Words about Words about Words

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The earliest of the essays in this volume was published in 1981 and the latest only recently completed, so that the collection represents a compact period of barely half a dozen years. I mention this chronology because, in a career like mine, which has been marked by shifts in theoretical emphasis if not in theoretical allegiance, it seems useful to delineate the extended moment in which the ideas in these essays have their sway. Not only do these essays, with their several interests, reflect upon one another, but the three groups into which I have arbitrarily placed them overlap sufficiently for me to move some of them from one to the other with almost as much justification as I can provide for having arranged them as they are. I have reserved for the final group ("Reconsiderations of Special Texts for Special Reasons") essays whose arguments largely depend on my responses to individual literary works, even if in some cases those arguments might be appropriate to one of the other two groups of essays. That each of the works I have chosen is hardly a casual example but rather has been most pointedly selected for the argument I can get out of it I would not pretend to dispute. I have divided the remaining essays into two other groups: those that emphasize the implications for social or intellectual or academic institutions yielded by recent movements in criticism and theory and those that emphasize the nature of these movements themselves, or of individual critics, especially as these reflect upon my own theoretical development.
I am not being altogether accurate when I speak of this as a collection of previously written essays. In order to come closer to reflecting my current thinking and to help relate them to one another, I have added new essays and have revised almost all the others, some of them substantially. Indeed, faced with the opportunity of this publication, I rewrote and enlarged a number of them so that they have not before appeared in anything like the form they take here. But in these revisions, some of them extensive, I have tried not to alter either the position or the spirit I intended them to display in their original form, so that some potential collisions between the earlier and later essays have been permitted to stand.

I do not want here to summarize the arguments that follow by making an extended theoretical statement; I prefer to let the essays, with their different shadings, speak for themselves. But I would like briefly to justify my title as a serious one by saying a word on behalf of the prepositions, the *abouts,* that hold it together. Recent theory has made the status of the *about-ness* of discourse thoroughly problematic, and I find myself trying to rescue some sense of that *about-ness* without blinding myself (as some others have done) to all that my theorist colleagues have written to make us question our previous certainties. Yet, though I now add qualifications that reflect my epistemological skepticism, I still urge that the capacity of a discourse to stand in a secondary and descriptive relationship to another discourse—if not to the world—is one that no serious writer about writings can altogether give up for the chaos of words upon words, texts upon texts, that threatens if the *about* is withdrawn. It is out of this lingering stubbornness that I have italicized the *abouts* I use in my title.

In my continuing dialogue with poststructuralists, I must acknowledge—for all that I give way to in their arguments—that in the end I remain, with respect to literary studies, a *sauve qui peut* theorist, in retreat but still anxious to take with me what I can of the critical tradition, even while I join in undermining its grounds. For I agree with them that the traditional place of the poem as art object, in effect a spatial entity, requires ontological assumptions that have been undone by what we have learned about the nature of human experience as well as about the workings of language and of its texts. Yet I insist that the critical tradition held its long sway because it confirmed the ways in which our culture had apprehended and valued its literary works; and it collaborated in creating that culture’s literary canon that in turn validated the literary criticism produced to sustain it. That canon and those works, however institutionally ordained, achieved and held their
status under the aegis of a theory of the aesthetic, both as a mode of experiencing and as a kind of object, that licensed them. It has all been a circular procedure, but it has worked for us: it has had a salutary function in producing the richness and the depth of the vision our culture has handed to us, whatever else it has, unfortunately, given us with it that might make us suspect darker motives. It is this claim for an aesthetic domain, traced back to Kant at least—if not to Aristotle—that has been most under siege, most subject to suspicion, perhaps even totally obliterated, by recent theory in its more extreme versions. Such versions of late have come to include historical and social-political critics, against whom I also must defend a qualified version of this claim.

I continue to allow for some residue of the aesthetic dispensation, though only as circumscribed by an acceptance of how certain kinds of verbal sequences have functioned for us in our culture, at least until the explosions of postmodernism in the arts and in theory. So, in seeking to keep this cultural awareness with us, despite our underminings, I do hang back from reducing away the aesthetic: what I have given away in ontology I try to get back via anthropology. But of course what I then have is far different—and less—than what I used to have. Still, I remain convinced that our culture cannot, even now, do without a concept of the aesthetic, even in this hedged-in and reduced form, and for more than reasons of nostalgia—indeed, for reasons deeply rooted in our most civilized sensibilities that want to flourish still, even in the face of so shattering a challenge. But all this is for the pages that follow to establish.

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clarity, no matter how strongly I complained, in my defense, about the
unavoidable complexities of the theoretical problems I was addressing.
To her persistence I owe considerable improvements throughout my
manuscript, although I am, doubtless, still some way from satisfying
her high standards.