished by mobilizing secondary school teachers in relation to English teaching.

Indeed, Leavis himself, though he had a highly conservative definition of culture and of the manifest destiny of English studies in relation to the national culture, was nevertheless different from many other scholars in the humanities, and this is why he was hated at Oxford: because he actually took questions of culture seriously. He thought it mattered what happened to the culture, whereas they thought the culture would take care of itself. So, in fact, our relation to Leavis included admiration for the seriousness with which he understood that questions of culture and cultural change lay at the very heart of social life and could not be refused, that the issues of language were central to the understanding of the national culture, and that any serious scholar must be engaged in the question of the nature of language and what it is saying. The fact that Leavis adopted a conservative position on these questions and was driven to an elitist educational program—in which only about five scholars in each generation could really have a vocation for this attention to culture—was one side of the

coin; the depth of his engagement with cultural questions was the other. As his neophytes, albeit in a critical sense, we took our distance from his educational program and from his conservative cultural values. But our respect for the other aspect of his project came from the fact that no other place could be found within the humanities that took these questions seriously.

The Leavisite influence can be gauged by the fact that Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* is really a rereading of the core "English Moralists" course at Cambridge. Required for all literary students, this course was the only point at which they engaged the broader cultural and philosophic traditions out of which works of literature arose. *Culture and Society* is Williams's attempt to read the tradition of the English moralists, including the moral element in English literature, from a different vantage: the vantage, as it were, of cultural studies. In turn, that project made possible *The Long Revolution*, which humanities departments in England received with total incomprehension. They said he wrote with incredible difficulty about simple questions; that he appeared to be a kind of Marxist but he couldn't actually name a single Marxist concept; that his work was written in code; that it had its own profound difficulties of comprehension; and, above all, that it seemed he thought he was theorizing. For a serious professor of English, who had paid his dues in the real world teaching adult students, and who had finally won his chair at Cambridge, to produce a book with the title *The Long Revolution* was a scandal, one which Williams, in his very seriously moderated way, never quite outlived.

When cultural studies began its work in the 1960s and '70s, it had, therefore, to undertake the task of unmasking what it considered to be the unstated presuppositions of the humanist tradition itself. It had to try to bring to light the ideological assumptions underpinning the practice, to expose the educational program (which was the unnamed part of its project), and to try to conduct an ideological critique of the way the humanities and the arts presented themselves as parts of disinterested knowledge. It had, that is, to undertake a work of demystification to bring into the open the regulative nature and role the humanities were playing in relation to the national culture. From within the context of that project, it becomes clear why people wrote us rude letters.

That represents the negative side of how we had to distance ourselves from some of the ongoing traditions in the humanities. The positive work one then went on to do in the Center had still to be invented. No place existed at that stage, whether in the social sciences or in the humanities, where one could find the concept of culture seriously theorized. Contemporary cultural forms did not constitute a serious object of contemplation in the academic world. And the political questions, the relationships, complex as they are, between culture and politics, were not a matter considered proper for study, especially by graduate students. The strategy of the Center for developing both practical work that would enable research to be done in the formations of contemporary culture and the theoretical models that would help to clarify what was going on was designed

as a series of raids on other disciplinary terrains. Fending off what sociologists regarded sociology to be, we raided sociology. Fending off the defenders of the humanities tradition, we raided the humanities. We appropriated bits of anthropology while insisting that we were not in the humanistic anthropological project, and so on. We did the rounds of the disciplines.

What we discovered was that serious interdisciplinary work does not mean that one puts up the interdisciplinary flag and then has a kind of coalition of colleagues from different departments, each of whom brings his or her own specialization to a kind of academic smorgasbord from which students can sample each of these riches in turn. Serious interdisciplinary work involves the intellectual risk of saying to professional sociologists that what they say sociology is, is not what it is. We had to teach what we thought a kind of sociology that would be of service to people studying culture would be, something we could not get from self-designated sociologists. It was never a question of which disciplines would contribute to the development of this field, but of how one could decenter or destabilize a series of interdisciplinary fields. We had to respect and engage with the paradigms and traditions of knowledge and of empirical and concrete work in each of these disciplinary areas in order to construct what we called cultural studies or cultural theory.

Not all the models and approaches we needed were to be found somewhere in the disciplinary mix of a standard English university, so, in part, the curriculum of cultural studies, or its literature, had to be made up from other sources. Increasingly, the books people read in cultural studies were not only salvaged from other people's bookshelves, but were taken from traditions that had had no real presence in English intellectual life. Cultural studies would not have occurred, and certainly would not have survived the 1970s, without the enormous program of translation of European work undertaken in the late '60s and '70s by *New Left Review*. The project of the second New Left was crucial, for, along with a few other publishers of that time, it translated books not yet available to us. For the first time it brought us, in English, the major works of the Frankfurt School, then of Benjamin, and then of Gramsci. Without those "Ur-texts," which no one was reading inside the academy, cultural studies could not have developed its project: it could not have survived; it could not have become a field of work in its own right.

At this particular period—and I'm talking now mainly about the 1970s, which is my own time at the Center for Cultural Studies in Birmingham—the development of cultural studies had two practical ramifications. First, a word about pedagogic practice, about how the work was actually done. It was obviously impossible for us to pretend that we represented anything like a discipline since there were so few of us hired as teachers and lecturers in cultural studies. During my time at Birmingham, the total complement of teachers of cultural studies was three, along with one Research Fellow; all the other names that are now known as the leading lights of cultural studies were graduate students. In

this context, it was impossible for us to maintain for very long the illusion that we were teaching our graduate students from some established body of knowledge, since it was perfectly clear to them that we were making it up as we went along: we were all in the game; we were apprentices to cultural studies trying desperately to keep just one step ahead of them. And so the normal pedagogic relations where the teacher is supposed as the keeper of wisdom and students respond to the question "This is so, is it not?" with that kind of compulsive drive that requires them to say, "Of course, of course," was simply impossible.

Consequently, and for a series of additional reasons I won't go into, we did not think that what had to be done was clear-cut from the first day we opened. Gradually it emerged that we had to have working seminars in which the theory itself was actually developed. We could not do graduate work as I think it is done both in England and the United States, where the first chapter of a dissertation is a review of the existing literature which implies that the candidate knows the books, has a complete bibliography, every item of which he or she has read, etc. What was the bibliography of a cultural studies thesis? Nobody knew.

Secondly, it was not possible to present the work of cultural studies as if it had no political consequences and no form of political engagement, because what we were inviting students to do was to do what we ourselves had done: to engage with some real problem out there in the dirty world, and to use the enormous advantage given to a tiny handful of us in the British educational system who had the opportunity to go into universities and reflect on those problems, to spend that time usefully to try to understand how the world worked. Therefore, if someone came to me asking me to suggest an interesting project that could be done in cultural studies, that person would not be a good candidate for us at the Center, because it was not someone who had already engaged with and become committed to a field of inquiry which seemed, to that person, to matter. (I myself still don't understand how people drive themselves through to the ends of their Ph.D.s on problems they don't think matter. I know how they start, because the lure of a proper career and a job at the end will always motivate one to begin, but how one manages to finish it three or four years later, I do not comprehend.) So, from the start we said: What are you interested in? What really bugs you about questions of culture and society now? What do you really think is a problem you don't understand out there in the terrible interconnection between culture and politics? What is it about the way in which British culture is now living through its kind of postcolonial, posthegemonic crisis that really bites into your experience? And then we will find a way of studying that seriously.

The question of studying seriously is important because, rightly or wrongly, the Center did not say: "All you have to do is to be a good activist and we will give you a degree for it." Rightly or wrongly, and especially in the 1970s, the Center developed, or tried to develop, what I would call a Gramscian project. That is to say, our intention was to address the problems of what Gramsci called "the national popular": how it was constituted; how it was being transformed;

why it mattered in the play and negotiation of hegemonic practices. And our intention was always to do that in the most serious way we could. In that sense we remained what people sometimes called "beetle-browed Leavisites." It was a serious project. We took to heart the Gramscian injunction that the practice of an organic intellectual would have to be to engage with the philosophical end of the enterprise, with knowledge at its most testing. Because it mattered, we had to know more than they knew about our subject at the same time as we took responsibility for translating that knowledge back into practice — the latter oper- ation was what Gramsci calls "common sense." Neither the one nor the other alone would do. And that is because we tried, in our extremely marginal way up there on the eighth floor in the Arts Faculty Building, to think of ourselves as a tiny piece of a hegemonic struggle. Just one tiny bit of it. We didn't have the illusion we were where the game really was. But we knew that the questions we were asking were of central relevance to the questions through which hegemony is either established or contested.

I therefore think it is true to say of the Center's work that it always insisted that intellectuals themselves take responsibility for how the knowledge they produce is then transmitted to society; that they can't wash their hands of the game of translating knowledge into the practice of culture. We never flattered ourselves that because we were studying postwar youth cultures we were nothing but street boys. The remorseless march of the division of knowledge and the gap between theory and practice is not to be overcome by wishing to do so or by declaring that it has just happened. The gap between theory and practice is only overcome in developing a practice in its own right. It is a practice to bring together theory and practice. It had to be done. And the vocation of intellectuals is not simply to turn up at the right demonstrations at the right moment, but also to alienate that advantage which they have had out of the system, to take the whole system of knowledge itself and, in Benjamin's sense, attempt to put it at the service of some other project. What the movement needed from us as part of their struggles of resistance and of transformation, then, was what we had in our heads. The Center's project was thus never what I would call a populist intellec- tual project. It never suggested it would be easy. It never implied it could be done without engaging with theoretical paradigms.

Of course, the foregoing is not the whole story of the Center's work; nevertheless, I want to leave it at that for now in order to turn to the contempo- rary context. We are, in Britain, currently going through our crisis of the system of higher education. In the particular area of the humanities and social sciences, and of education more generally, this crisis began with what is now known as "the standards debate," in which two university English professors, Copt and Dyson, broke the silence that had been developing in the universities about what they called the high illiteracy out there in the world. The high illiteracy had to do with the inability of the students they were getting to read and write; and it had to do with that typical figure, a stereotype of the 1960s, called in England "the

polytechnic lecturer." These are people reared in the '60s who couldn't get jobs in the universities at the decade's end but who, with the expansion of the polytechnic system (the bottom end of our system of higher education), were then recruited into polytechnic humanities and social sciences departments, to be regarded by the arts and humanities establishment as not much more than '60s barbarians.

The attack on higher education is not restricted to these limited targets any longer. Under Thatcherism, in the Baker Education Bill, there is a major and frontal assault on the free public-education system itself, on the schooling system as well as on that of higher education. We are in the throes of a debate as to whether, for the first time, the English educational system should have a national curriculum. On the one hand, this question represents the attempt to computerize and business-manage the entire world; but, on the other, it has as its central focus the question of what is being taught in two areas: literature and history. Because, as I think Mr. Baker says—having himself produced a book of national English verse which might be the primary text of the national curriculum in the English department itself—the attention to literary language and its impact on the question of who can or cannot speak English effectively is a central matter for the future and survival of the United Kingdom as a civilized society. As for history, it was in one sense a matter of why it is students do not know which king followed which queen and, in a very different sense, why they now believe (under the influence of the '60s barbarians, of course) that it might be important for English students of history at the school, undergraduate or graduate level, to know something about the rest of the world, any part of the rest of the world. Such a dreadful misunderstanding as this had to be dispelled; one had to be returned to the proper understanding of the national destiny as it is recorded, embalmed, and enshrined in English history.

This project has ambiguous and curious allies, like the Prince of Wales. He is a very ambiguous figure; from day to day, in our attempt to develop a conjuncture of politics, we don't know whether we should be for the prince or against him. But when he says things like, "The people I meet these days can't speak English properly; they can't write English properly; they have no knowledge of the essential structure of an ordinary English sentence," we must have some doubts. Now, from the ancient universities, the cry is going up that the students can hardly be taught because, of course, the schools do not provide them with basic skills. "In all of my time," said Professor Norman Stone, a distinguished professor of history at the University of Oxford, "standards fell" (though he doesn't indicate whether he had any responsibility for the decline). Professor Hugh Ropold, who is also one of our most eminent professors, offers himself as a kind of flying doctor, battling single-handedly with what he calls the educational pandemic—an epidemic raised to universal proportions. Having assured himself of the truth of a colleague's diagnosis at Oxford of creeping, or galloping, illiteracy among university students, he suggests two remedies. He

Hans Haacke. **Taking Stock (Unfinished).** *1983–84.*
(Photo: Zindman / Fremont.)

himself has so far abjured the construction of a list in the manner of E. D. Hirsch, but has offered instead the ten commandments for graduate students. And for undergraduates he has one recommendation: a steady and unswerving reading of Churchill and Orwell. Correct spelling, punctuation, and an elementary grasp of syntax and sentence structure now seem to be luxuries, even among the so-called educated classes, with a dismaying number of university graduates unable to master these essentials of a bygone age.

All this is part of Thatcherism; it has to do with a profound crisis of national identity, of the national culture; it's about the erosion and decline of the United Kingdom as a nation-state, about the threats Britain now feels itself facing, first of all from its own regions, second of all from Europe, thirdly from America, fourthly from Japan, and fifthly — and especially — from its own population. It is under threat from the "others," and the "others" accumulate in the cities; they accumulate around the margins; they accumulate in Wales and in Scotland; they accumulate in the trade unions. It's the attempt of Thatcherism to discover who can really still be English; it's a tiny handful of almost the same size as the number of people who gathered in Downing College under F. R. Leavis — and they may indeed be exactly the same people. Because, as Thatcherism has made the round of British society, it has, one after another, excluded everybody. Thatcherism has a place for women, of course, if they respect the traditional family role; otherwise they don't belong. And, through the exercise of this logic, one after another, all of us have been excluded from belonging to the national community at all. It has to do with a sense of unease and uncertainty that can only be shored up by a national curriculum; with the enormous displacements of a deeply centered and hierarchical traditional culture which has been blown apart by world migration, by fragmentation, by the rise of the margins, by the struggles of the margins to come into representation, by the contestation of the margins for cultural power, by the pluralization of ethnicity itself in English society.

Within the context of these "threats," what we are seeing is not the triumphant march of the human sciences and the glorious destiny of the liberal humanities; rather, the humanities are invoked as the last bastion in a primarily defensive operation. Thatcherism itself is a defensive operation. It asks: Who now can be English? What is it like to be English? Can one be English and Black? English and Muslim? English and feminist? English and socialist? English and Welsh? This is the degree to which Thatcherism sees itself imprisoned in an increasingly tight and tiny island. This has nothing to do with the question of whether Thatcherites hold power; of course they do. The notion that, because they don't really have anywhere to stand, they're going to abdicate their position at the center of the culture and tell the rest of us to take over is a kind of illusion that intellectuals sometimes have. They aren't simply going to get out of it; they are engaged, instead, in an enormous struggle to define what Britain can mean in the twentieth century if it is not to be the center of a huge commercial, economic, and imperialist empire. Where is there for the English people to stand, and what

could be the identities they could claim in the twenty-first century that might enable them to have any kind of self-respect? In the search to find an answer to that question, we have taken off to the South Seas to defend the Falklands; we have to defend something in order to assure ourselves that this dark heroic destiny is still a possible future for us. And these might be regarded as mere fantasy excursions — except, of course, that real people die at either end of the process.

If cultural studies came into existence in order to understand cultural and social change in British society since the war, what I have just been describing is the current, contemporary form in which that cultural crisis continues to work itself out in the United Kingdom. The vocation of cultural studies has been to enable people to understand what is going on, and especially to provide ways of thinking, strategies for survival, and resources for resistance to all those who are now — in economic, political, and cultural terms — excluded from anything that could be called access to the national culture of the national community: in this sense, cultural studies still has as profound a historical vocation as it ever had in the 1960s and '70s. But on the other hand, in relation to the mass education of students, both in higher education and elsewhere, cultural studies is, as an institutional form, very minor. But the humanities and the arts are not. And indeed the contestation that cultural studies was partly responsible for putting on the agenda has been taken into the humanities themselves. The notion that the humanities disciplines are an integral field that has the option to decide whether or not to become social technologies is, in my view, hopelessly utopian. The cultural crisis now cuts into and through the humanities from beginning to end: the social technologies of the other side have already invaded the humanities, summoning them to the barricades to defend an old project. And the humanities have thus to decide on which side of this particular form of cultural politics they are going to engage in the future.

That crisis, it seems to me, runs through most arts and humanities departments in British universities and, looking on from a distance, it is my observation that they run through cultural studies, communications studies, and the humanities in the United States as well. The people who understand what the problem is for the humanities are not to be numbered in terms of their institutions, their programs, or what their departments call themselves. In the United States, for instance, "cultural studies" has become an umbrella for just about anything, and to ask whether someone is doing cultural studies or not is unlikely to evoke the answer you want. Similarly, those who are doing formal deconstruction of the most elegant, mannered kind are perfectly in touch with the advanced frontiers of theoretical work, yet their contribution to the resolution of the cultural crisis I have just named is nonexistent. The question is not whether one is a deconstructionist, but whether these new theoretical techniques and the new positions opened up by feminism and by Black struggles, as well as the new theoretical positions opened up by the postmodernist and the poststructuralist debates, can

be won over and drawn into an understanding of the larger historical/political project that now confronts the humanities. It is perfectly possible to write elegant treatises on the "other" without ever having encountered what "otherness" is really like for some people actually to live. It is perfectly possible to invoke the postmodernist paradigm and not understand how easily postmodernism can become a kind of lament for one's own departure from the center of the world.

These crises cut through existing new practices; they intersect the humanities; they bisect cultural studies; they interrupt people's careers; they destroy people's reading lists; they cut through the canon; they fire cannons at one another rather than establishing them. They are a series of interruptions in the peaceful life of the humanities. There may be some idea that, now, late in the day, the humanities could still ask questions like: Shall we respond vigorously to the assault on our economic and funding base? Shall we venture even a toe into these troublesome waters? Shall we take thought for the morrow? But the notion that such questions are open for us to ask and that we have the time to reflect extensively on a reply to them—that, it seems to me, is the last of the humanist illusions.