**Conversation as a Metaphor for Reading**

Imagine you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally’s assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.

* **For Writing and Discussion**

The following exercise will help you explore the implications of Burke’s parlor metaphor for your own reading processes. Write your answers to the questions in a notebook, or as your teacher directs, so that you can compare your responses with those of your classmates.

ON YOUR OWN

1. In what ways does Burke’s parlor metaphor fit your experience? Freewrite for a few minutes about an oral conversation in which you managed to assert your voice—or “put in our oar,” as Burke says—after listening for a while.
2. Then consider how the metaphor applies to your experience as a reader. Freewrite for another few minutes about a time when reading helped you gather a sense of the general flow of ideas so that you could have something to say about a topic.
3. Not all the “parlors” we enter are filled with unfamiliar conversations. Sometimes we engage in heated discussions on subjects that are very familiar to us. Make a list of one or more communities that you belong to where you feel that you can quickly catch the drift of an in-progress oral conversation. What are some “hot topics” of conversation in these communities? For example, when we were writing this chapter, a hot cultural topic was the legal battle between the entertainment industry and software developers over file-swapping on the Internet to obtain free music. Most of our students were familiar with the software and had strong opinions about file-swapping, particularly the advantages and disadvantages of it for musicians. They could join this conversation immediately. However many faculty members, especially the older generation, were confused by the lawsuits because they weren’t familiar with how the younger generation listens to music and didn’t know anything about the software. If you wanted to address a general audience about this issue, how much background information about the music industry, the electronic transfer of digital information, and the varying fortunes of entertainers in post-rock culture would you have to provide to bring these oldsters up to speed?
4. Now let’s reverse the situation. Have you ever listened to a conversation in which you were a baffled outsider rather than an insider? (Think of the plight of those oldsters suffering through a conversation about the downloading of MP3 files and the ways that pending lawsuits threaten the survival of indie musicians.) Describe an experience where you had to work hard to get inside an ongoing conversation. Then consider how that experience might be an appropriate analogy for a time when you were frustrated by trying to read a book or article addressed to an insider audience rather than to someone with your background.