opponents" (something Richard Rorty has made clear in his defense of neopragmatism, arguing that we must change the terms of the argument) is a pragmatist form of engagement and good advice for how to deal with our predicament.

James D. Hoff
Graduate Center, City University of New York

To the Editor:

Robert Scholes's elegant and resourceful Presidential Address, "The Humanities in a Posthumanist World," provided a hardheaded picture of the difficult times faced by the humanities. But its remedial conclusion, "going back" to the "roots" of language studies (732), fell sadly short of the one thing needful: science. Summarizing George Steiner's despairing essay in *Salmagundi*, with its painful contrast of the soft humanities with the hard sciences, Scholes quotes Steiner's remark that, unlike the sciences, in the humanities "*[a]nyone can say anything*" (qtd. on 725). But instead of benefiting from Steiner's explosive message, Scholes just moves on.

Reading Scholes's address, one would hardly know that the intellectual universe has been turned upside down over the past twenty-five years by Darwinian evolution's "modern synthesis" and the latest developments in the cognitive neurosciences. Like the head-buried proponents of intelligent design, academics in the humanities don't want to know that literary texts, far from being autotelic or merely a part of cultural history, are—like everything else produced by organisms—the products of biological history, which means the history of the body and its materially constituted brain. This brain is not a free-floating, self-determining, autonomous spook, with "roots" in language and the "trivium" (732), but a gradually evolved custodian of the body that abetted the struggle for survival—and the production of offspring—against competing forces.

Indeed, language itself is a recently acquired capacity. Had human beings evolved somewhat differently, had genetic and environmental factors been slightly other than they were, had human beings been endowed with only three fingers instead of five, with differently formed vocal equipment, with batlike echolocation, with canine olfactory sensitivity, with different electrochemical transmissions and greater or lesser sensitivity of the neurons, with the visual acuity of hawks or a different heart rate, a different metabolism, a different configuration of the brain—had any of these alternative paths been taken (or a million others), language and all our arts would be radically different from what they are today. The composition of our blood, our involuntary emotions, our limited ability to focus on more than a small handful of things at once, our need for certain nutrients, the right air quality, a nurturing caregiver—all these factors (and a million others) lie behind the meters and sonics of poetry, the subject matters of novels, the layout and sense qualities of paintings, the scale of architecture, the compositional balances of photography, the failure of twelve-tone music. And most crucial of all, these factors lie behind the universal characteristics of human beings of all cultures (as Donald Brown has amply demonstrated in *Human Universals*), however diverse their expression. The study of literature without an ever-conscious awareness of its biological contingencies is akin to the fantasizings of creationism.

Humanists who presume to deal with the arts—or the world—in the twenty-first century, not simply repeating exhausted truisms from years of tedious inbreeding, should be facing up to E. O. Wilson, Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett, Joseph Carroll, Ellen Dissanayake, Richard Dawkins, Gerald Edelman, Jared Diamond, and similar thinkers, who rarely can afford merely to "say anything." It will take a lot more than a return to the same old roots to yank the humanities out of their dogmatic slumbers in time to rescue the sinking ship. When what we need to understand is how the machinery works, how it relates to our evolved nature, and what the arts and humanities have to do with it all, raising the ship's tattered pennant a foot higher won't do the trick.

Harold Fromm
University of Arizona

Reply:

I thank James D. Hoff and Harold Fromm for their thoughtful responses to my talk, to which I will respond below.

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900165708 Published online by Cambridge University Press

First, pragmatism. I think there are many versions of pragmatism, or ways of thinking that call themselves pragmatic. If, as James Hoff suggests, I am a pragmatist, I would put myself closer to Charles Peirce than to William James. But the real issue, I think, is whether neopragmatism, as embodied in the writing of Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and others, allows for the possibility of persuasion based on an appeal to principles. That is, do we believe what we believe only because we were born (or interpellated, if you like) into some interpretive community (or ideological system) or because we have reasonable grounds for connecting our beliefs to the world?

Is it enough, for example, to say of slavery that it doesn't work, or do we need to say that it is, in some way, wrong? Our social and political structures are based on principles, and my fear is that, for fundamentalists, the principles need no interpretation and that, for pragmatists, there are no principles. James Hoff says that pragmatism "relies on a set of principles and beliefs that are constantly subject to critique and change but that are held with no less passion, conviction, and appreciation" than those I might profess myself.

Well, that does sound like pragmatism to me: principles that are not really principles. If, by principle, we mean something like this definition from the *OED*—"a fundamental source from which something proceeds; a primary element, force, or law which produces or determines particular results; the ultimate basis upon which the existence of something depends; cause, in the widest sense"—then I would suggest that they ought to be held not with passion but with reason and that they ought not to be subject to change. They may need to be interpreted to suit new situations, but they are indeed fundamental. And that is why I would situate the humanities between fundamentalism, which denies the need for interpretation, and pragmatism, which denies any fixed belief in the first place.

As to the lesser issue of whether neopragmatists opposed deconstruction, I could be wrong about this, but I seem to remember arguments against theory in general coming from critics who claimed to be pragmatists. And, of course, I had my own reservations about deconstructive thought. But the question of whether deconstruction has fixed principles is indeed an interesting one—and well beyond the scope of this discussion.

Turning to Harold Fromm's comments, I cannot accept his argument as I understand it. What does it imply, for instance, to say that language is a "recently acquired capacity"? Did culture, as we understand it, precede or follow language? And does the precedence matter? Yes, we were natural for eons before we were cultural—before we were human, even—but so what? We are cultural now, and culture is the domain of the humanities. To the extent that culture is, to use Harold Fromm's terminology, a machine, it is that machine we must understand, and language is the engine driving that machine. The relation between signs and the world, between signs and the self, and the history of those relations—these are our domain.

I call that domain textuality, and I cite the old trivium as a way of organizing that domain for study in schools, meaning, specifically, the study of language as a system (the old grammar), the study of the relation between language and reasoning (the old logic), and the study of the relation between language and emotion (the old rhetoric). If we can resituate these at the center of our activities, we will not merely be raising a tattered ensign but rebuilding the ship itself while it is still floating. Not easy, but possible and necessary.

Robert Scholes
Brown University

The Chinese Renaissance and the Vernacular

To the Editor:

These notes are inspired by Gang Zhou's highly apposite "The Chinese Renaissance: A Transcultural Reading" (120 [2005]: 783–95), in which Zhou refers to "Hu's misrepresentation of the Renaissance narrative" (791). I hope I may be permitted to sharpen her criticism by foregrounding the baneful effect Hu Shi's mistaken views had on the course of China's literary history.

One major error is Hu Shi's equating his concept of vernacular with Dante's. The Italian poet's definition of "vernacular" is specific and clear: "that which children learn from those around them, when they first begin to distinguish words,

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812900165708 Published online by Cambridge University Press