

## Chapter 1

### Public Intellectuals and the Discipline of English Studies

Changing the mode of literary analysis or changing the object of literary analysis or changing the name of literary analysis will not change the material effectiveness of literary analysis and make it into an instrument of political action. That kind of change, if it is ever to occur, will require wholesale *structural* changes of which literary analysts might take advantage, but which they could never initiate.

—Stanley Fish

The conservatism of intellectual and academic institutions is more powerful than the imagination of those who predict their evolution.

—Stanley Fish

**S**tanley Fish has always, almost from the beginning of his career, had much to say about the “profession,” about the internal workings of English studies—its objectives, its methodologies, even how it might be renamed given the massive changes the discipline has undergone over the last quarter of a century. His most cogent and provocative statement has been a small book, *Professional Correctness: Literary Studies and Political Change*, which is a revision of the Clarendon Lectures, a

prestigious invitational lecture series sponsored each year by Oxford University. He presented the lectures in the Spring of 1993, but he conceived the project—its arguments, its shape, its general thrust—at the end of 1990 when he conducted a workshop at the Folger Library in Washington, DC. As with so much that Fish has published, this book prompted considerable antipathy from a fair number of readers. He was accused of being *against* historical work in literary studies, *against* political work in English studies, *against* cultural studies, *against* interdisciplinary work in general. Not only does a close reading of *Professional Correctness* demonstrate that such charges are baseless, Fish himself anticipates all of these allegations and addresses them, both in the Preface and in the Appendix of the book. Nevertheless, critics, especially those with progressive orientations, continue to characterize this work as a conservative or even reactionary diatribe against attempts to make English studies more politically effective in the world outside of the academy.

### **The Distinctiveness of Literary Studies**

The main thesis of the lectures is itself rather simple and straightforward: Fish argues that despite the claims of those who are attempting to transform literary studies so that it is more deeply and directly connected with contemporary political issues and struggles—sexism, racism, homophobia, terrorism, and so on—when literary critics are operating *as* academics within the constraints and forums of the discipline, they will necessarily be reaching only a relatively small number of people (their colleagues in the discipline) and thus will have little or no political effectiveness; conversely, if they depart from the usual modes of expression, methodologies, and forums of the discipline and thereby discover some degree of political effectivity outside of the academy, they will no longer be operating as literary critics: they will be operating as something *other* than literary critics. Now, he hastens to add that we may very well judge this new way of operating to be valuable—in fact, we may even value it more than we value a work of criticism—but the fact remains that such political work is *not* literary criticism; it is something different. What’s more, this new work is not ipso facto superior or inferior to a work of criticism; it, again, is simply different.

This argument rests on a strong notion of what it means to be a “specialist.” As Fish points out, a literary critic is a particular kind of

specialist, and all specialists are defined by the specific traditions, histories, techniques, vocabularies, and methods of inquiry of their specializations. In fact, it is exactly this unique set of traditions, histories, techniques, vocabularies, and methods of inquiry that allows them to be defined as specialists in a particular endeavor in the first place. As a field, literary criticism—despite the competing practices, assumptions, or epistemological orientations of its individual practitioners—is constituted by certain shared objectives and ways of defining its practice over and against the practices of other academic disciplines. That is, it exhibits a unique culture and way of asserting its distinctiveness.

The issue of “distinctiveness” is central to Fish’s argument. He takes what in effect is a Derridian stance in pointing out that any given thing is defined in contrast to all the things that it is not. Literary criticism is what it is because it is *not* sociology or history or critical legal studies, and so on—although at times it may borrow from these and other disciplines. That is, we understand a discipline to be what it is because it can successfully present itself to its own members and to the external world as performing some specific set of tasks that only it can accomplish or that other disciplines are not as qualified to perform. Fish is careful to caution that he should not be read as adopting an essentialist notion of disciplinarity or of the discipline of literary studies. He acknowledges that disciplinary boundaries are always in flux, always being renegotiated: “Negotiations on the borders go on continually, and at times border skirmishes can turn into large-scale territorial disputes in which the right of an enterprise to the space it has long occupied is hotly contested” (19). Despite these battles, however, a discipline will nonetheless remain coherent precisely because when all is said and done it still performs a unique set of specific tasks.

Once a discipline can present itself to the world as being uniquely qualified to perform a certain set of tasks—explicating poems, say—it will achieve, says Fish, autonomy as a discipline; it will stand on its own as an intellectual area independent of others. According to Fish, while the boundaries of literary criticism have waxed and waned over time, the core project has remained constant: to determine what works of literature “mean.” The paradigmatic question of literary criticism, then, is, “What does this poem (or novel or play) *mean*?” (34). Thus, the distinctiveness of the activity we call “literary criticism” derives from the dialectical relationship between a work deemed (in advance) “literary” and the critic’s setting out to read (interpret) that work *as* a piece of literature. A poem is categorized as a poem and not a theological sermon or political

tract because it exhibits a certain linguistic and semantic density, and the critic approaches the poem with a cognizance of this density. In fact, says Fish, “Linguistic and semantic density is not something poems announce, but something that readers actualize by paying to texts labelled poetic a kind of attention they would not pay to texts not so labelled” (13). What ensues in the critical act, then, is an act of interpretation.

For Fish, “interpretation” applies to all participants in the critical act: the readers of the poem as well as its author. The readers apply a clearly defined set of interpretive strategies to the poem, and these strategies are so constitutive of the act that they “fill the consciousness” of the enterprise’s members, thereby making the use of these strategies less a matter of free choice (“I choose to employ these strategies and not others”) than of being swept into an activity that has a character and operating assumptions all its own. Similarly, the poet is a co-interpreter who works within the constraints of a well-established field (producing poems, in this example) and who draws on a distinct set of available strategies in attempting to match his or her intentions to those of the audience. That is, the relationship between authors and their readers is one in which all participants are “engaged in the mutual performance of a single task,” and they are “at once constrained and enabled by the same history that burdens and energizes” their respective efforts (14). By “constrained and enabled,” he means that the tradition and conventions of literary criticism make available the guiding assumptions and interpretive strategies that a critic will—or, more accurately, must—employ when producing a reading; the critic is in the grasp, if you will, of a particular way of understanding and approaching the critical act. At the same time, this very set of guiding assumptions and interpretive strategies is what authorizes or makes possible the critical act in the first place.

Because critics are in the grasp of a particular way of understanding and approaching the critical act, they in effect begin in the middle of a process that has already begun:

They go about their business not in order to discover its point, but already in possession of and possessed by its point. They ask questions and give answers—not, however, any old questions and answers, but questions and answers of the kind they know in advance to be relevant. In a sense they could not even ask the questions if they did not already know the answers to questions deeper than the ones they are explicitly asking. (15)

In other words, the critic approaches a text guided—in effect, con-

trolled—by a prior understanding not only of what the act of literary interpretation entails but what a work of literature is in the first place, and this prior understanding restricts the critic's interpretive behavior (what kinds of questions and strategies are appropriate and what are not) at the same time that it provides a clear way of proceeding.

The critic produces a reading of a literary work within and because of this unique and specialized context. In fact, it is the very fact of being located within this specific praxis that marks its participants (fellow critics) as particular kinds of specialists who are jointly operating within a common field and by ways that are immediately intelligible to one another. Despite the micro-level differences that separate the activities of one kind of critic from another—a deconstructionist from a Marxist, say—it is the larger set of common prior understandings about praxis that establish all critics as participants in a common endeavor, an endeavor that in general is clearly different from other intellectual endeavors. That is, we recognize the practice of literary criticism as a discrete endeavor because we can contrast it with other intellectual endeavors and immediately ascertain that it is distinct from them. As Fish says, it is a “requirement for the respectability of an enterprise that it be, or at least be able to present itself as, *distinctive*” (17). What's more, the activity of literary criticism is primarily an “academic” endeavor: it takes place mostly in academic settings, is pursued by people who take a specialized course of training to undertake the activity, and is judged according to standards established by the “academic guild.” It is this very process of professionalization that serves to ensure that the discipline maintains its ever-important distinctiveness.

To say that all critics operate from a larger set of common prior understandings about their praxis is not to suggest that this praxis is immutable, frozen in one unchangeable form. Fish points out that, as with any profession, literary criticism is constantly undergoing internal scrutiny as new people enter the field and begin to question the operating assumptions and strategies that are in place when they arrive. Such scrutiny may and often will lead to debates within the field about how the business of the discipline should be conducted, and it may even lead to proposed changes in the established praxis. This is a common and healthy process evident in any disciplinary area; however, no matter how much the discipline is confronted with proposed operational changes or new or unassimilated material (the field should now pay attention to these as of yet unexplored areas), it will not abandon what Fish calls its “immanent intelligibility,” its internal coherence as a field of study distinct from all

other fields. In fact, confronted by such challenges, it is most likely to reassert its immanent intelligibility, either by strengthening its previously established disciplinary borders or by extending those borders to include the new concerns. Either way, the discipline will appeal to its own coherence as a distinct endeavor, arguing either that the changes are inappropriate because they threaten its distinctiveness or that they are appropriate because they in fact fall within the purview of its distinct mission and way of operating. Thus, at any given moment the discipline will be undergoing self-scrutiny of one sort or another, and it will measure all challenges against how those challenges will affect its disciplinary distinctiveness, its immanent intelligibility.

Of course, it is entirely possible that over time the members of a discipline can forget or underestimate or not comprehend the importance of the field's immanent intelligibility to its continued existence and thus allow its borders to expand so immeasurably that the discipline would then lose its distinct shape; that is, it is possible for a discipline to lose its distinctiveness and thus no longer be able to claim that it performs tasks useful to anyone beyond its own borders. This is precisely the scenario that Fish worries may be happening to English studies as it embraces new historicism and cultural studies. If the discipline becomes so inclusive that it no longer can clearly articulate "what we do around here," it is in danger of becoming a nondiscipline:

Today, of course, there is no end of argument about the precise parameters of "what we do around here"; but those who engage in the argument push against a sense of boundaries strongly (some would say too strongly) in place. The fact that there are disputes about literary studies is less significant than the fact that the disputes are about something assumed to possess its own rationale and therefore to have achieved "immanent intelligibility." It is an achievement, however, that brings with it a considerable cost; for if, from the vantage-point of a shared expertise, we can now intelligibly say "That's not the kind of thing we do around here," we are without defence when someone turns around and says to us, "Your specialized skills have no claim on our attention, for that's not the kind of thing *we* do around *here*." (29–30)

That is, it is no surprise that literary studies, like any other discipline, engages in continual self-reflection; the relevant fact is that the general parameters of the field and its assumed rationale have remained unques-

tioned, and thus its distinctiveness is in place. The true danger is in expanding those borders to such a degree that someone—a university's administration, say—can justifiably announce that the kind of activity that we claim to specialize in is not of any use to the institution. In such a scenario, one can easily imagine English studies going the way of classics in the university curricula.

### **New Historicism and its Discontents**

I set out to consider the claims and hopes of those who believe that literary criticism can be made to engage directly and effectively with the project of restructuring the whole of modern society.

—Stanley Fish

The vocabularies of disciplines are not external to their objects, but constitutive of them. Discard them in favour of the vocabulary of another discipline, and you will lose the object that only they call into being.

—Stanley Fish

It is certainly true, says Fish, that in past centuries the craft of *writing* a piece of literature was much more closely linked to the political life of the culture. Queen Elizabeth and James I produced their own literature, and many of the canonized authors whose work we cherish today were underwritten or supported by powerful patrons in the governments of their times. As a result, many of these authors enjoyed a kind of entrée to the corridors of power that would be quite impossible—or at least unlikely—today. Thus, prior to our own age, the literary and political were much more closely aligned. A renowned poet in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, say, might very well produce a poem that he hoped would influence a certain political outcome, and he might even have a reasonable expectation, given who his patrons happened to be in relation to the issue that he was trying to influence, of exerting some political pressure.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, even though certain authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could also act in the political arena, they did so by making use of their *literary* skills: by writing poems or other literary works. That is, they employed their distinctly *literary* competence to effect political ends. Today, the relationship between the literary and the political is, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent:

What distinguishes them from us is that they could contemplate incorporating that literary intention into a political one by, say, writing a poem intended to influence military or diplomatic policy. They would then be putting to political effect a competence that was not, in and of itself, political at all. In short, they could reasonably intervene in political matters by exercising literary skills. (33)

One effect of the triumph of liberal political philosophy is that no longer can an author expect to incorporate a literary intention into a political one. Literary works are generally seen as “the effusions of essentially free minds,” and while that means that the state can no longer regulate their production, it also means that they have lost their strong connection to political efficacy (36).

Notice that this discussion concerns *producers*, not *analysts* of literature; it would be exceedingly difficult to make the case that literary critics *ever* had political effectivity. The discipline of literary studies—the profession devoted to asking, “What does this poem mean?”—is a little over a century old, and in that time it has carved out a distinctive niche for itself and has thus been able to successfully justify its existence. While the connection between the literary and the political has remained severed for all of that time, some critics are now attempting to reconnect literary studies to political action. Fish is particularly concerned about the claims of the new historicists. He cites pleas that we begin to conceive of our work as more than the “merely literary” and that literary studies become a politically emancipatory endeavor. Some new historicists claim that critical work can have an impact on the larger culture beyond our classrooms and scholarly forums when we develop strategies of subversive reading that challenge or overturn conventional thought and received opinion. Still others contend that we can and should “stretch” and “violate” the rules of how literary analysis gets done.

In response to these claims, Fish asserts that the rules of how a discipline operates are always subject to change, but not just any change; a change will derive from the discipline’s own sense of mission, immanent intelligibility, and sense of appropriateness. A particular change may very well catch on, thereby producing a new understanding of how something is done; but this new way of doing things will always emanate from and reflect the discipline’s specific praxis, its distinctive contribution to intellectual work. And while critics can certainly produce readings



that subvert or call into question *doxa* or received opinion or conventional thought, they do not simply produce a reading because it is politically expedient (unless, of course they are propagandists instead of literary critics); rather, they are first persuaded by a given reading, captured by the reading's perspicuity and cogency. That is, one "doesn't 'choose' one's readings; one is *persuaded* to them, and one is persuaded to them not by calculating their political effects, but by coming up with answers to questions that are constitutive of the present practice of producing readings" (48). Even when one sets out to produce a new or subversive or revolutionary reading of a literary work, such a reading will necessarily occur "*within* and not in opposition to the normal routines of the discipline's business, routines that are at once open, in that they accommodate themselves to novelty, and closed, in that the aftermath of accommodation is a reconfiguration and not an elimination of a disciplinary boundary" (48–49). Hence, such readings could hardly be called "oppositional" in any meaningful sense because the very act of conceiving them will necessarily depend on conventional ways of thinking; indeed, they depend on the very *authority* of those conventional ways of thinking. In other words, for a reading of a literary work to count as legitimate (as a critical reading and not as something else), it has to be recognizable to other critics as "the kind of thing we do around here," even if individuals would object to the specific content or conclusions of the reading. The questions it poses and the answers it posits must be recognizably literary, deriving from the specific traditions, histories, techniques, vocabularies, and methods of inquiry conventional to the practice of literary criticism.

What confuses many critics who call for literary studies to become more politically effective is that they conflate two senses of *political*. When critics produce a reading of a literary work, they will undoubtedly be engaging in politics, but only in a weak sense. That is, they will be participating in the micro-politics of their subdiscipline—Shakespeare studies, say—in that any given reading will be contested by some colleagues and supported by others, or its particular methodological spin will be rejected by some and affirmed by others. Fish maintains that it is necessary to distinguish this general sense of the political (the sense in which on a certain level everything is contestable and therefore political) from the more substantive and consequential understanding of the political: the realm in which elections are won and lost, policies adopted or rejected, programs instituted or eliminated. He observes that when critics produce new or revolutionary or subversive readings of literary works,

they may well be participating in academic or disciplinary politics, but they are not engaging in the kind of consequential politics that will have effects in the world external to the academy—the very kind of politics that they hope and at times claim to influence. Fish insists repeatedly throughout *Professional Correctness* that despite the intention of the critic or the critic's particular theoretical orientation—new historicist, cultural materialist, or any other—the interpretation of literary works does not have (and is not likely to have in the future) any immediate connection to the kinds of issues and concerns that circulate in the larger world of politics.

To the chagrin of many new historicists and others who hope to transform literary studies, Fish's argument that literary analysis will not lead to effective political action is specific to *literary* work, not to academic work in general. The simple fact of being an academic and performing academic tasks does not preclude someone from influencing political decisions through his or her academic work. Certain law professors, for example, can count on at least the possibility of exerting such influence through their research and publications. In contrast, there are no routine and customary avenues by which literary scholarship can and does make its way to the centers of political power. As Fish says on more than one occasion, all strong connections between the literary and the political have long been broken and seem irreparable: "The moral is clear, and fatal both to the ambitions of the new historicists and to the fears of those who oppose them: no one cares very much about literary criticism outside the confines of its *professional* practice" (55).<sup>2</sup> And this would continue to be the case even if new historicists or others were able to change the internal workings of the discipline:

Even when new historicists alter their interpretive practices so as to reflect the conviction that both the objects of their attention and the forms of that attention are deeply implicated in society-wide structures of power and legitimization, the analyses they produce will not constitute an intervention in those structures. . . . The return to literary criticism of political questions does not make literary criticism more political in any active sense. (55)

That is, because there are no longer any routine and customary avenues by which literary work can and does make its way to the centers of political power—and this has been the case, some would say, for at least

two centuries—it is no longer part of the mindset of legislators or other politicians to seek counsel from producers of literature, much less from analysts of literature; so even if a great number of literary critics were to begin writing their scholarship with political issues and an audience of politicians in mind, no one but the usual consumers of literary criticism would be listening.<sup>3</sup>

Anticipating certain objections to this argument, Fish acknowledges that debates about multiculturalism and political correctness during the late 1980s and early 1990s thrust the humanities into the public's attention when conservative commentators launched vigorous and vocal attacks on the humanities, especially on English studies. As a consequence, certain academics who enjoyed more visibility than most, Fish included, briefly found themselves on television talk shows or in the op-ed pages of national newspapers defending this or that academic practice or theory against the inflammatory rhetoric of such adversaries as George Will. Most of the critics who attempted to perform in the public spotlight were unprepared for the kind of onslaughts they faced. As a result, the entire discipline was embattled and on the defensive, "forced to answer the charge that its most prominent members believed that words are meaningless, that values and standards are political impositions, that interpretation is entirely a matter of force and will, that no one's interpretation can be said to be wrong, that there is no rationale for deciding when one work is better than another. (I know of no influential theorists who believe any of these things.)" (63). While this scenario might at first glance seem to contradict the argument that the work of literary critics is of no interest to the public and that critics have no role to play in the public arena, Fish contends that these apparent exceptions actually *prove* his thesis. He points out that those critics who entered the public consciousness did so not by virtue of their own efforts but by virtue of the efforts of those who were seeking to turn them into "symbols of a threat they do not in fact pose." What's more, what outraged the commentators who were pillorying these critics was not their literary scholarship, their close analysis of texts; rather, it was the implications that such commentators drew (usually erroneously) from the critics' work. Thus, the cause of their momentary prominence was not the work they did *as* literary interpreters; they were temporarily prominent solely on the basis of their symbolic value in larger cultural struggles.

If the new historicists had their way and managed to change the praxis of literary criticism so that all criticism were written with a concern for larger social, cultural, and political issues and with the intention of

inducing change in the world at large, the result would not only be that such criticism would fail to have the intended effect (for all of the reasons just rehearsed), but the academic world would suffer a great loss: we would lose the skill and practice of close reading that make our work both unique and uniquely valuable. It is close reading with particular attention to the linguistic and semantic density of a work that gives the act of literary criticism its distinctive character and that constitutes its contribution to intellectual life. Fish laments that were that transformation to happen, something very precious will have died.<sup>4</sup>

### **Cultural Studies and the Appeal to Interdisciplinarity**

If cultural studies tells us to look elsewhere to find the meaning of the literary text, I say that if you look elsewhere, you will see something else.

—Stanley Fish

Cultural studies, it would seem, has replaced poetry as the replacement for religion; it is the new altar before which those who would cast off their infirmities worship.

—Stanley Fish

The same arguments that Fish makes in the Clarendon Lectures against the hopes and objectives of the new historicists apply to the hopes and objectives of those who advocate cultural studies. While both groups aspire to transform literary studies into a more socially and politically relevant and effective discipline, cultural studies brings with it additional desires, assumptions, and objectives. Cultural studies is relentlessly interdisciplinary—some would say “counter-disciplinary.” It regards the compartmentalizing of the production, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge into discrete disciplines as one way in which the dominant forces of society maintain hegemony over the oppressed. That is, to the extent that knowledge is kept fragmented and specialized, it becomes increasingly more difficult to comprehend the whole picture of oppression that constitutes the lives of most citizens on a daily basis. The university is complicitous in this effort in that it maintains and polices rigid disciplinary borders and regulates the production, dissemination, and consumption of knowledge. Cultural studies seeks to overcome the

fragmentation of knowledge by claiming to take the entire social “text” as its object of study. Every cultural artifact, representation, and text, then, is a potential object of examination in cultural studies analysis. Of course, one implication of this perspective is that the effort by English studies to cordon off literary analysis as its own and to separate the texts of literature (high art) from those of popular culture (low art) is part of the struggle to maintain hegemony through the continued fragmentation of knowledge.

In effect, then, cultural studies—whether explicitly or implicitly—endeavors to create a kind of master discipline, a grand synthesis of all other disciplines. Fish finds at least two critical flaws in such claims. In declaring that all other disciplines are fragmentary and overly specialized but that cultural studies will somehow lead to a clearer perspective on the world, cultural studies is in effect asserting its superiority over all other disciplines: others are fragmented, partial, and disjointed; it is unified, whole, and complete. Other disciplines will lead only to partial vision, incomplete knowledge; cultural studies will lead to a larger perspective, more comprehensive knowledge. Elevating one discipline above all others is not only an instance of inexcusable academic hubris, it is clearly misguided. There is no legitimate hierarchy of academic jobs or disciplines. Academic work is divided into discrete disciplines precisely because each area performs a specific task or set of tasks, intellectual work that is unique and particular to itself. It is the particularity of such work that justifies a discipline’s existence in the first place. The different jobs in academic work serve specific functions and are not capable, in Fish’s view, of being ranked; they are simply different.

For similar reasons, the attempt to unify all knowledge in one master field is destined to fail. While the drive toward “interdisciplinarity” may sound like a noble endeavor (Fish suggests that at times it is professed with religious fervor), the very distinctiveness of tasks from discipline to discipline will militate against unification. Put simply, disciplinary self-preservation will exert pressure against the discipline’s being subsumed in some larger endeavor. A discipline will strive to protect the unique kind of work it does from being appropriated or from being lost forever. Fish firmly believes that an intellectual discipline does not and will not simply choose to be partners in some utopian project that is likely to endanger its well-being. He insists that “whenever there is an apparent *rapprochement* or relationship of co-operation between projects, it will be the case either that one is anxiously trading on the prestige and

vocabulary of the other or that one has swallowed the other; and this will be true not only when one project is academic and the other political, but when both are housed in the academy, perhaps in the same building” (83). A discipline is constituted by its specific traditions, histories, techniques, vocabularies, and methods of inquiry; in fact, we cannot even conceive a discipline apart from these defining characteristics. Once one discipline borrows from another—be it a theory, a vocabulary, or a mode of inquiry—the appropriating discipline immediately transforms the borrowed material into its own.

Some critics contend that because literature derives from a specific cultural context and simultaneously is defined by and helps to define that context, the best way to understand a literary text is to shift focus to the larger cultural context. Fish responds to this argument by claiming that shifting focus to the “background array of social practices” behind literature will not solve anything; it will only replace the original object of study with a new one that itself will then require explanation of what is “behind” *it*—a process that will extend on and on in an infinite regress. Because there will always be some “hidden” cause behind what is “seen,” shifting focus from a literary text to a cultural text does not get us any closer to the deeper underlying causes of a text; it only shifts attention from one object to another. What’s more, the shift in focus to a “cultural text” is not, in Fish’s view, a shift to an epistemologically or ontologically superior text; it is simply a shift to a *different* text. And this different text brings with it “its own emphases, details, and meanings which ‘naturally’ crowd out the emphases, details, and meanings of other texts.” That is, focusing on the cultural text will not “provide a deeper apprehension of the literary text or the legal text; rather it will erase them even in the act of referring to them, for the references will always be produced from *its* angle of interest, not theirs” (79). Put simply, a move toward cultural studies would be disciplinary suicide for literary studies.

Because a discipline acquires its identity from being uniquely qualified to perform one set of tasks that others are not in the position to perform (not all tasks or any tasks but a set of tasks specific to its own competence), a discipline necessarily, then, does *not* perform a great many other tasks—tasks that do not lie within the scope of its own work. If a discipline pays undue attention to the relationship between and among disciplines, it will likely diminish its capacity to perform its own distinctive set of tasks. And if a discipline diminishes its capacity to perform its own distinctive set of tasks, it will begin to lose its immanent intelligibil-

ity and thus its usefulness to anyone external to itself: the academy or the larger society. This is precisely the threat that Fish believes interdisciplinary studies poses, especially to English studies.

Those who advocate cultural studies and its interdisciplinary approach argue that disciplinary integrity is an illusion and therefore not worth defending in the way that Fish does throughout the lectures. They contend that all disciplines are social constructions and so the “unity” or immanent intelligibility of disciplines is illusory. In reply, Fish claims that academic disciplines are indeed social constructions but that this fact does not make them any less real. While disciplines—the carving up of intellectual tasks into discrete sets—are human creations rather than reflections of “nature,” they nonetheless have force. Saying that disciplinary boundaries are social constructions only explains how the boundaries got there, not that they shouldn’t exist or that they shouldn’t exist in their present form. And the same is true about the unity of disciplines. Pointing out that a discipline’s immanent intelligibility is arbitrary or that it changes over time does not make that unity disappear; it only explains how that unity is constituted: “Just because the unity is underwritten by rhetoric rather than by nature or logic in no way lessens the force of its operation in the moments of its existence. So long as it is even temporarily established, the unity of a discipline has a material existence and therefore has material effects that no analysis can dispel” (74). In fact, the very fact that disciplines are *social* constructions indicates that their form and content are not simply self-generated; rather, they “become perspicuous by virtue of relationships (of similarity and difference) with other disciplines that are themselves relationally, not essentially, constituted” (75). One implication of this fact is that a group within a discipline—cultural studies specialists, for example—cannot simply will a discipline to become something that it is not. As Fish comments in the interview in chapter 5, one can’t simply wake up one morning and say, “Today, I will redefine the context of work within which I’ve been engaged.”

Redefining the context of the intellectual work of English studies, however, is precisely the agenda of many cultural studies specialists. They hope to transform literary studies so that it is more deeply and directly connected with contemporary political issues and struggles, including sexism, racism, and homophobia. Such work, they hope, will lead to substantive political and social change. Fish’s reply to these critics is exactly the same as his argument against the objectives of the new historicists outlined above: when critics are operating *as* academics

within the constraints and forums of the discipline, they will necessarily be reaching only a relatively small number of people (their colleagues in the discipline) and thus will have little or no political effectiveness; conversely, if they depart from the usual modes of expression, methodologies, and forums of the discipline and thereby discover some degree of political effectivity outside of the academy, they will no longer be operating as critics: they will be operating as something *other* than critics. Of course, the objection could then be made that it is not up to Fish or anyone else to decide “what we do around here.” One might ask why “academic work” can’t simply be enlarged to encompass not just the usual types of tasks but also tasks involving the struggle for social change. Fish’s answer to this challenge is that what constitutes a discipline’s “work” is certainly not up to any one person or group of people; it is decided by the discipline as a whole. If we were to successfully expand what counts as academic work, we would eventually reach a point where “academic work” means every kind of work—and thus no specific work at all: if the “category of ‘academic work’ were enlarged to the point that it included almost anything an academic did—whether in the classroom, the jury box, or the town hall—the category would have no content because it would contain everything” (87). Political work and academic work, though occasionally overlapping, are distinct from one another.

Fish notes that while it is true that three forms of academic study—feminism, African American studies, and gay and lesbian studies—seem to have particularly close links to transformations occurring in contemporary society, there is little evidence that *academic* work in these areas has led to specific social or political change. The civil rights movement and the struggles for women’s rights and for gay rights did not originate in the academy; rather, they began as social movements in the world external to the academy, and the academic areas of study associated with them emerged in response to and support of these ongoing struggles. Thus, when changes in society are already occurring, “academic work can be linked up to them by agents who find the formulations of that work politically useful,” but this scenario in no way equates with academic work—scholarly books, journal articles, conference presentations—effecting or even affecting social or cultural change. In effect, these academic areas of study “piggy-back” on the larger social movements already in progress.<sup>5</sup>

While the aspiration of most cultural studies proponents is to bring about social change, usually in the form of greater social justice, many



would settle for a less ambitious accomplishment: to help increasingly more people develop “critical self-consciousness.” The critically aware person understands that “truth” is contingent and socially constructed, and this understanding is itself thought to be emancipatory. It is not that the critically aware person can escape the force of ideology; it’s that critical awareness makes a qualitative difference in one’s life. This appeal to critical self-consciousness is a common theme in much cultural studies literature. For Fish, however, there simply is no such thing as critical self-consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Being critically aware in the way that it is typically described would necessarily entail simultaneously understanding that one is embedded in ideology and somehow mentally floating free of that embeddedness,<sup>7</sup> and this is inconceivable:

Critical self-consciousness, conceived of as a mental action independent of the setting in which it occurs, is the last infirmity of the mind that would deny its own limits by positioning itself in two places at the same time, in the place of its local embodiment and in the disembodied place (really no place) of reflection. It is to this latter place that cultural studies promises to bring us by relaxing the grip of forms of thought and categorization specific to particular disciplines. (104)

The particular form of cognitive activity that we term reflection, then, is central to cultural studies; in fact, Fish sees cultural studies as the attempt to institutionalize this activity. It’s not that he believes that reflection itself is impossible; he in fact acknowledges that it is a common activity for most of us. He believes, however, that some cultural studies proponents have made claims for reflection that it couldn’t possibly make good on. He contends that reflection does not float above the practices that are its object and thus provide “a vantage-point from which those practices can be assessed and reformed.” Instead, 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). That is, no amount of critical self-consciousness will enable people to achieve the kind of distance from their practices and assumptions that cultural studies advertises as being the result of its work.

## Public Intellectuals and the Work of English Studies

Almost everyone wants to speak to more people, but the trick is getting those people to listen or even to hear you.

—Stanley Fish

The public justification of academic practices is too important a task to be left to academics.

—Stanley Fish

A central theme reiterated by new historicists and cultural studies specialists alike is that a principal way for academics to make their voice heard by society at large and thereby enable them to influence social change is to resurrect the notion of the public intellectual: someone that the public consistently turns to for insight on any number of subjects. A public intellectual would expound not only on issues deriving from his or her academic area but on a wide range of subjects relevant to a broad audience, and such a person would do so by gaining access to forums of dissemination outside the confines of the academy—national television, newspapers, and magazines, for instance. Throughout the Clarendon Lectures, Fish repeats his contention that such hopes are unrealizable. It is not evident, for example, how one *becomes* a public intellectual in the first place. If it were simply a matter of choice, many of those who are calling for a return of the public intellectual would already enjoy greater access to the public. In addition, becoming a public intellectual is not exclusively a matter of gaining access to forums of communication; one then somehow has to ensure that people will *listen*. The fact is that given the structural relations between the academy and the larger public, no reliable avenue exists for preparing oneself for such a role. As Fish points out, there is “no degree to be had, no accepted course of accreditation, no departments of Public Relevance” (117). One might choose to become a public intellectual, but, after having made such a choice, there is no established procedure or formula that would dependably lead to that desired result.

A central defining characteristic of the public intellectual is that such a person can command the public’s attention, and, according to Fish, this factor alone disqualifies most academics. By definition, academics are marginalized within the confines of the academy, and the academy—the so-called ivory tower—is not a likely or even suitable forum from which to command a large public audience. Becoming an academic, then, is not

an appropriate strategy for becoming a public intellectual: “Since one cannot gain that attention from the stage of the academy (except by some happy contingency), academics, by definition, are not candidates for the role of public intellectual. Whatever the answer to the question, ‘How does one get to be a public intellectual?’ we know that it *won’t* be ‘by joining the academy’” (118).

Fish is quick to point out that it is certainly true that a sizable number of academics do appear in public and address a large audience. To illustrate, he cites a lengthy list of academics who would be familiar to most people who pay attention to the popular media—a list that includes Catherine MacKinnon, Edward Said, and Carl Sagan. But such individuals are not public intellectuals in the usual sense of the term; instead, they are what Fish calls “cameo” or “rent for a day” intellectuals. Cameo intellectuals are academics who are invited to appear on a given television talk show or to write a particular op-ed piece for a national newspaper because they are considered authorities on the issue in question. Typically, such forums pair off two or more academics with opposing viewpoints so as to increase the interest level of the program; that is, such forums appear to be more about entertainment and ratings than about delving deeply or substantively into complex intellectual subjects. Cameo intellectuals are only given a forum when a particular issue enters the news; otherwise, they have little or no access to large public forums.<sup>8</sup> This model hardly matches the usual sense of what it means to be a public intellectual. For Fish, a public intellectual is “the *public’s* intellectual”: someone to whom the public “regularly looks for illumination on any number of (indeed all) issues.” As things stand now, however, the public “does not look to academics for this *general* wisdom, in part because (as is often complained) academics are not trained to speak on everything, only on particular things, but more importantly because academics do not have a stage or a pulpit from which their pronouncements, should they be inclined to make them, could be broadcast” (119). In short, the structural relations between the academy and the available public forums of communication are such that the call for the return of the public intellectual is naive at best.

From time to time an academic will become influential outside of the academy—at least temporarily. Alan Bloom comes to mind, and Fish cites the case of Leo Strauss, the conservative political philosopher who railed against the dangerous relativism of postmodern thought. A host of individuals in the Reagan and Bush administrations picked up on Strauss’ views, and, as a consequence, his perspectives had great purchase for a

number of years. And, of course, from time to time academics will leave the university to accept positions in government, thereby exerting some influence. The salient point, however, is that while it is always *possible* for an academic to exert influence through his or her work or through securing an appointment outside of the academy, there is no reliable and customary avenue by which this can be accomplished:

But 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 that 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)

Commanding a large public audience and connecting one’s work up to that audience is simply not a matter of will; it is a matter of chance. Given the seemingly insurmountable barriers to transforming the world by becoming a public intellectual, Fish advises that literary critics seek their satisfaction in the pleasures of producing literary criticism (and, to Fish, such pleasures are abundant); otherwise, he warns, they will face a lifetime of constant frustration as the desire to extend the influence of their work into “precincts incapable of recognizing” or responding to it will go “forever unrealized” (98).<sup>9</sup>

The aspirations of those who seek to influence public policy aside, there will always be a need to justify academic work to the public, to demonstrate that “what we do around here” is of value and therefore deserves support. That is, while abandoning the distinctive work that defines our contribution to society in search of some wider, less-well-articulated influence on the public would be fatal, severing all connections with the public would be just as detrimental. In fact, justifying academic work to the public is essential to a discipline’s continued well-being. Especially at a time of shrinking budgets and demands for accountability, a discipline cannot merely content itself with *self*-justification. This need to speak to the public about our distinctive contribu-