

## DAVIS SCHNEIDERMAN (with Henri d'Mescan)

### Disable the “Mute” Button: Classroom, Creativity and the Cult of the Author

*The following is a “de-realised” portion of a transcript from the 2004 Association of Writing Programs panel. The event brought together three writers, teachers and scholars—Robert Miltner of Kent State University, Thrity Umrigar of Case Western Reserve University (see the following essays in this edition of *EnterText*), and Davis Schneiderman of Lake Forest College—and about twenty-five audience members to Chicago’s historic Palmer House Hilton in March 2004. In the months following the panel, Schneiderman sat down for a revision to his transcript in the form of an extended interview on the subjects of writing, teaching writing, and the interplay of the media. The interviewer, Henri d’Mescan, took Schneiderman’s portion of the AWP panel and reworked the answers by interpolating additional questions to elicit additional responses from Schneiderman.*

**Henri d’Mescan:** Davis, in our previous collaborations [*Absinthe Literary Review*, *Pindelyboz.com*, *3<sup>rd</sup> Bed*, etc.—HDM], you have maintained the stance that the media is not something to hide from, or eschew, especially in the classroom. You’ve also cast suspicion over the desire to negate the influence of the media in writing, whether student or professional. I wonder if you might clearly articulate a response to the positions of Robert Miltner and Thrity Umrigar, who advocate a sort of “unplugging” in order to avoid the cliché-inducing elements of pop-culture?

**Davis Schneiderman:** Certainly. To this end, I have prepared a brief statement:

ladies and gentlemen

i am TELEVISION and you love me.

you raise your voice during the commercials to tell your college teachers your boss your spouse with runaway eczema that you are just too damn exhausted to fight bad breath because you were up so late transfixed by the systolic glow of the first war you really feel apart of wondering if bombs dropped during shuck and jive cum shock and awe in someplace called iraq equals multinational terrorism on your doorstep in your neck of the woods down the street in the nondescript building where other sun-burnt Americans mull over the emptiness of their own lives and the chemical dependency of the hit-and-run massacres hoodwinked by the evening news on the same TV with the same obnoxious but multilevel news ticker and bullet list of main topics about today's weather so cold it's at least ten degrees different than the groundswell of coo cooing sounds fuming up with stink lines from the ceramic lawn dwarf in patent-leather codpiece like a figment of flamingo spring crowding out the over-inflated round-robin bust of some talking head ex-general with a fading-beauty buzz cut whose contract with the 24-hour news network allows him to say whatever the hell he wants to think so long as it plays in peoria at the pair-a-dice casino with its cigar-chomping computer poker hussies going all supernova crackerjack so the scum-sucking producers can fill the endless minutes that keep you watching the degraded hands of the nuclear war clock as the grease from a bag of deep-

fried potato chips with d-alpha tocopherel acetates and methyl heptine carbonates—of cheese-flavoured popcorn oozing its spoiled odour from a clear liquid model of your intestinal track—of over-salted peanuts containing 10% real nut product force you into a vacuum-sealed environment of run-on sentiments and slick overproduced twenty-two-minute teleplays about twenty-something now thirty-something single-now-married honey faces feeding the bulimia jones in high-priced Manhattan lofts while dusting lipstick traces off oversized coffee cups in the mocha double fair-trade latte shop where some of them “work” but never use the bathroom to view their botox-injected jellyflesh calcifying like a charbroiled fetus served to you on a metal spork that breaks apart from long-range psychic gamma rays to jam their cell phones as relationships which don’t even seem like your relationships anymore faltering and picking up again in time for the sweeps period Nielsen families gathered round the glowing rca vacuum tube and conspiring in some awful genetic conspiracy to flip off the racist show that you love so much because of the seizure-inducing colours of the choc-a-bloc trials and travails of a cartoon family with an abusive husband for a cult leader in crappy tennis shoes moving his followers along the forested trail of manifest destiny straight on up to the de-luxe comet in the sky where sweatshop conditions slow down to almost nothing as the hunk-a-hunk-a-burning-space-rock approaches the speed of light delayed eight minutes by the blinking caller id number projected over some nameless basketball player directly onto my screen.

you can press mute on my controller, but i won’t shut up. [Laughs—HDM]

**HDM:** So, you're saying that the current media hegemony, with television as its exemplar, effects a change of consciousness not unlike the switch between a medieval version of the world, with god as a central force and the Church as an intermediary, to a more decentralised post-Nietzschean worldview where third-stage capital replaces the godhead with an image of itself pressed into the pixels of each mechanical and electronic device, which becomes not only the human-divine intermediary, but the divine itself in the throes of uncontrollable reduplication?

**DS:** Well, not so simply put, but that is my television statement and it of course goes on and on and on. I'm adopting the opposite position from these two folks [Miltner and Umrigar—HDM]. One of the things I like about the Palmer House Hilton is its proximity to the *other* Hilton, the Conrad Hilton, just off Grant Park, which I'm sure you know was the scene of quite a violent struggle in late August 1968 during the Chicago Democratic Convention. On the Wednesday that saw the defeat of the "peace plank" and also gave Hubert Humphrey an easy win for the presidential nomination in delegate balloting [over alternative candidates George McGovern and Eugene McCarthy—HDM], Dave Dellinger led a Mobe rally [the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam—HDM] in Grant Park to organise a protest march to the Amphitheatre [the South Side site of the Convention—HDM], a location far enough from the designated protest areas that people were denied permits to march even *near* the venue.

**HDM:** Like the steel cages behind the Fleet Center, the so-called "Designated Protest Area" at July's Democratic Convention in Boston?

**DS:** Exactly. The state of most political protest since 9/11. But as history can tell, the political parties have a not-so-new habit of trying to keep dissident opinion well away

from the halls of power [literally, in the 1968 case—HDM]. Anyway, just at the moment where the Mobe rally is getting messy, after protestors lower the American flag and hoist a bloody shirt in its place, after the police charge the Mobe marshal line and beat Rennie Davie unconscious, Dellinger [who sadly died this past summer—HDM] tries to organise a march to the Amphitheatre [which, of course, never makes it—HDM]. Once the protestors swoop in from Grant Park to Michigan Avenue, the only fixed network cameras outside the convention hall capture that famous seventeen minutes of the police beating people right outside the Hilton, as the authorities attempt to “clear” the street. After a ninety-minute delay while the tapes are made ready for network distribution, somebody in the CBS control booth decides it’s important to show these students and young people being beaten, and switches over to the tapes.

**HDM:** And these seventeen minutes arguably sank Humphrey’s campaign. Can you imagine a worse Pavlovian association: people unmercifully beaten on American soil in synchronous playback with the candidate’s triumphant convention propaganda?

**DS:** Picture an even *more* direct intervention: George W. Bush saying his thing at the New York Republican Convention, and during his speech, cut in scenes of the Iraq insurgency or some carefully timed terrorist attack. Why, you can condition people to respond sexually to a dishrag if the pictures are just right, so imagine what the wrong *kind* of association would do to the Bush-Cheney re-election bid. Same process could be directly applied to any politician—the “Swift Boat Veterans for Justice” attack on Kerry operates on the same principle. Fight the memory of fire (Kerry’s war record) with a recording of other people dissing that fire. Why stop here? Why stop anywhere?

**HDM:** So theoretically, we might optimise the media for either complete mind-control dominance (an Orwellian scenario), or use it as a force for ultimate de-programming (another type of sci-fi trope, more in line with William S. Burroughs’ “Nova Police”)?

Isn’t this all just a limiting binary, a false Manichean conflict?

**DS:** We’ll get to that shortly. Media associations are part of our culture; they are ingrained. The statistics Miltner cites [about the pervasiveness of media culture—HDM] are certainly telling, but there is absolutely no opportunity to escape the pervasiveness of information flooding simultaneously through so many channels. Even the lack of information, for instance, the “silence” of a Luddite pose, becomes little more than a different type of information when juxtaposed against its opposite: “noise.” Nowhere to run to, baby, nowhere to hide! “Utopia” [Latin for “no place”—HDM]. If you grew up without TV as Umrigar did, great, but that is an anomalous position for those engorged by the USA. To posit the possibility of retreat, a “life of the mind” distant from the hum of the refrigerator the cable box the talking heads—all a dangerous illusion.

**HDM:** Please, tell us why.

**DS:** As a teacher working with undergraduates at a liberal arts college, I’ve discovered a number of tangible benefits to being “plugged in.” Primarily, the media environment offers a shared vocabulary, and a very different type of vocabulary from that of students reading Homer at an elite nineteenth-century university.

**HDM:** How so?

**DS:** As literacy increases, reading and writing and other aspects of media usage become available to persons of differing socio-economic backgrounds. The classics have their obvious value, and, of course, any student *might* benefit from understanding the conflict

between Odysseus and the gods, but the contemporary classroom is made up of many students whose relatives were not necessarily *allowed* entry into the university classroom even fifty years ago. So, the lament that some piece of pre-fabricated pop-culture, for instance, “Pimp My Ride” on MTV, drains the lifeblood from the wrath of Achilles, well, that’s bestowing entirely too much influence on the appeal of a re-upholstered 1972 Chevy Impala [albeit now with wet bar and Sony Playstation—HDM]. Of course, I don’t want to come across too heavy on the side of media *jouissance*. There are certainly pitfalls to the way we interpret our commonalities.

**HDM:** So, this relates to your point about Matt Kirkpatrick, whom we spoke about before the interview?

**DS:** Yes, I’m glad you brought this up. Last night, at the kick-off reading for Potion, [the new literary journal Schneiderman edits with Kirkpatrick and two other authors—HDM], he read a fantastic poem about Sea Monkeys; it brought down the house. The crowd of about seventy people fondly remembers, and dare I say it, *loves* those miniature brine shrimp. Yet, if we compare the subject matter of Matt’s poem to that of the Modernist era of poetry, to the work of a Pound or Eliot, a Joyce or Yeats (all people whom I respect, except for Eliot and Pound [Laughs—HDM]), the latter group comes off as just as interesting as Matt, but also highly allusive in the classical sense. Even though you could argue that Joyce is for the most part a populist, maybe with the exception of *Finnegan’s Wake*, let’s face it: you need concordances to understand this material. You need your *Bloomsday Book*. You need some sort of classical education, or at least a high tolerance for extensive footnotes. I don’t want to bemoan the claim that pop-culture has moved us away from this type of work [although this is hardly the case—HDM], instead, I want to

celebrate the fact that, to some extent, the iron grip of authorial elitism has greatly fallen away in the post-World War II years. The idea that literature is written by and for the “educated,” that literature is meant to reflect real life from an allusive distance, and that if you appreciate its multiform nuances, you wouldn’t sully yourself with the dirty little pleasures of pop culture...

**HDM:** This sounds similar to Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno’s argument. He perceived jazz music, and the freedom to become an expert on jazz music, as signalling the rise of a “Culture Industry” that degrades our ability to resist the economic machine, a machine that directs our attentions through a series of seductive ruses.

**DS:** Yes. But if in *using* pop culture we succeed in crumbling the elite edifice a little bit, all the better. The question revolves around how we make “use” of the media. For an author to sprinkle pop-culture references into her work (perhaps) creates conditions for parody and satire that connects with the reader, yet even with the most effective *détournement*—the turning of the situation or object into a parody of itself, the flipping of the power relationship—at best, you get *The Simpsons*: funny, astute, allusive in a non-exclusive way, but ultimately not anywhere near as subversive as its proponents claim.

**HDM:** Okay, but *The Simpsons* is generally recognised as one of the smartest programmes on television.

**DS:** *The Simpsons* sell Butterfinger candy bars with a wink, a strategy that says: you-the-viewer-are-hip-enough-to-get-the-irony-here-so-purchase-the-damn-chocolate-and-peanut-butter-bar-not-because-you-appreciate-a-direct-sales-pitch-but-because-you-are-so-cool-and-you-understand-that-you-will-eat-a-candy-bar-anyway-so-it-may-as-well-be-

one-that-makes-jokes-working-above-the-heads-of-everyone-but-you-and-your-super-plugged-in-friends.

**HDM:** There is also the appeal to “hip consumerism,” that Butterfinger is merely one part of an ensemble that will allow you-by-your-package-of-everyday-purchases-to-make-what-you-perceive-to-be-effective-political-statements-of-protest-against-the-dominance-of-corporate-entities-by-supposedly-“turning”-their-products-against-them-by-virtue-of-their-irony.

**DS:** You’ve captured part of it with that sentence-word. And so the negative of using the “shared vocabulary” of the media in the classroom is also part and parcel of the Culture Industry [a concept associated with Adorno *and* theorist Max Horkheimer—HDM]. You go to the cinema show after work and it becomes an extension of the workplace, because it allows you to relieve the stress of your job, to find some sort of “escape” from the economic pressures structuring daily life. You see a Hollywood starlet and she may as well be you, a stand-in or representative for you on the big-screen [or the illegally downloaded copy of the big-screen—HDM]. You return home and replenish your energies in the space of the movie experience, so that come tomorrow, you are better able to *produce*; you are thrust back into an environment that has expanded to fully conscript the leisurely consumption of media to the telos of the economic imperative. Look at how many European workers are revolting against the calls for increased production hours!

**HDM:** What about writing that is from before the era of the twentieth-century “Culture Industry”? You’ve framed genius in a particular way for the Modernists of WWI and beyond, implying that their role as “creators” is part of the problem because this plays into a certain type of elitism, but isn’t there a different tradition of writing—Balzac, Zola,

Flaubert—that tries to illustrate different sorts of social ills, and empower the citizenry to rise up, all through the power of the pen?

**DS:** Well, there are three very different writers! But, I think in terms of the argument framing “genius,” for people like Zola, or Balzac, or Flaubert—I’d go with someone like Pierre Bourdieu or Peter Bürger here. While the French tradition of the nineteenth century is very different from the Modernist vision of T. S. Eliot, this period in France is also distinctly “Modern;” it is the moment when authors are beginning to produce bourgeois fiction. They have the leisure time to write, they benefit from a particular set of social circumstances that give rise to their grand sweeping visions of society, and so the contradiction built into this type of prose is that it remains produced by a relatively small class of people who offer a critique of the world’s ills. Even if the vision is grand, this is still very much individual production, individual reception, individual response—you’ve left all those collective elements promoted by their texts *behind* in the very conditions of the textual production. Thus, we are to some extent discussing an extremely bourgeois period of an extremely bourgeois art form—and it is precisely this “bourgeois novel” that bleeds in all sorts of ways into the skin of so-called High Modernists. So I would say that I see these slightly earlier writers as part of the same general tradition, although certainly, the lack of an electronic media apparatus offers key differences—should we wish to undertake an extended comparison.

**HDM:** Your point about the creator/author and a certain elitism, as well as the interrelated critique of “unplugging,” makes me think of the different approach offered by theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, who present the position that our models for what is “real” have eclipsed the “actual” “real,” and following this, it seems to me that our

critical ability has been greatly altered by the substance of the media avalanche. Surf the web, surf the wave, embrace everything. You know, the Gulf War never happened except as a media event, and so we move fully into the empty Postmodern aesthetic that promotes all representation and language as a game—an intellectual game, a cerebral game—but merely a game of representation. The answer is that there is no answer, only the illusion of an answer, and “plugging in” becomes impossible to avoid.

**DS:** This leads toward worship of the *Matrix* trilogy, or salvation at Brad Pitt in the *Fight Club* movie [he famously explains that not everyone can grow up to be a movie star—HDM]: “Ha ha, it’s funny because he *is* a movie star.” Buy an album by pre-fabricated bad-girl Pink, and it’s from the same record label as Barry Manilow [Arista/BMG—HDM]—so if you think you’ve bought into the freedom of the subversive commodity (*à la Simpsons*, again), well, that’s exactly it, you’ve *bought* into it. More or less, both positions we’ve outlined so far are poses. Buy into media culture, and you’ve bought your superior-sounding logos, you’ve bought your radical anti-establishment music, you’ve bought your plastic fantastic trip. But once you’re fully clothed in your deck gear [a street term for “hip”—HDM], you end up reifying from a different direction those elitist ideas that we were critiquing with T. S. Eliot. You need money to purchase these items, of course, and the leisure time to focus on making certain purchasing choices; for all the poseur’s application to a fluid hybridity embracing the detritus of pop-culture in the creation of self-fashioned identity, she has “chosen,” as Lord Capulet might say, “within her scope of choice” [*Romeo and Juliet*—HDM]. And if it takes a certain “cool” factor to make these certain choices, the perception that those cool-enough-to-make-these-purchases possess a superior commodity understanding becomes an “elitism

of products,” almost entirely predicated, albeit with a different thrust, on the same notions that backed the elitism of the “classics” model, or the elitism of a position that argues for completely turning off and away from the media.

**HDM:** Okay, I understand how the “pose” is perpetuated in this second position, a largely purchased position made to appear *authentic* by the creation of a “shared vocabulary” between producers and consumers together. Yet, wouldn’t the first position, the argument of Umrigar and Miltner that we should “pull the plug,” despite its potential reification of creator snobbery (*à la* Modernists), simply offer a better alternative?

**DS:** Not so fast. The problem is that the aesthetic of MTV is also the aesthetic born from Modernist literature. If you look at the development of twentieth-century prose, or if you look at what happened to poetry after WWI, and the way transitions have developed—you know, “Here I am” in a nineteenth-century novel, and you’re going to describe me walking all the way down that hall, but in the twentieth-century novel, “Here I am” in one scene, and you’ve then skipped the bit with the hallway and placed me in a drug store in Katmandu. There are narratological changes that have occurred. Trace them, and you also trace the development of the visual arts, the development of cut-up motifs—that’s where MTV comes from. We have to avoid constructing literature and pop-culture as separate spheres. This is a very dangerous bifurcation that doesn’t exist.

**HDM:** Might postmodernism then allow us a way out, in that we can always reject the establishment of this binary, and say that while historically-determined from “elitist” culture, pop-culture can still be liberating?

**DS:** At first look, it would seem so, but consider the Marxist critique, which you are leading toward with all this talk of producers and consumers. That argument claims that

“all this media noise and posing, even when backed by a false belief in the radicalism of the media culture, is actually not only 1) distracting from the real class issues of society, but also, with this distraction, 2) allowing capital to enlarge its dominance.” This would be Fredric Jameson’s famous argument [in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*—HDM]. He claims that postmodernism is seductive, but ultimately, merely a way of smoothing out the uncomfortable rough edges of capital, propelling the present system to resolve its contradictions through a sheen of falsely productive universalism, or more recently, a falsely productive localism.

If a writer chooses to avoid involvement with the media environment [an impossibility, since at this point negation is always a comment upon presence—HDM], she will find it difficult to avoid the conviction that her writing, removed from the distraction of computers and flicker boxes, will assume an *introspective* character that has recourse to another host of Modernist ideas. Before long, the spectre of the artist-as-genius, the “chosen one” who alone has the power to fight the demons of information overload, rises up again with a fury, like a putrid belch. Instead of artistic progress against the romantic myths of the Enlightenment, the art of the volunteer Luddite becomes weighed down by the “amazing” characteristics of how it was made. A writer who struggles against the tyranny of the media to produce in “silence” becomes somehow better; the singer who lives in her car in Alaska becomes somehow “purer.”

**HDM:** That’s a fairly polemical position, Schneiderman, if I understand you correctly. Buy into media, and you’re a sucker (albeit an unintentionally deluded one). Retreat from the media *by choice*, pull the plug (as it were), and you’re reinstating dangerous and

perhaps elitist notions of authorship that contribute to the separation of art from engagement with the world...?

**DS:** Politically engaged writing comes out of this dilemma. My little paragraph at the start is not necessarily the answer, of course, but please don't think the goal is to realise that you are “plugged in” in order to adopt a pose to unplug yourself. Instead, I advocate, along with people like Burroughs, that you should plug *everything* in at once. This is not quite the Baudrillardian fascination [with the omnipresent simulacrum—HDM], but a position arguing that in order to “beat the system” you need to take control of the means of production in some way, you need to get your tape recorders and tape record everything that you do and feed the product back in, cut, and splice, put tape recorders in the hands of students, which is something that we do at Lake Forest College. Advanced students walk around Chicago to capture raw sound data; they edit and listen to it in order to develop new ways of writing without Joyce’s “ineluctable modality of the visual” [from *Ulysses*—HDM]. Do whatever you can do to cut-up the machine and force it back on itself, because you will not escape by ignoring its cold mechanical hum, and you’re probably not going to escape it at all either, but at least you can attempt to take *control* of its machinations.

**HDM:** So a new *Walden* is out?

**DS:** I would not advocate taking to your own cabin in the hinterlands, and writing by yourself, and walking in the woods *as a solution* to the problem of accelerated daily life. If that's a thing you can do, then great for you alone, or you and your commune—but otherwise, the media are going to be working against you even if you play dead, so let's

be aggressive, and take it, and use it for ourselves, and do the things we want to do with it, rather than have someone else manipulate and control us through its tentacles.

**HDM:** Well, you managed to outline a position that argues against your colleagues on the panel, Miltner and Umrigar, and also argues against the obvious opposite position of intense “plugging in” to the seduction of pop-culture. You propose a very vague mode of resistance that has something to do with manipulating the media machine in a way that won’t be co-opted into the “pose” that you warned against previously. Forgive me for seeming skeptical, but there seem to be all sorts of problems in practically enacting such a programme.

**DS:** Of course, the programme is always changing. It’s a programme of production literacy, rather than media literacy. We can know the object, but that gets us nowhere. Rather, we must learn to *use* the object.

**HDM:** Perhaps I can ask you about specific facets of this programme, then. What do you do with students who are already engaging with pop-culture?

**DS:** Well, as I’ve said, you can engage pop-culture in a positive way. There are interesting things going on in pop-culture. But the tendency in writing workshops is to respond to innovative prose with recourse only to the explanatory mode offered by falsely innovative media. Example: often, my students read a non-linear prose piece, and shout “*Memento*” or “*Pulp Fiction*” quicker than a hog gets to rollin’ in the slop. We discuss the parallels to those movies, and such comparisons are useful to a certain limited extent. For the student primarily familiar with these officially sanctioned forms of deviant narrative, the “radical” paradigm is already forming, coldly assimilating these movies, and now, these workshop stories. *Without* a sense of how a film like *Pulp Fiction* fits into

the landscape of other films around it, this new paradigm becomes part and parcel of a new realism, a postmodern realism that immediately taxonomises all non-linear narrative into an alternative commodity—a different way of getting your box-office dollar. At another AWP panel yesterday, someone said that any writer who writes realistic fiction is a conservative whether she knows it or not—and I would maybe take that position—but I would also say that anytime you get into one of these moments where you’re replicating something that at first appearance seems innovative, the co-optation, the commodification, will not be far behind.

**HDM:** Like (Dada and Surrealist artist) Marcel Duchamp. He rips the urinal off the wall, or finds it somewhere already ripped, turns the piece on its side, signs “R. Mutt” on it as its “author,” and it *becomes* “Fountain.” For maybe that first moment in 1917 (as with the first Duchamp readymade of 1913), this is interesting, but what will happen after the punch line of look-at-that-genius-Marcel-Duchamp-who-has-destabilised-the-idea-of-the-author-as-genius?

**DS:** Absolutely. All those contradictions come flooding back to you. So you can engage in innovation for maybe a moment, but if you don’t keep changing your act, it becomes someone else’s act.

**HDM:** So this is all an act?

**DS:** I knew I shouldn’t have said that before I even finished the sentence. [Laughs—

HDM]

**HDM:** Okay, but what about the idea of perfecting one particular mode of art, separate from the idea of the author-as-genius? How about honing a way of writing in order to *perfect* language as a representation that will, at its ideal, express human truth? Perhaps a

writer needs to shape and reshape this same impulse, this similar mode, over the course of a career. A haiku artist for instance?

**DS:** Well, you're pretending again that content or form can be separated from the means of production. But let's take your question even *with* that assumption. The writer who works with a mode of language, shaping a particular discourse over time, even outside the "author" system, cannot hold to a mode of language as the ideal. Why? Because no matter the discourse or the brand references or anything else about the content of a work—you cannot stop the procession of language. Language is constantly changing. Take Shakespeare. Even after a few hundred years, his plot can still be discerned, and with study, so can the specifics of the language—but the syntax and arrangement, and even the meaning of individual words are all so different that our current usage may, in one hundred years' time, look to us the way Middle English looked to a reader (or listener) in Shakespeare's day.

**HDM:** So a focus on perfecting language is misguided then, because we are not necessarily moving toward a "perfect" language anyway.

**DS:** Right, notice that I said, "language is changing," not "language is evolving." It's not just that a student adding a pop-culture reference will find that *reference* no longer holds the same meaning in one hundred years, it's that the *words* themselves will no longer hold the same meaning. This is neither necessarily a bad thing, nor does it point toward "progress" for language. That telos is an idea that comes from the human use of language; the idea of evolution toward an ideal is artificially [and perhaps religiously—HDM] constructed.

**HDM:** Okay, I take your point. Hitler wanted his Reich to last for a thousand years and that certainly is not something we would want to emulate at all. Why should anything last that long? Language changes so much that there is little impact to mentioning or not mentioning pop-culture references explicitly in a piece of writing. Your programme is not one of simply manipulating “content.”

**DS:** I’m wincing every time you call it “my programme.” It is certainly *not* my idea, and besides, the possessive pronoun only feeds into this “author” mania we’ve been dissecting.

**HDM:** So tell me how this production literacy is not the “product” of an “author” in a traditional sense. How can a student imagine her way out of the trap?

**DS:** You have to create opportunities. You write the beginning of a story, and someone else finishes it. Anonymously. Turn on the TV and write down the first line that you hear. Everyone writes the first line of a poem and then passes it around, each person adding something. Then you have something, and you edit it together. Surrealist ideas. Oulipo ideas. You record sounds and then surrender the tape to someone else, who will run it through the mud and hang it out in a hurricane. Eventually, you begin to think of ideas that stimulate your own brain and change the way you conceive of the messages you are already receiving.

**HDM:** There’s always that fundamental contradiction that an artist uses fake materials—the artifice of words—to try to elucidate something “true” or “beautiful.” This can’t work on some basic level.

**DS:** Right, I’m teaching people to write in college. This is an institutionalized profession. This is the institutionalized conference of that profession [the Association of Writing

Programs—HDM]. I learned “how” to “write” by obtaining a PhD in creative writing [at Binghamton University nee SUNY Binghamton—HDM]. There are all sorts of problems with this. If I’m not talking about them in some way, if I’m clinging to the outmoded idea that I can shape my words to plumb some essential experience *without* critiquing the system that provides for this idea of essentialism, then I will be experiencing a whole other litany of problems.

**HDM:** That makes quite a bit of sense, but not in the conventional, linear manner of hegemonic sense.

**DS:** Of course not; it shouldn’t—since the introduction to this interview indicates that as an “interview,” this piece is a complete fabrication. [Laughs—HDM]

**HDM:** I said.... [Laughs all around—DS]

[Fin]