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Janell Watson

On Free-Wheeling Careers

An Interview with Barbara Herrnstein Smith

Barbara Herrnstein Smith, known for her contributions to literary theory and for an unusual interdisciplinary career, is Braxton Craven Professor of Comparative Literature and English Emerita at Duke University. Born in New York City, Smith was equally passionate about science, the humanities, and the arts from the time she was a teenager, stargazing with fellow amateur astronomers as well as reading and writing poetry. After initially training in biology, experimental psychology, and philosophy at City College in New York, Smith attended Brandeis University, where she received her BA summa cum laude in 1954 and a doctorate in English and American literature in 1964. She taught literature at Bennington College in Vermont from 1960 to 1972 while revising her doctoral dissertation, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End*. Published by the University of Chicago Press in 1968, it won both the Christian Gauss Award and the Explicator Award and brought Smith's work wide attention.

From 1973 to 1987 Smith taught at the University of Pennsylvania, first as professor of communications at the Annenberg School and soon after also as a member of the faculty of the English Department. The influential journal articles on literature, critical theory, and language theory that she wrote during the 1970s were collected and published under the title *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (University of Chicago Press, 1978). At the University of Pennsylvania, Smith founded and directed the Center for the Study of Art and Symbolic Behavior, cofounded and chaired Penn's Graduate Program in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory, and was named University Professor in 1981. In the late 1970s, Smith began working on theoretical problems of value and evaluation, the focus of a year spent at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford and another year at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Articles and lectures on this topic developed into her pathbreaking book *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Harvard University Press, 1988).

Smith moved to Duke University in 1987, and in 1988 served as president of the Modern Language Association. Her continuing and

expanding interests in epistemology, twentieth-century intellectual history, and related debates over science studies, relativism, evolutionary psychology, and the relations between the sciences and the humanities (for example, the 1990s “science wars”) led to two more books, *Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy* (Harvard University Press, 1997) and *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth and the Human* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005; Duke University Press, 2006). In 1999 she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and in 2001 was named an honorary fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science for her “distinguished contributions to . . . a common scientific and humanistic understanding of knowledge and its advancement.”

Smith joined the faculty of Brown University in 2003 as Distinguished Professor of English, a position she held in conjunction with her position at Duke University, alternating semesters between the two, until her retirement from teaching last year. Her 2006 Dwight M. Terry Lectures at Yale University were published as *Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion* (Yale University Press, 2009). This book brings together many strands of Smith’s intellectual history—from biology to poetry, from the philosophy of science to the psychology of belief—even including, though obliquely, the heavens that she studied so avidly as a junior astronomer more than sixty years ago.

This interview took place in Durham, North Carolina, on February 28, 2012.

Watson At the 2012 MLA convention, you presented a paper provocatively titled “On Not Teaching Literature.”

Smith I was invited to give a talk at a session called “Why Teach Literature?” and, thinking about what I would say, I realized I hadn’t actually taught literature in thirty years. When I was at Bennington College in the 1960s, I taught everything from Greek tragedy to modern poetry, but when I moved to Penn in 1973 my appointment was in the Annenberg School of Communications, where I wasn’t expected to teach literature at all. They had hired me as a specialist in what they called “verbal communication.” No one told me exactly what I should teach, but I taught works by anthropologists on oral poetry and the origin of writing systems and works by Russian and French literary theorists on authorship and semiotics—in effect, pre-Derridean grammatology and proto-post-structuralism. For a few years I also

taught Renaissance poetry in Penn's English department. Then, in the early 1980s, I began teaching the introductory course on literary theory in their new graduate program in comparative literature, and, as it turned out, I would teach versions of that course for the next thirty years—first at Penn, then at Duke, a few times at summer institutes, and finally at Brown. The scope varied over the years, and I kept updating the readings. Sometimes we read Aristotle and Viktor Shklovsky, sometimes Derrida and Erving Goffman. For a few years it was Kant and Bourdieu. In its final spinoff at Brown, it was Nietzsche, Foucault, and Latour. But certain themes were recurrent, including various angles on language and aesthetics. I subtitled the MLA talk “a chronicle” and meant it to suggest, among other things, what a free-wheeling career one could have in the past as a nominal teacher of literature.

Watson Could you elaborate on the differences in career possibilities, then and now? Are the new constraints related to the professionalization of graduate students?

Smith To some extent, but not entirely. I studied and taught at some unusual places, and that probably made a difference as well. Brandeis was just beginning as an institution when I was studying there in the 1950s, and the university was extremely idealistic in its relation to the intellectual world. Certainly there was the expectation that, as a graduate student, one would be successful as a published scholar and go into teaching; but no one talked of a specific tailoring of interests or studies for the job market. Other things mattered more: showing that one was smart or knowledgeable, doing something original, being socially or ethically conscious—and that was true of most of the graduate students I taught at Penn and at Duke in the 1980s and 1990s.

To graduate students then, and also later at Brown, I often said, “Avoid premature prudence.” What I meant was, don’t be tailoring what you study, what you write in your dissertations, to follow what you see as most professionally successful now. If there’s some topic or angle that really interests *you*, then that’s what you should follow, because you are part of the generation that’s coming into the profession, and that’s what is likely to be interesting in the future. Of course, one doesn’t want to be naïve about the practices of the profession or lead students down some rosy path toward unemployment or irrelevance. But I remember a time when—and certainly places where—

the motor for graduate studies in literature was specifically and unashamedly intellectual, and I think that must remain the case if the literary academy is to survive at all as an intellectually significant institution.

Watson Even though you've had joint appointments in different departments and centers, you've usually been attached to English departments.

Smith I think of it more the other way around. My degrees are in English and American literature, and I've had appointments in English departments, but I came to the field rather late—I had studied a great deal of science and philosophy at CCNY—and I identified more, all along, with more interdisciplinary fields, including communications and comparative literature. I was lucky, when I started to teach, to have positions at Bennington and then Annenberg, where I could play out interests in fields like aesthetics, anthropology, or psychology. I was happy when Penn's English department offered me a joint appointment, because I enjoyed teaching literature and literature students. But the department was rather stuffy and confining in those years, and I had been spoiled by all the textual roving I was able to do at Bennington and Annenberg. So I was glad to join people from various language departments at Penn to form a new graduate program there in comparative literature *and* (we added very proudly; this was the early 1980s) literary theory. It was a very good fit for me and, in fact, very much like the literature program at Duke when I joined it—not foreign-language based and not Euro-centered, but theoretical and interdisciplinary.

Watson How have you experienced the evolution of English departments over the years?

Smith The English department at Brandeis was quite remarkable during the years I was there, in the mid-1950s. The faculty was a combination of New York intellectuals—people like Irving Howe and Philip Rahv, very smart, mostly left wing, and wonderful teachers—and European émigrés, exceedingly learned people; plus some unconventional types like my mentor, J. V. Cunningham, a very austere poet and Renaissance scholar. The Bennington department in the 1960s—it was “Languages and Literature,” not English—was also unusual, but in a different way. The atmosphere was not political or

especially learned, but it was intensely literary. My colleagues were mostly writers—sophisticated, interesting people who could not have imagined talking about scholarly careers or going to a meeting of the MLA. I used to refer to myself jokingly as “the resident scholar” at Bennington—a twist on schools that often had, in those days, a single “resident writer.”

I think that the move by most English departments—including Penn and Duke—toward a greater global reach has been all to the good. The moves into areas like cultural studies and electronic media were probably inevitable given the earlier expansions to film and other popular media and the changing student population. I think that departments of English, because it's the de facto national language, will continue to be a locus of some form of intergenerational transmission of literature and literary culture. I certainly hope something is. But I don't think we're going to see the older periods of literature taught or studied very much in the future except in a few elite places. I remember spending several months studying the Variorum Edition of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*—all six volumes. I was immersed in it because I loved the poetry but also because the scholarly notes, pages and pages of them, gave me an entry to a world of knowledge—about the period and about classical thought and literature—that I found exciting to come to know. I think it's going to be increasingly rare for students to seek or enjoy that kind of purely literate learning.

Watson You've been involved with comparative literature at Penn and what used to be comparative literature at Duke. What are the relationships between English departments and foreign language departments, which of course are the composition of the MLA, of which you've been president? You've seen this relationship from several angles.

Smith Some comparative literature programs have been strongholds of traditional Eurocentric concerns and scholarly approaches, but in my experience they figured most significantly as channels for the introduction of European thought. Important new work in Europe was generally ignored in Anglo-American departments of philosophy, and it came, if not through French or German departments, then through the kinds of intellectual interchange you could have in comparative literature departments. Of course, people in comparative literature departments had to negotiate their own differences of language and tradition. But if those differences didn't produce extreme

national or linguistic insularity, they had the opposite effect: a cosmopolitan quality that I missed in most of the English departments I came to know.

Watson The audience for your work has included literary scholars, critical theorists, cultural critics, scientists, historians, analytic philosophers, Continental philosophers, sociologists, religious studies scholars, and so forth. How have your readers in various fields responded to your work?

Smith Well, I've had fans and critics across the board. It generally isn't a matter of field. It's more a matter of intellectual temperament and prior intellectual commitments. For example, people who believe firmly that some values are—or should be—immutable are going to be distressed by the very title *Contingencies of Value*, and the book certainly caused a lot of distress among traditional humanists and philosophers. People in religious studies are generally happy with my discussions of belief, certainly with my critiques of rationalist accounts of it, though some of them think I'm too kind to scientists. Scientists who are not already fully armed science-warriors seem to like my discussions of science, especially my ways of explaining its relation to the humanities. But I can always count on a certain amount of furious condescension from some analytic philosopher in any audience where there happens to be one. There are two reasons for that. One is that they see me as practicing philosophy without a license, which is to say I take on these grand topics, like truth or value, and don't go through the verbal-logical routines that are par for the course in academic philosophy. But I also think that the strong reactions from at least some analytic philosophers is that my views on such basic matters as language, truth, reason, and argumentation itself are at odds with some bedrock notions that are traditional in the field or, in fact, definitive of it. That said, I should add that I have had very cordial intellectual relations with a number of analytic philosophers, especially philosophers of science, at Duke and elsewhere.

Watson As a result of *Contingencies of Value*, you've long been associated with relativism, but it seems to me that a notion like complexity better describes your work. I'm thinking, for example, about *Natural Reflections*, in which you show that the very terms *science* and *religion* include a wide range of ideas, practices, institutions, techniques, and so forth. Moreover, there are many overlaps, since, as you say, both

involve many of the same human cognitive tendencies. You describe your view of human cognition as “ecological” and “dynamic,” terms closely associated with complexity.

Smith I think we all have a tendency, when we are faced with multiplicity and difference, to simplify, and especially to create hard-edged dichotomies. What I’ve observed, and I see this in all fields and at all times, is a tendency to divide arrays of complexly differing, overlapping things into just two kinds and—this is also important—to set them in evaluative opposition: positive and negative, *truly* this and *merely* that, genuine knowledge versus mere belief, and, especially, enlightened *us* versus deluded *them*. These processes have the useful effect of stabilizing what we’re thinking about and make it easier to refer to what’s important to us. But of course they have tremendous downsides also. At least one of the important functions that intellectuals can perform is to reveal what is being forgotten and obscured when we engage in those processes. What I try to do in discussing science and religion is to call attention to the multiplicities, continuities, and ongoing interactions that are there but obscured or forgotten.

As far as relativism is concerned, it usually operates as what I call a straw herring—part straw man and part red herring. People charged with relativism may be, for example, historians, anthropologists, or sociologists who question commonly asserted moral absolutes or claims of universal intuitions or objective judgments. But rather than deal seriously with the questions raised, defenders of those views—for example, theologians or moral philosophers—charge these scholars with maintaining or implying absurd things, such as “anything goes” or “everything’s equally good” or “you shouldn’t judge things as better or worse.” Most people would agree that our perceptions and judgments depend on our positions and perspectives, that those are inevitably affected by where we’ve been, what we’ve known, and what our experiences were, and that the differences among all these are not readily escaped or transcended. But none of these observations, which are certainly relativistic in some sense, implies that anything goes or that all things are equally good. Drawing such improper inferences is what I call the egalitarian fallacy. It amazes me how many people fall into it, and from what high places.

As for the notion that people should not judge, that certainly doesn’t follow from the sorts of observations I just mentioned. We evaluate all the time. It’s not a matter of should or shouldn’t. We can’t stop, that’s the way we—and not only human beings, but all

organisms—live. We continuously orient ourselves differently toward things that seem better or worse, more or less desirable. In relation to art, morality, and the intellectual world, we continuously ask and decide whether objects, acts, and ideas seem better or worse. We usually decide on the basis of what we know, what we have seen, what we can imagine, what we can see as the likely outcome, and, of course, what we care about; but we usually don't spell it all out, either to ourselves or to other people, and we usually don't have to.

The notion that the contingency of value implies that you can't say that anything is truly terrible—for example, that torture is absolutely wrong—seems to be what people worry about. They worry because there's something—a condemnation or approval—that they feel must be affirmed in the strongest possible terms, and they're afraid that attention to conditionality, or contingency, or relativity deprives us of some rhetorical power or moral force that they think is necessary for us to act appropriately. But I think that's a mistake about how evaluative language operates and about what motivates us to act well or ill.

Watson Could you talk about the context that motivated *Contingencies of Value*?

Smith What motivated it most centrally was my feeling that critical theory, insofar as it spoke to the question of value, really hadn't thought it through very well. At the same time, I found the discussions of value among most philosophers very narrow and remote from people's actual experiences and practices. Philosophers reviewing the book were horrified that I—nonphilosopher, mere literary critic, perhaps mere woman—actually took issue with Kant in it. But my own key points of philosophical reference on these questions were Hume, whose essay “Of the Standard of Taste” I thought was crucial but also deeply ambivalent; Dewey, especially his very original “Theory of Valuation”; and, above all, Nietzsche.

The book was published in 1988 at the height of the canon wars in American universities, and many readers mistakenly associated it with those battles. But its central ideas actually originated many years before, in a talk that I gave in the mid-1970s in a very different intellectual and institutional world. The talk was for a session of the MLA titled “Evaluating Shakespeare's Sonnets.” The idea of the panel's convener was that we panelists—all scholars and critics of the sonnets—after the many years of ups and downs of their

reputation, would finally provide what he called “a just estimate of their value.” I found that idea and the language that went with it very pompous and silly, but it was possible for people to think and speak that way then. The talk I gave, which played on the famous description of true love in one of Shakespeare’s sonnets, was intended as sort of a send-up of the session; but it also expressed my skepticism about current notions of true value and objective judgments. A long essay elaborating the talk was later published in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, and it became the first two chapters of the book.

Ideas from the book were enlisted, for better or worse, in the canon wars; but the ideas themselves weren’t motivated, as some of my critics evidently believed, by a wish to attack literary canons or even to make them more demographically representative. My point was not that the standard reading lists and anthologies were unjust to, for example, women or non-Western writers but that the arguments used to defend the standard selections, by largely Western, male writers, were empty or manifestly—that is, empirically—wrong. As I also tried to indicate, the familiar ways of getting around these problems and facts were circular. For example, if you pointed out that these classically great texts with alleged universal value were not actually valued by a great many people, then the answer was that there was something defective about those people—usually that they hadn’t been properly educated or that they just didn’t have any taste. And if you then asked what made the right kind of education or how to recognize good taste, then the answer was that they were what led really good critics to appreciate really great texts. These circular, self-affirming answers, it seemed to me, pointed to forms of unconscious self-privileging—that is, assuming that one’s own situation, perspectives, education, and interests, or those of one’s group, are obviously good and proper and should be universal or normative for everyone. I thought those assumptions should be questioned as such, along with standard ideas of what literary value—or any other value—was and how evaluations actually operated.

Watson Have the practices of evaluation and valuation changed?

Smith Yes, at least in literary criticism, certainly since the mid-1970s. There’s much more consciousness of the institutional mediation of value, of the fact that many complex social and institutional processes are involved in forming both our individual tastes and what we call canons. I think there is, at least among people who are thoughtful

about these questions, a greater consciousness of the contingency of literary value and less pomposity in issuing literary evaluations.

Watson We still have a canon.

Smith *A* canon, yes. But there's more than one. There are now canons of women writers and minority writers, and canons of non-Western classics. I don't think there shouldn't be canons or that we could prevent them from emerging. In every academic field, certainly in the humanities disciplines, there are works that are acclaimed and referenced over and over again by influential scholars and teachers. The reasons are various and the specific contents of canons shift over time, but there are also forces that stabilize them. Certain works are acclaimed because of how well they suit people's tastes or serve their interests in a particular cultural or intellectual context; they are then cited and re-cited, and then they become obligatory to cite. In the field of culture, nothing succeeds like success. Once a poem, or a play, or a piece of music comes to be known as a masterpiece or a classic, it becomes much more readily available for further notice, for other uses, and to serve other tastes and interests. It gets republished, re-cited, and performed over and over; multiple translations and editions are published; many imitations or spin-offs are produced. All of this cultural reproduction creates yet another effect: the effect of familiarity, of happiness with what one already knows and what one knows is valued by others. Being canonical has effects that reinforce and preserve canonicity.

Watson So when the organizer introduced the panel as an attempt to arrive at a just assessment of the value of Shakespeare's sonnets, it was not really a question.

Smith Yes, at the time the session was convened, in the 1970s, the high value of Shakespeare's sonnets was taken for granted. For most of the New Critics, as you can imagine, the sonnets were absolutely wonderful—their density and intensity, their emotional and formal complexity, and because they were Shakespeare's. But, at the same time, they had been hated in the past by people like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Hazlitt, and certain important later critics—for example, John Crowe Ransom and Yvor Winters—had raised questions about their sentimentality or, in Winters's case, about how bad some of their endings were. Winters's complaints about the sonnets' endings

were, in fact, one of the things that led me to write *Poetic Closure*. I asked myself, what makes the ending of a Shakespeare sonnet good or bad, and then I just continued asking it about poetry generally.

But to go back to your question and that original occasion: the convener's idea for the MLA session was probably something like, "Time has passed; the clouds have disappeared and we can now see the sun directly. We are no longer blinded by ignorance or bias." That's a very common metaphor in these cases. Hume used it in his essay when he was describing Homer—a glory, he wrote, that no clouds of ignorance or envy could obscure. Of course, the earlier critics were upset by the self-abjection and the homosexual overtones in many of the sonnets, and you could say that historical biases led them to that view. But I don't—and didn't—think that we or any group of critics, simply in coming later, were without biases, without interests; that we could simply pick up a sonnet, read it, and see right through to its true value.

What we experience as the value of a poem, or of anything, is always going to depend on who we are, where we sit, what we know, what we care about. There is no way to identify a value—of a poem or of anything else—that is outside such contingencies. What we can do as critics, whether formal or informal, is indicate as well as we can our own experiences and, in effect, predict how other people will respond. And as theorists, we can try to identify the contingencies—that is, the conditions, perspectives, and interests, sometimes very subtle and varied ones—that affect how the value of various things (films, novels, new media, and so forth) is experienced. That's an important task for a cultural theorist, especially when such contingencies are obscured, and especially if their existence is denied altogether.

Watson Do you have any comments about the increasing demands that universities conduct formal assessments and evaluations of student learning outcomes or program effectiveness as part of the public record, to show the value of the university, the value of the humanities?

Smith Yes, I find this dismaying in every possible way. What's objectionable is not that evaluations are being made. We are always, continuously, evaluating everything, and there's nothing objectionable in the evaluation of education in the humanities or any other education. It's the idea that the processes of evaluation can be formalized, exacted, and extracted in this way. It's a matter of who is asking for accountability, the specific forms in which it's being asked for, the notions of

effectiveness and outcome that are being invoked, how they are being used, and how the assessments are being administered. All of these, as presently mandated with regard to public education, are quite counter to the forms of ongoing, local, informal evaluation that are crucial for all institutions, for the creation of norms, for the creation of patterns of expectation, for the sense of achievement. Ongoing evaluations and exchanges of valuation are desirable. But the transformation of this desirability into nationally mandated, dubiously motivated, formal assessments of supposedly measurable “social impact” or crude bottom-line “outcomes” is destructive in every way, at every level.

You’ll remember that my first teaching job was at Bennington, where there were no grades for the students and no ranks for the instructors. I was very happy not to be obliged to give As, Bs, and Cs to my students and to be writing comments on their work instead. I was also perfectly happy to be part of an unranked faculty instead of a system of what always seemed to me to be artificial and constraining differences. Exchanges among faculty of all ages and achievements were much more fluid at Bennington. Of course, we fell into different kinds or forms of sorting and ranking—by generation, by specialization, and by the forms of admiration we gave to each other—but it wasn’t formalized by professional titles.

Watson Some people think that if we did away with grades, the students wouldn’t work as hard. You didn’t find this to be the case?

Smith I was just reading about this view, what economists call moral hazard, the risk of bad consequences if you make things easier for people. In my own experience, that didn’t happen with the absence of grades. The students at Bennington were the hardest-working students I had ever encountered. You can rationalize a poor grade, but not a comment with specific content.

Watson Giving back comments is a different form of assessment than trying to put a number or a letter next to it.

Smith Yes, it’s a fact that I’ve had trouble with grading ever since then. It’s a system that basically goes against the grain for me. In some respects, I’m an anarchist from way back.

Watson I think of you as a role model for women scholars and students, and yet as far as I know, you have never explicitly identified as a feminist.

Smith It doesn't appear on my CV, but during a period in the 1960s, I was quite active in what was then called the women's liberation movement. I organized a successful campaign against the antiabortion laws in Vermont and was the state convener for the National Organization for Women. I still have a whole archive of NOW application forms and of letters to the editor that I wrote and talks I gave at the time. I was especially annoyed by the ridiculous things that were said in the media about "women's lib." I had written a talk—the title was "Women's Liberation: An Anti-Credo"—that I used to give to anyone who would listen: the local high school, the Chamber of Commerce, the League of Women Voters, the Women's Auxiliary of the town's Episcopal Church. I would begin by saying, Yes, here I am, a supporter of the women's movement, and these are some things that I *don't* believe. Then I listed all the crazy, stupid things that feminists, in those days, were supposed to think and want. And then I would go on to describe the actual history of the movement and what the current concerns and aims were.

I read Simone de Beauvoir when it first appeared in English translation, which must have been the 1950s, and it flattened me, literally. I was reading on the sofa and lay there immobilized for hours, rethinking everything I knew and everything that had happened to me. Later, I was quite elated by Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, because, like her, I didn't like the then orthodox Freudian line on women's psychology. Millet was the same generation of feminists as I was, what I sometimes call Annie-get-your-gun feminism ("Anything you can do I can do better"). My own emphasis, though, has not been on equality as such but rather on recognizing differences without either dichotomies or stereotypes. I was not that drawn to the sorts of feminism that emphasized temperamental and intellectual differences falling along gender lines. That did not make much sense to me and seemed to me to confine women even more.

What I saw and still see are multiple forms and ranges of difference—differences in capacities, differences in desires and forms of happiness—among people, among women themselves, and of course also among men themselves. I also see these differences as arising from many sources, both physiological and experiential, and as developing and changing for each of us over the course of our individual lifetimes. Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir were crucial figures and thinkers for me in the 1950s. In later years I found myself sympathetic to Julia Kristeva's third-wave feminism and to Judith Butler's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's views of gender

and sexuality. I found Susan Oyama's deconstructions of standard nature/nurture dichotomies especially valuable for such issues.

Though I never produced any feminist criticism or theory as such, the views I just mentioned were certainly apparent in most of my literature courses, and I assigned and discussed works by feminist and gender theorists in my critical theory courses and, especially, in a graduate course called Biological Issues in Cultural Theory that I started giving in the 1990s. I think that, after that early period of activism at Bennington, my sense has been that the women's movement was well established, that there were many people working on feminist issues in the academy, and that I could contribute to the movement best by being as good as I could be in what I worked on as a scholar and theorist, and also—this has been important—by giving special attention to my women students and women junior colleagues to enable them to do the same.

Watson You've more recently added religion to your interdisciplinary mix.

Smith It probably started because of the title of my 1997 book, *Belief and Resistance*. The book is actually concerned with belief very generally, with current controversies over epistemology, especially the new views emerging from fields like the history and sociology of science. Some people at Yale who had read the book invited me to give their Terry Lectures, which are meant to be on religion and science. At first, I turned down the invitation—No, I told them, you've got the wrong person, religion is altogether outside my ken—but I finally agreed and then spent some time, nearly two years, reading in theology and religious studies. I became fascinated by the field of religious studies itself, especially by the issues that divided and bothered people in it. There's a long-standing split between those who see the field as intrinsically humanistic and are tremendously resistant to any supposedly scientific explanation of religion and, on the other side, those in a long tradition of accounts of religion that don't necessarily call themselves scientific but that are purely naturalistic and nontheological. They go as far back, if you think about it, as Lucretius, and they include works by Weber and Durkheim and thousands of articles by psychologists and sociologists of religion.

I have no religious affiliation myself (an anthropologist friend likes to describe me as the most profane person he knows), but when I was reading the current debates over science and religion, I found

myself more annoyed by the condescension and scientism of the so-called New Atheists than by the efforts of people in religious studies to defend their views and their work. Ignorance and false beliefs are always unhappy to behold, and I can understand the antagonism to religion when it's associated primarily with extreme self-confinement or murderous hostility. But religion isn't the only place that you find provincialism or violent antagonism to supposed enemies or supposed villains. They're found across the board, in political thought and social life, in philosophy and academic life, and among scientists and other intellectuals, where they're often combined with arrogance and authority—a very dangerous combination.

In *Natural Reflections* and in other work on science and religion that I've done more recently, I've tried to indicate why that dichotomy—between science and religion—is itself questionable. I have no interest in reconciling them, as various theologians attempt, but I try to complicate the idea that they're starkly opposed monoliths. If you look at how science and religion operate cognitively, if you look at the history of the relations between the church and Western science, and if you look at the ongoing practices in both of these very complex institutional packages, then you see that the dichotomy is a very significant oversimplification. We recognize now that the old secularization thesis is dead—that is, the idea that religion will fade as science and technology spread. What we see now, and what I think we are going to continue to see, are pockets of very different combinations of the secular and the religious across the world. There's no simple trend toward the secular, nor is there any simple return to the religious. The illusion would be to expect an eventual triumph of either. What I think is certain is that we're going to have religiously affiliated people living with people who aren't religious for a long time to come, and it will be happier for all concerned if we don't have exaggerated notions of their differences.

Watson Your work of the past two decades points to exciting new directions for a productive relationship between the sciences and the humanities. How do you see the relationship between the humanities and the STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—in this current climate of downsizing and of questioning the value of a university education?

Smith The present situation is a complicated one for me. I've promoted closer relations between the sciences and the humanities since I started

teaching, and I directed centers for interdisciplinary studies at Penn and Duke. But a number of current gung-ho movements for integrating science into the humanities are disturbingly shallow. Studies of literature, history, art, and philosophy profit from being scientifically informed, but I worry about what is lost, what is valuable and unique to these humanities fields, in the effort to make them more scientific, especially by people whose notions of what it is to be “scientific” are crude and simplistic. These integrationist efforts are also shortsighted when seen as ways to rescue the humanities from cost cutting or to redeem them in the eyes of science faculty.

Of course universities must prepare students to be scientists and engineers, and of course all citizens should be scientifically informed, but people in STEM fields should also be educated in the humanities. It’s not a pious matter of having them read old authors or appreciate high culture but of their being given more historical and critical perspectives on the world and a chance to understand what it means to be reflective about one’s own experiences and activities. For that to happen, we must have teachers who want to offer that sort of education and who have themselves been educated to do so. Making study in the humanities more scientific—however that is understood—is hardly the way to do any of that.

Watson Would you also argue that we humanists would do well to study more science?

Smith I would say that, as intellectuals, humanists should know what there is to know, certainly when it’s relevant to what they’re talking about. For example, if you’re theorizing about sexuality, you cannot decide that biology is uninteresting. The same would go for race. But it’s not just keeping technically informed about one’s special subject. A good deal of quite challenging theory is being developed in the sciences that would be useful to those working in the humanities and that is, in fact, very much in accord with theory—regarding sexuality and race, among other things—already developed in the humanities. For example, work in theoretical biology and cognitive science by people like Susan Oyama or Antonio Damasio challenges classic dichotomies of mind and body, biology and culture, or reason and emotion—dichotomies that have, of course, also been questioned by people in the humanities, often precisely those dismissed as “post-modernists” by current science-and-humanities integrationists like E. O. Wilson and his followers.

You noted earlier that I describe my views of cognition as “ecological” and “dynamic.” These are views that I share with people in various scientific fields. A key idea is that cognition—perceiving, learning—is not just something that happens in the brain, that it’s a matter of ongoing interactions between total organisms and their environments. That’s what “ecological” means. “Dynamic” means that everything is changing. How your environment can affect you, what your environment actually is—these depend on how you are constituted as an organism, top to toe, inside and outside; but this changes as you develop and respond to your environment, which is also changing. So there’s an ongoing *reciprocal* interaction here. This is different from—and, in fact, is an important critique of—the idea of cognition as a matter of inputs and outputs of a computer-like thing located between the ears. There are other important analyses and alternatives being developed in the sciences—for example, in primatology about the evolution of language—that would affect research in the humanities. In my own experience, graduate students in the humanities—for example, in literary and cultural studies—are very glad to come to know these views and accounts. And the students, at least those whose work I’ve followed, have made very good use of them in their own research.

Watson You talk about different disciplines in the same breath, and yet even though you use the concepts and vocabularies from different fields, you don’t jargonize. What I find striking about your writing style is that your arguments are always nuanced, but you have a very crisp language. It’s elegant, it’s not fussy.

Smith Partly it’s a matter, as you might expect, of what I’ve read that was important for me—both my having a taste for a certain kind of writing, which kept me reading it, and once I was reading a great deal of it, its affecting how I wrote. In philosophy, in the years when my style of thinking was being formed, my taste was certainly for the empirical and the skeptical. I especially liked Hume, Nietzsche, and William James. As a young positivist, I didn’t like German metaphysics—what I used to call all the terrible “H’s”: Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl. So the language that goes with that is not in my head. The effort toward elegance is perhaps from Hume, but I also read a great deal of poetry, taught it for many years, and even wrote some. I still enjoy summoning language and moving words around. Writing, the very process of doing that, is an important part of life for me, is part of who I am.

The lack of jargon probably comes from my moving around from one discipline to another, having colleagues at various times and places who spoke different idioms, and also teaching classes and addressing audiences that drew people from quite different disciplines. I was always conscious of needing to put what I wanted to say in a form that could be picked up by the people who were actually in front of me. I have nothing against specialized, technical language; it obviously has important functions. But it's also important to recognize that there are different kinds of audiences and discourses.

Watson Do you have advice for the rest of us on the way we write? I think people are getting away from the jargonizing that we so enjoyed in the 1990s.

Smith I really loved those wonderfully intricate formations that we were all somehow given the space to indulge in when deconstruction was at its height. But that was mostly in the 1980s, not the 1990s, when the jargon did become thick. The advice I often gave my graduate students was to write to engage your audience, not to impress them; and, also, to give your readers, at every point, something that makes it worth their while to continue reading.