



DANIEL MENDELSON & JAMES WOOD

in conversation with PICO IYER

Reading in a World of Images

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. "Expect Wasabi" is the new motto for this season. No more lions roaring. I'm sure many of you will be relieved. Last night we had Bernard-Henri Lévy and Zizek. It was quite some wasabi. And I expect with James Wood and Daniel Mendelsohn there will be plenty as they are deftly and nimbly guided and goaded by Pico Iyer.

On Friday come hear Robert Badinter. I don't know how many of you have met Robert Badinter. It may be the last time he comes to this country. He was the minister of justice under the first François Mitterrand regime. He probably single-handedly abolished capital punishment. As you know, capital punishment is one of the topics we never see in our presidential races. But I think it's a very important topic to investigate. America's probably the last democracy where capital punishment exists in twenty-nine states.

Also next week come and hear António Lobo Antunes, one of the very, very great Portuguese writers, Céline Curiol and Paul Auster. And to finish us up next week, maybe to finish me up, I will have the pleasure of interviewing James McBride and Spike Lee. To find out more, I encourage all of you to join our e-mail list.

And now let me tell you a little bit about how this evening will happen, or so I imagine. First of all there will be a conversation which will last about as long as a psychoanalytical session. It will be followed by a Q and A period. I ask you to legibly write questions down, which will be brought to me at various moments throughout the evening. Legibly is important because I do need to be able to read them and then I will make a very difficult decision of choosing a few. I encourage you to write questions that *are* questions, rather than long comments. That is an advantage actually for me to ask you to write them. 192 Books will be selling the books of our authors tonight. This will happen right after the event, so please come up and purchase their books.

I could not be happier tonight than to be welcoming James Wood, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Pico Iyer as they return to another LIVE from the New York Public Library event. Pico gave us a title and a description for the evening tonight, which he agreed to instigate: “Reading in the World of Images.” “Does the common reader exist in our world of splitting screens?,” Pico Iyer asks.

“Where might we find beauty, seriousness, or moral passion among our fraying books, and does it even make sense to put Flaubert, Homer, and Oliver Stone into the same sentence? Two of the defining public critics of our times, James Wood, a passionate reader who creates cathedrals out of words, and Daniel Mendelsohn, a professional classicist bringing rigor to the popular arts, investigate the space where reading ends and real criticism begins.” I, for one, and I’m sure many of you as well, do not wish reading to end and none of us do I think and it probably won’t. Pico Iyer will be introducing James Wood and Daniel Mendelsohn to you in just a moment.

Pico Iyer studied nothing but literature, he tells us, for eight years at Eton, Oxford, and Harvard and regularly writes literary essays for the *New York Review of Books*, *Harper’s*, *TLS*, and the *American Scholar*, among others. He’s the author of two novels, *Abandon* and *Cuba and the Night* as well as seven works of nonfiction, including *Video Night in Kathmandu*, *The Lady and the Monk*, *The Global Soul*, which is truly one of my very favorites. I remember many years ago, maybe seven years ago, Pico Iyer came to Los Angeles, and performed actually the week he spent living at LAX when he lived in the airport. And he’s written most recently *The Open Road*, an account of thirty-three years of talks and travels with the Fourteenth Dalai Lama; we spoke about that together just a few months ago. It gives me really great, great pleasure to welcome Pico Iyer and his guests.

(applause)

PICO IYER: Well, thank you very much. I think the simple way to put that question is that I am the luckless fool who asks all the questions you wish I weren't asking and who gets you to roll your eyes by not asking the urgent or germane or follow-up questions you wish I were asking. But as you heard, you'll get the chance to do that. And I'm just really so touched to see so many people here and I think another room upstairs. You're almost suggesting by your presence that the book has a future and that literary criticism isn't a relic of the twentieth or even the nineteenth century, so thank you all for coming.

You're here, clearly, because you know James Wood and Daniel Mendelsohn, so I'll just say very briefly as you probably know already. James is chief literary critic for the *New Yorker*. He's professor of the practice of literary criticism at Harvard and, I think he's most importantly author of four books. His first, *The Broken Estate*, is the only book of literary criticism I've ever foisted on my friends again and again for Christmas presents and birthday presents, a dazzling meditation, really, on how literature has begun to fill the space perhaps left by religion after it abdicated its position at the center of culture in the middle of the nineteenth century. His next book was *The Irresponsible Self*, he wrote *The Book Against God* and I think much more important than any of that, James is the rare person who really suggests that reading and writing and important and that they have stakes, and who I think who brings to the text the kind of keen, close attention, the furious engagement, and the sense of wonder that many other people might bring to scripture. And I will say that in my life as a reader and writer he's the only critic who

has made me feel that reading and writing are honorable professions and worthy of love and worthy of really caring about.

Daniel, as all of you know, is a professor at Bard and a distinguished scholar of the classics who seems to be able to write in pretty much every form. He wrote a memoir, *The Elusive Embrace*, he's written a scholarly study of Euripides. He's about to come out with a two-volume translation of Cavafy next spring from Knopf, and he's the author of the huge excavation of history, personal and collective, around the Holocaust called *The Lost*. *The Lost* won the National Book Critics Circle Award last year. Daniel had earlier won the National Book Critics Circle citation for reviewing. He won the George Jean Nathan award for drama criticism. And I think one of the things that really distinguishes him is that most of us have probably read him constantly in the *New York Times Book Review*, in the *New Yorker*, formerly in *New York* magazine, and especially the *New York Review of Books*, bringing his eye really to everything, from Philip Roth to Oliver Stone from Michael Crichton to in fact James Wood. And I think what really stands out uniquely about Daniel's writing is that he brings his high, rigorous classical eye to the stuff that's around us, and to books and films and popular fiction and perhaps elevates them in the process.

James's most recent book is *How Fiction Works*, came out just a few weeks ago, really a classical handbook to the tools of fiction—characterization, detail, point of view. Happily, the rare book of literary criticism that actually made it to the *New York Times* extended best-seller list. Daniel has just brought out a book a few weeks ago, a huge collection of essays, called *How Beautiful It Is and How Easily It Can be Broken*, which comes from stage directions by

Tennessee Williams and collects his musings on everything from Almodóvar to Wolfgang Petersen, from Tarantino to Stoppard to Housman to Wilde to many others. And it's interesting that it instantly strikes me that both of them have used in the titles of their books the word "broken," as if to suggest there's been some fundamental rift in the last few years and a certain contract that obtains between reader and writer or between society and book has been broken.

And I suppose the natural place to begin is to ask you, James, that every other time I open a magazine I find a piece by you, but nearly always on literature and I'm not aware of your having chosen to train your eye on other forms. Is that because you worry that literature is—are you fighting a rear-guard action, or are you celebrating something that people care about?

JAMES WOOD: I think I'm celebrating something I know about. I know about music and play music, but I feel unqualified in some way to write about music, so I steer clear of it. I think—you know, the old, it's the Kierkegaard thing, purity of will, of heart is to will one thing. There's something to be said for mining as deeply as you can in one form and in more or less one genre. So that's why I plug away at it.

PICO IYER: And how do you choose the books you write about? Because this current book is really a work of appreciations, I feel, but in the past you've written a lot about authors you don't seem to cherish so much.

JAMES WOOD: Well, I get—of course, I could choose what to write about. It's a combination as ever of choosing and having things chosen for you. The new book, *How Fiction Works*, came

in some ways out of teaching. I've been teaching in the last three or four years part-time at Harvard and I've also done a few master classes at Columbia with the MFA students. In some ways I prefer those classes with writers who are thinking hard about matters of technique and craft and who are studying authors to see what they can do themselves as writers in imitation. So I felt that there was—there was a certain amount of stuff going on in classes that could stand being codified in some way in a book and when you think about it, there aren't very many. I mean, when I was twenty, I wanted a kind of general guide to the novel that was distinct from the academic work that I was reading—and it's not to denigrate that, that had its use too, but I wanted a sort of writerly text and there aren't very many. There are Kundera's great three books now on fiction. There's the somewhat elderly Forster, now, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, but there isn't much of a general essay around matters of technique, so it seemed fun to do.

PICO IYER: But were you looking for that at age twenty as a potential critic or as a would-be writer or just as a delighted reader?

JAMES WOOD: Well, at twenty I mean I was a very zealous aspirant writer, so—

PICO IYER: Of creative prose.

JAMES WOOD: Yeah, of creative prose and wanting to—and thinking intently about writing creatively and so I needed, I felt I needed help. Well, I don't know that it's help that one needs, one needs company, and you go to criticism for it.

PICO IYER: And I mean I think of you as distinctly, almost self-consciously public, in what you're doing, and you're addressing the things that everybody is talking about, but you're addressing them from a different angle, perhaps. Is that part of your conscious plan, or—

DAVID MENDELSON: Well, I mean, I don't, you know. I wish I *had* a conscious plan. I think, you know, to a certain extent, my training as a classicist informs a lot of what I do in the sense that, you know, when *we* look at literature, *we* meaning scholars of the classics, we look at the entire surround, you know, you don't just read Homer and not look at Bronze Age implements that are being dug up and forms of justice, the you know, the 800s B.C. and so on, so you get used to I would say contextualizing a lot, because it's a necessary part of what you do. You can't—as a classicist, you know, you can't focus on the plays of Euripides and not care you know that the Peloponnesian War also was going on, so you have to know history, art, everything, you know, it's all the surround. So I didn't have a plan, you know, I just, when I started, because I left that world, that's the joke, you know, as my sainted grandmother used to say, “Man plans and God laughs,” you know, when I left the classics and decided I wanted to be a writer and I really wanted to be a critic, I mean, that's *really* what I wanted to grow up to be, it's not a sort of fallback position. That's just how I ended up writing about things. You know, for example, when I was reading the Alice Sebold book, *The Lovely Bones*, you know it seemed to me that the only way you could write about that book in a way that was to me interesting was to in fact enlarge the focus from the book itself, which is, you know, a completely okay mid-level novel and try to understand why *that* book had *that* impact at *that* moment, and for that, I thought you needed to think about 9/11, so, you know, I think I'm “public,” which is an

interesting word, only because I was trained in a funny way to look at how everything works together, you know.

PICO IYER: And to read the culture as much as you read the text before you.

DAVID MENDELSON: I would say to read the culture. I would never call myself a cultural critic, you know, I think I'm just somebody who focuses on—I mean, you know, sort of my stock-in-trade, obviously, as people know who read the *New York Review*, is to—is to often see how a contemporary interpretation of a classic, whether the classic is you know the life of, you know, a Greek play or, as I just did, *Brideshead Revisited*, or whatever, and to see how the space between the original and the reinterpretation tells you something about our moment, I would say.

PICO IYER: And maybe what also tells us about our moment is that your training *is* in classical literature, but the forms you're working with, in this book probably the majority are films and plays, wouldn't you say, they're actually performance pieces more than literary texts.

DAVID MENDELSON: Yeah, which surprises—you know, when I first started writing. You know, when you first start writing, I don't know if this is true for James, but you know, you write about anything because you've got your rent to pay. You know, I did an article about food courts in Las Vegas, so, so **(laughter)**—that's true. And you know, I was often asked to review books, you know, because I had a PhD, so people figured I was literature and I was always, you know, I wrote for a lot of gay magazines, because that's how I sort of got into writing in this niche kind of way and what's interesting to me about my own sort of looking back is how I ended up going

away from books and—and doing this—really being interested in the theater, I would say.

Although I always come at it from I would say a purely literary angle, you know, I'm always looking at the text, I'm always starting with the text and how does that get you someplace, whether it's *The Producers* or Euripides, and I take both equally seriously when I'm reviewing them.

PICO IYER: And then I think there's a real shape to this book of essays, you say at the beginning that it's an intellectual autobiography, and at first that has a kind of Wildean sound to it, but I think that's really true, that out of the many pieces you've written, you've chosen these, and you've arranged them and I thought that you really were developing an idea about what a gay sensibility or a gay perspective, because it seemed whether it's Housman or John Boswell or Wilde or Noël Coward, that's something running through all four hundred pages.

DAVID MENDELSON: Yeah, I think to a certain extent that's true. You know, it raises a question that's inevitable and of large interest, I think, which is the extent to which the sort of—the life of the critic is a fundamental factor in the criticism, you know, there's an issue that people think about a lot, and one knows about this because, you know, *we* read the blogs, too, which is how who you are determines your reaction to things and, on the one hand, and it's very interesting. You know, on the one hand, who I am, obviously has a lot to do with what I like, you know, and on the other hand, I would say—and I would be very interested to hear what you both think about this—that what I like is also the first impulse that I dismiss when I start writing about something. You know, that you're always sort of oscillating between a kind of abstract notion of

what *ought* to be the case and your own response to something and I think in that space can be some very interesting kinds of writing.

PICO IYER: And I want to come back to that, but first I want to ask James, provocatively, are the things that you choose who you are? Many of your readers, including one called Daniel Mendelsohn, have suggested that the circumstances of your life have shaped very much actually the sensibility you bring to—the first person you quoted tonight was Kierkegaard, which is interesting.

JAMES WOOD: Yeah, no, of course, just speaking personally, it was fascinating to publish a novel because I found that whatever the reviews were, and there were nice ones and not-so-nice ones, I was relatively untouched by them and you'd think it would be the other way, that the novel would be the more personal, confessional vessel, and actually I find that when people are reviewing my criticism, I get very personally involved and hurt and I want to fight back and feel that—that they must see things the way I do or there's something wrong with them. **(laughter)** This is the—you can't be a critic unless you operate on that principle, right? But somehow the novel—rightly so—was more like something that you just push out, you know, like a child or something, that is yours but is not yours. So, yes, I think there's always a—there's quite an intense buried personal inflection in these—in any decent critic's work and I'm perfectly prepared to accept. I mean, I grew up in a religious household and it was very, not *very*, it was *reasonably* evangelical, shall we say, sort of not quite American evangelicalism, more like an English version, which is more like Victorian evangelicalism than the full born-again, so not incompatible with liberal politics, for instance, but nevertheless, scriptural and austere, and I

think I was aware as a teenager of transferring an inherited familiar zeal from religious texts onto those things, those secular texts that I was so busily reading, and of course that's there in the work.

PICO IYER: And you're in the happy position, for a literary critic, of being read and discussed a lot and therefore sometimes challenged a lot and I'm wondering have you've learned things from the people who bring criticisms against your criticism?

JAMES WOOD: Yeah, I have, because I think—I think you can't be an important critic unless you remain very, very curious. It's why, for instance, I think Alex Ross is such a terrific music critic. I mean there are, he's a wonderful music critic because he has the real art of redescription, which most people don't, you know, it's amazing how many art critics do everything *except* bring alive on the page the canvas they're talking about, but he can do it brilliantly with music and, more to the point, he has a very, you know, wide-angled curiosity about all forms of new music. I know myself to lack in some ways that curiosity, and it's something I struggle with because I don't think you can be a serious critic without some of that continuing interest in what's being produced, or otherwise, of course, you're going to be wandering around a cemetery of touchstones, just being the Arnoldian that one is accused of being, which I'm not, by the way. But yes, you've got to—you've got to stay alive.

PICO IYER: Did you find that your criticism changed after you wrote a novel and after you really experienced firsthand being on the other side of the table?

JAMES WOOD: No, it didn't much. Daniel, in his review of my novel, said it would or it might and it didn't. I think actually if I'm a slightly sweeter critic than I used to be, it's partly because I live with a novelist (**laughter**) and we know from the Bill and Hillary Clinton thing that it's—of course everything's much more painful when it happens to one's spouse than to you, I mean, this is a truth.

DAVID MENDELSON: Especially if it you did it.

JAMES WOOD: But, so, you know, after a while the business of bringing with a shaking hand the negative review to the person you live with and having been asked to read it out gets to you, I think, and you're aware of what you can, of what you can do to people as a writer when you review their work. So I'm probably, I'm probably a bit gentler on that score.

DAVID MENDELSON: What you're bringing up raises a question that everybody thinks about when they think about critics and criticism, which is the "wound factor," you know. And I mean, to my mind, sort of a crucial thing that I always am trying like a madman to emphasize is that—and we were once on a panel together and I think I made the same point. You know, having—as—when you're trained as a classicist, you're used to thinking that everyone you're writing about is dead, you know, for a long time, you know, but I—people always ask, you know, how easy I had it, but I think, you know, and people always say, well, do you think about the feelings of the people that you're—and I say, "No, and I don't want anybody to think about my feelings when they're reviewing my book, either," because I—and this is sort of a hobbyhorse of mine, but I think that the obligation is to literature, say, you know, and to really

the *activity* of literature, and that I think it's insulting if you're worried about the feelings of an author because the—the, you know, the person whose feelings you should be worried about, so to speak, is *literature*, you know. Does this book make a claim, does it attain to seriousness, is it going to do something in the world? And that's the criterion for judging it and I think that's—I think that's crucial to say, because you know the general sense, let's bat the 8-ball into the open here, you know, there's a general idea of critics as people, you know, of a slightly lower level of life who are filled with resentments and beefs and, you know, have to have power. You know, I always love that one.

And, you know, I don't know about James, but I only write about things that are interesting to *me*, because it's usually something that I want to work out for myself, I don't think about the author, I don't think about anybody else, except why it's interesting and what's either right with it or wrong with it or *usually* both and I think it's important to bring this out into the open, because I think people, you know, have—a lot of people have a very loony notion of what motivates critics, and, you know, in my own book, in which in order to explain this long but I like to think very beautiful title. You know, critics write because they love their subject, they don't care about, you know, people, so to speak. I don't become a critic because I think writers are nice, God knows, (**laughter**) quite the opposite, usually, but you like your *thing* and you want to protect it from damage in a funny way. I would say that's a strong impulse, and so I don't think about the people and, you know, I've written other kinds of books myself, and I don't want somebody to say, "Well, should I not say this critical thing because then he'll have a bad day?" No, because I'll think you're taking me more seriously if you're talking about my book and not worrying about me.

PICO IYER: But you could say that Wolfgang Petersen's epic movie *Troy* or a Broadway production of *The Invention of Love* or something like that that it's not really fair to bring to them the standards or criteria you would bring to high literature and that literature isn't wounded when there's some huge splashy three-hour Hollywood spectacle, because it's aimed at a different audience and it serves a different need.

DAVID MENDELSON: Well, I think I would, my first response to that is that to a certain extent, what differentiates between high literature and, let's say, *other* literature is we're not going to know the difference quite often until two thousand years from now, so, you know, it's a distinction that we sort of recognize in a funny way but also one I'm a little bit reluctant to get into. You know, Greek tragedy was a form of mass entertainment in its day. Everybody went to see it, right? I don't know what's high literature, you know, but I think that if somebody engages in the activity of creating something that's interesting and *aspires* to seriousness, whether it's, you know, I think *The Producers* is a very serious—not the recent one, but the original movie in a tradition of comic engagement with the world. I think that was a *serious* undertaking. I think Tom Stoppard in the *Invention of Love* was doing something serious, you know,. I think Wolfgang Petersen when he made *Troy*, although you know Hollywood has a different set of considerations because of the money, but, you know, was trying to do something. I don't think anybody wakes up in the morning—well, I *could* name some names—but I think most people who are creative don't wake up and say, you know, "I'm going to put something over on the public." I think people want to *do* something that's *engaged* and that's the criterion by which you judge it. By its *own* premises, in a funny way.

You know, and if you're for example in the Alice Sebold case, you know, just because everyone loved that except me. You know, if you write that novel and you think it's saying serious things about death and suffering and redemption, whatever that word means anymore. You know, then, okay, fine, let's talk about death and suffering and redemption because, you know, I know a lot of serious works that are about that, you know. So I'm not going to determine what's high or low, but I think seriousness of intent and adequacy of execution are the things that I'm interested in, whether it's *The Producers* or Euripides, you know. If you're going to put it on, I'll go and look, you know.

PICO IYER: So two thousand years from now, we may assess new works in the light of Oliver Stone's *Alexander*, or that may be the Euripides of the future.

DAVID MENDELSON: That's an interesting point, because canon—you know, what becomes the exemplary text of a culture is not necessarily the ones that everybody loved. You know, in antiquity, the play of Euripides that everybody thought was the really hot one was one called *Orestes*, which no one reads anymore, except people like me, you know, so you know, we never know because we're in the moment. You think about the writers who were huge in their time and deservedly huge—Fontana, Daloz—you know, people that have disappeared off the face of the earth. We don't know.

JAMES WOOD: In Andrew Delbanco's biography of Melville, there's a fascinating little line or two where he's talking about how unimportant Melville was as a writer in the culture, how

unknown, how obscure he was when he died. There's only—Delbanco says there's only one reference in the whole of Henry James's work to Melville, and it's a roundup reference to the stable of Putnam's writers or something like that—"The Putnam's writers like Melville . . ."

That's an important thing. And so to go back to what you're saying, I think you're absolutely right, it isn't—I may feel it more acutely than you do, for whatever reason, whatever mad insanity, this feeling of the hurt feelings of the author, but I agree that in principle this is not one's concern. Instead, one's anxiety must be about—and perhaps this is what I meant more. The anxiety is about being terribly wrong. You know, there's a—If, as you say, you're protecting something from damage, you must not be the damager, and you don't—it's hard to—if I go back to—

What was the first thing I did when I arrived at the *New Republic* in 1996, I started looking through all the files, the old archives, for fun, and just because they're all there, the old magazines, and there is Mary McCarthy's review of that great Christina Stead novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, and there's nothing wrong with it as a review, it's a brief sort of a thousand-word notice, you know, and it's actually not a—it's not a—it's not a pan at all, she could see the quality of it, but it's so—so blithely disdainful in the end, compared to—if you compare what that review—If you put that review up against the labor it took to produce that book, the agonies of producing that book, the quality of the book, that it's a horrifying lesson, I think, in what we need to be careful of as critics, because we can all be, I think, too—it's not about being dismissive, it's about not taking things seriously enough and as you say on their own—to some extent on their own terms.

PICO IYER: Not looking closely enough.

JAMES WOOD: Not looking closely enough, yeah.

PICO IYER: Are there pieces you have written you would like now to rewrite or to take back?

JAMES WOOD: I don't know if exactly—yes, I think there—no, not to take back, but there are things I'd like to—I would have liked more time. Obviously one of the things—this is something we could talk about—is one doesn't have time. I think it's what I enjoy about teaching that I can, you know, I can spend three weeks reading *A House for Mr. Biswas*, or a month reading *A House for Mr. Biswas*, with students, a hundred and fifty pages a week as opposed to, you know, knowing that in three weeks' time I've got to review the new biography of V. S. Naipaul, which will mean, you know, a quick—if I'm lucky—a quick glance again at *Biswas*, maybe I can have a read of, you know, *In A Free State* again, and you know, do you know what I mean, you're patching it together as quickly as you can. And this has its own potency, but there's something lost. So yes, I would have liked more time.

I was very struck by something that I read earlier this year, and I don't know whether it's complete nonsense or whether it's really fundamentally true. It was the great music critic and musicologist Hans Keller, who wrote a lot in Britain in the Forties and Fifties and he's talking about, I think it's a little essay about the—that annoying mnemonic theme to the *Third Man*, you know that one. And he sort of hates it as a tune, but he can't get it out of his head, and so he's interested, and so he does a musical analysis of why it's so catchy, and in the course of that

review, he says, in that piece, he says, “As soon as I hate something, I ask myself why I like it so much.” Now, that has to be in some way untrue, I mean you couldn’t simply—You would turn into a lunatic if you worked on that principle throughout your life, but it isn’t a bad thing to have above your desk as a critic.

PICO IYER: I always sense in your writing there’s an attempt to teach the reader how to read in some ways, or, if not to teach, to give them a model.

JAMES WOOD: Oh, sure, one of the things I very much felt I benefited from at university with the chance of studying literature was that I was sure when I graduated that I’d been taught how to read. That I’d arrived at eighteen with some fairly inchoate ideas about what a text was and how to go through it line by line and I was at a university in which the whole notion of close reading, practical criticism had been largely invented in the 1920s, so there was still a great emphasis on practical criticism, though in fact I was being taught by a theorist, not by an old-fashioned practical criticist, but by a poststructuralist, but he was a very good close reader, and I felt for sure three years later that I’d been taught how to read and it’s something I try to do, obviously, with the students but I try to enact it, also, in my criticism.

PICO IYER: I was just backstage wondering if students really read the way—with all the diversions in the world now—the way they did forty years ago and you were giving a stirring defense of them as a sometime professor.

DAVID MENDELSON: Well, you know, I don't know how they were forty years ago, but I mean, I do because I teach in a very limited way, but I do—I'm always teaching something.

There tends to be a lot of anxiety and breast-beating about the state of literature and literacy, and, you know, it's serious, I think we're in a serious situation, but, you know, what always impresses me about freshmen is how, you know, that they're true believers, you know, they want to believe that great literature is great and that it will do something for them. I mean, in my experience, you know, and I take that very seriously, you know, as long as there are people like that. But I think that's true in general. I mean, I've done some reading groups and, you know, for example, I mean when I was on my book tour, you know, you go out there and you meet lots of people and, you know, the country is filled with people who want to read, you know, they just tend not to occupy positions of high governmental importance, **(laughter)** but, you know, so that gives me a lot of comfort. People believe, you know, they want to believe. And I think to some extent, you know, I feel responsible to *those* people. You know, I don't feel responsible to authors but I feel responsible to readers and publics, because I do write about films and plays, you know, like telling *them* what I think is the way to look at something, because they are, you know, interested. I take the public very seriously and they're the people I'm talking to when I'm not just talking to myself, you know. And I think this teaching experience keeps reinforcing, to me at least, that the world is filled with readers. You know, it will always be the case. They may be reading, you know, a thousand years from now on a chip implanted in the palm of their hand, but that doesn't mean they don't want narrative than we do or any less than people did a thousand years ago.

PICO IYER: It's interesting, even V. S. Naipaul, whom I think of almost as high priest in the church of letters, who has consecrated his life to the word, I think he said that if he were starting

over now, he would go into movies, that *that* has become the dominant narrative, and even this man who is such a believer in literature seems to suggest that literature's moment is over.

DAVID MENDELSON: But this raises, I think, an absolutely crucial question. I mean, literature is a very wide pool and we can all jump in it. You know, literature is the hymn to the son of Akhenaton, the Egyptian pharaoh, it's the letters of Madame de Sevigny, it's the journals of John Cheever, it's the poems of Sappho, who never saw a piece of paper in her entire life and never wrote a word in her life. It's certainly ditto for Homer. You know, you know, we're attached to writing. I always prefer to talk about narrative, you know, about texts, maybe, because you know, literature is big. Literature is Oscar Wilde and Tennessee Williams and, you know, Tom Stoppard, and, you know, those are not texts that you *read*, necessarily so I think that we'll be more comforted if we restrict literature to books, you know. Books may—look, I just got—my dad's birthday was two days ago, he's sitting here in the front row—and I got him an Amazon Kindle. You know, I guarantee you in a hundred years, you know, that's what we're going to be reading on. And who knows? So I think, you know, this is where I think having a certain long view, because I'm always thinking in thousand-year chunks, you know. That's comforting, you know. What I think has been persistent, to go out on a limb here, you know, is what people have *always* wanted, you know, from Ug sitting around the cave to yesterday at six o'clock was a good story, you know, *that* doesn't seem to have diminished. The stories are different, they're complicated, sometimes they're hysterical. You know, but that seems to be a constant, so I think if you think about it very widely, you're less panicked. It's just because we don't—we're in a funny moment, as I hope we're going to talk about, because there's a lot of

different forms of distribution that are changing the way we think about texts, you know, but I think it's okay, you know.

PICO IYER: I mean, I actually think of—James, sorry.

JAMES WOOD: No, I'd actually like to ask you, Pico. I mean, Daniel and I are likely to give pretty sanguine answers to those questions because we, of course, spend our time surrounded by people, more or less, who are reading and writing and thinking about reading and writing, so it looks fine. But I actually am—and I'd be happy to talk in a minute about why I am reasonably sanguine in the way that Daniel is about things, but I sense from you and you live in Japan and you don't live and work in a university setting, I sense from a kind of resignation or pessimism and I'd like to know—I mean, I'm interested in what your sources are.

PICO IYER: Well, I spend four months every year in California but beyond that I go to the bank and there's a screen, where usually I would have stood in the bank line and read my novel. I get on a plane next week, a Singapore Airlines plane, and as I get into my economy seat, there are a hundred movies, including Kurosawa, Ozu, Fellini, Godard, you name it, art-house movies, and I realize that even I, whose livelihood depends on writing, am to find it very difficult to pick up a book in the face of such temptations and more so if I were twenty-five years younger than I am. On my way over here, as I wanted to think about the future of literature, there in the back of the taxi is a screen generating People.com's five top celebrities as well as the Zagat guide and ESPN. I suppose I just feel the pressure of temptation and realize the way in which even I cannot resist many of those temptations and, you know, one thing—not to turn it back on you—but one

thing I love about your book, this current book, is a sense that you are trying to pick out those precise places where literature can operate that nowhere else can. I mean, you're sort of the king of free indirect speech but beyond that you're alighting on James or Proust or Flaubert, as if to suggest they are doing things that the camera, the tape recorder, multimedia will never be able to get to, places inside ourselves, so I mean, it's maybe not a conscious thing but it seems to be close to your heart.

JAMES WOOD: I think it's not a conscious thing because I don't feel equipped necessarily to fight that battle, or at least I don't have a strong enough sense of the enemy perhaps, so I'd rather do it, as you suggest, implicitly or suggestively. Of course there's a lot of visual distraction around or just a lot more rubbish, but that has been—I mean, it has been with us now for quite a while. I mean, if you go back to the solidly realist American novels of the Fifties and Sixties, whether it's Herzog or—I mean, not solidly realist, actually at all, I take that back, I shouldn't even use a term like that because there isn't such a term, there isn't such a thing, but the less formally experimental, more reportorial novels, like *Herzog* or *Seize the Day* or Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, they're already registering an extraordinary amount of confusion and presence of advertising and rival languages and discourses and so on in fact they seem very prescient books, I think when DeLillo came to write *Cosmopolis* he was essentially just rewriting *Seize the Day*, just not as well, it was a weak miswriting or misreading, but so I mean this isn't entirely new. There's more of it, right?

PICO IYER: It's accelerating very quickly.

JAMES WOOD: It's accelerating very quickly. But look—I mean, in some ways it seems to me actually almost the other way round. We're—this also may be a source of anxiety—that we're freakishly protected from it to some extent. I mean, here we are up onstage, you know, having a chat that could easily have been parodied by Monty Python. Do you know what I mean, do you know what I mean? Why is this any different from forty years ago? We'd have the pipe and so on and I'd defer to you and you'd defer to me and you defer to him and he defers to me—

DAVID MENDELSON: We'd all be smoking.

JAMES WOOD: I mean, look at—it seems to me for instance that we're in actually a very good period for criticism. Why is it the case that if Edmund Wilson or Randall Jarrell came back from the dead, they would be at all horrified by the state of things in American letters? There's the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, *Bookforum*, not to mention a whole host of other things and I haven't even gone electronic yet, where long essays are being written by serious critics who—present company excepted—are actually I think a lot more incisive and scholarly and intellectual than was the general standard thirty, forty years ago, which of course is precisely what you would expect as two or three generations' worth of essentially graduates in literature come out of the universities, particularly, perhaps, as theory has been absorbed and the theory wars are over and so on. There's a rigor and a seriousness to—you know, say, when Ian McEwan publishes something like *Saturday*, *Saturday* gets a serious, you know, three- or four-thousand-word consideration five or six times in different magazines, I don't think that's—there's no sign of ill health in that regard.

DAVID MENDELSON: But I mean—It seems to me that the sense is what there wasn't forty years ago is all the everything else. You know, I think there's a sort of perception by people who say, enjoy this kind of discourse which you are talking about, which is let's just say an old-fashioned one, let's just call it that for the time being, that those—and this, of course, goes to the heart of what a lot of people are interested in. You know, those people never had any competition, right? They were writing in the *New Republic*, they were publishing in the *New York Times*, and there weren't thirty million people with laptop computers saying what they thought of *Moby-Dick* or whatever and so I think that this sense of panic that exists in quarters of the literary public, I'm not going to say the producers, but the readers, you know, comes from a sense of a kind of destabilized feeling that who do you know—how do you know who to trust in some funny way, because here we used to grow up with the idea that if you read it in a magazine they knew what they were talking about, you know what I'm saying, and now there's a million competing voices, and it raises very interesting issues, I think, about publishing, traditional publishing, electronic publishing, you know.

There's a *huge* controversy that's been going on about literary bloggers versus people like us, you know. And I don't think it's actually a competition, I think it's two entirely different enterprises, but *that*, I think, is what's making people feel anxious, because that's what was different then. It's not that the old way of doing things has died out. It's that now for the first time *anybody* can publish. You know, everyone with a laptop computer is a person who's publishing right now, you know, and I think, you know, they may say—they may be, a lot of these people are sort of hiding under free speech, but, you know, what they are doing is

publishing. What's interesting about the blogosphere, say, and, you know, I understand, although I'm not a big blog reader, but I understand. There are—you know, the Internet is a—I've said this a million times. The Internet is like a printing press, it is neither good nor bad. It distributes—thanks, Mom. **(laughter)** It just distributes. My mother's here, she just—you know. **(laughter)** It just distributes texts, you know, and what's interesting about that, you know, is that *anybody* can say *anything* about *anything* and have it be published and that used to not be the case.

PICO IYER: And do you feel that's expanding literature, diminishing, or just making it more interesting?

DAVID MENDELSON: I would say C, you know, because it is the most powerful medium for distribution of ideas in the history of the planet, you know. That's a great thing. You know, you can have discussions about books with people living in Timbuktu, and why not? And ideas zip back and forth, that's all great. What I think the problem is, to go to the sore, sensitive point that people are interested—is what to my mind, you know, the problem with *that* kind of criticism is there is—there is—and it is interrelated—there is no authority and there is no responsibility. Right? You know, when I publish an article about something I can't just say *anything* that I want, because Bob Silvers is going to say, “Well are you sure that's fair?” and “Are you sure you're not taking that quote out of context?” and “Is the quote accurate?”, because there's some little elf checking on that and, you know I think it makes a difference. I think it makes a difference, because and what the bloggers always say because I've had some tussles is well, if we're wrong, someone will correct it. And I will say, why have a thing that's wrong

buzzing around to thirty million households, because that you can't pull back, so I think that unlike what we do and I will say this and I don't care if everyone hates me tomorrow, you know, well, there is no—it doesn't seem there's any sense of responsibility in that world, it's just people saying what they think. And I don't think that's what *we* do, actually. I don't know what you think.

PICO IYER: What do you think, James? Do you read blogs?

JAMES WOOD: I *do* read blogs and I actually think some of the literary blogs are better than that. And are—I mean, are posting essays and so on that are not uninteresting. The problem, as you suggest, comes in the awful thing of the comment, you know. You know, you read these pieces now and you've got the little blue thing at the top and you think: "why is the blue thing only halfway done, is this a hundred-thousand-word piece?" And you think, no, "It's a two-thousand-word piece but there are four hundred and fifty stupid comments at the bottom of it." It's the world of the totally as you say, and there I think the rule is sanctioned ignorance. And indeed there is a pattern which, you know, I think probably came from cable TV or maybe essentially the two forms arose at the same time. The pattern goes something like this. I won't use my name, I'll use yours instead. **(laughter)** "Mendelsohn's just written a savage piece about X. I haven't read the book yet, **(laughter)** and I can't get the, I can't get much of the review because there's a wall around it. But here's a paragraph," so then the paragraph goes up. And then fifty-four people write in and say, "Absolutely appalling what Mendelsohn's saying about this book. I mean, I haven't read the book yet, but as far as I can see from the review, it's disgraceful." **(laughter)** And that's how it goes on and by the time you get to the bottom of this

world of commentary, it's the people who didn't even make it into Pope's *Dunciad* are having their say. So it's yeah. But, as it were, at the top of the screen when the people are, and some of them have been friends and some of them have been foes of me. When people are—you know what it's like—there are people with their own aesthetic agendas are writing essays about fiction or whatever, that can be relatively interesting, there's something going on there.

DAVID MENDELSON: There's plenty of great stuff, you know. But I think—you know, this is also maybe sort of the eight-hundred-pound gorilla and this may just reflect a kind of antiquated, again, training on my part, but I think there's such a thing as *expertise*. You know, as I say at the beginning of my book, the word "critic" comes from the word to judge and you cannot judge a thing if you don't know anything, you know, and I quite often think that people who open literary blogs. You know, great, have an opinion about Herman Melville.

But it's like me opening a blog on brain surgery. And you know what, there's nothing to prevent me from doing that and people may for all I know read my blog and go do an operation and kill somebody. **(laughter)** You know, and that's the difference for me is that I don't think that what we are engaged in is airing our opinions. Whatever we are and we have very different backgrounds and very different attitudes about things, but that you are trained—and this is something that I think we actually both do in a different way but what we are interested in is sort of explaining to people how you pay attention to a text. You know, that it's not just, "It made me feel good," or "It reminded me of my boyfriend in high school," or whatever. You know, that's not what it's about and that what seems to me problematic, let's say, because I'm generous, about this other thing is that it just seems incredible to me that you could just say anything about

anything because that's how you feel about it. And that may just mark—and I'm willing to admit—that that just may mark me as a kind of antique person, but I wouldn't dream of—and this may be just because we're writers—I wouldn't dream of going public in print about a subject that I didn't feel I had a kind of rigorous training in, and that's I guess the difference.

And I may be wrong, you know. And I'm not saying people shouldn't have opinions about books, but that's not what we do, actually. And I think that is a—in this day and age, you know, where the lines between public and private have been completely eroded that's what I think is a line I want to keep drawing in the sand, that, you know, I think I know something about. I don't know about most other things, but I do know about *these* things and that's why I write about them. It's not just because I have a *feeling* about *theater*, you know.

PICO IYER: You use the word “attention” and I think a lot of this has to do with attention span, too. James was talking before the Fifties. If you take a paragraph of Bellow from the Fifties and if you take a paragraph of Dave Eggers, say, now, it will look different and it will feel different. You were talking a lot about screens and screens teach us to take in information in a very, very different way. One of the most interesting things about your new book is that potentially it's a long, beautifully flowing 250-page article or essay, argument, but you break it up into little sections, and it could be that they're sort of broken up like Wittgenstein or Aristotle or something, but it more seems to have to do with people are better able to take in one page at a time now and all this will go down more easily if you say this is point six and then have a lot of blank space and this is point seven. And I was wondering if you broke it up because of attention span or because—

JAMES WOOD: No, no, I didn't, actually, I broke it up because I was just writing, it was coming out in sort of six-thousand word chapters, so they were like lectures and it was too pedagogical and I just got stuck. And it wasn't my idea, my editor—

PICO IYER: So he was thinking of attention span, maybe.

JAMES WOOD: No, I don't know, I think he was thinking it was stodgy, is it was, and he was right. And he said wonderfully, you know, "I'm thinking of the *Tractatus*," and I said, "What, you mean, Wittgenstein?" He said, "Yeah," I said, "Don't be silly," and he said, "Yeah, numbered paragraphs." So, absurd and pretentious as it sounds, the idea was that. And it did free me to—I could sort of contradict myself, I could alight on something just for a line or two and then go back, and of course there are—there are plenty of examples of that in criticism of the sort of aphoristic or the paragraph-like form. You know, Roland Barthes does it a little bit occasionally. And I think who is it T. J. Clark did a sort of version of that recently in art criticism.

PICO IYER: Nietzsche.

JAMES WOOD: More augustly, going back. But yes it seems to be a form that serves one nicely. I think you're right about screens. I think that for instance writing—it's just a cranky thing of mine but I think that writing—I see it in my own writing. I think that writing on a computer shortens one's paragraphs, because there's a sort of anxiety about the text that's

disappeared off the top of the screen, **(laughter)** do you know what I mean? And that is different, I mean, when you have a piece of paper—when you have a piece of paper in front of you, if you want to write a long paragraph, it's all there in front of you on the page and then if it's behind, you just flip behind and see how long the para—does it make sense and so on. But the screen, I know it myself, the thing's disappeared off the top and you scroll back to see, okay, now it's time for a break.

DAVID MENDELSON: Get a bigger monitor.

PICO IYER: And reading and writing e-mails changes the way one thinks of a sentence and a paragraph, too, you know, dramatically.

JAMES WOOD: Sure.

PICO IYER: Daniel was just mentioning seriousness, which is I think is one of the things that bringing a certain aesthetic standards and moral—I won't say earnestness, but sincerity, to the business. And I'm wondering where do you find seriousness in the twenty-first century, who are the—where are the places of hope that both of you look to to continue this great tradition?

JAMES WOOD: Certainly, as I was saying, in criticism I'm very hopeful. Cynthia Ozick wrote something a year ago or so in *Harper's* about sort of criticism and realism and so on and I didn't necessarily agree with all of it, but one of the things she said in it, and what I didn't agree with, was that it was very much a kind of, you know, "We can't go back to the Fifties and we can't

regain Trilling and Roth and so on,” and then she gave a list of sort of working critics who she admired and I think we were both on that list and I felt actually it could have been doubled or tripled quite easily and when—then if you’ve got sort of thirty or forty names, some of them academics, some of them working journalists who are all writing about poems and plays and novels, it’s not a bad place to be in at all, so there’s plenty of seriousness in literary culture, and I’m sounding very Pollyannaish, but I think there are lots of serious novelists, too, working at the moment. I just reviewed one, Marilynne Robinson, and whatever one feels about the forms in which she works her thing and this novel in some ways is much more conventional than either of the last two, it’s a gravely serious business that she’s involved in, which I mean—she’s treating nothing less than the fate of the soul.

PICO IYER: I mean, your book is—in some ways is a record of disappointments, lots of things that don’t meet the standards, but where are the places that you find that do meet them?

DAVID MENDELSON: I have to say, you know, as a person who enjoys popular culture very much, you know, I think there’s a lot of seriousness in *Battlestar Galactica*, and I do, but I—you know, the older I get, the more I’m aware of all of the really serious stuff that I still haven’t read, so it seems, you know, you realize you’ve got more time behind you than in front of you, I would much rather—like, I’ve been reading Trollope for the first time, lots and lots of Trollope, and I thought, “Am I going to read some new novel by a thirty-three-year-old Brooklyn guy who can’t get his life together and that’s what the novel is about, or am I going to read Trollope?” I mean, come on. And it doesn’t mean that I don’t like, you know, contemporary novels, but I do find this funny thing happening, which is I feel like I want to play catch—I’m

always catching up, like I realize how immense is the amount of *really* serious stuff that I've never gotten to, so I find myself much more and more looking backwards, I hope not fatally, but I like to think that my live interest in many aspects of pop culture rescues me from being a total fogey, you know, but I think there's a lot out there, again. I think the problem is that there's more *static* now, maybe, than there ever was, or because this is our moment we hear it more—literally, everywhere we go, like you say, there are no quiet moments and I think a thing that James has always been interested in that I think is a crucial thing to latch on to is the idea of quietness and privacy. That one of the things—as a champion of other kinds of literature I'll acknowledge that one thing about novels, in particular, but all books, is that it's a private experience. You know, it's not something that you can do, you know, even great theater you have to do with lots of other people, you know, unless you're the queen of England, I guess. And so I think *that* is what I worry about, and I see this in my students, the kind of anxiety about being *disconnected* from the static and just being alone with the texts, which is, of course, why people of our generation, say, that's what you—that was why you liked it, you wanted to go in your room and be together with the novel, and *that* I think is a cause for concern, as optimistic as I often try to be. I think that the ability to be private is something that you see disappearing.

All you have to do is, as I do very often, ride New Jersey Transit, you know, and people cannot be. You never see people reading anymore. Everyone's on a phone, watching a movie, you know, being connected, doing their e-mails, and I do this, too, so it's not like I'm some high and mighty person, and *that* I think is interesting because you know a form of public transportation in New York City used to be an object filled with people reading books and newspapers and

magazines and now they're all connected and that, I think, is changing how people read. That I think is a material difference in culture.

PICO IYER: I'd love to ask you about the difference between Wilde and Housman and *Looking Backwards* and I'm really—I've been waiting ten years to attack James about Pynchon, **(laughter)** but all of you have diligently written your questions, so Paul why don't you . . .

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have many, many questions—about forty-five—and I will read about fifty-two of them to you.

DAVID MENDELSON: Is that what the person walking around with the sign . . .? I thought somebody's lights were on. **(laughter)** For the past hour I'm looking at this guy walking around with the card—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The first question for you, Daniel, is “Are your lights still on?” To the three of you, are there times when, as Isherwood wrote in the *New York Times*, “the Muses are in retreat, creativity will be stymied for decades, leading to a cultural blight,” and are we in such a time because of an overemphasis on pop culture? We might begin actually with you, Daniel.

DAVID MENDELSON: I—you know, I'm torn when I hear a question like this because the fogeyish part of me wants to say, “Yes, it's all so terrible,” and then you know if you look at the history of culture, it's pretty much been the same the whole time. Which is, you know, there's

some people doing great stuff and a lot of people doing junky stuff. I don't think particularly, you know when you talk about creativity, I think that's a very big subject. There are people creating things *all the time* and I think that, you know, *our* obligation, especially as a critic, because you're trying to read the culture is not to be distracted by your own panic, and to try and have a wider view, maybe. I don't think we're in a particularly—as compared to, say, the Elizabethans, or the Periclean Athens, you know, there was always a lot of crap being produced, it just never got—they didn't have, you know, the Internet so it's not still with us, only the good stuff lasted. You know what I mean? So I would be wary of passing judgment on our moment, again because we're not out of it enough to see what it adds up to.

PICO IYER: It's just like everyone thinks his own family is the most troubled in the world and the same applies to one's own time, I think. So I am fully in agreement.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What do you think about novels, short stories, and articles being adapted for film, television, and even theater? As this becomes more common and frequent one wonders if eventually film could even exist without literature.

JAMES WOOD: These are very big questions. I think, you know, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I think generally, generally the novelistic adaptations are less successful, aren't they? And the reason that something like the first *Brideshead Revisited* worked so well was that the filmmakers reserved for themselves a *novelistic* length of time. That's the thing that's hardest to do, is capture that passage of time and, clearly, compacting it down to two hours isn't going to work. And then film generally finds interiority hard to do, so it has to find ways of

dramatizing interiority or dramatizing descriptions of someone thinking, which will mean putting it into dialogue, which will then mean generally making things more explicit in some way than they actually were in fiction. So I—generally, I expect *nothing* from adaptations and am pleasantly surprised when one or two succeed.

DAVID MENDELSON: I'd be out of a job if they weren't adapting film, so I don't see a— Bob Silvers is laughing—you know, here, again I would argue for perspective. You know, in the early nineteenth century people used to grumble because every hot new novel got turned into an opera, and now we think that the operas are great high works of art that we have to curate and protect and cherish, right? And but I'm not saying that these adaptations are going to turn out to be good. I'm just saying—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: They might.

DAVID MENDELSON: You know, well no, but what does it matter? You know, no adaptation of a great work of literature that was terrible ever hurt the great work of literature. I think it's safe to say. And in a case like *Brideshead*, the adaptation, it was one of the rare examples when the adaptation was actually better than the original, right, you know, so you know, I think Evelyn Waugh's estate should be very happy about that adaptation. So, you know, I don't think it hurts. I am very interested right now and I do think this may be what the asker of the question was sort of concerned about it is there's a kind of sense of recycling lately and it's recycling from as it were unworthy objects, so you first you have *The Little Mermaid* the cutesy cartoon that becomes *Little Mermaid* the unspeakable Broadway musical, which is now going to

be *The Little Mermaid*, the cartoon of the musical and then there will be a musical out of that cartoon. You know, and there's very much a sense of that, but that's just schlock and I don't think it does any permanent damage, I don't think, you know, really.

PICO IYER: I don't think film could exist without the novel. Which is why the Hollywood studios are so greedily optioning every book that comes out. As you were saying—

DAVID MENDELSON: If only.

PICO IYER: Henry James and Jane Austen and Somerset Maugham are having wonderful second and third careers long after their deaths, thanks to Hollywood.

DAVID MENDELSON: Think of great movies—Think of great movies that were just great movies that, of course, weren't good adaptations. You know, of course I can't think of one. My father's sitting here with the lady knitting. I can't think of the name of the book. The French Revolution. Dickens. Hello. *Tale of Two Cities*. My mother says *Jane Eyre*. *Wuthering Heights*. You know there have been fabulous movies made out of books that aren't so great, I mean that are, you know, that are just different and wonderful. Film is different.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: James, a very quick question for you. Where did James Wood learn the art of reading? He named a university but didn't tell us which one.

JAMES WOOD: Oh, it was Cambridge University and actually—I won't give a long answer because I don't think it deserves one—but going back to what Daniel was saying about how he feels about his students and how good they are, but also how there's always been a lot of rubbish in the culture. This idea that standards somehow were a lot higher. It was at Cambridge that the academic I. A. Richards in the 1920s decided to do an experiment, which was he brought in some poems by John Donne and he—without the name attached to the poems and gave them to his students and asked his students to write about them. And the results were very instructive because the students—a few of them had interesting things to say but on the whole they sort of guffawed at these poems and said, you know—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did they do?

JAMES WOOD: They laughed, they just sort of, “Absurd. Kind of overwrought. Line Four is ridiculous. These metaphysical conceits don't work.” And so on. And Richards had got the result that he—that in some ways I think in some ways he secretly hoped for, which was this sort of chaos of subjectivity that enabled Richards, as he saw it, to sort of bring a scientific rigor to the business of trying to teach people how to read. But so it was at Cambridge that Richards did this thing called Practical Criticism, a term that actually he got from Coleridge, but that became associated with *that* university, a mode of close reading line by line, word by word, with elements of philology and so on.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I know when you use the word “subjectivity” I am constantly asked how I make decisions like the one today of inviting the three of you to come and I always

tell people that they assume too much, but also that it's an informed subjectivity, it's a subjectivity that comes from years of actually doing what Pico was speaking about, which is the pleasure of being alone and you know reading, I often quote this line from Winnicott, he talks in a wonderful chapter called in a wonderful essay called "The Contribution of Mothers to Society," he says that the role is for the child to be alone in the presence of the mother. And in some way reading—as your mother is here, Daniel—**(laughter)** reading you are never alone. But anyway, let me get to this question. Mom is always there.

"The constructivist choreographer Fyodor Lopukhov, a critic of critics, proposed that the only effective criticism in his field could be offered by individuals who knew at least as much about technique and the theatrical history as the poor schlub being criticized. Do you agree in the realm of literature and literary criticism?"

(laughter)

JAMES WOOD: Sorry—that it can only be done by—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: By somebody who is as informed as the critic, as informed as the creator.

JAMES WOOD: Well, I don't know what that would mean, exactly. You know, one of the irritating things about evolutionary biology, of which there are many irritating things, it seems to me, is this sort of new discovery of the mirror neuron, you know, this idea that if you're in a

baseball park, and you see a guy hit a home run or whatever—I'm being very American, you didn't expect that, did you? But you see a guy hitting a home run, you know, it's now been proved that neurons are going off in your brain that are identical to the neurons going off in the slugger—is that the right word?

(laughter)

DAVID MENDELSON: You're batting a thousand.

(laughter)

JAMES WOOD: Therefore, continue some evolutionary biologists, you know, that must be the historical, this must be the biological basis, rather, for sympathy and altruism, that we actually experience the same thing as the person being knocked down by a car or hitting the home run. Obviously as soon as I've said it, you realize that this cannot be true. It is not the same to spectate as it is to be the doer, whatever the similarities of brain function are. And so it must be the same in reviewing—I can't have exactly the same knowledge and experiences as the person I'm reviewing. That could never be. Indeed, I might know a lot more than the person I'm reviewing. That's fine, too.

PICO IYER: What he must be getting at, though, or she, is that Wildean thing that literary criticism is the only form in which the criticizer and the criticized are in the same medium, in

other words, a ballet critic or a film critic is inherently performing a very different kind of task. Which is how the critic in literature can trump the person he's criticizing.

JAMES WOOD: No, certainly, that's always been a great source of pleasure and excitement for me, in just the idea that you're swimming in the same medium, and that that's your great advantage over all other kinds of critics—yeah, of course.

DAVID MENDELSON: But also I think at the root of the question is in a sense a weird desire to erase the *audience* from the equation. You know, if—who are you making this stuff for? Of course, if you're a constructivist Russian choreographer, probably nobody, but you know.

(laughter) If a critic can't judge it because he's not the filmmaker, how can the audience judge it who goes to see it? I think it's just—the whole thing is specious. But you get this all the time: “Well, if *you* ever tried to write a novel you'd be a lot nicer,” you know, or whatever. Except, no, that's actually not how it works. Does a judge have to commit murder, you know?

(laughter)

JAMES WOOD: My fifteenth Amazon reader review response of *How Fiction Works*, fifteenth and last so far, counting.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're looking at it carefully every day.

JAMES WOOD: Gives me one star. And it's headlined "Obviously Wood Never Wrote a Novel." (**laughter**) Now, I think at some philosophical level, that's probably true, because it wasn't a good enough novel, but the fact is I *did* write a novel, it was published.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You spoke a little bit about the life of the critic and here we have a question about something that just happened very recently. "Does one want to attempt to read the death of David Foster Wallace, a suicide, as a literary gesture, or is that just too distasteful a suggestion?" And there's a note, "I'll terribly miss what he will not be writing in the future."

JAMES WOOD: No, it doesn't. No, it doesn't seem to me a literary gesture. Of course, when the news of that terrible event came on Saturday it was only natural that one was thinking, as one does, this is the nature of suicide, that it places the burden of explanation horribly on those who survive, though one was thinking of all the possible reasons and in an idle way no doubt one was probably thinking Is there some, is there some literary involvement? I don't mean as a gesture, I mean more like was he not able to write? And was that part of the problem? But as far as one can tell, and I feel sort of wrong even sort of commenting on this, but as far as one could tell, from the obituary, which quoted his father, it was a long, a long, many years of depression and that everything had been, everything had been tried. You know, Virginia Woolf didn't commit suicide as a literary gesture, she committed suicide because she knew she was going to get depressed again and she couldn't bear that idea, it was worse than anything, and she had to end it.

DAVID MENDELSON: You know, I'm so dumbfounded by the question I don't—I'm not sure what to say. The only literary gesture is writing. It's the only—I don't know what it means to be a literary—I just literally don't know what it means. I do, what comes to mind is the young fellow I know who is at Columbia and was taking some kind of fancy theory course and they were talking about death in this course and the famous theorist professor said something like, "You know, that's not a text I'm ready to encounter," or something, and I thought, "Oh, Mary, get over yourself, you know." **(laughter)** I think one of the things that literature tells you about is about, you know, the significance of life of in a profound way, so to refer to this, you know, in any way as a gesture, it seems to me—I can't comment on it because it seems sort of grotesque, I don't know what to say.

PICO IYER: James actually has some very powerful pages in his book that now seem both prophetic and even poignant about David Foster Wallace and how he had ingested and could at twenty, thirty pages at a stretch, embody the confusion and the fracturedness and the excess of the times and I mean, there's something—when I reread James's book in light of that death, it threw off sad haunting resonances, I think.

JAMES WOOD: Well, one thing I quoted was that marvelous Auden poem "The Novelist," where Auden said, a poet can leap forward like a Hussar, you know with one phrase, can seize everything in an image but the novelist has to learn how to plain and awkward and must become the whole of boredom is what Auden says and he doesn't mean it, it sounds catty, and lord knows, Auden could make anything sound catty, but I don't think he meant it cattily, and when I quoted it in relation to Foster Wallace, and said that he's very good at become the whole of

boredom, I didn't mean it cattily either but in some way that's the—there's that mimetic burden on the novelist and everything we've been talking about in the last hour is in some way a circling round that question of what—how the contemporary novelist responds to *this* particular reality. You know, there's all this stuff going on, so do you take it in and fill your text with it and alter your sentences on the basis of what's been taken in, and obviously Wallace was fearless at doing that.

PICO IYER: And between him and Marilynne Robinson you have such an interesting contrast, because she has built her structure in some—

JAMES WOOD: It's about silence and paring down.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: On this very stage I recall having Pierre Bayard and Umberto Eco and Pierre Bayard wrote this quite comical book called *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*. Have you read that book?

JAMES WOOD: Yes, I have.

(laughter)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's fairly good and it always brings back to my mind years and years. Please, what were you—

JAMES WOOD: I can't talk about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It brings back years and years and years of teaching and my favorite comment still remains, one day a student who always had interesting things to say, but were mostly sort of off and perhaps one might even dare say wrong, and one day I said to him, "Michael, have you actually read 'Bartleby the Scrivener'?" And he said, "Not personally." Thank you very much.