Stanley Fish opens his 1989 essay "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do" with the observation that "as an agenda interdisciplinary seems to flow naturally from the imperatives of left culturalist theory." In the decade since this essay first appeared, the parallel rise of cultural and interdisciplinary studies in the American academy has certainly borne out the perception that they are intimately linked. But what is interdisciplinarity? Fish offers a characteristically shrewd and funny critique of the pretensions that accompany the version he calls "radical interdisciplinarity" (242), but he never stops to examine the concept on which the whole discussion turns, the concept of a discipline. A surprising omission for the critic who had earlier argued so persuasively that what we take to be disciplines are in fact "interpretive communities" whose key procedures are consensually supported social practices. But perhaps not so surprising if we notice that this essay, like so much of Fish's recent work, insists on the odd notion that logically distinct activities cannot be mixed in practice. "Once you turn . . . from actually performing literary criticism to examining the 'network of forces and factors' that underlie the performance," Fish objects, "literary criticism is no longer what you are performing" (247). If literary criticism were a discipline with a recognizable method, a discipline in the strong sense of the term, then such an objection might hold. But in spite of the imposing technical vocabularies that academic critics love to flourish, criticism isn't really a discipline at all. To the limited extent that it does have a recognizable identity, literary study is characterized by precisely the sorts of contradictory procedure that Fish keeps describing, in one of his favorite phrases, as not "a possible mode of action" (246). Needless to say, Fish as a master critic is himself a preeminent artist of the impossible in just this sense.

Let me begin, then, by asking what a discipline is. I have already begun to speak as if a clear distinction could be drawn between a discipline in the strong sense and a social practice, but of course we know better. Not every social practice is a discipline, but every academic discipline is certainly a social practice. Even the natural and mathematical sciences, which I take as my model for disciplines in the strong sense, are social practices whose political dimensions often go unacknowledged. The contrast between disciplinary procedures and social practices

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*This talk was delivered as part of a video teleconference on “Renaissance Studies at the Millennium,” hosted by the City University of New York Renaissance Studies Program, on March 31, 2000.*
is, in fact, an excellent example of logically distinct activities that are not just mixed but inseparable in practice. The distinction I want to draw between a social practice and a discipline in the strong sense cannot be equated, then, with the boundary between scientific and humanistic forms of study, for it is a distinction that persists within every field of study.

Chemistry, for example, is a discipline in the strong sense not because social determinants have no place in its practice but because it is by definition engaged in a perpetual struggle to purify itself of merely social determinants. It seeks to screen out such influences by basing the knowledge it produces on a strictly regulated and highly refined method that can in principle be employed by anyone. This doesn't mean that Chemistry is purely objective, but it would be foolish to claim that the stunning instrumental value of the natural and mathematical sciences has nothing to do with the experimental method and its ability to achieve a relative independence from social determinants.

Northrop Frye argued long ago, in the "Polemical Introduction" to The Anatomy of Criticism, that if literary study hoped to become what he called a "progressive" form of knowledge, it would need to follow the example of the sciences by rigorously distinguishing between methods and objects of study. By "progressive," Frye meant teachable: just as scientists teach science, not nature, critics can only teach criticism, not literature. This argument is not without force, and those who lament the rise of "theory" in the curriculum at the expense of "primary" texts may feel, looking back, that Frye helped pave the road to this particular hell. But for all our current emphasis on methodology and interdisciplinarity, we still do not have a method and we are still not a discipline. Many of the fields often cited as primary examples of interdisciplinarity—Women's Studies, for example, or African-American Studies—are defined by their objects, not their methods of investigation. And while both of these academic movements have recovered a great deal that was blocked or ignored by past inquiry in traditional fields of study, they have done so not by developing new methods of investigation but by directing a wide range of well-established scholarly procedures to new ends. They have revolutionized the social practices, not the methods of investigation, that generate knowledge in the humanities and the social sciences.

Again, these distinctions are all provisional, relative, and easily deconstructed, but I would argue that this is generically true of the terms and distinctions on which the humanities rely. I am often asked to identify my "methodology," and I have read far too many dissertation prospectuses that claim to have such a thing, or, in the more ambitious instances, to create one. I take this usage as symptomatic of a certain tendency in literary criticism, and especially in cultural studies; if my remarks today have any particular target it is this tendency to burble on about "methodology." You may have noticed that I use the word "method," if only to deny that one exists. A method is a systematic way of doing things; it's a term we borrow from the social sciences, which borrow it from the sciences. In the absence of systematic procedures that are independent of the practitioner, what sense does it make to
speak of methods? In criticism, repeatable results aren’t really much valued; the special insights of the individual practitioner are what we admire. When Stanley Fish writes, in the passage I quoted earlier, about "performing literary criticism," his diction is more apt than his argument, for literary and cultural interpretation are socially constituted as performative arts in which the virtuosity of the performer has more value than what the sciences would call the "interobserver verifiability" of her conclusions.

These assertions are relatively more valid for "criticism" than they are for "scholarship"—to invoke another highly provisional distinction. The nondiscipline of literary study contains many subdisciplines that rely more heavily than interpretation does on systematic procedures: archival research, linguistics, textual editing, and critical bibliography come to mind as examples. The relatively more glamorous genre of "theoretically sophisticated literary analysis" does often purport to be systematically applying analytic methods drawn from one or another of the social sciences, but the defining characteristic of this genre is that it puts the apparatus and vocabulary of method to rhetorical use. The most accurate term of praise for such work is not "rigor" but "sophistication," with emphasis on the etymological root.

Critics are sophists. In this respect our colloquial language is truer than our formal meditations and reflections, for we do not in fact test theories, nor do we build the possibility of disconfirmation into our critical procedures. Instead we execute "moves," like athletes or chess players. We have only one method, and it’s neither feminist, psychoanalytic, deconstructive, Marxist, formalist, nor historicist. It’s called argument, and it’s not epistemological but rhetorical. The fact that so many practitioners imagine themselves to be employing something as grand as a "methodology" appears to me as evidence for the effectiveness of certain powerful academic tropes. One of the most universally practiced (and widely effective) rhetorical moves in modern criticism is to create "self-consciousness" about one’s critical practice by doubling one’s "method" into an "exemplary" reflection upon itself. This may not be a "possible mode of action" in Fish’s aquarium, but it is the normative mode of contemporary critical practice. In that sense, what critics do may indeed be called methodology, if what we mean by that term is "a discourse upon method." But since the discourse is itself rhetorical, the dominant form of contemporary criticism may be described as methodology without method.

If Fish is wrong, does that mean his opponents are right? Criticism is not a discipline defined by its methods but a set of rhetorical practices; is it, then, a form of political action? Cary Nelson makes a strong case for criticism as politics in "Always Already Cultural Studies: Academic Conferences and a Manifesto." If Fish is recto, Nelson is verso. He sees the “Americanization” of British cultural materialism as a bad thing because it blunts the polemical edge of critique. In an effort to sharpen the scythe, he moves from ad hominem ridicule of several prominent American academics who spoke at conferences between 1988 and 1990 to a manifesto that defines cultural studies by posting sixteen theses about what it is or isn’t. Point 8, for example,
asserts that to ignore "the long, complex, and often contentious history of cultural studies' engagements with Marxism, from Williams to Hall . . . as many Americans do, is to abandon cultural studies for a fake practice that merely borrows its name" (199). A critical endeavor that cannot be defined by its methods must instead be defined by its loyalties—-that is, by its history and its politics.

I find much to agree with in this essay. Cultural studies is not just the application of standard close reading practices to magazine ads and popular songs; it does not consist simply in the study of popular culture, nor does it require that we abandon the canonical works of high culture; it is not simply the formal analysis of sign systems; it does require that we study the production and circulation of texts as well as their formal properties, because it conceives of culture as a field of relations among objects and forces; it is not a fixed method to be learned and applied, but a politically inspired program of intellectual work that needs to be aware of its own history; it is concerned with the social and political effects of its work, and therefore studies the past in relation to the present; it needs to keep on rethinking its own loyalties and commitments; it should remain skeptical both about identity politics and about the politics of disciplinary knowledge.

In short, the question is not whether literary study should be political, for it already is. The question is how. "The choice of what scholarly writing to do," Nelson tells us, "involves a decision about what one's most effective cultural and political intervention can be" (200). I would say the same about the choice of what teaching to do, and also about the choice of how to write and teach. Writing in the mandarin style of high theory, for example, or using one's classroom authority to impose leftist politics on students who are required to be there and to submit, are both in my view thoroughly reactionary practices.

Deciding how to be effective is not easy. The weakest moments in Nelson's manifesto come when he takes a crack at prescriptions for action. English departments, he suggests, should "make a commitment to hiring faculty members who do not have degrees from English departments" (202). Right, let's take it out on the graduate students—those new PhDs, already facing a depressed job market, who are the one group within English studies most likely to open the field to newer interests. And when the New Right accuses cultural studies of politicizing the classroom, let's not deny the charge: "Cultural studies can step in and be the very thing the right loves to hate" (204). As effective political strategy, that one reminds me of Walter Mondale's acceptance speech at the Democratic convention in 1984. Reagan was running for reelection by warning that the Democrats would raise taxes, and Mondale decided it would be a good idea to agree. "Of course we will!" proclaimed Mondale—"but so will the Republicans. The only difference is, we won't lie about it." The Democrats in '84 never knew what hit them.

Politics is a realm in which it is very hard to be smart, especially if you are motivated by the desire to be righteous. Imaginary "us and them" oppositions exert a fatal attraction, beguiling intellectually sophisticated but politically naïve academics with
fantasies in which evil has a name and a face and can finally be confronted. The cachet of terms like "oppositional" and "dissent" rests on just such a layer of self-congratulatory political fantasy: we may not be able to end oppression, but at least we know who to blame it on. There is something almost comical in the way this imaginary politics entails a fear of success, for to gain power is to become little better than one of the wicked. In his introduction to the collection that reprints Cary Nelson’s manifesto, Isaiah Smithson warns that "The institutionalization of culture studies confronts several problems... Foremost among the problems is the likelihood that the original conceptions of culture studies will lose their oppositional edge, become distorted, be absorbed, and die the subtle death that institutions can casually impose on dissent." This kind of reflexive opposition is the political equivalent to aestheticism—not art for art’s sake, but dissent for dissent’s sake. Its fear is comical because reflexive dissent is always already institutionalized by the logic of opposition. My children sometimes play what they call the Yes-No game, and it works in much the same way. I say Yes, and you, being oppositional, say No. We repeat this exchange, gradually building up our speed until it becomes institutionalized—that is, until the mechanism of contradiction picks up enough momentum that I can trick you by switching suddenly to No. If my timing is right, Yes will be out of your mouth before you can stop yourself. You’re coopted, and I win.

Sounds mechanical, doesn’t it? But the game is not itself mechanical, rather it’s a way of playing with the mechanism of opposition. The unpredictable element of the game is timing: either of us may try to switch at any time. If I try too soon the reflex won’t work: I’ll say No, you’ll say No too, and I’ve lost. But if I wait too long the reflex will catch me instead of you: you’ll switch to Yes, I’ll say No before I can stop, and again I’ve lost.

The problem with the game of opposition is that by definition, only two can play, whereas politics is a game with many players. When advocates of political criticism start playing the Yes-No game, they forget the theory that underlies their own work. Nelson does this in the peroration to his essay, but earlier, under manifesto point 6, he had insisted that "Cultural studies conceives culture relationally. Thus, the analysis of an individual text, discourse, behavior, ritual, style, genre, or subculture does not constitute cultural studies unless the thing analyzed is considered in terms of its competitive, reinforcing, and determining relations with other objects and cultural forces" (199). My point is that cultural studies needs to conceive of itself relationally, and that it needs a more complex model of relationality than reflexive dissent. Gerald Graff identifies the problem with that approach:

Conceiving cultural studies as an expression of nothing but oppositional discourses seems to be not only undemocratic but also seriously mistaken from a political and tactical point of view. It perpetuates progressive academics’ bad habit (although one that is hardly peculiar to us) of speaking only or mainly to our own kind.
Reflexive dissent is a failure of relational thinking.

From what I've said so far, it shouldn't be surprising if my own effort to prescribe an effective politics of scholarship and teaching turns out to be the weakest moment in this paper. I do value the relative autonomy of the University as an institution, and of literary study within the University, for these are the social and political conditions that make our work possible, however we choose to pursue it. They are the conditions that enable us to debate the political implications and effects of doing our work in one way rather than another. But the other side of that relative autonomy is that we have relatively little direct impact on political and economic processes. This is not to argue that what we do doesn't matter or have consequences, only that it isn't a direct means to social and political change. The social arrangements and political practices we are most likely to influence through our work are those of the University and of our own professionalized fields of study.

Beyond those horizons the political effects of our work are, and should be, highly mediated and indirect. That is the meaning for us of the truism that all politics is local. In my estimation, to conceive of the struggle in more grandiose terms is a category mistake, like attacking a tank with farm tools. Within the horizons that are proper to its endeavors—the classroom, the academic department, the interdisciplinary program, the University, the structures and venues of professional research—cultural studies has much to contribute. I think there is nothing to be gained by trying to limit in advance the kinds of projects worth pursuing; I hope that the medievalist my department hired recently will not devote the rest of his career to theorizing internet pornography, and I may try to talk him out of it, but if he does it well enough I'm still going to support his tenure. He too has his relative autonomy. Its existence as a political reality is a historical achievement of the first order, and I think that handing this achievement on to another generation of scholars and teachers is our most important political task.

I take this task seriously because we are now witnessing the rapid and uncompromising transformation of the University. The relative autonomy that has characterized our peculiar institution since the late middle ages in Europe is yielding to a corporate dynamic that seems as irresistible as a force of nature. Tenure is under attack; public funding is receding even in times of economic prosperity; and while all this has happened before, it is accompanied now by the privatization of knowledge and its means of production on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the professional class in this country finds its social existence splintered between a restless, vacant hedonism and a compulsive work ethic that are all too easily recognizable as internalized versions of the linked economic imperatives to increase productivity and consumption. We work harder and harder for commodities that offer less and less meaningful pleasure.

This may sound like a grim diagnosis, but I haven't even mentioned the redistribution of wealth in our new guilded age, the rapid abandonment of the economic underclass that goes along with this redistribution, the flood of media
I do think that such efforts are political in an important way. In a field like Renaissance Studies, constantly glancing back over its shoulder at "the fate of Classics," we are intensely aware that to be marginalized is a highly relative position. The canonical works and traditions of European high culture may be marginalized by the ascendancy of American literature, popular culture, and the immediate appeal of the contemporary. Elements and tendencies within those classic works that do not confirm the master narratives of the moment—the emergence of nationalism, the oppression of women, the poor, and non-Europeans, the growth of colonialism—may be marginalized by single-minded reading practices. The pleasures of discovery in reading and writing may be marginalized by the imperatives of corporate productivity or by those of a censorious political righteousness. The most important political goal of Renaissance studies should be to maintain a dynamic relationship with the artifacts and traditions of the past. To do this we must indeed avoid the dangers of institutionalizing our thinking and writing, but we must recognize these dangers in order to avoid them. They lie not only in the specters of bureaucratic inertia and corporate sponsorship but in the self-gratifying fantasies of partisan politics and the inevitable tendency of a professional class to speak only to itself in a language no one else can understand.

I was going to offer yet another manifesto, but fortunately it looks like there won’t be time. So I will end by tossing out a last thought that is by no means a final one. What if the most politically shrewd and effective critical practice, at this particular moment in the American academy, were to resist both the contradictory dynamic of workaholic hedonism and the insularity of academic professionalism? We might resist these things on the institutional level by seeking to scale back the factory speed-up in our workplaces that proceeds under the name of "productivity"—the next time you hear anyone suggest requiring two books for tenure, I suggest you throw a tomato at them. I’d like to spend less time on meetings, program reviews, outcomes assessments, and the rest of that dreary bureaucratic nonsense parade; I should be spending more time interacting with students, their parents, and the public. In our teaching and writing, we might try reviving for criticism today a version of the program Wordsworth announced for poetry two hundred years ago. That program emphasized a return to ordinary speech—the language, we might now say, not of "a man speaking to men," but of men and women speaking to each other—and it emphasized "the grand original principle of pleasure." Our work should not be drudgery, any more than our pleasure should be empty. Behind
Wordsworth lies the older humanist tradition of intellectual work as *serio ludere*, a form of serious play. That is what I want for my own teaching and writing: to overcome for myself and my students the disastrous cycle of productivity and consumption by finding and affirming a mode of work that is playful, open, and deeply serious, not driven, anxious, and combative. Wish me luck!