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An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

BY DAVID LATANÉ

DAVID LATANÉ: *What's going on at Duke as a place or center for literary studies with regard to the rest of the profession?*

FRANK LENTRICCHIA: This issue of the change at Duke I think has been overplayed in the profession in some ways. It's been overplayed even on the Duke campus. The Duke department in the late '70s and early '80s was a department on the point of change because so many of its key people were retiring or at the point of retiring. So the change that was initiated around 1984 was in some sense a natural change.

Given Duke's ambition to stay in the top rank, was it inevitable that people who would draw attention to the school would be hired?

Oh, I don't know that it was inevitable that they would hire people who would draw attention to the school. There were some very imaginative administrators who wanted to see that happen, and I think they made it happen. What I would emphasize is that these changes do not indicate an ideological coherence or centering at Duke of a particular position. The fact is that in the United States critical positions are advanced from academic sites. The advantage of collecting people at any one particular place is that you make it possible for there to be a kind of continual conversation, exchange of ideas, debate, and so forth, an interchange both on an intellectual and on a social basis. You make it possible for a community to come together. Ours is a community that I think qualifies strictly speaking as a community because it is not a collection of the same. I mean, in contrast to other highly visible places that have been known as centers of advanced critical theory, the Duke scene is characterized by its intellectual diversity. I think that if you run down the roster of the people that you happen to be interested in and who are getting attention these days you'll find out that if we exist as that community, which I think we do, we exist as a community of diverse writers and teachers; and it's that diversity that is our strength, because it keeps life here vital. It makes it possible for me to learn because what I'm hearing from my friends and colleagues in

the halls and what I'm reading when I read them is not what's already in my head. That's the center of my appreciation for being here. Now one of the implications of that, I think, is that we do not have a brand X criticism to export around the country. We don't think we have it, we don't want to have it, and even if we wanted to have it I don't see how we could have it.

I think there's going to be a natural tendency just because of the way people talk about each other in the profession to want to give Duke a label.

What would it be, David?

The structure of diversity you've described may make it hard to do, but some people will want to focus on the kinds of things that Fredric Jameson is doing and say that this is going to be a center for . . .

Marxist criticism? I've been called a Marxist critic, but the Marxists know better. They don't think so, that's the key. Who else would you call one? That's one thing to say about us. There's another part to your question having to do with, as you put it in your letter, "to what extent is a conclave of critics at any given spot also an enforcement of the general class-structure of academia?" That is a provocative question. Maybe I should ask you what more specifically you mean by the "general class-structure of academia"? The fact that we have hierarchized rankings of faculty?

I was thinking of the hierarchy of institutions and within that a hierarchy of kinds of professional fields: the sense that most of us got in graduate school that our goal should be not to teach in a particular situation (composition, say, at Podunk U.), but to move up the ladder of institutions.

What I sense behind the question, and you can tell me if I'm right about this, is a kind of rap about this department that is now abroad in the profession—that we are collecting here, and this is the sort of thing I've heard around at MLA and other places,

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

that what Duke is doing is hiring a bunch of, going out and paying a lot of money for a bunch of high-powered theorists whose interest is in furthering their own careers. Is that what you're...is that what the question drives at? Because I've heard that, you know.

Not entirely—but that's a natural reaction. I'll use a horrible analogy from sports: when Wooden at UCLA was stockpiling the five second best players and sitting them on the bench so that they could continue being the center for basketball—in a way this kept basketball from being good at other schools.

There's no question that Duke in the past three or four years stockpiled some reputations. What has not gotten publicity is that this department has hired and is in the process of hiring more junior people than senior people. That's been the great effort since I've been here. The maximum effort has been put into that. Now if this means that we're trying to stockpile the second best five and put them on the bench so that when we graduate, to what? I mean I don't even want to fill the blank in on that one. So that when we graduate to something else, death or retirement, they will be ready to step in. I suppose you can say that—but communities—to come back to my analogy—communities also like to sustain themselves as stories in time. They are narrative entities—narrative processes I should say—and of course we are looking to hire young people to sustain the community. You know I was a student here. I came back not because I was interested in being in the company of august personalities, whoever they might be; I was interested in coming back to a place where I wanted to live. I was interested in coming back to a place where I had been given a very generous and gentle and humane introduction to the profession as a graduate student. When I came back here a number of the people who taught me were still here. These people welcomed me; these people made it easy for me to come back, and they made it a great pleasure to come into this department. I say all of that in the face of a lot of rumors about the kind of—I mean really ugly rumors—about the kind of internal warfare that is supposed to be going on here between the old Duke and the so-called new Duke. The fact is I'm old Duke; I was here in the early sixties.

Now to come back to your other point about stockpiling. You know, it's not that. No one sits on the bench at Duke. Our junior people teach graduate courses immediately, if they want to. We want to

sustain the life of this community, and you can't sustain it by merely replicating certain intellectual types, by turning your community into a commodity; you can't sustain it by hiring people all in their forties. You've got to have a spread of the generations. This is very important. Otherwise it gets boring. Does that get at it? You know what I'm talking about, David, a desire for an after-life.

I think that's pretty fair. We've always had models of ideal communities—Elizabethan England and so forth—on a smaller level you want to build that kind of diverse community in an American university. My question is a kind of outsider's question. As these communities grow, are good colleagues being drawn away from other places, leaving the rest behind, in lessened communities?

Yeah, I see the point. You're talking about the competitive part of this thing.

And about the general health of other intellectual communities as well.

My colleagues and I wish nothing but good things for other universities. Our health doesn't depend on others' sickness. The question is not why should Duke steal away interesting people from other places, the question is why do interesting people from other places come to Duke? Or leave wherever they are for some place else? I think the answer is obvious: they're looking for something that they don't have, something that is more than intellectual. That's why I used the term community to describe what I think is coming together here. I think it's yet another reflection upon what has happened to American life. It's hard to find, any more, the kind of rootedness and historical sense of being in place, being related to a place, and being related to others, being related to something more than yourself. Given what's happened, given the mobility people have these days, given the destruction of the family really—as we used to know it—destruction of neighborhoods for whatever reason, people look for substitutes. People need to replace that; they just can't live without it. And I think what moves people is to get that. What I think of as this ideal of relationship. This is what we're trying to build here—this will come as a surprise to cynics elsewhere who think that all we're doing is coming down here and ripping off big salaries.

Critical Texts 5.2

By the way, this business of salaries. We ought to talk a little bit about this. I have a fair idea of what we're doing here—more than a fair idea—and I know what comparable people are making elsewhere, and it's about the same. It's a big lie, this notion that Duke is doing something way off the scale in order to rob people who wouldn't of course ever think of living in North Carolina. Christ, I mean, why would you? Why would you come here, you see, this bastion of racism and backwardness and rednecks? Of course I grew up in New York, so I know about racism from my childhood, and I know what it was like up there, and this is a lot of . . . there's a lot of self-styled . . . self-serving bullshit involved in these rumors, too, a lot of fear and anxiety emanating in particular from the Northeast sector.

I wanted to ask about the South Atlantic Quarterly, and perhaps about your editing of the Wisconsin series. What do you feel you're doing as an editor? How do you feel about the power of the editor?

Yeah. The SAQ issue is another old Duke/new Duke question, isn't it? What should be stated here is that I was asked to do this first by the outgoing editor, Oliver Ferguson, who thought it was a good time to move SAQ in new directions, it was time to change things. I mean, Oliver is possessed by this odd idea that if things don't change they *die*. This goes along with the other business about Duke's personnel changing too. Change is not in itself a sign of warfare, is it? It seemed natural, when I was asked, that I should ask my new colleagues to be involved in this with me. I don't really think of myself as the editor, by the way, but as a sort of chairman of the board of editors. This is really utopian thought, and it goes along with what I was telling you about community: the SAQ board ought to run more or less as a collective—more or less. Not everyone can be involved to the same degree. But as we move along, I think you'll see more and more that the various issues of SAQ will reflect the diverse personalities and intellectual issues of the people involved in this board. SAQ, if it's successful, ought to be a mirror of the diversity we have here. There's no line. We don't have an ideological line as we put it together. Compare it to *Representations* if you like.

Can we compare it to other new journals? If the old SAQ was modeled after the turn of the century and post World War One academic journals . . .

That's right, the old University quarterlies.

. . . then this is clearly based on other models.

What do you think it is? What are the models? I have no idea—I'm innocent.

It would seem to have more affinities, I should say, with journals like Raritan rather than, for instance, Representations or Diacritics which seem much more oriented . . .

Those are partyline journals.

Is that a fair assessment?

Yes. We don't even have the choice to be like *Representations*, which is an organ of New Historicism at Berkeley, because we don't agree on fundamental issues to do that. You see what I'm saying.

Another difference that occurs to me is in the editorial board; it's fairly usual for journals to be edited by people from different institutions who share certain affinities, whereas one of the things that distinguishes this is that all of the members of the editorial board . . .

Are here at Duke.

Will that continue?

Oh absolutely. This is our thing. But I want to come back to the point about intellectual diversity. The fact is that we don't agree enough to have a unified, coherent ideology propelling this thing—just as we don't have one propelling our graduate program in literary studies. What we have is a sense of what constitutes the cluster of significant intellectual issues now troubling and interesting us. We have a good sense of each other in our differences. How shall I put this?—our disagreements are focused. Focused disagreements make debate and dialogue in conversation possible along coherent lines. The debate and the dialogue are coherent; the content or the ideology is not. We're having a conversation that makes sense, because its disagreements are in touch with each other and grounded in what I'd say is a set of cultural and political issues that we think of as central. So as long as this situation obtains at Duke, and I hope that it will continue to obtain, the SAQ will reflect that, so that you won't know exactly from

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

year to year—if you're outside this community—what this magazine is going to be producing. I want it to be surprising in its contents and in its perspectives.

You've defined the journal within the context of dialogue and opposition, but have not used the word "pluralistic" at all. I think W.J.T. Mitchell has said that Critical Inquiry is edited with two cheers for pluralism. How would it be more surprising to pick up an issue of SAQ than an issue of Critical Inquiry?

My sense is that *Critical Inquiry's* pluralism rests in literary theoretical debate. *Critical Inquiry* is the premier journal in the field for that. It does that; it has attracted submissions at an extraordinary level of quality and interest for years now, and I think it's the place we all look to for the cutting edge of critical theoretical debate. We conceive of our role in a broader fashion than that. Now if that implies a criticism of *Critical Inquiry*, I want to take it back. I don't think they are narrow. I mean, I think that they do what they do wonderfully. But since they do it, I don't think we should try to compete; I mean, there's only so many people to go around. So if you look at the SAQ table of contents . . .

Yeah, the forthcoming issues—there are a number of these things which simply would not be considered by Critical Inquiry. Probably not "Post-modernism and Japan."

Definitely not "Homosexuality in the Academy."

And certainly not "The Fiction of Don DeLillo."

Certainly not "The Fiction of Don DeLillo." One issue, "The Politics of Liberal Education," will be devoted to an assessment of Allan Bloom's and E.D. Hirsch's recent extraordinarily popular and influential works. What I hope to see that issue produce is not only a critique. I think we already know how the critique will take shape. It's easy for us, you know, to produce this critique. You already know what we're going to say about it. But what is not easy for us to do, where we have fallen down, I think where the left—let's put it that way—the left in American education has badly fallen down is in producing a positive alternative. I don't think that "let a million flowers bloom" is an alternative because saying that—like God: "let there be light," "let a million flowers bloom"—the fact is a million flowers will not

bloom, because the structures of education and the structure of the social situation that the university exists in will not permit a million flowers to bloom. Foucault—you want Foucault to come to bear here. The disciplinary nature of modern social institutions will not permit a million free, beautiful flowers to grow without impediment. You see what I am getting at? So we need to produce an alternative to Pollyanna pluralism. I'm saying this is where the left in American higher education has screwed up entirely, I mean has just not done its work.

It seems to me they've let the right set the agenda and then have reacted to it, leaving either pluralism or the status quo, which in many cases is nineteenth-century liberal humanism, as the alternative.

Pluralism is a word that usually doesn't inhabit my discourse because I've always thought of it as a . . . for me that's always been a sentimental term—it's related to the "let a million flowers bloom" sentiment. The problem is that pluralism might be an ideal—might be an antithetical word. It's an antithetical word operating in our conversation; it's antithetical to the state of discourse as we see it—which is not pluralistic; it's not heterogeneous; it's too often a dreary, repetitive sameness that we see in cultural criticism. Again, a nod, a tip of the hat to Foucault for telling us about the context and the origins of the repetitive dreary sameness and the politically horrifying implications of it. So I would say if one is shooting for a pluralism, that's a kind of desire, that's a kind of political desire, to work against the grain of an institution that has been apt at producing replication rather than plurality—you see that, does that make sense?

Yeah. I might inject here something you said in another interview, which came in the context of talking about your own background: "To be where the padrone is, in intellectual terms, is to be where this 'idea of the university' is: to become a traditional humanist intellectual." Even the left has been co-opted into taking the role of the traditional humanist intellectual now—we're fighting on the same turf, trying to say we're traditional humanists too, but we don't want it quite as narrow as William Bennett or Allan Bloom—rather than proposing an alternative.

I don't see many traditional humanists around anymore, to tell you the truth, in the strict sense of the term, masters of Greek and Latin and the classics.

Critical Texts 5.2

I think what the term sort of refers to in literary circles is this soft sentiment that literature speaks above history to all ages through a certain repetitive and universal set of problems that we all have all the time and blah, blah, blah—the family of man and all of this. I mean, I think this is what humanism refers to; it doesn't have the real hard and demanding sense anymore, right? Now that idea of the intellectual, of the literary intellectual, that humanist idea that I just crudely sketched for you is a very powerful one. I think if you're looking for some point at which the various intellectuals who have recently gathered at Duke could be said to have a common ground, it would be, let's say, the attack on this notion and the effort to do the work that's historically more specified and differentiated, work that would take literature out of this gray, soupy, ahistorical atmosphere.

One of the more interesting rumors about Duke, actually, is that something will be done to the traditional curriculum.

That is in process. It will not happen overnight.

Will the major be changed away from the canon? Away from the coverage model?

Well, we've already instituted changes in the English major that move against the grain of the usual education, the canonical masterpieces—not altogether by the way, and I'm glad not all the way—I myself mainly teach what are referred to as canonical writers. I don't grant the canon an ahistorical status; however, I think one way to diversify and change the curriculum is by bringing to bear in courses writing and writers that have traditionally been absent. Another way to do it is to practice shall we say the hermeneutics of suspicion on the writers that have traditionally inhabited the canon. For me that's the more interesting task—to take the masterworks out of their ahistorical heaven.

You've talked about your project in terms of the literary history of modernism. I'm wondering if it's interesting to historicize texts that it would be difficult to make into ahistorical masterpieces, like McTeague or something.

That's too easy.

Right—but to take the things which seem to ask to be taken, as Wallace Stevens' poems do, and to show . . .

I think of high modernist lyric poetry as the last bastion of the formalist and humanist mind. I don't know if I've said this some place else or not, but this is where I think a job needs to be done, in the reconception of modernism, because that's been the place where you've had this hold up—in modernist poetry. The focus of critical theory—what we call contemporary critical theory—has really been on narrative; it's been on fictions; it's been on philosophy; it's been on critical theory itself; it's been on the essay. When it touches poetry it tends to touch on the long poem—poetry where there is narrative. But critical theory on the left has been largely incompetent to talk about modernist poetry—or poetry in the Romantic vein, shall we say—and this absence of work on such literature has in effect given the game to humanism, it seems to me, to formalism and humanism.

Because it's left genres untouched?

It's left the lyric untouched. It has little to say about it.

It seems to me that reader-response criticism has been primarily guilty in this regard as well, since all the theories are proved on novels.

Well Marxism is not innocent either; I mean . . . Marxists find their key texts usually, as you know, in fiction, in the novel—and well they should. But the work is not done. Unless you can historicize the lyric, the job is not only incomplete, it's worse than that. Unless you get to the high modernist lyric, "literature" in the old sense is still alive and well.

Where will you go in modernist lyric, besides Stevens?

Well, I'm writing this history of modern American poetry within the Cambridge history, so I will deal with all the names you know: with Eliot, Pound, Frost, Crane, Williams—those will be the famous ones. And then I'll deal with a number of not-so-canonical writers, Amy Lowell, Marianne Moore, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and I could name names for an hour here. My big problem is to make all this a story that makes sense.

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

You've stated that one of the goals of criticism should be oppositional; and even in talking about the community at Duke, you're talking out of something like Blake's phrase "opposition is true friendship."

Right. That's good.

So when you write and use a term which is bound to provoke opposition because it's going to be a term that's remembered—I'm thinking of "Manichean Feminism"—how does that tie in with what you've said in Criticism and Social Change about . . .

Do you think that sounds like a Madison Avenue coinage? "Manichean Feminism"?

No, I just think it's something that people will remember, and the Christian negative connotation carries over. How does that tie in with the notion of oppositional criticism? You knew when you wrote it that it was going to cause opposition.

I think the first thing I want to say about this issue of feminism is that it should be obvious, and I hope it was obvious to you as you read the *Critical Inquiry* piece—the work on Stevens—that this work could not have been done unless people like Gilbert and Gubar and Showalter—just to name the three big ones—my work could not have been done had not feminism been doing its work. That should be made clear. I mean the whole approach to taking the issue of gender seriously on a male canonical writer. My work is indebted to feminism; I know this and I appreciate it.

Number two, what is feminism after all? The term itself has a kind of homogenizing quality to it. It suggests that there is a single critical and political position that this group of people holds in harmony with each other. I think this is false—there are many feminisms. Gilbert and Gubar are the authors of an immensely powerful version that has liberated a lot of men and women who've read their work. I happen to think, however, that oppositional critics function against sacred cows, that sacred cows are dangerous things. And I think right now that feminism is a sacred cow, that male theorists and critics particularly are afraid to grapple with it for fear of being called sexist.

Now you know there's plenty of all-out intellectual struggle over the issues of deconstruction, over the issues of Marxism, over the issues of structuralism. There has not yet been, because we have held

back for the wrong reasons, a good healthy debate about feminism, or I should say, *feminisms*. My work on Stevens could not have been done without the impact of feminism on the one hand. On the other hand, within that work I mean to contest a particular view of gender that I think is very much at work in Gilbert and Gubar, and in their many daughters. And if you read the literature that's coming out—the catalogues from the various presses today—you will see that much feminist work is being produced and much of it—much literary, I must say *literary*; we're talking about literary feminism—much literary feminist work is deeply indebted to the vision of Gilbert and Gubar. I think there are certain problems in their work. I meant to contest those problems, and I could see no better way to do it than in the context of a debate over gender in the broader context of the positions (literary and economic) I had taken up on Wallace Stevens.

The positions I had taken up on Wallace Stevens are implicitly positions that the sort of feminism done by Gilbert and Gubar, and those who have been strongly influenced by them, cannot countenance. It is a position first of all that sets gender in history. I don't think that Gilbert and Gubar have set gender in history. I don't think *The Madwoman in the Attic* is an historicized book. The position I've taken says that the terms male and female or masculine and feminine are terms that cannot be worked with except as interrelated pairs which have situations in class, which have national sites, which have racial sites, and, when we're talking about literary figures, which have situations in literary history.

Now we come to the issue of Manicheanism in feminism—in Gilbert and Gubar's version of feminism—their *version* of feminism. It seems to me that the ahistorical character of their work has led to a setting up of the genders as sites of good and evil, and I don't need to translate that any further for you. I think this is a problem. I don't think this leads to any progress socially; I don't think it leads to any progress in the interpretation of literature. In fact, the ahistorical and Manichean notion of gender has led to a kind of separatist understanding of literary tradition in their work that merely re-inscribes all of the political problems that they would like to see resolved. I don't think that's useful. It has led to an understanding of literature that is not significantly at odds, I think, with what we were calling earlier the old traditional humanist view of literature. That is to say, there is a set of issues that preoccupy a so-called female imagination for them, and these issues have a

Critical Texts 5.2

kind of transhistorical repetitive insistence in the literature that women write. Part of that is absolutely right on. Let us say that the reason there is this repetitive insistence in these texts by women is that there is a repetitive, oppressive, sexist pressure on women that has helped to produce this repetitiveness. So, in one sense the ahistorical nature of their works is absolutely warranted and, as it were, grounded in history, the history of sexism itself. That's the most and the best I can say for their work, and I honor their work for that.

So it's chiefly a matter of taking the part for the whole?

Pardon me?

You're seeing them taking a part of the story, a true part of the story, and making it into the whole, and then—well silence and suppress are obviously very loaded terms—silencing and suppressing the rest of the story which involves . . .

Exactly—men. Men who do not necessarily have a coincidental—is that the word I want? Coincidental? No that's not it—coterminous relationship with patriarchy. All right. As Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland have said, it's time to raise the question of whether or not there's a third term outside the patriarchy/female opposition. The third term might include many men. And maybe we need a fourth term, too, that would help us to differentiate privileged women from feminists with tenure.

I'd like to go back a little bit to your sense of male fear at attacking feminism, because I think there's also a sense in which there's a male envy of feminism. If you're trained as a traditional formalist, and trained, though not overtly, to feel that a lot of what you do is useless in the world at large—writing new critical explications of Wallace Stevens' poems for instance has no social function—as a university intellectual you feel a yearning towards social involvement, and then you see some people who are able to practice something—feminism—which has clear connections outside literature.

This “you” general or . . .

A hypothetical humanist “you.” In a sense then there's an envy that feminists are doing something important; but there's also a fear that if you critique

their positions, you'll be joining sides with newspaper editorialists who deride women's studies as fluff, and you'll be labeled an anti-feminist.

There are a number of points that you've made here. Let's see if we can remember them all. The fact that some are attacking feminism for the wrong reasons should not stop anybody from launching a critique for right reasons. I mean we mustn't keep silent just because the wrong people—whom shall we name, Allan Bloom?—don't like feminism. That's number one. I mean that's intimidating; that's a subtle form of intimidation and a silencing of real intellectual exchange.

This is related of course to the business of fearing to attack feminism. Well, you know, this has been the intellectual style for twenty years. I mean you're not supposed to attack deconstruction, especially if you're perceived as a theorist. We're not supposed to do that. And you're not supposed to attack Derrida and de Man; you're not supposed to attack Foucault; you're not supposed to attack Marx . . . or are you supposed to attack Marx? Is Marxism the one thing it's permissible to attack? Now we've gotten over the fear of attacking deconstruction, de Man, Derrida, and so forth. Others have taken this matter up. But there has been a stifling atmosphere. Let's say people who consider themselves Derrideans, or de Manians, or deconstructors, or Foucauldians, or feminists have in effect said, “we have this area of truth, and if you want to belong to the club, fine. If you do not, if you choose to attack us, you are performing a heinous act, a sacrilegious act.” There's a lot of intimidation in intellectual debate over these matters. I've seen it operate up close ever since my days at Irvine. What are we supposed to do? Cower in silence?

Now this gets back to your question about oppositional criticism. I think oppositional criticism, whatever else it does, should make trouble for the clubs, the sacred cows, the hero-worshipping groupies. This de Man business is an interesting example of all this. I think oppositional criticism should take on these oppressive clubs, and that's what they are, because what they have in mind is the suppression of real difference. What they have in mind is the programmatic turning out of little acolytes and ass-kissers, and so I think that what we should do is make maximum trouble for these clubs. That's how I've always felt about it. It seems to me that there's something inauthentic, fraudulent in the desire to belong to clubs. You read my stuff. What did you

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

think? You read the stuff in *Critical Inquiry*; did you think it too harsh?

I probably shouldn't say this, but in one sense it was a brave piece.

I've been told that by others. Why brave though? Why does it take bravery? Let me ask you that.

Because you could have predicted that it would cause a fuss. And there has been a personal fuss in the response that isn't very intellectually stimulating.

Well, I take it both as a compliment and as a grievous sign that you should characterize the work as a brave attempt. I've been told this privately by other people, that it took some big—what? Fill in the blank—to jump into “shark infested waters”—that's a quotation. What a sad sign that is. What does this imply about the status of intellectual exchange? What we're talking about right now is feminism. But we could have said the same thing several years ago; we could have said the same thing about deconstruction, that it would take some *cojones* to do this. What a sad sign, what a sad political sign. I don't think it takes any bravery on my part. This is what I do. O.K., I've always done it. But I take it as an interesting comment that you should say this, because I've heard this elsewhere, and I know what you're saying.

But it is something that I think is fruitful in that it's going to open up certain issues.

I hope so. I won't be taken up with this. I've had my say and that's the end of it. I hope others think about the issues.

Five years ago, when deconstruction was at its height, you sat through paper after paper in which people attacked the view that the poem had a single determinant meaning, and they opposed this as if it were the hegemonic view, or as if anybody had ever really held it at all, and that's sort of a false oppositional view, because there's nobody to stand up and shout back . . .

I don't know. I don't think I shouted.

O.K., not shouted but answered back.

Well isn't that what we're supposed to be doing, answering back? The problem, to go back to Gilbert and Gubar, is that the real weight of their work finally is away from what we want. I mean, it puts all these women together who are not together. I mean they are together in the sense that I acknowledged before—that sexism produces a certain repetitive allegory, so in a certain sense that's true—but there's, you know, come on . . . My mother doesn't want to be sisters with Nancy Reagan or Elaine Showalter. Maybe Sandra Gilbert, maybe. Sandra is an Italian, you know.

I thought it was very telling that in their reply they appealed to an almost Kantian disinterestedness in aesthetic judgment and accused you of being partisan, when you haven't attempted to pretend you were anything but partisan.

That's right. Well, when they appeal to this disinterestedness, I think they say everything about themselves that I accuse them of. Kantian disinterest is that subtle appeal that they made throughout by calling me partisan. It's that accolade which they gave themselves in their attack on me. In effect, when they call me partisan they agree that what I said about them was a fact: that they are—that they do work in the traditional humanist mode, and they do not conceive of the essential nature of their work as ahistorical, and that they are what they claim they do not understand, “essentialists.” But this question—Why did you do this Frank?—has been asked before. I've been asked before by people who meant something else. We might as well go into this. They meant that . . . this comes from women who happen to be feminists, who say to me, “Look, we don't like Gilbert and Gubar either, but we won't piss on our generals in public.” Feminism is an unalloyed good thing is the implication here. Let us not attack it at any level, at any place, because it will give the wrong people ammunition, which we don't want them to have. Well, feminism is like Marxism, is like deconstruction. It is *not* an unalloyed good thing. There is no such thing as an unalloyed good thing, not on this planet. Why should we extinguish the critical spirit in anything? So we can love Big Brother and Big Mother?

To change the subject, I'd like to know how you conceive of your project in the Cambridge History. I just saw an ad for David Perkins' History of Modern Poetry. I can imagine the differences in approach.

Critical Texts 5.2

Well you did read the Stevens stuff, and contained in the Stevens stuff is in effect a paradigm of what I'm doing in the *History*. The Stevens stuff you read in *Critical Inquiry*—plus a whole other chunk on him that's in *Ariel and the Police*—contains the paradigm. You want me to try to describe that to you? In so far as I can know it?

Right.

O.K. What do I do when I think of myself as doing literary history? First of all I don't have a theory of it, and I suspect that we may not be able to have a theory for it either. But I do have certain rules of thumb—a certain number of instruments which are useful to me for doing this job. Where shall I start? You start where you are, within the climate of what goes by historical thinking, literary historical thinking. I mean you work through that, that's what you begin with. Now one major paradigm of historical thinking, literary historical thinking, as we've known it, is really the old influence model: you have certain writers in the past who produce a certain body of work, which other writers, newer writers, are impressed by; but the newer writers do their own work and liberate themselves from the influence, while taking the influence in—that's one model of it. Another is the Russian formalist model of literary history where any given era defines its originality by attempting to rupture itself from past models. There is a third model which has been made powerful by Harold Bloom, which goes under the rubric "anxiety of influence," his great insight. And those are the sorts of big models we deal with, we have to work with. I take all of them seriously. What each of these models of literary history has had to tell us, implicitly, is that literary history has a certain integrity to it, that literature produces more literature, that literature comes from literature, that writers come to themselves—this making sense?—through engagements with other writers. Now the thing that these three models have in common, I think, is that all of these encounters between writers are imagined as spread out over a very long historical continuum. The typical thing that is imagined is that you have a contemporary writer—say, yourself—who reads Coleridge, who has read Milton, who has read Virgil, etc. I think that that's useful, I think that writers at some level either early on or much later on conceive of themselves in that way. I think one wants to preserve a writer's sense of himself or herself as working with and against a powerful past. It may even be useful to

think of that past as existing as a father figure, as Bloom does, and it is useful to think of this as a Freudian drama, as family romance . . .

Or even the Valhalla of tradition in Eliot's view . . . you can make a little shake up if you make it in.

That's right. Now I think what has to be added to that is something that has virtually gone unnoticed, and unworked on. And it's to me a sort of scandal. Any writer I've ever known or read about—either known personally or read about—fiction writer or poet or critic, has been for a long time in their career, especially in the early phases—and by the early phases I don't mean the first year or two, I mean the period extending into the middle forties shall we say, all right?—has been acutely and even obsessively concerned with what the guys in California are writing, or what these women are doing in Chicago—with contemporary networks of writers. They are concerned with relating themselves to what goes by the name of literature and criticism in their time and place; they are concerned with defining themselves within or against that framework, and I think that unless a literary historian makes a very serious effort to get at that, we will not even come close to understanding the freshness or the originality in the writers that we admire.

I'm concerned with these modern poets, and what interests me about Frost, Eliot, Stevens, Pound—those four especially—is that they grew up in great part, and in some part absolutely, hating what passed for poetry in their day. Not that they were unaware of it—not that. The great myth is that there was nothing around Pound and Eliot and Stevens; they gave out these notions that there wasn't anything around to be interested in. Well what they meant was that there was nothing around to nourish them. There was plenty to despise, and I think one of the ways we begin to see the freshness of the kind of writing they produced—from a literary perspective, now—is to investigate writers who are not in the canon, who cannot be recovered except in older, now defunct, anthologies of American literature and American writing. You want to know what modern American poetry was in 1912, the inaugural year of Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* magazine, when modern poetry barely existed? Go back and look at the anthologies of modern poetry that were produced in this country between about 1900 and 1912. There you will find a great story. Take a look at what was being published in the commercial magazines. So that's one level,

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

that's just one point. That's the literary. I mean the literariness of literary history is involved in digging out that stuff, as well as digging out Frost's relation to Wordsworth—the struggles of contemporaries, brotherly and sisterly rivalries, as well as Freudian family romance.

I can see the other point coming, which is that there's a lot outside the literary.

Yes, the other thing, we'll move on . . . but let me add one more literary point to the literary side of this. I think the other thing I have to be concerned with is the means of literary production. What were the means of literary production in the early twentieth century before—I'll put it as a question—before the avant-garde literary magazine came into existence? The avant-garde literary magazine was revolutionary. The coming into being of that scene was really a revolutionary moment, in that writers decided to take the means of literary production—seize them in effect—in effect. They didn't seize them. If they were going to actually seize the literary means of production they would have to seize the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Century Magazine*. They couldn't seize those magazines. Those magazines were in the hands of a commercial venture, which demanded a certain kind of writing, which they couldn't stomach. So what they did was invent their own means of production. It was quite a, it was—not a revolutionary moment; I'll have to cross out that word—it was a utopian moment, a move to another social space.

So you would see that as a kind of struggle that needs to be reported?

Very much so, David, the struggle—the move from the popular commercial scene to the avant-garde scene—not that the commercial scene got wiped out. Frost cut his teeth on the commercial scene. He grew up and began to write before the avant-garde scene came into existence, so his very conception of his discourse as a poet was molded by a means of literary production which would be hostile to the production of an Eliot or a Stevens or a Pound kind of poem. When we think about why Frost, for example, tends to be excluded by high modernist critics, and high modernist poets, from the mansion of modernism, I think we have to go back and recover his origins as a writer in this sense. So that's the point that finishes off our literary topic.

Now there's of course—it's not an "of course"; the problem is that it's not been an "of course"—there's a nonliterary matrix of literary production that typically has not gotten into literary histories. The whole issue of gender as something that gets inside a poet's conception of himself or herself as a writer, inside his or her very consciousness of vocation as a writer, is something that feminism has put forward, and something that I find unavoidable. The issue of class, or the issue of one's viability as an economic being (give credit to Marxism for this), but Marxism has not yet seen how such an issue would become, like gender self-consciousness, internal to a high modernist lyric poet's conception of his poetic identity and of his poetic discourse.

You've talked about how literary Marxism has missed talking with any kind of sympathy about the middle class, and in a writer like Stevens that . . .

Well, in a writer like anybody, virtually any American writer. To miss the middle class in America is virtually to miss America. To do the nonliterary, to get your hands on the nonliterary sources of literary identity means doing something. Among other things, it means doing history in a way that contemporary theory from Lévi-Strauss on has not been interested in. I'm talking about the biographical, personal subject.

In a lot of what you're saying you can see Foucault's concepts of the archive, or of genealogy, where he's looking at struggles, but you're really making a departure when you talk about the inescapable attention to the subject in the lyric poem—it's the heart of the genre.

I think we must not forget our Foucault—we must not forget the lessons that come through structuralism and Foucault, that subjects are produced by large entities which we call institutions, archive, genealogical processes, and that therefore these subjects that are produced have a certain disciplined sameness with each other. But I think to ignore the intellectual opportunity to do detailed biographical investigations, particularly in a period of literature, our very own, where we are fortunate to have these documents—the letters, the diaries, interviews, extensive, monumental biographical studies—to ignore all this particularity, all this detail, seems to me to be another kind of scandal. I mean one cannot ignore all that. In other words, in order to do this kind of literary

Critical Texts 5.2

history, you have to go against the grain of the main message of contemporary theory; you have to get behind contemporary theory a little bit to what contemporary theory—if you believe Perry Anderson, that the decisive inaugural moment of contemporary theory occurred when Lévi-Strauss killed off Sartre—fundamentally, you know, that's his thesis, and it's a pretty good one, because the killing off of Sartre was the killing off of the individual as a subject struggling in history. So if you want a theory for this, then read Sartre. I'm not sure you need it; I'm not sure you can use it; I don't believe in a theory of literary history, really. I'm talking to you about rules of thumb, pragmatic little instruments.

O.K. Now move to a different era; I mean, I'm working in the modernist era. Move to a different place; move to medieval literary history. I think that a lot of the tools I have available to me for obvious reasons a medievalist does not have available to himself; he just doesn't have them. But if we're going to want to refresh our literary history with some theory, then I think it's time to go back to read that extended preface that Sartre wrote to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This will give the literary historian all the philosophical bracing I think that he needs—not that he should take this as some sort of sure-fire way to tell him how to do his work. You see what I'm saying?

It's something to balance against, as you say, the useful things in structuralism that make it possible to conceive of and use the noncanonical in a way that would have been impossible a few years ago. But in Victorian studies there's a new historical tendency towards talking about the archive and de-emphasizing the author to such an extent that in a recent article Jon Klancher talks about Carlyle's essay "Signs of the Times" as "The Edinburgh Review writer's essay," as if this were produced by the Edinburgh Review, the matrix, the archive, the discourse.

You're putting me on . . .

No, I'm serious—it's in Studies in Romanticism. We're still so close to the individuals of modernism—it hasn't been that long since Ezra Pound died—but the farther we get away in time from them, the more likely modernists . . .

I don't know. You think a hundred years from now they'll be talking about . . .

... the Poetry writer's . . .

... the *Criterion* writer's poems? I don't think so. We could do it any time; I mean, I fully expect that new historicism will do its job on modern writers too; it's not the job that I want to do. I simply am not comfortable ignoring all the documentary data that we have that will enable us, that will help us, to individuate the writer's struggle. Of course, under all of this I assume one thing: that it's a good thing to individuate the writer's struggle, that it's a good thing not to fold the writer back into the archive.

I'd like to leave you with one question to answer in writing. In commenting on the history of theory, you have stated that "to study theory and its history in the way I'm advocating is to try to recover from a reading of the calcified record of ideas the real conflicts." I would like to place this quotation against something Foucault said in a lecture: "Let us give the term genealogy to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge today." What tactical (or strategic) use today do you foresee from the knowledge gained from your practice of literary history?

Your question is about the linkage of cultural work (like writing literary history), which very few recognize as itself a political act, to the kinds of political struggle that almost everyone recognizes as certifiably political. To conceive of your work as having linkage is to conceive of it as assisting in those struggles. Marxists and Foucauldians are the same on this point: they conceive of their literary work as linked to political struggles, whether the big ones of class struggle and global social change, or the small, micro-struggles which Foucault talked about. I don't think of my work as strategic in that way, though I'm pretty obviously sympathetic with left perspectives. My story of modern American poetry—a story of our immediate past—will be a story of small, but real victories; of men and women against all kinds of injustices making it as writers and achieving a self that experiences itself, in however limited a space, as free and strong, of having done this against forces which are with us still and which make it difficult for us to have any self at all not already produced and manipulated for somebody else's happiness. That's the sort of story I tell myself all the time; it's not foreordained that you have to live a life of living death. Nietzsche calls this kind of his-

An Interview with Frank Lentricchia

tory writing "monumental" because it gives us the right sort of example—it comforts by teaching that we are not alone in our struggles. I am not against someone drawing the implication that monumental history is good for only one thing: for fueling our desire for deliverance, for leading us, in other words, to "critical" history—to judgment and even condemnation of the past that still causes us to suffer. The next step is "action" in the hope of social change. Given what my writers had to live through, I'd say that the past I narrate deserves condemnation—that's implicit in my story—but I don't see much point in explicit condemnation. If I tell my story in the way I want to

tell it, I'll make the past seem to condemn itself. So my monumental history is implicitly critical. That's my work; that's it. As for the translation to programmatic action, I have no practice in that; that's somebody else's work, somebody who's maybe been practicing at getting down some cunning know-how. I don't desire to do everybody's work. I told you that I believe in communities.

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