Wendy Lesser: Joan Acocella is a dance critic and a book critic for the *New Yorker*. I have actually known her work for a long time before she became the regular dance critic for the *New Yorker*, because she wrote a wonderful book about Mark Morris. We share a passion for Mark Morris, and she has executed her passion in this incredible form of this great, great book that's still in print, which is an amazing thing for a book about dance. And she pretty much said everything that could have been said about Mark Morris up until that point in his career, and has continued to follow him and write about him since then, and also about all the other dance in this city and others. Everybody I know, dance fans and non-dance fans alike, reads her columns with instruction and pleasure. She's written a wonderful book about Willa Cather, which grew out of a *New Yorker* article. She's edited the diaries of Vaslav Nijinski. And in general, she finds and writes about interesting artists—new, living, working artists in dance, books and in other fields. She had a great piece in *The New York Review of Books* about Neapolitan hand gestures.

Luke [Louis] Menand, when I picked him for the panel, represented in my mind *The New York Review of Books*, for which he is a contributing editor and for which he writes wonderfully on film and on books—so wonderfully that almost every time he's published something in *The New York Review*, I write him a little note saying, "That was an incredible piece about William James," or "That was a wonderful attack on the movie 'Wings of the Dove.'" I kind of got tired of writing these notes. It was like everytime he published, I would have to write one of these notes. And now he has transferred much of his wonderful writing to the *New Yorker*, where he's a regular critic and commentator. He has a book coming out in May from Farrar, Straus and Giroux called "The Metaphysical Club," which will touch on many of the figures about whom he wrote so beautifully in those *New York Review* essays that I had to write all the notes about.

James Shapiro teaches here at Columbia University and is one of the really celebrated teachers here. I've heard from so many people who've taken his courses or have heard about them from others that he is one of the teachers that people care about taking a class with. He's the only one among us who has regular contact with undergraduates—that seems an important aspect of criticism also. But he's also a very fine writer about the theater. In book form, he's written "Shakespeare and the Jews" and a book about Oberammergau, and will be writing a book called "A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare." In article form, he writes frequently for *The New York Times*.

You've seen articles of his in the Book Review section, and in the Arts and Leisure section.

Why are we talking about "criticism and/or journalism"? First, about 12 years ago, I had to help organize a panel for the MLA when it met in San Francisco. I was already interested in this notion, and I was already champing at the bit about academia, and thinking people needed to get outside of academia and think about what kinds of criticism were going on outside of academia. And so I helped organize a panel that was called "Criticism Versus Journalism." But one of my panelists was Christopher Ricks. If you know anything about Christopher, he focuses on the detail. He spent his entire time on the panel talking about "versus." So I thought, "This time I'm not going to make that mistake. We'll call it 'Criticism and Journalism,' and no one will be able to mess with me that way." But then the title got talked over at the National Arts Journalism Program, and András Szántó, one of our administrators, who's from Hungary and always likes to have a back door, didn't like just plain old, flat, "Criticism and Journalism." He said "Let's push 'slash-or.'" So now we have too complicated a connective for anybody to focus on, unless you are going to mess me up by focusing on the "slash," which I hope you won't do.

And then I started thinking, "What do I mean by 'Criticism and Journalism'?" That will be part of what we talk about, that's what we're trying to figure out. But I happened to be re-reading Balzac's "Lost Illusions" a few months ago when I was putting together this panel. Really, anything you want to know about the state of modern journalism, criticism or literature, you just go read Balzac's "Lost Illusions." It was all going on in 19th-century France already. So here are a few quotations of his notions about criticism and journalism.

The main character is Lucien Rubempré. "Lucien's life was one long bout of intemperance, punctuated with the facile labors of journalism. He continued his series of short articles and made prodigious efforts from time to time to produce a few fine pages of carefully thought-out criticism." So there's one little opposition of those two notions. Then there's a friend of his, telling him why he'll make a great journalist. "You only too obviously possess the qualities of a journalist: brilliance and versatility of thought. You would never deny yourself a shaft of wit, even if it would reduce a friend to tears. I meet journalists in the theater foyers, and they horrify me. Journalism is an inferno, a bottomless pit of iniquity, falsehood and treachery. One can only pass through and emerge from it unsullied if one is shielded as Dante was by the divine laurels of Vergil." And then Lucien is horrified. "Great heavens, but what about criticism, the sacred task of criticism?" said Lucien, still imbued with the doctrines of the Cenacle. "My dear chap," said Lousteau.

"Criticism's a scrubbing brush which you mustn't use on flimsy materials. It would tear them to shreds."

So, that doesn't exactly define the subject for us, but I think it gives us a starting point. And I wanted to ask the panelists whether you thought criticism as you define it—and you can define it any way you want—is more likely to be taking place these days in the academy, or in what we might call "journalistic locations." Or if you don't like that opposition, cut it in half any way you want.

Louis Menand: First of all, I didn't mind receiving those notes at all, and you shouldn't stop sending them.

I've had a chance to think about this question, because I knew I was going to be on this panel. Though if I hadn't known that, I wouldn't have known what to say. I've always made a distinction between criticism and reviewing. I don't mean to make it seem like an invidious distinction at all, or suggest that there's anything like a bright line separating them. But I think the job of a reviewer is to let readers know whether they'd be interested in reading a book or seeing a movie or whatever it is that a reviewer is reviewing. I think criticism is slightly different, in that the critic has something to say about whatever the subject is, or that art form that is being written about, that is from him or herself. A critic is somebody who has a personal voice, a shtick as it were, something that they've already thought about that they want to say. And the work being criticized is, in a way, an occasion for that being said.

So to answer Wendy's question, the work that academics do in English departments—I'm in an English department—is criticism. That is, they have something they want to say, and the work of literature is an occasion for them to say both something about the work and to say something that they want to say that bounces off the work. Certainly a lot of non-academic journals sponsor that kind of critical writing. But I assume that if you were to look at it in the gross, you would say that most commercial publications do reviewing because that's a service they provide for their readers. There are great reviewers and it's a perfectly honorable thing to do. But I would make that distinction.

James Shapiro: When I do journalism, I'm really trying to do scholarship or criticism and get away with it. And the process of writing journalism, whether it's for the *Book Review* or for the arts section of *The New York Times*, is seeing how much I can push a critical line or argument against editors who push back against getting too much criticism into an occasional piece of journalism. So for me, the distinctions collapse.

If we were holding this meeting 30 years ago, this room wouldn't be so glorious, first of all. There's money in journalism now. There's not money in the English department. If we go over there, there wouldn't be a room to hold all of us over on that side of campus. I say this not only in terms of money, but as a matter of cultural authority.

These days, those who shape the culture's view of writing in the arts, by and large, tend to be journalists. They tend not to be academics.

I was fanning through the extraordinary list of artists and participants in the *New Yorker* Festival. I was struck by the fact that there were a couple of academic critics on board, but most denied their academic affiliation. In other words, they identified themselves as journalists. These days, those who shape the culture's view of writing in the arts, by and large, tend to be journalists. They tend not to be academics. That leaves me puzzled but struggling to create a space between journalism and criticism. I don't know if my fellow panelists feel more comfortable in a bifurcated role, or in trying to collapse those roles.

Lesser: I should have said in my introduction that we all four have graduate degrees in literature. That is, we're all people who were trained in the academy but have maintained more and less attenuated degrees of connection with it.

Joan Acocella: I didn't teach for long, and I went from teaching literature very briefly, being a TA in my graduate department, to teaching dance history and dance criticism. But I think that I probably, just because I've lived my whole life in journalism, feel the conflict a little bit less.

I am delighted to be a journalist and not to be at the university. I think it's been a hard time for academic criticism in the last couple of decades. And I'm very pleased to be talking to the public. Also, I certainly do, secretly in the dark of night, think that I'm an artist. But I know that I'm recommending. I know that I'm affecting reputations and I want to. So I do do consumer guidance. Since the *New Yorker* has a one-week lead time and an awful lot of dance seasons are maybe five nights long, I generally don't come out in time for them to go to the concert or not. I come out right afterwards. But I do think there's such a thing as high-level reviewing. I want to write an essay,

but that doesn't seem to me to be inconsistent with the business of recommending or disrecommending.

Lesser: Let me put a similar question in a different way. Do you write in a different voice, when you're writing your own books (and all of you have written your own books) from the one you write in when you're writing journalism?

In this case, you can pick your favorite kind of journalism: in other words, the magazine that is nicest to you and where you get to express yourself most like yourself. Do you nonetheless change your style when you're writing in a magazine from when you're writing in your own book?

Acocella: The only difference for me is that I'm a little more playful in writing journalism. I read most of my magazines at about 11 o'clock at night. I figure most other folks do too. And I want to keep them awake. I'm having a little fun, and I know it's going to be a short road. But if it's a book, I'm projecting a long arc. I won't say the books are more serious—two books I've done are expansions of *New Yorker* articles—but my books are less fun.

Lesser: And why is that? Because you think that the audience 10 or 20 years from now that's reading a book won't get the same kinds of jokes? Do you think humor is more of a temporary thing? Or do you just feel you don't need to be funny? And funny is something that you can control?

Acocella: In a book, you can plant things. You have a large architecture. You have to be remembering what went on in Chapter Two. You have to be already planting things for Chapter Five. There's a big, long argument. I used to write for the *Village Voice*. Luke and I both wrote for *Seven Days*, which was a kind of tough-guy downtown newspaper, and I enjoyed that. I loved getting out of the university.

Menand: Edmund Wilson, as you probably know, used to live in Wellfleet during the winter, and lived in upstate New York during the summer. He wasn't a big beachgoer. But he would sometimes be there during the beach season, and whenever he would go to the beach, he would always wear a white dress shirt. People would make fun of him, and he would say, "I only know one way to dress."

So, my answer to the question is, "I only know one way to write." It's just the way I write. It's true that different media have different audiences. Certainly, the books that I write, I have a slightly different audience from *Seven Days*, let's say, or for the *New Yorker*. Therefore, you can assume more or less, depending on who you think your readers are going to be. And if you mis-

assume, your editor will usually tell you, "Explain this," or "You don't have to explain that." But I would say in terms of the style of the writing and in terms of how serious I try to be, I don't see a big difference.

Shapiro: I come from the other side of the panel from Joan, insofar as I never think of myself as a journalist. I think of myself, really, as a scholar. "Critic" is a term I'm less comfortable wearing. I'm a scholar that does journalism, because I see the erosion of authority from English professors in this culture. Luke went to graduate school at Columbia, studied with some of the most influential cultural critics of the day. I don't know if you studied with Lionel Trilling and others; I studied with him when I was an undergraduate. And I feel painfully that loss of authority for the profession.

So when I try to do journalism or I write books, I try to imagine that there is a very educated audience out there: one that subscribes to the *New Yorker*, buys *The New York Review of Books* every two weeks, perhaps picks up the *TLS* or *The London Review of Books* on occasion, and want scholars writing for them, and are bewildered by the kind of scholars that you take to task so beautifully in your Willa Cather book, Joan, the ones who are writing for a coterie. As long as there is an audience out there, I can imagine, in my books especially, trying to reach them by writing as well as I can. But there is a need for that. And there are not many scholars, for complicated reasons, who devote themselves to that.

I get a call to write a book review and my life, and the life of my wife and kid, is only miserable for those two or three weeks. . . When I write a book, my life is miserable for about ten years before I finish that book.

The difference for me between writing scholarship and writing journalism is, I get a call to write a book review and have to do it in two or three weeks, and my life, and the life of my wife and kid, is only miserable for those two or three weeks, plus the last-minute editing and cutting. When I write a book, my life is miserable for about ten years before I finish that book. The advantage of it is it's a kind of low-level misery. But there's a depth. When you write a review, you must have that experience where two weeks later, you come across a sentence or an idea and say, "I could have worked that in," or "I might have worked that in." When you have 10 years, or eight years, or six years to struggle over a book, you don't have that excuse.

There's a kind of depth and complexity that criticism and scholarship afford, that journalism can't afford. And, I suppose I feel like I'm winging it more when I'm doing journalism. But I'm more conscious of the loss of depth and complexity when I'm writing 1,200 or 1,700 words.

Menand: A lot of it has to do with length. The way my career has fallen out, I usually write at much greater length than that. So I have a chance to plant things and do all that kind of stuff. Apart from my experience at *Seven Days*, when I was a movie critic and had to write every week, I've never had the duty of having to cover things. So it's a little bit different. But I think the fun of journalism comes from the fact that you're on a deadline. It's kind of a sport, in other words. You have a limited amount of time to do it in. You have a subject that you may know more or less about. And you have three or four weeks to get up something interesting about it. And I think you can't look back from those things. You just try to get the best piece out that you can. You will miss stuff, because you're not spending 10 years on it. But that's the fun of it: the anxiety of trying to do justice to the book, or the movie, and do justice to the subject, and also write something that people will want to read.

Lesser: But there's an obvious way in which one's wife and son would suffer more during a journalistic editing experience than a book editing experience. Length aside, aren't there journalistic pressures exerted by editors that don't exist when you're writing your own book?

Acocella: *Mais oui*. I had a book that was due about four years ago.

Lesser: Deadline aside, I'm trying to get at the actual shaping of your style that editors in a journalistic setting tend to do.

Acocella: It's what Luke said, it's a different state of mind. It's like being at bat at a baseball game. They're going to throw at you, you've got three strikes, you try to get on base, and if you don't, you go sit on the bench, and you come back nine guys later. One thing that's interesting to think about is the idea of collecting one's journalism. I talked to my agent about this subject some time ago, and he said, "Yech."

I'm a very professional journalist, I've been doing it for 20 years, I get it in on time. I won't say I don't look back when I'm feeling bad and I have to write something new. Very often, I'll read something of mine that I think was good, just to buck myself up. But sometimes, the spirit that will get you to do a good weekly piece is one that might work against its being collectible 10 years later. It's a problem.

On the other hand, if I died and went to heaven and they wanted to send me back to earth as a critic, and which critic would I want to be, I would want to be Edmund Wilson. And I would wear wing-tips on the beach. I would be happy, I'd love it. One of the things I love about Wilson is the smell of the '20s, the '30s, the '40s, the '50s in those pieces. When he talks about Willa Cather, for whom he had less respect than he should have, I feel a certain man at a certain time, reading books as part of his life, as part of a life he shares with the public. It is his life, his daily life, his bread and butter. And that I love.

Lesser: I don't think that's limited just to an excellent critic. A great artist also partly gives us his time. There's a great line in Thom Gunn's essay about Christopher Isherwood that says, "It is surely of permanent interest to us that reading these books, we feel what it was like to live in 1930s Berlin and 1960s Los Angeles." That's partly what makes them great books that we still want to read. I think we look to artists for that, for marking their times for us. And we should look to critics for the same.

Shapiro: I was just going to add one thing. Journalism is collaborative. You're working with an editor. You're often working with a series of editors. Somebody gives you a word length, which could change if there's an ad that comes in, if there's an ad that's removed. You write a sentence, and you use a word… I remember writing a piece for *The Forward*, and I used the word "shiksa," and the editors at *The Forward* said, "You cannot use the word 'shiksa' in *The Forward*," which, for those of you who don't know, is a Jewish newspaper. And I said, "Are you telling me that the readers of this newspaper don't know what this word means?" and they said, "No, we just don't use it."

When you're doing journalism, you have to know which fights you're going to win, which fights you're going to lose, which fights are worth fighting, and when to decide not to write for that paper or journal any longer. But it's collaborative and contentious in that way. And you have to learn to work with good editors and avoid bad editors, because your name is on that piece, but it's been hammered into shape by other people, including copy editors, who are persnickety, who may not like certain kinds of stylistic habits. I'm curious. I follow both of your writings a lot. I'm wondering whether you internalize those stylistic constraints, or whether you keep fighting the fight.

Acocella: A friend of mine, Arlene Croce, has a theory that you so much internalize the standards of the magazine, and indeed your image of the audience, that a piece that is written for one magazine cannot be successfully sent to another. And that has been my experience. Of course, one finds out quickly that there are some journals that one is not going to be able to write

for, no matter how well they pay. It's like, a kiss for one man cannot be planted on a different cheek.

One finds out quickly that there are some journals that one is not going to be able to write for, no matter how well they pay. It's like, a kiss for one man cannot be planted on a different cheek.

Menand: I agree. I think you do internalize the editorial sensibility of the magazine that you write for. I don't think when I'm writing for one magazine that I'm writing for that magazine. But you do do that, I think. That's also part of the sport. If your editors are good, you can anticipate what they're going to say.

Acocella: It's a relationship. You don't think about it. I have a relationship with my editor, and I have a relationship with my imagined reader. I've imagined him/her/them. But it works. I would be curious to know from you guys: I just put down galleys, and my editor had sent me these galleys and she wrote "Could you please explain who Nijinsky was, and what was his importance to ballet?" Now, he's the person I have written most about in my life, and I wrote my dissertation on him. I completely understand why the audience might want it, and when I'm reading a review of the new book on Tennessee Williams, I want to be reminded of which state he came from, and did he die of drink, and the sister, what was it she had? I want that little paragraph, the little potted history. But Lord, I get tired of writing it.

Lesser: You do like it? I don't. Elizabeth Hardwick is great on this subject, the way *The New York Times* makes you stick in "the 19th-century author Herman Melville."

Acocella: Oh, yes! "Poet and critic Jean Cocteau."

Lesser: I think the danger of it is, if you're explaining for some people, you're insulting others. And to have to put in the potted history implies that you're instructing the reader and that the reader doesn't know these things, and that automatically does something to the relationship you're talking about. So I fight it, to the death, when the editor asks for it. Because I'd rather the people just read the criticism the way I read Russian novels when I was 15. The names go by, you don't get the whole thing. But you can still read the novel.

Acocella: It's partly a generational problem. A lot of the readers of the *New Yorker* are 20 years younger than I am and have had a different education. I won't go into that subject, because we'll all sit around like a bunch of old geezers and crab about it…

I'd rather the people just read the criticism the way I read Russian novels when I was 15. The names go by, you don't get the whole thing. But you can still read the novel.

Menand: Maybe I'll disagree then, just to make it less uniform. I think that there's an art to this. There's an assumption that the *New Yorker* radiates to its readers that they are well-educated, well-informed, cultured people. But they never assume that they actually know anything. So in [William] Shawn's *New Yorker*, it's true that they would query Herman Melville and things like that. But the reason they did that is because they didn't want readers to ever feel that a piece was beyond them. And they were brilliant at that.

The art of it is not saying "the 19th-century American author Herman Melville." It's saying it in a way that makes it seem as though, "Of course you know this, everybody knows this. It's just part of my sentence. I happen to have the words '19th century' in it." And I think *The New York Review of Books* is very much like that. *The New York Review*, of course, has a much smaller audience. But the guiding editorial theory is that a piece written by an English professor should be completely accessible to a biology professor. To do that, the English professors are often eminent specialists in a particular area. But for *The New York Review* to be happy with what they do, they have to write in a way that doesn't embarrass them in front of their peers in the English department, but that people who aren't experts in the area can read. And that can be done, it seems to me, in a very artful way. It doesn't require putting in obvious flags to identify people. But it is one of the ways in which this kind of journalism is successful. I think the *New Yorker* is closer to that now than it was under an earlier regime, in which there was a lot of knowingness in the writing, a lot of assumptions about names people would recognize, terms they would recognize, products they would know. Other magazines do that.

Acocella: It's very interesting what you're saying, because it can be done with a certain amount of finesse. I find today that I'm willing to say, because it's so important, why Nijinski was important to dance. But I was not willing to re-describe the riot over "The Rite of Spring." And I said, "It produced one of

Paris's most cherished theatrical riots, and the police had to be called," and that was the end of the description. Because I owe it to my friends not to make them just die of boredom to hear that thing described again. But the business of "most cherished theatrical riots" alerts people to the fact that this is something that has been talked about a lot. You're complimenting the reader in a way and saying, "You remember that, don't you? That was that big corny thing that we're not going to talk about."

Shapiro: Let me play, for the sake of argument, the devil's advocate from the scholar's perspective. I've had the same argument about "Do you really have to identify 'William Shakespeare'?" There's an assumption that we know who we're talking about here. But the battle lines tend to be drawn about certain kinds of knowledge. When I pick up the *New Yorker* or even *The New York Review of Books*, compared to when I pick up *The London Review of Books*, I find that in American journalism—this is the best American journalism there is—there's not the intellectual and cultural depth that the readers of *The London Review of Books* might have. My fear is that as journalism moves more and more to make the people who buy the *New Yorker* feel better about themselves and feel hip and connected, the depth that scholars bring to problems, the historical range and complexity, is not where the battle is. The battle is, "Should we explain who this Russian author is or give Shakespeare's dates?" Something is lost when the work of tens of thousands of scholars laboring in a variety of fields somehow doesn't, through some kind of osmotic force, make its way into the things that people read, the things that I read, on a weekly basis. I'm increasingly troubled by that. I place a lot of the blame on scholars, who simply turn their backs on trying to write for a popular audience, and they say it snidely when they say that. But that doesn't mean that as readers we should be so accepting of, not a dumbing-down of, but a simplifying of complex literary, political and artistic issues.

Lesser: I'd like to add to that from the point of view of a critic—I'm interested to hear why you avoid the word "critic"—you don't need to have studied these things in the library or done major bibliographic and historical research on a subject. You can just have done a lot of wide reading to feel that depths are not being explored in weekly or monthly journalism. And when you said, Jim, that the academy has lost its authority, and there was no figure in the academy like Trilling: well, where is there a figure out there like Trilling in journalism, either? There aren't figures writing anywhere now who convey either that moral or that aesthetic authority. And there aren't very many subject matters that people can converse with each other about, in this sense that they all have this enormous depth of field and can understand what each other is saying.

Except, in my experience, television. The other day, I was teaching class and we were reading an essay by George Orwell on Charles Dickens. And the students thought he was just dropping all this information, he was in the library too much. I tried to explain to them that in Orwell's day everybody had Dickens read to them all the time and knew who Sairy Gamp and everybody was, it was just floating around in their heads. These students couldn't understand how a body of literature could accumulate in someone's brain like that without studying. And then we had the break, and we started talking about "The West Wing," and whether C.J. was going to keep doing this, and what's going on with Josh, and what do we think about Leo… Everybody knew all the names, and they were totally up on every little turn of the character, everybody in the room. It was the same with "Seinfeld." So, there was a way in which there was this huge body of knowledge that we could talk about in an informed and critical fashion. But it's been relocated onto this flimsy material.

Joan, you were talking about collecting one's criticism. Don't think I'm being mean to the panelists, because I warned them I was going to ask this—whether you could dredge up from your memory the most embarrassing incident, and the most commendable incident, of your critical judgments. If you look back over your whole critical or journalistic or scholarly career, what is the thing that you asserted that you now most think is wrong? And what is the thing that you feel most prescient or proud of having said?

Acocella: You mentioned in one of your other questions the matter of "spotting"—how important it is to spot talent. And I think that is very important to the art. So I guess I am pleased with the fact that I wrote a book about Mark Morris when he was 36 years old. A lot of people thought that was silly, to write something on an artist who was so young. But that's when I was in love with his work, and I was glad I did that. Of course, now I'm tempted to update the book, but whatever. I did that. I wrote a book on a 36-year-old artist.

I wish that when I'd started out,
I hadn't been so mean and so arrogant.

As for embarrassing, I tried, and there are little things. But for me, it's a more general thing. I wish that when I'd started out, I hadn't been so mean and so arrogant. I was so insecure, and I really didn't know what the hell I was talking about. I'm from the one art that is not taught in the university. I was a literature student, and I was self-taught in dance. But it's one thing to read a

lot of dance history, and another thing to go and see the Alvin Ailey or the Merce Cunningham company for the first time and will yourself to pretend that you can write about this. You read others—of course, the reason I became a dance critic was I read dance critics who I admired. But in the beginning, I was really mean, because I was trying to have authority. And also, I was surprised by sin, if you know what I mean. At least, now it doesn't amaze me that the corny people are corny and the juvenile people are juvenile. Sometimes I think I was more fun then. Wooh, the things I said! I was really a tough cookie. The extent to which I made fun of John Cranko's ballet, "The Taming of the Shrew"…There's an audience for that junk. These days I wouldn't review it. But then maybe I needed to get it out of my system, I don't know, it's a good thing I wrote for such obscure, lousy journals that nobody read it. So anyway, that's my moral report card.

Shapiro: My regrets are not what I've written, but the assignments I've turned down because I didn't have enough confidence to take something on, or in the back of my mind I didn't really want to make an enemy, or something of that kind. I had been offered a review of Helen Vendler's book on Shakespeare's sonnets. I'd had a little nasty exchange with her in the pages of the *New Republic* which precluded that. But I knew her book was coming out, and if I hadn't sent that nasty letter to the *New Republic*, I would have been asked to do it. And I regret having sent that letter to the *New Republic*, because her book got a flatulent, fulsome review which praised it for all the wrong reasons, and it's a book that I think is a wrong-headed book, and I never got to review it. And I never wrote a nasty letter about Harold Bloom, and I got to review his book, and he no longer speaks to me, but, you know, you write a review, you run the risk of making an enemy.

Shapiro: The rule in *The New York Times* is if you have exchanged insults, broken bread, or hit somebody over the head with a two-by-four, you can't review their book.

Menand: Unless you're Norman Mailer.

Menand: Wait a second. In order to avoid insulting Helen Vendler by giving her book a bad review, you write a nasty letter to the *New Republic* about her?

Shapiro: Helen Vendler had written a review of David Denby's book, and I wrote a nasty letter about her… The rule in *The New York Times* is if you have

exchanged insults, broken bread, or hit somebody over the head with a two-by-four, you can't review their book.

Menand: Unless you're Norman Mailer.

Acocella: Or unless you lie. I've noticed a couple of times. They've always interrogated me. And then I watch people I know who've slept together, and one is reviewing the other's book.

Shapiro: But the rule really is, and it's supposed to be respected: you write without having either a close friendship or…

Acocella: What do you think about that rule? Wendy, you and I had a talk about this over lunch last year. And you said to me, "In England, they completely ignore…"

Lesser: They give John Buchan's grandson the book about John Buchan to review. That's par for the course in England.

Acocella: When Martin Amis's memoir came out, I think it was reviewed by [Christopher] Hitchens and by Ian Hamilton, who is a friend of his.

Lesser: Ian Hamilton isn't a friend of anybody.

Acocella: Oh, I'm sorry. It was from two close friends. I do have a rule that I don't review friends' books. But it is a very inconvenient rule. It means that I miss some important opportunities to talk about things that I think are central. But you know, Arlene Croce's collection, which just came out from FSG, I could do a better job on it than the other person is going to do.

Lesser: It's somewhat arbitrary to not do it about books, when you have to do it about dance. Immersed as you are in the dance world, you have gotten to know some people better than others, and you have to write about all of them anyway. You're not immune from writing about the dancers that you know, that you've broken bread with. For *The New York Times*, when they ask me, "Do you have any prior dealings with this person?" sometimes I say, "Well, he or she has published work in the *Threepenny Review*. Does this count as an economic relationship? This person was paid in the very low three figures." Then they say, "No, there's no way that counts as bribery or anything amounting to a serious relationship." And over the course of 21 years, 25 writers per issue, that's a lot of writers. So if I couldn't ever review anybody who had ever been in the *Threepenny Review*, that would rule out almost all the people I write about.

Menand: My rule is, I think it's not a good idea to review books by people you know. Because no matter how much praise you heap on it, there will always be one sentence that they hate, and they'll tell you about it. So it's just generally not good for a friendship to do that. Should the reviewer have some stake in what the book is about? I generally think better reviews are written by people who are involved. It has something to do with the difference between reviewing and criticism. What you want is an interesting piece. You want an honest piece. You don't want the writer to pretend to a disinterestedness that doesn't exist. But you generally won't get an interesting piece if you pick somebody from left field. The *New York Times Book Review* used to find people who were so disinterested that they had never heard of the subject.

Lesser: Especially for a major novelist. They would get somebody who had never read any of this person's six prior books.

It's not a good idea to review books by people you know. Because no matter how much praise you heap on it, there will always be one sentence that they hate, and they'll tell you about it.

Menand: You just don't get a good piece.

Shapiro: I know a lot of journalists who hate—hate—to have their books reviewed by academics, and academics who hate—hate—to have their books reviewed by journalists. Since I have friends and relatives in both camps, I don't know if you hear similar kinds of complaints in your world.

Menand: At the *New Yorker*, the assumption is that you're not being reviewed by an academic. And most people would rather have a review in a magazine like the *New Yorker*, because it's good for business.

Acocella: My problem with friends is not that they're going to hate me afterwards, but that I'm going to hate myself afterwards. But I pull my punches. One thing I do in dance: I protect myself. Basically, if there's a party, I don't go to it. If there's a "Would you like to meet so-and-so?" then "No, thank you." If there's a green room, I go to the bathroom. I just don't do

it. But it's impossible with book writers in dance. After all, in New York, there are what, ten dance writers. I know them all.

Lesser: It's not just that. It's that once you get to know somebody's work very well, you become better able to write about it, more of an expert, but also less able to be a critic in some ways. I'm sure you've found this, Jim, because you've followed theater pieces all the way through. When I wrote a book about a theater director, the first time I saw a piece of his and I didn't know who he was, I could write a piece of criticism about it. Because I was just an audience member, I didn't know how the piece was put together mechanically, I had the vision of somebody who was trying to figure that out, from the audience. After I watched him rehearse pieces from beginning to end, I could no longer see it from the point of view of a critic. I couldn't imagine what it was like to see this work of art whole at one time, without all of its little rehearsal pieces trailing along behind it.

Do you guys ever find yourselves respecting an artist to such an extent that you are no longer really a critic of that art? I know Jim has, and maybe you'll talk about having that mix of knowledge and perspective.

Shapiro: Just to disagree a little bit, I was sent a book called "The Amateur" about two years ago. And I loved the book. If I had been sent that book now and had written the exact same review, Wendy would never have known whether I was writing in praise of it because I was hoping to get invited to another panel like this or for drinks afterward, or whether this is disinterested criticism by somebody who is an academic in an English department who says, "This is great shit. It's a great book." And the *Times* wouldn't let me write that word, but it was the scholarly equivalent of it.

Lesser: It was so over-the-top, my agent called me up and said, "Whoever this man is, and you must know him very well, he's written so over-the-top a review…"

Shapiro: That's why, from my perspective, you keep kosher about not writing about people you know, so that when you actually do praise someone for a praiseworthy book, that person's going to actually believe what's written.

Acocella: You do this within limits. Once you have written a book on somebody…There are two artists—Mark Morris, and I am writing a book about Baryshnikov right now, and so I've followed him around the country, and I've had a lot of conversations with him—I can never feel the same about them as before. And I am disturbed by intentionalism. I now know what they wish. I've talked to them while they're in the process of doing something. I know their hearts a little bit. And I can never regain the position

of the critic. It's very hard for me to come down on a work by Mark Morris. It's not just that he'll hate me—actually, he won't, he's got the hide of an armadillo. It's that I'm so much aware of his career as a whole. I've watched him all along, so I can see what he was trying to do. So as I said, the intentional fallacy comes in and plops itself down on the page. "Four Saints in Three Acts," I don't think I wrote a successful piece on. I liked the San Francisco Ballet piece so much that I was able to do it. But the piece on "Four Saints and Three Acts" was not completely sincere. I was so unhappy that I didn't love that piece that I spent about 18 paragraphs saying other things because I couldn't bear to get to that point.

Menand: This goes back to something that Jim said earlier. It's the Lionel Trilling question. Just two thoughts about what Jim was saying, which is a position that I certainly understand. One is that in Trilling's time, and until fairly recently, the culture was much more book-driven than it is now. A new book is less the occasion for general cultural conversation that it was even in the 1960s and 1970s. Certain issues are book-driven; the culture wars, obviously, was a book-driven topic of conversation. But most things that people talk about don't seem to be generated by books. And that has changed the status of people who write about books, either criticism or reviews. It makes the book review less central, culturally. I think that's a general shift with a lot of factors that don't have anything to do with how intellectually challenging we are to each other.

On the issue of cultural authority, I have no wish to be a cultural authority. I certainly don't think that my views or morals or culture or anything else are any better than anyone else's. Having been in English departments for most of my life, I tend to believe that about my colleagues, too. I think our job is to write about literature, and I don't think that having that job confers on us the additional duty of saying something to the culture generally. Some people do that. Some people who do that are English professors. But I don't think it's part of the job description necessarily.

One other thing I'd say is that there's a difference between *The London Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*. *The London Review of Books* has a very small circulation: 35,000. The *New Yorker* has 800,000 subscribers. It's a completely different audience. And therefore, the kind of writing that the *New Yorker* wants to sponsor in order to make money is very different from the kind of writing you're going to get in the *London Review of Books*, where people are writing to specialists in their own field. The *New York Review of Books*, which actually does make money, has 130,000 subscribers, which is very large. It's much larger than *The Nation* or the *New Republic* or most of the other small magazines. It's a very successful magazine in its particular niche. I don't think *The New York Review of Books* is shallower than *The London Review*,

though I do think that there's an effort in *The New York Review*, for reasons that I tried to explain a minute ago, to make the pieces more accessible to a general reader than *The London Review*. I find in *The London Review* that if I'm not in the field, I often don't understand what the reviewer's saying. I rarely have that experience in *The New York Review*. Partly, that's because *The New York Review* is designed to reach this somewhat larger readership. So I think when we're talking about the intellectual level or the critical level of periodical journalism, it's useful to make distinctions among the journals according to the size and the kind of readership they are trying to attract and keep attracted to them.

Shapiro: I just finished two weeks in an undergraduate "Intro to the Major" course, in which we read *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, the *TLS* and *The London Review of Books*, and my feelings come out of that. But my students see Louis Menand as a cultural authority, and I do too. Whether you wear the Master's jacket of Lionel Trilling, or however you want to think of it, willingly or not, the *New Yorker* is where culture is shaped today. And those who write in it about dance or literature or the arts, or law—Jeff Toobin and others, and David Remnick is certainly among those—have the cultural authority, whether they want it or not. My colleagues in the Department of English at Columbia who all vie to wear the mantle of Lionel Trilling do not have it. But I'm very conscious of the fact that someone has cultural authority, because they are the ones urging us to read, see plays, see dance performances. And whether you take that authority or not, it's there. It's a given that goes with your name on the page. And I think you two do a terrific job of it. The reason why I'm having my undergraduates read all these magazines is not that I'm teaching them to be the next Lionel Trilling. I'm teaching them to be useful, functioning intellectuals, and they had best know what the best intellectual writing out there is, and it is in these journals, at least in the United States and England. This is where I see the future and where I'm encouraging them to go. That's a radical departure. *The New York Review of Books* may be read by English professors in the department here, but it's certainly not taught as an example of style. I'm trying to change that, because I see that really as a place that the smartest, most ambitious writers should imagine writing for down the road. So I disagree with either a claim of modesty or disavowal.

Lesser: I want to make a distinction between "cultural authority" and "authoritative voice" here. I don't long for somebody who will tell us all, "Now we all ought to be reading Updike, and not reading Roth," or "Now we all ought to be going to the movies of Pedro Almodóvar, and not Billy Wilder," or whatever. But I do long for a voice that I hear coming off the page at me, the way Lionel Trilling's voice did, the way Randall Jarrell's

voice did, the way George Orwell's did, the way Edmund Wilson's does for you, Joan—he doesn't work so much for me…

Acocella: We've lost the knack of it. And it sounds like pontification when we do it.

Menand: Thank God! Who can read those guys?

Lesser: I don't think we've lost the knack.

Acocella: When I see it done, it's like writing…

Lesser: But I hear those voices coming occasionally out of the pages of *The London Review*. And the reason is that *The London Review* allows people to write in a personal voice. And all those guys—Trilling with a more magisterial, hiding-the-first-person manner—sounded like they were speaking to us from themselves, not from an editorial position. And people who write for *The London Review* speak in that way, with that syntax.

Acocella: I find that they often natter on rather longer than I wish. I would much rather read *The New York Review of Books*.

Lesser: Well, nattering is part of it. Nattering is part of that voice.

But apart from that, Trilling hid the first-person singular in the first-person plural. With all respect to Trilling and the Columbia English department, I do think that it's unreadable now.

Menand: But apart from that, Trilling hid the first-person singular in the first-person plural. With all respect to Trilling and the Columbia English department, I do think that it's unreadable now. The reason is, there's a kind of provinciality to the tone of it that has completely lost its appeal. I would further say that Trilling was writing from an agenda: He was writing from the agenda of *The Partisan Review*. Now when you read those essays, you just see it everywhere, the agenda of liberal anti-communism that he represented—a good cause, in my opinion, but it wasn't as though he was an eclectic or was coming at things in a completely independent way. Of course he carried cultural authority, because it was an important cultural position.

That's what *PR* represented. That's what Trilling represented, and Howe. It meant a lot at that time. Not to disparage it, but it's not the same thing as what Jim was talking about when he said that people get their cultural authority from reading magazines like the *New Yorker* rather than reading *PMLA*. That seems a little bit different, because there, it may be the case that people learn about new books and new movies and how to think about them and talk about them from the pages of those journals, rather than academic journals. But it's not quite the same thing as what being a public intellectual in the '50s meant. Because there, it really did carry a huge amount of ideological baggage, and they were out to wage war against a particular group of thinkers. I just think it's a long time ago. I can't read that stuff anymore. It's time to move on.

Acocella: I can read it, but I read it with a certain amount of distance. I feel as though I'm reading something from the past.

Audience Questions

Audience member: If you're given a book to review that you think stinks in some way, and you're trying to make the decision about whether you need to weigh in on it or whether it should just fall by the wayside, what motivates you to actually write that review? And what are those decisions you make about how you'll take it to task?

Menand: I think if a book is by a relatively unknown author and it stinks, you shouldn't review it.

Shapiro: I think that's very true. There's 50,000 or 60,000 books a year that are published. I've turned down books on the grounds that there's a better book out there that deserves the space, and I'm just not going to use it as an occasion for being witty or cute. It's just a waste of my time and intellectual energy.

Acocella: For me, one important thing is whether it deals with a serious issue or an issue we should care about, and whether the book is going to have influence. Last year, I reviewed a book by Gail Sheehy on Hillary Clinton. I knew from page 10 that this was a terrible book, and that I was going to say so, and that it wasn't going to get any better. But I reviewed it, because Hillary Clinton was going to be running for the Senate, and Gail Sheehy was a best-selling author. I'm reviewing a biography about a choreographer right now, a book that is quite mediocre. But I've got some things I want to say

about that choreographer, and he's just now dead, the body's not cold, and I've got them on my mind.

Lesser: I think I'm closer to Joan in my reasoning. If I think something interesting can be said in my review, then it doesn't really matter to me whether it's a known writer or an unknown writer. I have something important I want to say in relation to what's going on in that type of fiction or non-fiction or poetry.

There are also more personal considerations. If it's a big, fat book and I hate it in 10 pages, I'm going to be so angry by the time I finish the 900 pages that I'm not going to write a fair review. So I turn it down at the front end. I have to measure the amount of effort I'm going to be putting in writing the review with the effort I think the author has put into writing the book. And if it seems too disproportionate, I don't do it. Of course, it's not worth stomping on new, little writers who are not likely to get anywhere. But if you view reviewing as criticism and not just as reviewing, then it has another function than just a thumbs-up, thumbs-down. You might be able to say something that has some wider influence in the field.

If you view reviewing as criticism and not just as reviewing, then it has another function than just a thumbs-up, thumbs-down.

Audience member: You talked a lot about criticism and not too much about reporting. But I'm seeing an increasingly common kind of arts reporting. That is, a profile of an artist, but where the work is rarely discussed. It's usually the peccadilloes of the artist, the intriguing weirdnesses of their personality. And their celebrity's been established elsewhere, not in the pages of these kind of publications. It's clear that both the editor and the writer are writing this kind of piece because either the writer is incapable of engaging with the actual work that the artist does, or the editor's afraid that if the writer does it, the readers won't read it. Is this where we're going?

Lesser: The little answer is, it's beyond the purview of this panel, in that I picked people who at least think about their relation to criticism as journalists. Some of them actually do arts reporting…

Acocella: I do profiles now and then when I feel it needs to be done. Believe me, your editors want a lot more profiles than you're willing to write. But what

you're talking about, I regard as parasitism. I think we should interrogate potential authors who are writing biographies of artists, and if the author does not wish to cope with the art, then he should not be given a contract. It's all right if they want to do the damage that they're going to do about the guy's mother, about how he didn't like being Jewish, and he didn't like being gay. But to do that and not talk about why his greatest theater piece was what it was, it's a crime in my opinion. It's a moral problem, in that you are assuming authority and invading privacy without doing honor to the art that exposed that person in the first place. I think it's a scandal.

Audience member: Then why do you think it happens? Does nobody care about the art anymore?

Menand: To sell newspapers.

Shapiro: From my perspective, it's a tempting argument to make—oh, journalists are just trying to do the quick, easy profile, just dredge up some stuff about sex and drugs and rock and roll. The reason why a good critic or scholar has to deal with personal profiles of artists is because the questions that students, general readers and whomever care about are: "How did he write, why did he write, what made him write that way?" Avoiding those questions does not stop people from asking them. The better journalists, the better critics, are able to begin with the life and then begin to explain Mark Morris or Baryshnikov or anyone else.

Acocella: I'm very interested in those questions. I've written biographical chapters on the people I've written about. I remember reading psychiatrist Peter Ostwald's book on Glenn Gould. To hear Peter Ostwald (who brings more psychoanalytic baggage than I would ever want to bring) describe how Glenn Gould's mother sat there with Glenn Gould in her lap at the piano, Peter Ostwald describing this mother's body and this child's body and this piano and how that flipped a switch in his brain or that pressed something onto his brain that never went away—I'll never forget that, and I think it's terribly important. I don't think it's vulgar to look at the life. What I think is vulgar is to look only at the life with the assumption of superiority.

Audience member: I'd like to reinterpret the question of journalism and/or criticism. The role of the critic is the high art of the personal voice and the personal intellect. The role of a journalist is to expand that inquiry into the public domain or outside of the circle that we're familiar with. I listen to you talk about Herman Melville and Nijinsky and Baryshnikov, and I think about Ellington and Alvin Ailey and Wynton Marsalis. I wonder to what degree a critic has the responsibility to use their journalistic skills to step outside the metier in what you're doused as a child or as an academic, and begin to

reinterpret the broader culture in a way that brings out a more multi-ethnic or cross-cultural experience, a reinterpretation of what American culture is going through at this moment in 2001?

Lesser: My own feeling, one, is that the critic can only address issues from within her own mind. You cannot project yourself out into a mass of ideas and perceptions. You can do everything you can to acquaint yourself with a wider variety of artistic experiences, and go to jazz performances and small theater groups and other things that maybe you weren't trained to do back in your school. But you cannot stop being yourself and write decent criticism. Criticism comes from the voice of a self.

The second thing I would say is that this notion of reaching wider audiences, if we're talking about at the particular moment in time: yes, the journalistic enterprise goes wider in space, reaches more readers the second the publication gets to the newsstand. But anybody that we still read from 50 or more years ago generally wrote as a critic. They might have written for periodical publication. They might be Edwin Denby or Virgil Thompson or somebody else writing weekly or monthly. But they wrote from the point of view that I'm talking about, this self, this voice, encountering art one-to-one. And from the 19th century and earlier, all we have is criticism. So numerically, the number of people now in 2001 reading criticism is much higher than what a journalist from 1850 or 1860 was reaching.

One of the funny things about being a journalist is it's like dating. You wait for an editor to call you and say, "Would you like to write about X or Y?"

Shapiro: One of the funny things about being a journalist is it's like dating. You wait for an editor to call you and say, "Would you like to write about X or Y?" No one has ever asked me to review a book about Ellington, or a book about jazz, or dance. I don't know if I could. Three or five years ago, I probably would have said no. Now I would just say "I'll need a little more time," and I'd immerse myself. But writers tend to get pigeonholed in certain ways, and writers constantly have to resist that pigeonholing. I don't call up *The New York Times Book Review* and say, "A new biography of Ellington is coming up. Send it my way." That's just not the way, at least for me, it works. It's a collaborative enterprise. I know I'm a better critic and scholar for the journalistic risks I've taken, writing about things I don't really know

about, and you get stretched in that way and you get smarter. I know I don't define my range as a journalist. It's defined in large measure for me.

(unintelligible question)

Acocella: The project you're discussing has been the project of academic dance criticism in the last 20 years. And so far from ignoring these matters, on the contrary, we've been through a frightening business in the last 20 years, a kind of Stalinism whereby we were not allowed as critics to criticize works by targeted groups. Writing for the *Village Voice* was very hard in this respect. And I can't tell you how much blood is on the floor.

The project that you're talking about, which is the opening up of things (actually, Nijinski wasn't that influenced by jazz, but Balanchine was which is a fact that was ignored. You're absolutely right). But it's been a tough 20 years. And we paid for a lot of our predecessor's sins. In the '80s and '90s, reviewing downtown dance in the *Village Voice*, if (as was so often the case) it was a show about having AIDS or being gay, if the guys wore lace corsets, you really had to fight with your editor if you thought it was a stupid show. It was hell. It has been hell. And you had to ask yourself every day whether, if you didn't like a lot of the Alvin Ailey repertory, if you thought it was sentimental and corny and old-fashioned, is that something about you personally, is that something about being white or whatever? I know that I have absolutely not been unaffected by this.

But one thing that I did consciously, an affirmative action, an actual movement that I made that I wouldn't naturally have made, is that with regard to black American dance, I wrote a lot about tap. Because it's what I really loved. I cannot tell you the amount of wishy-washy, hey-isn't-this-great diversity criticism that you read. Read any review of Indian dance, flamenco, Ailey. These are sacred cows. I want to write about something that I love enough that I could conceivably be mean to it and make choices within it. And for me, that's tap.

I cannot tell you the amount of wishy-washy, hey-isn't-this-great diversity criticism that you read. . .These are sacred cows.

Audience member: I'd like to venture a response to the question of why profiles get substituted for criticism. I think in the realm of the visual arts, there are two reasons. One, we're living in a celebrity culture. And two, the

work is often unintelligible, so there's nothing that can really be said about it critically that makes any sense. So you deal with the personality of the artist.

Lesser: Somebody can get to be a celebrity by doing unintelligible work? Are those the same people?

Audience member: That is an interesting question, but it certainly has happened in spades in the past several decades, so that's a topic for another panel.

Audience member: I'm interested in something you said regarding provinciality. I'm thinking about the circulation of different publications and about something like *The London Review of Books* with its smaller circulation and the kind of audience that Lionel Trilling, say, was writing for. It seems to me that assumptions of commonality are frequently mistaken for depth. The off-hand reference to something that everybody knows can just be a quick "we're in the club," rather than a real intricate thinking.

I wonder how much you feel conscious of a larger circulation in what you're writing—150,000 or 800,000 or one million people who are reading the *New Yorker* or *The New York Times*. That's a much broader audience than people might have been addressing 30 years ago. I wonder if that's a more heterogeneous audience, and if that changes the way that you write. Although I know you said you imagined your reader very specifically, that might be a broader set of audience member.

Menand: It's a very good question. Two responses. One is, yeah, you're totally right. The circulation of *Partisan Review*, I can't imagine ever was more than about 20,000. It was a very important readership, an important place to write, and Trilling made his books basically by collecting those essays, and they reached a slightly larger audience, but not a huge one. In Diana Trilling's autobiography, or book about her marriage, she said that "The Liberal Imagination" sold something like 7,000 copies the first year out. Now, everybody knows that book now and knows what's in it. But not that many people bought it. So that's a very different scale from the scale of a magazine like the *New Yorker*, which used to be about 400,000 and is now about 800,000. It just seems apples and oranges to compare Lionel Trilling to a magazine writer from a place like the *New Yorker*. It's just a different social function that's being served.

On the question of how that affects one as a writer, having a large audience, my experience is that I think that's my editor's problem. It's the editor's job to figure out how to reach the biggest chunks of the audience that are out there, that the advertisers want to get to. That's not my job. I assume that I'm

being asked to write a piece because I fit into that general project of trying to reach all these people. But not just me alone—it's along with Joan or whoever else is writing for that particular issue.

So it's true, what I assume people know is probably less than what I would assume in a smaller-circulation journal. But I don't worry too much about reaching all those people. I assume my editor will tell me if I haven't made things clear enough for them or said it in a way that would interest that kind of audience. I also would have to say I've never really had that problem, I've never had an editor come and say, "It's not popular enough. It's not dumb enough." My stuff is always dumb enough.

Acocella: I don't have a problem. I seem to have the common touch.

Shapiro: We shouldn't think of audiences monolithically. When I write criticism, a book like "Shakespeare and the Jews," I'm really not writing for a general audience. I'm writing for the 2,000 people who teach Shakespeare, and who will teach it to their students, and whose students will teach it to their students. On my tombstone, no matter what I write between now and when I die, they're going to write, "He's the guy who wrote 'Shakespeare and the Jews.'" Professionally, that's what I will always be remembered for, insofar as it changed the way a lot of people read one of Shakespeare's 37 plays. I can rest content that I did something that had an effect, that wasn't ephemeral (you can put all my journalism here and it just disappears), and that's going to have an effect about something I really cared about.

One of the things I hope everyone here will realize is that if you write a good book about something that you care passionately about, you're going to make a bigger difference than writing a review of Wendy's next book in *The New York Review of Books* or *The New York Times Book Review*. Everybody can do that. Nobody's being silenced. To the extent that you are being silenced, is your book going to be reviewed or not in a major place, in a major media outlet—if it's good enough, it will be, there's no question about that. But what I think is missing from much of the discussion is, there's a lot of passion in your writing about something you care about. And you reach a larger audience, the more passionate you are, and the better you write that stuff. That just goes without saying, but it needs to be said as well. Anybody with that passion, who can write as well as these two can, will be read.

Menand: I agree. Books make a much bigger difference than magazine pieces. It's just a different scale, a different kind of accomplishment. I do think of magazine writing as very ephemeral. I certainly never write something under the illusion that it should be collected and last for ages in something called "The Shores of Light." Because I think all writing, even book writing,

is intervention in a conversation that's going on while you're doing it. The great thing about magazine writing is that you get to jump right in there within seven days of whenever something's going on. You get to have your little intervention. You shouldn't ever think, "Well, how will this look in your collection?" Because when you go back and look at them—Joan's had this experience too—you just say, "Well, that was then, and everybody knows this now. It's not interesting anymore. It isn't important." I just think that's a healthy approach.

I said some disparaging things about Lionel Trilling, which I apologize for. But what I was trying to say was, he was a writer of his moment, he was addressing issues that meant something to people in 1955 and 1965 that have changed tremendously. Those issues don't exist anymore, the way we think about them doesn't exist anymore. All I meant was, the stuff isn't really timeless, and you shouldn't think that it's timeless. It's for its moment, and if it makes a difference, it's precisely because people say, "Yeah, this is the thing that needed to be said right now." The fun of it, really, is being able to do that.

Audience member: I wondered, even more specifically, how do you indicate that you know everybody's in the room. Even if you're not going to write about Alvin Ailey or you're not going to write about a subject that's multicultural or broad. When you start a piece for a magazine that has an 800,000 circulation, how do you indicate that you know that people are coming to the subject from all different kinds of places?

When you start a piece for a magazine that has an 800,000 circulation, how do you indicate that you know that people are coming to the subject from all different kinds of places?

Acocella: I don't indicate it. As I said, you're asking me about something I haven't given that much thought to. Unlike the other folks here, I don't teach normally. I am every day a journalist. Occasionally, I disburden myself with a book. But I do this every day. I've written for the *New York Daily News*, I did it for three years. I just trust myself and, as Luke said, the editor will tell you if you're doing it wrong. I find that my Aunt Casey can understand my stuff. She only went to finishing school. She didn't even go to college.

Audience member: My question, actually a kind of clarification, is similar in that I wanted to talk about your response to the critic's relationship with the

audience. I'm directing this question toward James Shapiro. You've talked about a kind of erosion. Do you see an erosion in the audience or in the quality of work that is being published? And is it a concern, or a kind of disdain?

Shapiro: You've misunderstood me completely if you think I view it with disdain. I view it with great concern. I don't want to dumb down culture. And don't mistake me—none of the periodicals or journals that we're talking about are in the business of dumbing down our culture. In general, they've all made me a lot smarter. But in general, once you go beyond a half-dozen really good periodicals in this country, and *The Threepenny Review* is one of them, you're getting into trouble. I'm not trying to point a finger or blame anyone. I think academics have a huge burden that they're not facing up to in trying to connect with an audience. But that really is part of their job. And if they don't make that connection, members of the general public will be less inclined to tell their state legislatures to fund English departments and departments of criticism to keep doing this. So I'm trying to imagine, very unsuccessfully, a space in the middle, a much more fertile cross-fertilization of journalism and scholarship or criticism that exists today. I'm happy to be on a panel with practitioners of that. But I don't see a whole lot of it out there, and it concerns me.

Menand: In terms of the issue in the background of this question, of drawing attention to the heterogeneity of cultural production and producers in Western art and literature, I think English departments are way ahead of magazines. I think most of the magazines we've been talking about are rather leery of that subject and don't really know how to address it. I think English departments—it's true, they don't have an audience outside of English departments the way they once may have—have done a lot to make people aware of, or create conditions in which people ought to be more aware of, the multicultural variety of Western culture. So I think there's an issue of audience, and of a forum for addressing a larger audience that's very important. But I wouldn't disparage what's being done in literature departments. And I think in many ways the periodicals that we're talking about are behind them.

Audience member: I earn my living as an opera singer. So for the past 20 years, I have been on the other side and have wonderful stories about reviewers, critics and other people, including journalists. But I won't share any of them at the moment. I would just like to say, I congratulate you, Joan, for your wiseness in avoiding green rooms, backstage receptions and parties, because it helps avoid unpleasantness on New Year's Eve.

My question to all four of you is an invitation to take just a final second to reflect from a personal point of view. Do you ever in your writing—and this might be different for a review as opposed to a larger piece of criticism or a book—come down to the point where you just say, "This is a really good ice cream, and it's well made and it has great ingredients. But I basically hate pistachio. I just really like chocolate. And it could be pistachio from heaven, and I still wouldn't like it." Or what also sometimes happens, and which those of us in the industry notice with bemused bitterness, is when you realize, "That guy likes chocolate so much that even if it's really lousy chocolate, he's still going to say it's good." Do you ever have the moment where you recognize this about yourself, and do you share it in your writing?

Acocella: I think you're onto something. Speaking as a person who reviews physical bodies on a stage…actually, you've touched my conscience. One of these days I'll write this piece. But it is true. It is true that dancing—and I'm sure it is true of opera singing too—is personal. We are looking at their personalities. Some people on the stage, I just love them. And some people, I just can't wait for them to get off the stage. I find them coy…and these are, by the way, moral things. These are dance things too—I do care whether they can get their leg up in the air, whether they're musical. There are certain things I can judge objectively. But I'm human too. There's a certain kind of smirky dancing, of pompous dancing, that I can't stand. And I think everybody would have this experience, that there are certain dancers that I respect and will write about with respect, but I wouldn't go out in a snowstorm to see them. You get to a certain level and have a certain amount of experience. You don't dump on Nina Ananiashvili just because she's not your favorite. But there's no question, in terms of the amount of attention you give a person in a review or indeed whether you write a book about them. It's personal. It's personal.

To me, it's not personal. I think my job is to cast a cold eye, period. My model is Howard Cosell, you know, "Tell it like it is."

Menand: To me, it's not personal. I think my job is to cast a cold eye, period. My model is Howard Cosell, you know, "Tell it like it is." I think if I felt that I was skewing my response to something because of an unexamined prejudice or taste or something, I would try to examine it or get over that part of what I was writing and fix it. I'm not claiming to be disinterested. It's just, to me, the job is partly to be disinterested, and not to choose things to write about or

the way you're going to write about them because you have a general yearning to have it come out well. You just do what you should do. But I'm sure if I went back and looked at things…

Acocella: I think you and I agree more than you think, I think things can be personal and disinterested. That's why I don't ever go backstage, or go to their parties, or make friends with them.

Menand: There's this industry. And you're well out of it. I rarely go to book parties. You're better off being able to be aloof from it. And I think the critical tone is well-served by that posture. It doesn't mean it's the only way to respond to things. It doesn't even mean it's the best way to respond to things. It's just that it's better for your work ethic to have that attitude about it.

Shapiro: The only thing I'd add to that is, you can't show your prejudices over time without eroding your authority. People are going to say, "There he goes again, hating pistachio." You could do it once, you could do it twice over an extended period of time. But I read *The New York Times* and have read the theater reviews since I was probably seven years old. And after a certain number of columns where I feel it's pistachio or chocolate, I no longer take that writer seriously. I'll read that writer, but I'll find myself testing my experience of that play against the wrong-headed pistachioness of that review. And I think we're all smart enough to know when somebody does that to excess.

You can't show your prejudices over time without eroding your authority. People are going to say, "There he goes again. . ."

Lesser: I agree, that's how I read, the way Jim reads. But I have to say that as a critic, I'm a bundle of unexamined prejudices. In fact, I'd go farther and say that as a human being, I'm a bundle of unexamined prejudices. That's just what I am. There's hardly anything left over if you take away all the unexamined prejudices. And over the years that I've been writing, I've learned to know what some of them are. But as with much psychotherapy, knowing what they are doesn't help me overcome them. I still operate on them. And so the only times I'm ever conscious of being able to overcome them or even bring them to the fore in the process of my critical work, is when I'm in the presence of an artist whom I deeply trust—Mark Morris is the one that jumps to mind. Because I deeply love much of Mark Morris's

work, and know that he cares about many of the same things that I do in art and has produced art that matters to me, when he does something that violates one of my prejudices, I can actually begin to view it as a prejudice. And I can do a little bit of calibration and a little bit of triangulation and imagine that if I were another kind of person, I would be able to appreciate what it is he's doing. And I can even write an essay that takes those things into account. But it needs to be an artist that has already won my heart to get me to do that.