

Nathan Hensley. Phone Interviews with Stanley Fish, Davidson-Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Humanities and Law at Florida International University and Floersheimer Distinguished Visiting Professor of Law at Cardozo School of Law.

The following exchange took place by phone over several days in early February, 2015, and has been minimally edited for typos and continuity. I have added links where appropriate.

NH: Were the tensions in and surrounding the Duke Department a result of disagreements about “Theory”?

To some extent. What happened in early 70s to the mid 80s, when the so-called theory boom occurred, is what happens in any discipline when a set of practices that acquired the status of being routine and obvious -- a status where these practices were second nature, and you couldn't do anything else -- were suddenly challenged, and challenged vigorously, by some high powered and increasingly visible types. In effect, a whole bunch of people who'd bought a ticket on a train called literary studies, and understood how it worked-- who understood how one went about performing exercises of evaluation, how one went about justifying and explaining those exercises-- all of these assumptions that had been internalized by everyone were being suddenly and publicly challenged. And of course the defenses in such a situation is to regard the interlopers as crazy or unintelligent or both.

NH: So there was a widespread resistance to this intellectual insurgency?

A lot of departments responded that way, but they discovered that the grad students were interested in this stuff, whatever it was. Many departments thought they thought that they could hire one [person who could teach “Theory”], and satisfy the demand that way. And it could be clean and contained.

NH: And what period was this, would you say?

I would say this would have been in the 70s, between 1970-75. Now you can mark this period out with the School of Criticism and Theory, at Cornell, which was founded in 76. The stated purpose of the School of Criticism and Theory was to introduce members of the profession -- not novice members, mind you, but veteran members-- to all this stuff, stuff from France, from Germany, from Russia. I joined up in 77, which was the second year of the school; I'm still a member of the board of directors. When I taught my first year, we had there Murray Krieger, Edward Said, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, myself, and a music theory scholar by the name of Leonard Meyer. What was noteworthy was that most of our students were full professors with enormous lists of publications: clearly they were there for what we might call, in another context, a “refresher course.” They were there because they were aware that something was brewing and it wasn't going to stop, but they didn't know how to get a handle on it. So there was this 6 week course, where you could be brought up to speed; and you could decide what to do after that -- you could accept it, reject, or whatever-- but you now knew what this thing was.

That gives you an idea of how it was in 76-77. *Now*, of course, at the School of Criticism and Theory the students are either advanced graduate students, young assistant professors who are being sent by their institutions, and an increasing number of academics coming from abroad, who are coming to study these matters with people whose names they recognize. The entire population of this School has changed, in other words, and this reflects that theory has become part of the landscape.

But there was that period, in the 70s and perhaps in the early 80s, when departments were torn apart by this stuff. Especially when senior professors started to see the enrollments of their own courses decline.

NH: That point about declining enrollments makes me wonder whether you would characterize the controversies over theory in those early days as a dispute about ideas, or a dispute about resources?

It was definitely a dispute about ideas, since it was about by what basis you could make interpretations, how you could assign meanings to textual objects in some kind of coherent interpretive process. Those are all disputes about ideas. Later on, in addition to the high theory people, the new historicists came in -- and now all the sudden there was a question about whether literature was even separable from other historical processes. So you would get formula like Louis Montrose's famous formula, "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." All of this was very, very upsetting to people who'd been trained, as I had been, in new Critical Methods of close reading -- assumptions about the text as object and about how you go about reading that object.

NH: So was it a world historical methodological struggle, as was sometimes alleged by participants on both sides, or was it more like a series of micropolitical battles among professional personnel?

I don't think those need to be separated at all. When I was in Berkeley in 74, this stuff was starting to percolate; I was teaching courses in literary theory in the late 60s and early 70s, and there was no particular resistance to it then. When I went to Hopkins in 74-85, it was the same way -- of course, the itinerary of theory had begun there [at Hopkins], with the famous conference in 1966, so they were open to those ideas and were used to them. There was an acceptance of, and a familiarity with, those approaches. Then, in 85, my wife and I left and went to Duke -- and it was as if we'd slipped back into the 50s. Even genre studies and film studies courses were thought to be kind of odd and suspect.

NH: And you brought in with a brief to change that?

In a way -- not that in particular. I was brought in with the idea that the university wanted its liberal arts programs to achieve the status that many of the other programs in the University already had. [Lists a series of other units at Duke.] All those other schools were in the top 4 or 5 of professional schools in the country. But the liberal arts departments were not. That was the idea: bring me and Fred Jameson and some other people, and try to raise the level of achievement and expectation.

We were able to hire, and we did hire, some extraordinary people, and that meant that we could hire some extraordinary younger people [i.e. junior faculty], because they wanted to go be at this place. And that in turn meant that we could attract top tier graduate students, who wanted to be working with those people.

So it's both an ideological and a professional story, and the two are intertwined. It's a story about the clash of ideas and about the different ways of thinking about things -- about the rise of antifoundationalism across a number of disciplines -- and it's also a story about how people began to understand the making of a career. Think about it; if you're a younger person, are you going to go with the people about to retire, or are you going to go with who's doing the newest and most exciting new work? The answer is obvious.

NH: Do you think that the “resistance to theory” was in part, then, a resistance to professionalization as such?

Yes, absolutely. There was a culture of the amateur. Especially in the liberal arts, in philosophy, literature: the idea that you weren't a professional in any sense in terms of being a seeker of status or personal distinction of any sort. [In that model, y]ou were a man or, increasingly, a woman who was a person of letters, of discernment; and this was reflected in how you lived, the kind of house you had, how it was decorated, the kind of wine you were able to enjoy. That was all part of the package of genteel amateurism. And that lasted for a long time. So then, when this whole new generation of hungry careerists emerged, a lot of people were taken aback -- and when salaries began to rise, and people began to ask for perks, summer stipends, research assistants, and doing this aggressively -- this disturbed a lot of people.

NH: What do you think of that change? Do you have an opinion on these historical changes or do you remain agnostic about this question of value?

I certainly never hired or didn't hire anybody because they agreed or disagreed with me about some matter of ideas. I hired people because their work would be exciting to the younger members of the profession and the department: people like Eve Sedgwick, Houston Baker, Jan Radway. Those people were doing work that was exciting, and they were exciting, passionate people who were doing it.

The other thing we did had to do with spousal hiring. There wasn't a tradition then of taking care of spouses, and families want to be together -- it's not just a matter of George Bush style moral platitudes. It's a way to build a department: find academic couples and offer them a way to be together. That was one thing we did, but the other thing was publicity -- as you know publicity feeds on itself.

NH: And that was helpful, when you constructed the department at Duke?

Absolutely! As my friend Walter Michaels said to me, whenever I see somebody looking up to the sky in contemplating something, I assume that they're contemplating an offer from Duke.

NH: What do you think that episode has teach us, if anything, about the state of the humanities now?

I'm afraid I don't, because I've been out of the liberal arts world for ten years now. I've been teaching at a law schools.

NH: Well I'll try to state the question more directly: did the Duke thing kill the humanities, as was sometimes alleged?

Are you familiar with Pierre Bourdieu's work? Well, there used to be something called cultural capital. If you could speak about Greek tragedy, Russian novels, or what have you, that used to help you as you moved through your professional career: it was useful in the world of law or management, or whatever: it was useful in your professional life to have at your fingertips these sorts of references. That no longer exists. That idea doesn't seem to be a feature of our cultural landscape anymore, and you can't drop names and references -- to Dryden or Milton or Emily Dickenson, or Ralph Waldo Emerson-- and feel confident that there will be anything coming back from the person you're talking to. That cachet that was provided by humanistic study, that identifies you as a "worthy" person -- I don't think that applies any more. And that, in combination with the lessening of distribution requirements, where people used to be pretty much forced into courses, that has much lessened in force. So people can go through college without ever encountering any of these so-called major figures or so-called major events. Enrollments get smaller, and then universities can then cut the course.

NH: Is it possible to stop this historical sequence? Or is this an inevitable thing?

I don't see any response. I don't see any response to it that could work. Aside from a wholesale restructuring of the universities that would take them back to the past. And the budgetary issues of modern universities have made it less and less likely that these dd can flourish as they once did. I myself, from a position of some distance from these matters, I don't see much hope. Then again, when I go around and speak at colleges, places like Wesleyan or San Diego State, I find extremely engaged students who are absolutely enamored of humanistic study.

NH: Are you proud of what you did at Duke?

SF: Proud is not the word I would use. I felt that those of us that came to Duke, we did raise the profile of the university, we did bring stellar students, we did raise the visibility of the humanties, and all of this helped to make Duke -- along with the success of the basketball program of course [laughs]-- this helped Duke advance. People don't realize that Duke back in 85 was not what it is today. It was a Southern institution, on the order of a Vanderbilt or perhaps even Emory. But it was nowhere near UVA. When lecturers would be visiting United States universities, Duke was not even on the map then. It was not on the circuit. That all changed.

NH: Finally, Would you say that the stereotype that the Duke implosion happened because of some inherent nihilism in "Theory" --

SF: Well first of all, there was no “Duke implosion.” When my wife Jane Tompkins and I left Duke to go to Chicago, almost all the major people were all still teaching there -- Eve Sedgwick, Marianna Torgovnik, Houston Baker, Karla Holloway, David Aers, Sarah Beckwith, and my particular friend Michael Moses. Annabel Patterson and Lee Patterson had of course gone to Hopkins. But all those people were still there! So what are you talking about, the implosion? And Skip Gates had gone to Harvard. It was *still* a powerhouse department, and it was a powerhouse department that lasted. When I left, that department had lasted for fifteen years. And there was no nihilism, of course, that was ever a part of what we did there: we had strict requirements, we ran multiple courses on Milton, on Shakespeare. So I don’t know where that all came from.

NH: The issue of *Lingua Franca* that had the Duke article in it showed a hot air balloon on the cover, deflated and crashing, and called it “the department that fell to earth.”

I remember that article.

NH: It was taking the Duke story as a kind of emblem of the fundamental vacuity of the theoretical approaches as such.

Do you believe that? Was that your experience at Duke?

NH: No, not at all -- quite the contrary.

Right: no. No. I don’t think that was accurate.

NH: So then why was that narrative so powerful to people?

I don’t know, I have no idea; you’d have to ask the people for whom it was powerful.

NH: I guess what I mean is, did that narrative affect you at Duke, did it have real consequences, despite being false?

Well, of course we got attacked all the time by the Durham newspaper, and the student newspaper, but that was just rearguard action. The administration was totally supportive throughout that period.

NH: So you don’t keep up on literary studies at all now. Is that because you’ve turned away from literature; have you rejected it?

No not at all, I haven’t rejected anything. I’ve just moved into the law. I’ve just become increasingly interested in the law, and I concentrate on that now.

[I conducted a follow up interview with Professor Fish several days later.]

NH: If you were re-recruited at Duke today -- or some other school in similar position--- do you think it would be possible to accomplish the kinds of things you did then? Why or why not?

For reasons I mentioned last time, it would be very difficult for me to answer that question, since I've been out of the humanities for so long now. I just don't know the lay of the land.

NH: Your own work was picked out by culture warriors as nihilistic or as you said earlier, anti-foundationalist -- but with "foundations" now meaning something like "attacking the foundations of culture." I'm assuming you don't view yourself as doing that, but what was your impression, then, of the attack coming from the right on, in your case, Reader Response theory?

Well much of that response was based on a misunderstanding about what theory is. That's a deep intellectual point, but one not deeply understood by those who were writing about it.

NH: When I mentioned the NYRB last time, you kind of sighed. What was your sense of that publication's role in the culture wars?

[Laughs.] Well the *New York Review of Books* represents a certain Manhattan sensibility, you know. One imagines bright and brittle conversations in somebody's well appointed and very tasteful living room, lined with books; a tastefully decorated living room. There would be well-informed conversation, and a lot of references to people by their first names, because everyone there in the conversation would naturally be familiar with everyone else and would of course have all the same references.

NH: What was your sense of their role in the Duke episode?

Oh, I really don't recall.

NH: Well, what was your impression of the role that the upper-middle-brow literary press, if you want, more broadly played in what you called the "rearguard" attacks on the Duke department during the period?

Oh they played the same role that the media always plays, and the role it's playing once again. If you pick up a *New York Times* or the *New York Post* even today you'll again find essays and editorials about academics, mocking them for excesses or inscrutability, and the frankly instrumental tack on these issues [implied by such attacks] is more and more respectable, or even standard. Everyone seems to agree now that the right questions are about utility, about the degree to which graduates are able to secure gainful employment after a given course of study. The press likes that kind of thing, because it likes to ally itself with common sense and "realistic" views of higher education.

NH: I know you said you'd pulled back from literary studies in recent years. But one thing you said in 1998 still registers as an amazing diagnosis of literary studies in the current moment. This is you in the *Duke Chronicle*, in Septmeber 8 1998

“If people could figure out what English departments were supposed to do for the 21st century, everyone would be very grateful to whoever figured it out. Ethos? Sure. Overarching mission? Sure. I haven't seen any in the marketplace recently.”

Here we are in the 21st century. If you were somehow forced to run an English department now, what ethos or overarching mission would you build it around, if any?

I said that? [Laughs.] The only English curriculum that I'm interested in, and I don't anticipate that it will be adopted by any universities any time soon is one that's simply focused on the object of humanistic attention -- poetry, drama, philosophy-- and unashamedly so, and doesn't pretend to tie that attention to objects or to yields that would have 'value' in terms of monetary utility to society. I describe this in an essay I have in a new book on academic freedom. [[Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom, Columbia UP, 2014.](#)] Questions of utility are put into the background. Another name for this approach is the ivory tower. It's now a commonplace that this isn't what the university wants to be, an ivory tower, but my argument is that rather than fleeing the ivory tower, we should embrace it.

In the current situation, that is, what is being demanded of humanities scholars is justification from the point of view of utility, but this demand cannot be met. When the demand for justification comes from outside, from outside your own set of procedures and protocols, and says 'do it on our terms,' -- that is, when justification is being asked for in terms that are not your own, that is a bad idea.

NH: But you don't think that this return to the ivory tower would be an appealing idea from within the assumptions of the contemporary university, or contemporary neoliberalism?

No, I don't. [Laughs.] Do you?

NH: If somebody was making a movie about the Duke English department, what would be the genre? What would be the opening scene?

Oh, I don't know. Maybe something from a David Lodge novel. You could show a department meeting, with all the old guard, very comfortable in their roles and in their work, and then the new guard, on the other side, and you could have some very minor curricular or personnel issue come up -- it was always the areas of curriculum or personnel that would bring these things out-- and then all the issues would quickly come out.

NH: What genre would this be, then?

Oh, I suppose something approaching farce.

NH: It sounds like it would be more the story, as you mentioned last time, of an inevitable generational struggle, old versus new, is that right.

Yes, exactly.

NH: Something approaching farce is a great phrase. When I spoke with Thomas Pfau he called it a melancholy farce. But you don't sound melancholy at all, it sounds like it was actually quite funny.

It was quite funny, it was very funny. No, I don't have any regrets about that period, I don't see anything to be regretted about that period at all. My only regret, actually, was that Michael Moses and I decided to teach Thomas Pfau to play basketball, which was a very big mistake -- he had these enormously long arms, and he was just very difficult to play against.

NH: What is there about the Duke episode that you know, but that the culture wars coverage didn't understand?

There is a line from Wordsworth somewhere that captures what I felt about being there at that time. "Bliss was it in those times to be alive." [Fish slightly misquotes Wordsworth, from Book 11 of the *Prelude*, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive."¹] You can go and find that line. That's what it felt like to be there.

NH: Let me read that back to you: "Bliss was it in those times to be alive"; that's from the *Prelude* I think, the Revolution parts. That's amazing.

Well it's there somewhere; you can go and find it.

NH: So that would be the headline of the story about Duke English, if we told it today?

SF: [Laughs] Yes, yes. I guess so.

¹ Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven! O times,
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once
The attraction of a Country in Romance;
When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,
When most intent on making of herself
A prime Enchanter—to assist the work
Which then was going forward in her name. (*Prelude* XI, 692-700)