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B R U C E R O B B I N S

## On Amanda Anderson's *The Way We Argue Now*

*The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*, by Amanda Anderson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006. Pp. 224. \$19.95 paper. \$59.50 cloth.

IN A COUPLE, NOTHING IS more undyingly contentious than the assertion that an argument has or has not occurred, that the couple is or is not in the process of arguing. Up to and perhaps even beyond the point where doors are slammed or household items are flung, the opportunity for plausible disagreement on this fundamental issue remains open. What argument? No, I did *not* raise my voice.

The question of whether argument is or is not happening marks an apparently minor but, I think, revealing ambiguity in *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*. As the title indicates, the book's official line is that we are indeed arguing, but arguing badly, or not as coherently as we might be. According to this account, Anderson's project can be seen as the diagnosis of structural weaknesses in current academic reasoning. One pathology she uncovers usefully and repeatedly—it is also a theme of her previous book, *The Powers of Distance*—is the refusal to grant the theoretical possibility of a reflective self-consciousness that one is clearly if only tacitly claiming for oneself.

This account assumes that arguing, which is to say reasoning with each other about and across our differences, is something that theorists or academics generally are already in the habit of doing, however competently or incompetently. But when Anderson writes that her book “might well have been called ‘How We Fail to Argue Now’” (2), that assumption is withdrawn. Perhaps we are not rising to the level of argument after all. The admission is not quite a reversal—the distinction between ephemeral inconsistency and full-blown irrationality is, I suppose, only

In this issue's review section Bruce Robbins and Elspeth Probyn review *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory*, by Amanda Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), and the author responds.

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a matter of degree—but it does offer a significantly different sense of the primary business coordinating these brilliant and justly admired essays. For if Anderson “might well” be suggesting that argument is something we are currently failing (or not even trying) to achieve, then her project would have to be seen as potentially something a bit stricter, or pushier: getting us all to agree on what should and should not count as true argument.

Proposing a norm of conduct for scholarly disputation may seem innocuous enough. But any such norm could only ignore the bittersweet fruit of interpersonal experience alluded to above; by definition, it would try to settle once and for all the question of whether or not we are having an argument. In making this proposal for increased argumentative normativity, Anderson also ignores precisely that theoretical position to which the unconvinced among her readers will probably reach out as the obvious challenge to her own. The double assumption that Anderson seems to reject from the outset, without quite acknowledging it, is that (1) in scholarly discourse, as in couples, the most important arguments may be over the terms and stakes of the argument, over what should count as proper reasoning, and even over whether an argument is happening at all, and (2) that these arguments can never be closed down, though the impossibility of closure does not necessarily make them (as there is reason to fear) futile, repetitive, and unrewarding. While urging us to agree in advance on the proper rules of argumentative engagement, Anderson would be seeking to legislate exactly that which, according to such philosophers as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Rancière, no democratic constituency can allow to be fixed a priori without risking the loss of that which makes it democratic. She would also be failing to embody her theoretical ideal of argument by neglecting an engagement with her most significant antagonists. Neither Rancière nor Lyotard has an entry in the book’s index.

I am not demanding respect for a particular cluster of proper names. Nor do I favor an alternative (quasi-theological) commitment to the opaqueness or absolute inviolability of otherness. The issue here is staying respectfully open to the possibility that dangerous disagreement, even over what appear to be first things, may turn out to be necessary and productive for both parties, which is to say for the future of their relationship with each other. To a non-Habermasian like myself, this sounds like what Jürgen Habermas might mean by his “principles of respect and reciprocity” (25). Anderson herself seems attracted to the close analysis of dueling theoretical couples, like Habermas/Foucault and Benhabib/Butler. But this binary-belligerent focus may distract her from the existence of a less polarized version of academic common sense, one that, like Anderson herself, attributes considerable positive value to the collective and the progressive and, like her again, takes a certain critical distance from so-called identity politics. In this book she does not seem to feel that public opinion is much on her side. The result, at least in places, is an attitude of quietly aggrieved militancy that is likely

to draw attention away from her characteristic gestures of critical magnanimity—for example, a willingness to criticize the Habermasian positions closest to her own, and a willingness to see hidden virtues in the poststructuralist thinkers of whom she is generally most critical—and to invite more combative readings. Reacting more to the book's polemical self-framing than to the quite extraordinary nuance and self-questioning of the individual chapters, some readers will surely wonder whether argument is, after all, what she wants—that is, whether argument is only a means to the ultimate but disguised end of universal accord (on her own terms). Faced with the prospect of submitting to her version of argument—roughly, Habermas's version—and of being thus authorized to disagree only about other, smaller things, some may feel there will have been an end to argument, or an end to the arguments they find most interesting. With current events in mind, I would be surprised if there were no recourse to the metaphor of a regular army facing a guerilla insurrection, hinting that Anderson wants to force her opponents to dress in uniform, reside in well-demarcated camps and capitals that can be bombed, fight by the rules of states (whether the states themselves abide by these rules or not), and so on—in short, that she wants to get the battle onto a terrain where her side will be assured of having the upper hand.

I for one would not like to see Anderson unwittingly provoke a resurgence of the Enlightenment-equals-totalitarianism position, whose former allure seems, thankfully, to be fading. Literary critics seem more and more impatient these days with rote reenactments of their discipline's founding romantic protest against the Enlightenment. This is surely one reason why Anderson's work, early and eloquent in its defense of the Enlightenment, has been greeted with such excitement; at any rate, this motive is more visible than, say, any sudden collective passion for Habermas. The time seems to have arrived, or at least to be arriving, when the humanities in general and literary criticism in particular will want to come clean about their own partial and qualified but nonetheless constitutive commitment to the Enlightenment legacy. It would be a desirable step toward self-knowledge, for example, if we were to recognize the continuity between today's interdisciplinary constructionism (*X* is not natural, but a social or cultural construct) and the liberal rationalism of the nineteenth century, a continuity that's immediately visible to anyone viewing this constellation from the outside. Instead, we act as if we believed that constructionism descends directly from poststructuralism and as if both, founded on pure rupture, set their admirers in eternal opposition to every aspect of nineteenth-century liberal democratic thought. Intellectual history demands a larger view. So do our responsibilities as citizens. The return of creationism and the current embattledness of secular ideals in the American public sphere offer an obvious situation in which those who define themselves by their fury against Enlightenment reason ought to be asked what they think they are accomplishing in their limited time on earth. (The same question of course applies to the other side.) I will pass over in silence the

unspeakable role of God-talk in inspiring the invasion and occupation of Iraq. But even the less consequential challenge of defending the university against its current attackers would seem to demand that we try to remember, when we speak about the Enlightenment, that what we try our best to be when we evaluate the work of our colleagues is, indeed, objective and impartial. After all, we—in Anderson's limited sense of "we"—are not only arguing among ourselves. We are arguing for our professional lives.

My introductory foray into the language of couples counseling probably reflects a certain embarrassment before the challenge of figuring out how to argue with an argument about how we argue. But it is also intended as an appreciative gesture toward one of this book's most fascinating and adventurous themes: how novelistic insinuations about the "character" of one's opponent (and thus implicitly about one's own character) work their way into theoretical argument, as, for example, when pragmatists are "accused of being, among other things, smug, complacent, cynical, blithe, and dismissive" (15). Invited to play this irresistible game, I immediately hear behind Anderson's sentence a certain petulance (my word), as if its author were incredulous that anyone could possibly think a position has been "put down" merely by someone's unappetizing character portrait of its or its adherents' style. A voice seems to cry: *Fight fair! This is not refutation! Theoretical positions are not a mere matter of taste, like rope dancing or sherry!* In fact, Anderson's argument here is not nearly as defensive as my summary might make it sound. One might even say that she puts everyone at ease, including readers who are in doubt about the purity of their logic, by indulging in a certain amount of covert argument-by-characterization herself. For example, feminist historians are praised for "the more theoretically *modest* tendencies of history as a discipline" (49; my italics), and this modesty is set against the immodesty of "self-aggrandized agency" in feminist criticism. (Other character terms of Anderson's that invite special attention are "casual" and "charismatic.") But her most elaborate and daringly revisionist move is to link character talk with the Aristotelian term "ethos." Among its other effects, which are too complex for scrupulous treatment here, Anderson's invocation of ethos seems intended to acknowledge an inevitable compromise between abstract logic, to which she otherwise seems fundamentally committed, and the finitude of individual life choices. Since human finitude is one of the key poststructuralist themes that (coming more from the right than the left) usually count as corrections of liberal democratic progressivism, Anderson's mobilization of ethos would itself have to count as another generous unbending toward her antagonists.

When (still playing the character game) I call Anderson generous, there is little mystery about how the characterological virtue, which is much in evidence throughout Anderson's writing, might be translated back into conceptual terms. Generosity to the opponent is proof of balance and impartiality, and this is presumably why the character description deserves to count as bolstering an argu-

ment. Having generously or courageously suggested that not all the work these character terms do is illicit, Anderson might have gone on to expose more of the conceptual content lurking in her least favorite characterizations. Often these characterizations are shortcuts to important places. Illustrations of my own, not treated in this book, would be phrases like “self-righteous” and “holier-than-thou,” which reveal, for better or worse, a good deal about the characteristic posture of literary criticism vis-à-vis society in general—that is, about what we critics mean by “criticism.” To return to Anderson’s own repeated example, adjectives like “smug,” “complacent,” and “blithe” are not difficult to purge of most character innuendo and restore to the level (if there is such a thing) of more or less pure logical argument. Very simply, these terms suggest that pragmatism, like other forms of liberalism, is too *uncritical*, too ready to accept too much of the status quo. It is strange to me that though Anderson wants to defend liberalism, she doesn’t display any need to decode these adjectives or to take on the critique they convey: the charge that, like pragmatism in particular, liberalism in general doesn’t want to know about the founding acts of violence on which a social order is based, or about the persistent inequality that thus keeps present individuals of different identities from participating in the liberal game as autonomous rational equals or from accepting the rules of the game as fair. There are compelling things to say in response to the charge and in favor of this radically atemporal view. Under the general heading of cosmopolitanism, in which Anderson and I share a strong interest, one thinks, for example, of arguments by Jeremy Waldron. But Anderson doesn’t want to argue the case of liberalism at the level of temporality (though she has insightful things to say about temporality in Judith Butler and Selya Benhabib), or indeed with reference to any specific contents.

Some of Anderson’s deepest commitments seem centered in her field of specialization, the period of the nineteenth century. One form of justice in which she is especially interested is the justice due to the thinkers of that period. It seems remarkable, therefore, that her case for reason does not engage with, say, colonialism or racism in the period. Why not admit at the outset that if the prestige of liberal democratic reason has fallen, it’s at least in part because of the blindness on these topics of its most rigorous defenders, like John Stuart Mill? Again, there are certainly points to be made in response, say, to Uday Mehta’s critique of Mill in *Liberalism and Empire*. But Anderson doesn’t make them. Her case in favor of the Victorians slides dangerously toward old-school period loyalty. She says there should have been “fuller recognition of how Victorians themselves understood and grappled with the question of detachment” (64). Well, okay, but it’s not as if critics (like Mehta on Mill) haven’t tried to “understand” the Victorians. What she wants under the term “recognition” seems to be not so much understanding as sympathy and even assent. More credit should be given. Taking up her useful phrase, here one might speak again of a certain self-aggrandizement of agency, this time at the level of the period.

In her commentary on my writing on cosmopolitanism, Anderson stresses, neither unfairly nor unsympathetically but across a certain distance, my willingness to accept a worldliness that includes an element of professional self-interest. There is a fruitful conversation waiting to happen between us—I'm not sure it would be an argument—on the subject of self-interest. I imagine, though in the present format I can easily be corrected, that Anderson would be somewhat closer to the nineteenth-century canon's celebration of disinterestedness, while I would be somewhat more worried by the "holier-than-thou" characterology mentioned above and its tendency to exacerbate the humanities' proud self-marginalization.

Though she has clearly been inspired by the work of Nancy Fraser, much of it as Habermasian as her own, it seems fair to ask why Fraser's passionate concern with justice as economic redistribution finds so little echo in this book. *The Way We Argue Now* would have reached a higher level of argument if it had faced more of its areas of both agreement and disagreement with Fraser. One topic I myself would have liked to see developed is the defense of the welfare state (another of Fraser's themes, but not Anderson's), which offers potential common ground between various sorts of leftists and liberals, and one of particular interest to feminists.

Fraser has no particular commitment to literariness. Neither does Habermas. Does Anderson? It seems a somewhat pressing question even if one does not want to assume that she must necessarily have such a commitment. According to Rey Chow, poststructuralist theory carries on the anti-instrumentalist protest of romantic and modernist literature; it is literature by other means. If so, then Anderson's critique of poststructuralism could be seen as a critique of literature itself, at least to the extent that literature mainly presents itself as something other than rational disputation. Who needs literature? What is it good for? What is its relation to argument? Perhaps Anderson will want to take these questions on board at some point. My own provisional hypothesis would be that she is already trying to deal with them, if somewhat obliquely, when she turns to the Aristotelian term "ethos." One way to read this audacious turn is as an attempt to escape from the dilemma of the normative and the descriptive that Habermas inherited from Immanuel Kant—more specifically, as an attempt to reinvent the Kantian aesthetic. Kant's problem, too, was that reason seemed abstract, bloodless, and arid—in characterological shorthand, unappealing. In order to save reason, and with it his hopes for the realization of justice, he concluded that he would have to compromise with the unreasonable. That seems to me the wager behind Anderson's championing of ethos.

In her thinking about ethos, Anderson gives strong emphasis to variants of the word "life," as in her claim that the ethical question "How should I live?"(11) trumps all epistemological questions. (I think it's worth saying that she also seems eager to see ethics trump politics.) The emphasis, together with the extreme and irrepressible ambiguity of this set of words, makes one wonder what exactly Anderson is trying to get "life" to do for her. I've suggested that life marks an

unbending toward the theme of finitude. Here the example of cosmopolitanism might show how far the life/finitude pairing takes her. If cosmopolitanism is understood as an ideal of equal concern for the well-being of everyone on the planet, then one inevitable thing to say about it is that it cannot be fully embodied or enacted, cannot be satisfactorily *lived*. Yet I think Anderson would say that the ideal cannot be dismissed on these grounds, as localist-nationalist champions of finitude like Edmund Burke have always demanded. It would seem, then, that the dialogue between abstract reason and finite livability would have to take the form of unending tension and negotiation. By the same token, ethos could represent neither a backhanded concession to cultural particularity, as it sometimes seems—what are cultures but collective answers to the question of how I should live?—nor, on the contrary, a term that exposes particular cultures to the stern singleness of ethical universality. It would mark, again, a domain of irreducible argument. As desiderata for such argument, if not quite as norms, I would specify the following: space for the remembering of old injuries (the inclination of the humanities) as well as their forgetting (the inclination of liberalism), on a schedule and in proportions that can't be settled in advance, and an admission that it is ultimately turtles of political conflict all the way down without, however, a denial of the possibility of moving toward common goals or ends.

I conclude with a few brief questions that I have no space to develop here: (1) Why is it that Foucault counts for Anderson as a charismatic figure, the object of a “cult of personality” (150), but Habermas doesn't? Why are we to assume that loyalty to Habermas, like her own, is a product of pure reason with nothing cultish or charismatic about it? (2) How does Anderson view the project of Gerald Graff, which offers certain parallels to her own? Graff proposes that learning to argue is the very essence of undergraduate education in general and, following the logic of his proposal, has moved away from the teaching of literature in particular. (3) No one proposes that having arguments is the point of life in a couple, but something very like this is proposed, indeed often assumed, in the humanities. Is there some way of talking about the end or goal of scholarship in the humanities that neither takes argument as an end in itself nor assumes that argument is the disguised means to the end of ultimate agreement? If so, what changes might this entail in how we conceive of the cultures we preserve, transmit, and interpret?

