Prospects for Theorizing

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The retrospective tendency built into this opportunity to reflect on the (first) thirty years in the history of the Society for Critical Exchange is both great and grave, and therefore, given the somewhat contrarian nature of this organization, worthy to be resisted. I will indulge the impulse, however, in the hope of juxtaposing two times separated by three decades which I believe have a great deal in common. While the intellectual questions are in most respects independent of the personal, they are connected in ways that do merit cautious attention. What we do in literary and cultural studies is not crisply delineated by fact and concept, but draws at times upon convictions and aspirations that are often hardest to see clearly because we are so directly involved with them. Most on my mind, however, are younger colleagues who, finding themselves already committed to an uncertain enterprise, may recognize the peculiarity of the conditions that led a few of us to start SCE in 1976.

In the 1974-75 academic year, I spent part of a sabbatical leave from the University of Rochester as a visiting fellow at Princeton in the History and Philosophy of Science program, to pursue work on a book project, interrupted by a fire that burned most of our house and almost all of my library. The project itself had begun in graduate school, but had moved little by little to a more intense belief that recent intellectual developments in literary study reflected a serious but deeply ambiguous moment at which a distinct phase in the history of criticism had largely played itself out.[1] The changes that were emerging seemed, in short, a profound challenge to the practices common in literature departments, and more importantly, to philosophical foundations long taken for granted across most academic disciplines. My view then, as now, was that if we did not address the intellectual problems with a heretofore unprecedented degree of philosophical and systematic rigor, nothing in the goodness of our practical will would ever suffice to get us through those challenges.

Ironically, even the lingering smell of smoke signaled a rare opportunity for starting over. Thus a period of leave, which probably should have been devoted to doing the things expected for promotion and tenure, became instead an invitation to pursue concentrated work in other fields (particularly philosophy and intellectual history), central to that interrupted book project on the historical relation between literary criticism and philosophy since Plato. Since I came to professional work in the humanities after having chosen a fellowship in English

over one in genetics, I saw this as the chance of a lifetime to study philosophy and the history of science with superb mentors and without distraction or any compulsion to treat differences in fields as categorical.[2]

The result was at once career threatening but life changing: instead of pursuing an invitation to submit my dissertation to an academic publisher, I stuck to the larger and much less manageable project, sure to take longer and offering nothing more than a generalized hope that the concrete result would be publishable book.[3] This decision was aided by a reasonably clear understanding that the institution where I was teaching did not routinely tenure assistant professors (one case in nineteen years didn't look like good odds), so I might as well enjoy following my intellectual inclinations instead of settling for a less interesting but equally uncertain pathway to professional safety. One of my closest colleagues, the late William Rueckert, nudged me (no doubt unintentionally) in that direction by sharing an MLA paper on the theme that the slogan, "publish or perish" was in large part a fraud, since we all go on, "publishing *and* perishing," with only the latter term really certain. Rueckert's main point was not as gloomy as that sounds: it was just that there is no very good excuse for publishing just for the sake of publishing. What matters is being *present* to the intellectual life of the profession by every means available.

In any event, that term on leave in '74-75 provided the strongest possible incentive to take up the suggestions which later led to the creation of SCE, from conversations with James Sosnoski and Patricia Harkin, Britt Harwood, Peggy Kamuf, David Shumway, and others, following an ambitious international conference at Miami University of Ohio in which all of these practical and intellectual issues energetically converged.[4]

In the life of institutions, such of it as they have, critical times are usually those at which social and political disturbances coincide with profound intellectual recognitions, either because the familiar terms of one's own thinking and feeling are exposed as radically insufficient or that the present appears either to be riding something like a cresting wave of The New or headed straight for a train wreck. The early 1970s were certainly such a time. As Paul de Man memorably noted, it is almost unavoidable to refer to such times in the mode and the rhetoric of crisis,[5] but that is shorthand for what is both more attenuated and complex. While we surely felt the pressure, I would have to say that we never really had, nor did we sense the need for consensus, either about what that organization might represent or what it ought to aim for. This was not for lack of planning or by defect of discussion. It came from the much more fugitive and fundamental fact that an operative consensus was already there, in the very decision to do literary or cultural study, and not, say, biology or business administration. It was sufficient that for a few months, we saw an opening clearly enough to pass through it, and, in 1975, laid the groundwork for The Society for Critical Exchange.

From the start, the idea for the structure of SCE as a not-for-profit corporation was simple enough: instead of focusing on particular events like single theme conferences funded by one or more universities or charitable agencies, the corporation provided a legal, albeit at the

outset, a fictitious identity for an open-ended project that was not to be owned by any university or existing organizations, but run wholly by members committed to a singular idea. That idea, which has provided (and still provides) more guidance than may be immediately evident, was equally simple. It was that the depth and difficulty of the changes then emerging exceeded the likely abilities and preparation of any single individual—and the most pressing need was exactly for *critical exchange*, committed debate and conversation, moderating the natural tendency to pre-judge the outcome and get on whatever train was on the tracks before it left the station.

At that time, "theory" was by no means common in the curricula or program requirements in literature departments, save at a relative handful of institutions—Cornell, Yale, Iowa, North Carolina, SUNY at Buffalo and Binghamton, the recently founded U.C. Irvine, and a few others. And while it is hard to imagine it now, among some of our older colleagues who still had not forgiven the New Critics for contaminating literature with "Ideas," the very thought that one would bring abstract reasoning and high pitched quarrels into the profession was a little like taking a pig into the parlor and butchering it before your hostess. Fortunately, vivid resistance of that sort, though real, was short lived, as "theory" quite rapidly emerged at the horizon of professional visibility, coincidentally giving a very small cadre of very young people a chance to have an impact quite out of proportion to either our numbers or our readiness for what was to follow. The immediate plan was simply to encourage in whatever ways we could the serious and focused discussion of criticism and theory. Our first activities were to assemble a mailing list, contact people we knew, and propose special MLA sessions on theory in the name of this new "organization," which in reality amounted to a used offset press and four or five people, depending on schedules, determined to bring as much focus as possible to the subject of theory. Very quickly, we were joined most notably by Vincent Leitch, Wallace Martin, and James Slevin, until within a year, the numbers of people actually involved had grown by a good deal more than an order of magnitude, which turned out to be just the level of critical mass required for SCE to continue and to grow.

Even then it was clear that the core idea of *critical exchange* is not compatible with pronouncements in the spotlight of magisterial positions or with the dissemination of doctrines, privileged methods and the like. It does not go well with the forms of celebrity culture, professional jealousy, or other familiar tactics of bluster that so often serve to disguise inadequate work, not least of all because open exchange presents a perpetual risk of exposure. Far more important was the creation and protection of venues for critical discussion that trusted to the inherent generosity of intelligent conversation and debate to decide, moment by moment, what was promising and good.

Of course, we were naïve in this, not knowing how to distinguish between productive discussion and interminable talk, but we got enough of both in early conferences in Ohio, Washington, Indiana, and yearly MLA sessions to learn the difference. What is very much worth preserving, however, is the *principle of critical patience*, somewhat along the lines of Keats' idea of "negative capability," that would

allow us not to be in a desperate hurry to decide hard questions when we were not even sure what made them seem so hard. Furthermore, if this were a "crisis," it appeared to have been going on, more or less, for about 2400 years, and given the positions emerging in the unraveling of formalist and structuralist methodologies, it could hardly be expected to end soon. In short, this looked like a *chronic* condition, radically unlike, say, medical crises, where the patient either gets better or dies. This principle of critical patience, however, was no meek and mild thing, but a kind of fierce stubbornness resting first on the certainty that a small band of assistant professors and newly tenured associates in their late 20s and early 30s—no matter how smart and energetic—did not already have the solutions, but was actually grounded on the deeper certainty that neither were these problems going to be solved by a much larger group of tenured professors in their 40's and 50's and 60's—no matter how smart and seasoned *they* might be.

This has everything to do with the typical shaping of academic careers in the humanities, where deep and intricate commitments are formed early, in response to *antecedently available* options[6] and passing events, without any reliable way to know whether the ideas and methods being taken up and built into one's own professional identity were either sound or sustainable. We were sure only of this: the prevailing ideas and practices of that time simply *could not* continue unchallenged or unchanged. Subsequent events confirmed it: the accepted professional practices of those times have proved unsustainable, and a very great deal *has* changed.

Today, it appears that we are once again, young and old alike, in a similar condition with a number of ironic differences. Theory is now ubiquitous in the curricula of English departments, large and small (a result to which SCE and its members have certainly contributed in manifold ways); and cultural studies as it grew out of theory is firmly established. Even as these institutional changes have come about, however, there has been a ten-year stream of gloomy pronouncements that literature is dead (theory killed it), or theory is dead (it killed itself) or that we have to go beyond it, push it farther or give it up, focus on the 'public sphere,' or *something*.[7] What is missing is any consensus about either the immediate past or the immediate future, as there was in the waning days of the New Criticism about what we *had* been doing and why it had to change. So too, there is now nothing new having the kind of electric visibility that theory had in the 1970s to galvanize current choices. For that matter, perhaps the most striking thing about the last 30 years of theory is the extent to which it has been driven by endless revisions, retoolings, and elaborations of ideas that belong primarily to the nineteenth century, especially in the work of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

As theory has moved to a position of prominence, if not dominance in English departments, moreover, the practical effects are ambiguous at best. At my own university, the number of English majors is down (in line with national trends),[8] though enrollments have stayed steady in the lower division literature courses (where most courses are taught by TAs). Yet we have had to institute requirements for courses that introduce theoretical models and cultural studies, which a

decade ago filled to capacity, another hint that the wheels may already be off the carriage.

Despite all these sobering circumstances, I would argue that the changes that have happened were necessary, for all the reasons theory has made clear. The prevailing view of the profession prior to the '70s was elitist; the population in the universities and in our classes *was* highly restricted, and dominant economic-political views both outside the university and in, seemed both intellectually shabby and morally shameful. And while there was no unanimity about the details, it was very clear that to argue *against* changing that particular status quo was to align oneself with moral and political reaction that was itself profoundly incompatible with the view of the value of literary education—one that had made New Criticism since World War II arguably the most successful pedagogical movement in the history of American public education.

What no one anticipated in the 1970s was the depth or the duration of the turmoil ahead, not just in the tearing apart and reshaping of English departments that proceeded at sufficient decibel levels to show up from time to time in the pages of *The New York Times* and other publications, but more pervasively in tensions in the general cultural economy nicknamed "The Culture Wars," that have been going on even longer than the so-called "War on Terror."[9] It resembles a cultural revolution without a clear beginning, middle, or end, but which throughout has tended to pit the universities against more conservative forces within the society at large.

If this had been just an intellectual revolution in a specialized field, parallel to cases of "scientific" revolutions, then work would have gone on under the new model with its legitimacy sufficiently guaranteed by actual results, without regard to opposition by adherents of a prior model.[10] That has not happened in literary studies, at least not in any obvious way. Every decision continues to be contested, whether it is priorities for hiring, revisions to the curriculum, requirements for the major, or the admission of graduate students, with no effective agreement about what constitutes intellectual excellence, best practices, or even "good" work. It is not, moreover, a clearly generational divide, even when it appears that the changes most strongly advocated as part of the emergence of theory *have* succeeded and have been welcomed and embraced. Still, the next new hire *may* applaud all that yet argue (and vote) against some initiative to require, for example, more courses in theory or cultural studies (to the consternation of members of the hiring committee who thought she was a *theorist*), or vote to require every English major to read *Paradise Lost* and take at least two courses in the medieval period (to the possible discomfiture of the Miltonist and the medievalists because she *does* do cultural studies).

Even in this made up example (though the components of it are well grounded), the most salient point is that though we may sense ourselves to be divided, nobody has a reliable chart of what the divisions might be, how they developed, or how (if at all) they might be reconciled. The paradox is that the main project of theory *has* evidently succeeded, but we cannot for all that just declare victory and move on. On the one hand, we are not in any agreement about

what such success might mean, and on the other hand, it has not at all meant that we are willing or able to give up any of the numerous things English departments have done throughout their history: language study and philology, textual editing, teacher education, historical scholarship, rhetoric and composition, literary criticism, theory—and since the 1930s—creative writing. Thus, we end up every budget cycle in a tight spot for resources as we constantly add to the list of things we ought to do, with nothing like compelling arguments for why we should get what we ask for. Though the canon (i.e., the list of books we actually put on our reading lists) is vastly more representative and the demographic mix in our classrooms is manifestly different, more rewarding and exciting, we are nevertheless losing our students at only a slightly slower rate than we are losing our public audience. For at least a decade, the pattern has been clear and growing more pronounced, as the only people buying our books or reading what we write are, evidently, other professors and the students (mainly at the graduate level) that we still have.[11]

For all these reasons, there is perhaps no problem more worrying than the persistence of factions and surprisingly bitter oppositions in language and literature departments that we seem unable to forget and powerless to resolve. In this, the parallel with cases of disciplinary change in the sciences diverges, since a new way of doing physics or chemistry or biology thrives primarily because it produces what all competent professionals in those fields are firmly committed to producing: repeatable and confirmable *scientific results*. In literary and cultural studies, by contrast, we remain profoundly uncertain, as well as unconvincing to anyone not already on the train, about what it is we are supposed to produce. Arguing about it offers no solution, since the disagreements and divisions are an intrinsic part of the legacy of fundamental concepts about which we are still not clear. Since almost everything we do is related directly or indirectly to teaching, just as our "research" consists of reading and writing about books, we pay no immediate penalty for ideas that are inconsistent or methods that systematically resist verification. In the classroom, they may appear good enough to make a point, but the destructive effects only show up over much longer periods of time.

The past thirty years have shown sufficiently, I think, those destructive effects in three substantive areas. The first is the problem of language and representation, which for a variety of reasons took shape in the fusion of a very sophisticated analytical strategy, deconstruction, and a very rudimentary, if not crude linguistic theory, drawn largely by non-linguists from the posthumous work of Ferdinand de Saussure—or, in the phrase of Marc Angenot, "the pseudo-Saussure of the *Course in General Linguistics*."[12] The sense in which theory has carried out a "critique" of *linguistic* representation has consisted primarily in making the case that traditional assumptions *about* language and meaning are fundamentally flawed. The principal result, however, has not been to sponsor or sustain new theoretical speculation about language or meaning, but rather a strategic destabilization of assumptions about language, in the showing that determinate meaning always devolves into an infinite chain of signification with no final terms—a result well known at least since the writing of Plato's *Parmenides*.

What we have taken from Saussure has been a generalized claim that the linguistic sign was arbitrary, though that claim signally fails to take Saussure's own warning that while both signifier and signified, taken separately, are arbitrary, the sign as the union of signifier and signified is "a positive fact" without which no language could actually function *as a language*.[13] Generalizing the claim has the obvious polemical advantage of providing an opening salvo against conventional positions to which we had *moral and practical* objections. For critics, however, being held to account as *linguists*—or as logicians—has never been accepted as part of the deal. Saussure was *readily available*, so attention to other arguments concerning signification, whether contemporary work like Chomsky's analysis of syntactic structures, or C. S. Peirce's older but less widely circulated demonstration that the relations of signification *cannot* be explained in a binary system—but can, in fact, be explained in a trinary system—have been ignored or misrepresented, in a preference for the seemingly more "practical" view of "semiology" derivable from Saussure.[14]

In this respect, the incorporation of "Saussurean linguistics" into literary theory and criticism can hardly be considered a triumph of intelligent critical evaluation. Indeed, it only insures that the destabilization we *sought* in order to take on the eminently practical (i.e., *political*) matter of the *power* of language (particularly in the hands of powerful people) transfers completely to destabilize the enterprise of theory itself—and thereby disrupt the relation of literary theory to any philosophical practice in which conceptual and logical accountability is paramount. What is overlooked is the obvious pragmatic fact that *languages do function*, and the instability in question pertains not directly to language *per se* or to the act of writing, but to how we do, in fact, understand or fail to understand its specific intent.[15] By a focus on signification without connecting it to its communicative function, we further contribute to the destabilization of the relation between criticism and philosophy, for example, to say nothing of the relation of critics as writers to a larger audience. The result is mainly to insure that discussions will in fact be endless *and* contentious, with no hope of resolution.[16] The problem is systematic, but so long as we are content not to hold ourselves to more exacting standards of logical consistency or conceptual coherence, we only insure that our intellectual engagements remain localized and disconnected.[17] What is at stake is not a question of merely logical criteria, but intellectual values and norms that are directly tied to what we conceive to be the purpose and function of our discourse. If we want to be thoroughgoing about arguments we appear to have accepted and claim that *all* values are contingent, that answers no questions but only changes the subject: contingent *on what?*

The second problem, larger in scope and less precise in detail, is the relation between cultural production and values, either espoused or implied. In diverse ways, through work by Gramsci, Raymond Williams, the Frankfurt School, Althusser and Foucault, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Judith Butler, a concentration on the interrogation and critique of ideological elements in diverse forms of cultural production emerged, and like the methodological reception of deconstruction, was easily integrated with multiple thematic

lines of development. These have included efforts to open and expand the literary canon relative to under-represented groups, thereby opening up a secondary critique of "representation," the elaboration of critical and materialist historical studies, feminism with several differing emphases, post-colonial critical discourse, and a host of specifically thematic orientations in race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

In all of these loosely compatible source lines (whether stemming from the Birmingham or Frankfurt schools, or a mixture of Italian, French and Anglo-American sources) the reception of arguments—and the rapid assimilation of them across a broad thematic front—has been marked by the same problems. As Charles Altieri has pointed out, the incorporation of theoretical tropes freely adapted from "master theorists like Derrida and Foucault" can effectively paralyze any serious discussion of abstract problems in criticism since we cannot disentangle them so as to single out the "relevant underlying assumptions."[18] But even that claim presumes too much in suggesting that if we could do the disentangling, the abstract discussion could proceed fruitfully. In almost all cases, it appears that arguments have been taken up on the basis of value positions about which there is already a consensus, which actively *constrains* discussion. To engage in such debates is to risk the immediate opprobrium of being thought a sexist, racist, or elitist, for example, even if one's objection were only to the practical choices for selecting a course of action.

What is quite evident is that there is, here, an ideological element in professional criticism itself upon which we implicitly rely—to critique and interrogate ideological effects *everywhere else*. Taking ideology, in Althusser's adaptation of Marx, as the "imaginary relation of men to the real conditions of their existence"[19] severely complicates the critic's ability to be theoretically clear about why he or she actually does the work of criticism. For the critic too, there is a "call," an experience of being "interpellated" into a role already prepared for a subject, exactly as Althusser has argued, and not merely because most critics, as teachers, are employees of the state. Yet how can we actually apply Althusser's argument to hearing the 'call' of *Althusser's own work*—or Gramsci's or Williams' or Foucault's, or Spivak's?[20] It is more than being persuaded by an argument, or convinced by a concept, since the 'role' in this instance is that of the cultural critic, as one called to interrogate all other systems of cultural production. There is in it a rough sense of enlightenment, even when the historical movement is bracketed out for ideological reasons, that tilts the scale: the desire *not to be taken in*. If the would-be critic doubts the authenticity of the call to become a critic, he or she simply doesn't do the work, or goes into an altogether different field. But once the choice is made one has accepted alignment with an institutional community, for which and to which one is, in some way, responsible. If not, then there is no obvious or inherent reason to claim the right to have one's opinion respected or even heard, as anything other than a purely idiosyncratic choice and not even as a voice of one crying in the wilderness. To call into question the legitimacy of what one does poses the paradoxical double-bind of being constrained from doing any critique of ideology (for if what one does is not

legitimate, by what right does one presume to call the beliefs or practices of others into question?), while actually satisfying what it is one is committed to doing (namely, calling into question the call of ideology itself). As Achilles says in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, "nor doth the eye [. . .] behold itself [. . .] for speculation turns not to itself, Till it hath travell'd and is mirror'd there, Where it may see itself (III.iii)." For "speculation to see itself" requires a willingness, and an occasion, to call into question one's own values and beliefs. In a formulation of Coleridge's, "In opinions of long continuance, and in which we had never before been molested by a single doubt, to be suddenly *convinced of an error*, is almost like being *convicted* of a fault."[21] What is beyond doubt is that questioning the authenticity of another critic's commitments is to put that critic under attack. Discussion stops and defense begins.

The third problem, the one that I remain convinced is the most difficult of resolution since it hinges on both of the first two, is the relation of theory to the imaginative. We can easily mark out the change from the idolization of the "aesthetic object" in the heyday of the New Criticism, to the pervasive skepticism of it as the last harbor of an elitist ideology today, but the arguments and the conclusions that have gotten us to this juncture are mixed at best. Even the distinction between the *imaginative* and the "imaginary," after Lacan and Althusser, appears to have been resolved by default in favor of the latter term, following the tendency to concentrate more and more attention on ideology. What we have not recognized fully is that this merely reinforces the manifestly anti-intellectual position that facts and reality are obvious and require no other modality (such as the imaginative) that serves primarily to create a definite space precisely for speculation and reflective thinking: in a phrase of William Carlos Williams that always bears repeating: "I have told you, this is a fiction, pay attention."[22] If something is "imaginary," the label puts us on the lookout for a probable delusion, a mystification, or a covert but already recognizable ideological entailment, which it is the cultural critic's mission to interrogate, explicate and expose. But here too, who, or what, performs that function for critical debate itself? In this connection, the long duration of a link between literary texts and criticism is much more than an historical and institutional contingency.

As I will argue in greater detail, the huge paradox of contemporary theory lies in the fact that the historical tradition of literacy is precisely what has led to a practical consensus on exactly the values that provide the ideological foundation for contemporary theory. It is, in brief, a commitment to *a discourse of social justice*. All of the operative themes in contemporary theory and cultural studies resonate to this idea, from the opening up of the canon to be more culturally representative, to concerns with gender, sexuality, class, economic exploitation, colonialism and hegemonic power, and so on. But there is nothing at all inherent in ourselves or in the world that *requires* anyone to doubt the rightness of being who they are.[23] If one is a king with subjects, a pasha with slaves, or just an upper middle class white American male, realizing the moral dubiousness of the privileges involved in such positions does not automatically *happen*, like puberty, at a certain age. No: the idea of justice is something

that has to be *taught*, and it invariably requires speculation and reflective judgment, so as to see oneself in terms of the other. Equally necessary is the explicit recognition (as Kant argues in his second critique) that one has a real freedom to choose, and not merely to presume upon the cultural and historical accident that puts one in the position one actually occupies. This lesson is initially privative: the right to withhold assent to axiological positions that undermine the value of the right to choose, though it does not tell us what to do.[24] Equally obvious, but much harder to discuss, is the fact that a *value* such as justice—which we have, without always arguing the case, taken *as* universal—is obviously not something that can be universally found in all cultures at all times. So, the contingency in the question is historical, institutional, and theoretical, in the traditional sense of requiring a systematic exposition that actually delivers on providing a compelling explanation. For obvious reasons, this demands an alternative view of the *function* of imaginative writing that does not collapse into the useless commonplaces of fetishizing the literary "object" or "literary language" that theory has been at such pains to deconstruct. Quite clearly, this in turn requires revisiting arguments that concern the aesthetic from a different point of view.

Since these three areas cover almost the whole range of current work in contemporary criticism, it is important to point out that I am not just claiming that we have bought into bad arguments (a point that I think is not hard to make), or settled for loose methods because they appeared to be good enough to make a point in the classroom or to get an article or book published. At stake a fourth area of concern not identical with any of the others, but including them all. The deep problem lies in trying to understand *why* we have settled for vulnerable ideas and dubious methods, which in turn would require a different requires a different kind of examination of the detailed relation between theory and practice. On what basis do we choose what we choose?

At the outset, this is a dilemma inherent in the logic of *assent*: the *fact* of acceptance tends to occlude examination of the reason for it. Generally, we are much better able to see why someone *else* may make a particular choice, but we ourselves, in the very act of choosing, do so by immersion in a process, including all the reasons we might offer, that is entirely focused on reaching the result, the actual choice. In looking back, it is unmistakable that we are rationalizing the choice, not explaining it, from the singular perspective of actually having chosen. When we take this into account, the common assumption that theory leads and guides practice gets the matter exactly backwards: practice *always* precedes theory. More particularly, practice, in the philosophical sense, cannot be separated from the discussion of value, and I will argue in the next section of this paper that our further prospects for theorizing will hinge on our ability to make genuine theoretical sense of it.

II: Theory as Practice

The foregoing commentary implies that the unfolding of theory since the 1970s has depended fundamentally on an ideological formation that has frequently trumped any genuinely critical evaluation

of our ideas and methods.[25] What makes the case distinct, if not unique, is that in this instance, the ideology in question is an avowed and unmistakable value position, an explicit affirmation of a discourse of justice, in which there is *no* interest in debunking, demystifying, or showing it to be "imaginary." It is practical not just in the philosophical sense, as pertaining to moral or political questions, but pragmatic in the sense that our manifest desire is precisely to *advance justice in the world* as an idea that can actually be integrated into cultural and governmental practices. If all we can do is talk about it, the very content of the talk indicts us of bad faith if we cannot demonstrate a way to actualize our professed concerns.

In this sense, theory *has* been successful in vitally important ways, most notably in the opening of the canon and the curriculum; in serving as an important point of advocacy and dissemination of principles of cultural inclusiveness; and not least, in strategically zeroing in on practices that have—in manifold ways—failed tests of fairness, or of logical consistency, particularly in the saturation of questions of truth by the interests of power. Why, then, is the profession of literary and cultural studies in such a troubled state of division, malaise, cynicism, and frankly puritanical dogmatism on questions that we already know can be effectively resolved *only* if they are decided by genuinely free *assent*?

We may ask this question in a slightly different way, as to get at the details of this impasse without merely repeating it. In the cases of what at least arguably *are* successes, we have made choices of terms and methods not because they were the best, nor because they were sound, but because they were both *available* and *apposite* to the value agenda of the collective enterprise. In this respect, there has been something distinctly *romantic* about the emergence of contemporary theory in its characteristic mode of operation. Like the great writers and thinkers of the Romantic period, faced with the outbreak of revolutions worldwide and the rapidly gathering evidence that the vision of Enlightenment led not to a heavenly city but to ghastly tenements in polluted cities, we have carried out a vast project that is in its essential character ironic and negative. It is the project of demonstrating what has *not* worked. The encyclopedic scale of it, already hinted at, strikes not just at institutional practices but at the heart of a culture that had prided itself on being a very star in the firmament of human progress, but has shown itself to be appallingly negligent of the lives of people and inconsistent with respect to its own values. But the radical element of theory, in its present *romantic* phase, is a serious philosophical ambition to effect the deconstruction of a linguistic and metaphysical regime that has endured at least since the classical age of ancient Greece. In one view, this has been largely the work of amateurs—in the etymological sense, of those acting for love of justice, not professional philosophers who get paid for it.

But in our actual adoption and evaluation of concepts and methods, in the *technical* dimension of theory construction, there is no longer any reason not to look more closely both at the ideas we have endorsed and their consequences. The entire point of such an exercise, moreover, is not to point out what has gone wrong (in the enterprise

of describing what has gone wrong), but to identify grounds for actually moving forward.

I have already suggested why the adoption of the trope of "arbitrariness" in language had less to do with the sufficiency of Saussure's theory of language than with the need for a political intervention: we needed to unhinge cultural power from oppressive linguistic conventions. But the binary structure of Saussure's account of the sign simply reflected the metaphysical assumption, most clearly articulated in Plato's theory of Forms and dominant for over two millennia in the West, that meaning depends on the existence of an original, to which an image (whether visual, verbal, or conceptual) is subordinate. That assumption is exactly the logical node to which deconstruction attaches. Peirce's relevance to the problem is his showing that a sign is invariably *constructed* by a hierarchically dependent system of conceptions, each in turn grounded on its antecedent. First is an act of attention to some possible quality; second is the identification of that quality in a set of relates and correlates; and third is the conceptualization of the sign (the interpretant) which confirms that the quality, as discerned in the correlates, does in fact designate a determinable (and determined) feature of reality. Its methodological superiority lies in the fact that from *any* sign, it is possible analytically to trace it back to the correlations and acts of attention that led to its acceptance. Significantly, this system is *not* based on language: it is a system of concepts that hinges on a fundamental metaphysical insight, that the real is not exhaustively describable by *any* of the familiar binaries that have dominated prior metaphysical theories: form and matter, mind and body, subject and object, or reality and appearance. And that is why it is possible with a Peircean logic to formulate an account of language that is exactly determinable according to the purposes for which that language is employed—without the perennial distraction of needing to deconstruct claims which systematically end in infinite regressions or paradoxes.[26]

I have claimed earlier among the successes of theory the deconstruction of an ancient metaphysical system, but it is critical to note the general sequence, for there is no sense in which what we have learned, after Derrida, to call "the logocentric metaphysics of presence" was something as vulnerable as a stack of alphabet blocks waiting to be toppled. On the contrary, it is exactly what Kant had in mind when he distinguished between a *common sense* and "the common understanding" (*sensus communis*) also conventionally called "common sense."[27] The common understanding *is* the "sense of the community," as it has been formed historically and supplied with a deep stock of *concepts*, all formed by convention and therefore immediate candidates for ideological critique. Common sense, by contrast, is the complex of *bodily senses* that we have as creatures vastly more alike than we are different, as *living beings*. When Shylock says in *The Merchant of Venice* (II.viii), "If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?" he is speaking from *common sense*, but when he continues,

> and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew

> wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

the speech is precisely adapted to the *common understanding*, with all the bitterness, lack of self-conscious reflection, and prejudice that has already been visited on him—and is the rule for most conventional communities that trust to their "common understanding." This is precisely what invites and demands deconstruction and ideological interrogation.

The critical common understanding in literary studies *did* topple—almost like a stack of blocks—within less than a year. First came the critical demolition of Northrop Frye's synoptic vision in *Anatomy of Criticism*, meant to reconcile the conflicting factions led by Yale and Chicago into a *Newer* Criticism based on archetypes (at the decorous but brutal English Institute meeting in 1965), then followed shortly by the conference on structuralism at Johns Hopkins in 1966. That conference too looked back in its original title, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," to the last book of the greatest of the Chicago Aristotelians, R. S. Crane, titled *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (1953). Crane, like Frye after him, had argued for a reconciliation among factions, which worked no better than Frye's—just as the ambitious and generous conference organized by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato collapsed into what we recognize in the short title of the proceedings: *The Structuralist Controversy*. As Macksey noted in the 40th anniversary reprinting of that volume, this was a conference meant to introduce American critics "to the methodological rites of Continental structuralism, [but] would prove by its final day to have been something more like a requiem for the movement."[28]

At the time, perhaps only Jacques Derrida, whose celebrity in Anglo-American circles was clearly launched by delivering the "requiem" for structuralism, accurately saw it as a decisive moment in the long history of Western metaphysics. We have simply taken it as the effective *start* of "theory" and more particularly as the grand gesture that signaled the end of the line for the New Critics. Yet it is at least arguable that Derrida would not so quickly have attracted an American following were it not for the example of Paul de Man, whose work bore enough resemblance to the best of the New Critics in putting a "tighter exegetic pressure"[29] on texts than either French traditions of explication or popularizing efforts by figures such as Roland Barthes or Umberto Eco or the more sociologically oriented Frankfurt School and early Marxists such as Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann. De Man's version of deconstruction, as propagated through *Blindness and Insight*, argued the case for closer attention to the more philosophical style of continental criticism, and thus served in part as a bridge between the wreckage of what had been the New Criticism, and the apparently bright shore of continental philosophy that did not reject the poetic out of hand, as analytic philosophy had done. Thus with a profound irony, many American critics moved with

alacrity to embrace continental philosophy as if it were the *only* philosophy, in part because it wasn't *analytic*—without in any way taking the measure of the challenge to its strictly dialectical traditions by analytical philosophers following Russell, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Quine, and others.[30]

With Derrida's quite dramatic emergence onto the world scene came celebrity not just for a figure of intellectual elegance and deft rhetoric, but celebrity for a method. Deconstruction was perceived to be liberatory, particularly as already noted when coupled with the idea that the "sign" is inherently arbitrary. Despite the notorious difficulty of Derrida's language, deconstruction has been, for better or worse, quite easily adapted as a technique of reading that can be readily simplified and propagated. Fundamental to the technique is turning the premises or assumptions of writing back upon the text itself, to disclose both inconsistencies and subtle differences that undermine the notion that "meaning" could be completely represented without residue or remainder.[31] Grafting this analytical procedure into a wide array of thematic projects has clearly released enormous energy, but at the explicit cost of overshadowing if not eclipsing the *philosophical pertinence* of Derrida's work. It is, throughout, a fundamental critique of the logic of phenomenology and existentialism, in turn profoundly disruptive of complacency in structural anthropology. More broadly, the main purpose was to mount a critique of metaphysical postulates dominant in Western philosophy from Parmenides to Heidegger. We easily forget, despite the aptness of the term *deconstruction*, that it is the dismantling of *a colossal error and an habitual oversight*. In the mode of irony and negation, deconstruction was deservedly viewed as the most characteristic *triumph* of theory, but when it becomes institutionalized as a habit—as something presupposed or absolutely taken for granted—it is itself an infinite deferral that comes at length to be the practical *refusal* of theory: it leads to no speculation about what could replace a traditional metaphysics of ontological presence by treating its preferred theory of language as inevitable.

The result is not just that deconstruction comes to resemble a repetition compulsion, nor even that it is, in Altieri's characterization, so embedded in so many diverse practices that we cannot isolate the underlying assumptions. For there is only one operative assumption: that Derrida's account of language and critical analysis is both evidentially true and logically necessary. If so, keeping faith with deconstruction as a discursive technique serves primarily to institutionalize the destabilization of professional discourse itself. Accordingly, the liberation to which deconstruction pertains is the liberation from an inherited illusion. When it becomes a privileged item of rhetorical technology, it can easily swamp the practical purposes of communication.

In a similar way, the systematic affinities of theory, as critical romance, have been for models and sources of concepts and methods that are immediately germane to the axiological issue of social justice. We continue to return to Marx, for example, only because of a need for his *critique of capitalism*—but not, I would argue, with the same vision that Marx himself had. Nothing could be more obvious than the fact that neither Capitalism nor the State has withered away in the coming

of Communism, which *has* in its turn withered away in light of the historical demonstration of its capacity for cruel tyranny. We read Marx, moreover, for the systematicity and complexity of his analysis—not to become the secular equivalent of Christian martyrs of the first and second centuries, following a sanctified text. Again, the theoretical problem remains the critique of social, political, and cultural formations for our time, in our time, and specifically attuned to actual empirical conditions of our time. That appears an altogether daunting task, making the endless revision and adaptation of Marx actually the easier route, for it keeps us systematically on the near side of a rigorously *critical* reading, with an eye to seeing in detail where Marx cannot help us and could not possibly have anticipated the developments through which we have lived and the conditions under which we must act. It is not necessary here to extend the point in detail, since it is, I think, entirely evident that the same applies to Nietzsche and Freud. They are for us sources of critical tropes, *topoi*, and basic strategies of analysis on the entanglements of language, truth, and power in the first instance, and identity, desire, and the making manifest of what is latent in the second. We know that if Nietzsche's *Übermensch* arrived, it would be a day of calamity and disaster (even if those of an apocalyptic temperament rejoiced), just as we have almost no surviving clinical illusions about Freud as a healer. But the persistence of all three *as sources and models* is a revealing symptom of a matrix of theoretical problems to which no one, nor all three together, are adequate—but they can point the way to a re-characterization of our theoretical interests as genuinely new, and needing desperately to move beyond their now largely exhausted terms and presuppositions.

It is in this context that concern for the forms of scholarly communication, the actual state of the art of writing and analysis in criticism, needs to be taken up with the same kind of critical eye. Just as news items about English departments tearing themselves apart and going into the equivalent of receivership are no longer newsworthy, the fad of "bad writing" contests that made news in the late 1990s has also passed. But I think it is disingenuous to think that it is because our communicative practices have improved or that they are sound and serious, but objectionable only to people who would be our enemies under any conditions. The complexity of the problems addressed in theory and cultural studies are formidable, so any argument that our writing ought to be simple and easy to follow is impertinent.[32] The issue, however, is that our practice of carrying along in our prose a trail of citations of recent theoretical authorities, indicated, not cited, by catch phrases and key concepts, as a way to insure the credibility and currency of our arguments, does nothing to guarantee the depth or cogency of our thinking. The main effect is to make it almost impossible for anyone who might be interested to follow arguments that are as gnarled and misshapen as the harpoons lodged in Melville's great White Whale—who always gets away in any case. That is all the more unfortunate because it means that our prose swamps the message repeatedly, especially when the message is important. In such cases, the issue has almost nothing to do with prose style, but with the fundamental problem of the relation between theory and practice.

It does not appear that we have framed this question as it pertains to the protocols of our own prose, just as we may bypass it when considering how we might implement something like, for example, the actual teaching and staffing of courses responding to a more open and expanded curriculum. The very urgency of theory as practice, in its axiological dimension of a concern for the manifold forms of social justice, leads us first to suppose that "practice" is best exemplified by field work, by volunteering, trying to carry out something like a Gramscian "war of position" in reshaping our own departments, or projecting an image of ourselves as "public intellectuals" whose true home ought to be a resuscitated "public sphere." But that overlooks the most obvious circumstance of our work, which is overwhelmingly, *to teach*. Given the fact that in the United States, we are still trying, no matter how ineptly, to pursue a democratic experiment of teaching all of the children of all of the people, the "public," that is ours, consists of the students who take our classes.[33] Thus, when we are unable to hold enrollments either in our classes or in the major, it isn't a mere exigency, but a direct reflection of our *inability* to connect theory and practice. If we look over the heads of the only real source of our influence with the public, *in our own classrooms*, for a field of practice by which we imagine that we may change the course of history, we are primarily neglecting the history that really is ours to affect.

In a precisely parallel way, worry over our publication practices, including our styles of argument, is not a matter of watching our prose manners or dumbing-down difficult subjects (a gesture that our students and readers detect as fraudulent and condescending in any case) but a failure to insist on communicating even difficult things perspicuously. The pedagogical success of the New Criticism was mirrored by the precise honing of the essay as a tool for teaching—but it unraveled when the task of "interpreting" the single, precious poem swamped the vital contextual and informing issues affecting both its production and reception in actual societies. Its excess (and subsequent abandonment as a stylistic paradigm) lay particularly in fixating on formal features and rhetorical or stylistic tropes to the neglect of the actual purposiveness of the writing. In its decadent phase, so to speak, the artiness of the text drew attention *away from* what Aristotle would have designated as the *techné*, the art as a set of relational principles under which the writing is intelligible as a *work*.[34] The 'theory article,' it seems to me, has also reached a similar state of decadence, in which the paralyzing effect of redundancy, seeming to 'prove' a point known full well in advance, is offset primarily by a kind of dialectical 'leap-frog' or 'hop-scotch' among authorities in the history of the discussion.

In the lead-off article in the essays from the 1999 English Institute, "From Haverstock Hill Flat to U. S. Classroom, What's Left of Theory,"[35] Gayatri Spivak provides a very telling example in her intense reflection on the current state of the profession, precisely as it struggles with the relation of theory and practice. From the opening paragraph, with its subheading, "MARX," Spivak comments sharply on the *real* condition of academic critics and theorists on the Left, no matter what the imaginary representation of those conditions might be:

> It is perhaps no surprise that, in the absence of a "practical" left in the United States, a dwindling enclave in the academic and journalistic world continues to debate the theory-practice binary with a vigor matched only by its lack of consequence outside the academy. But the U. S. Academy is our home, and in so far as the consequences of this debate affect our hiring and firing practices, it is worth commenting on it in a strictly academic way [. . .] In this sorry field, then, I begin, as usual, in the classroom (1).

Her discussion continues with a pointed explanation of the importance of teaching Marx's abstract conception of the "value form" accurately, against the grain of Engels' editorial deflections of the argument to reduce the "*substance* of value" to *labor*, so as to clarify the point that in the value form, "use as well as exchange suffer abstraction" (5). The move is crucial, for upon it depends on the possibility of preserving what Spivak later calls "Marx's ghost" (7) in a contemporary situation that Marx in the flesh would have understood, but in the 1870s surely could not have imagined. The issue, that is to say, is the power of abstraction when it is "managed from within capital" that must be turned to "ethical practices [. . .] that were '*defective* for capitalism.'" To address the real conditions, not in the "sorry field" of the university, but the still sorrier fields of those who have, as Spivak puts it, "lost in the capitalist competition again and again" the genuinely theoretical task is to transpose Marx, "in order to turn this ferociously powerful form of capital around to the social" (7).

While this explicit turn to the social and the ethical confirms the *telos* of theory, Spivak's insistence on recognizing the power of abstraction, as useful for socialism as for capitalism, is driven by the recognition that in his own time, "Marx could not think this need" (7). But for us to think it does indeed return us to the classroom, though we should hope, *not* as itself a "sorry field." What makes it so is that abstraction by itself, in Marx's time or our own, produces only an abstract ethics, in a discourse that can only teach those who have already absorbed the lesson, or are not actually interested in the practice, but only in the academic glitter of the theory.

Consider a second passage, which opens the next section of Spivak's essay, as an instance of a fervent desire to communicate in the process of undoing itself:

> Let us acknowledge the protocol of Marx's initial movement, from speculations about the subject of labor in the Economic and Philosophical manuscripts to the definition of the agent of production in the Capitals. This agent, only a part-subject, since its labor is part of an abstract flow, will turn the lever, *as* commodified labor, *of* political economy, *to* veer capital into *pharmakon*, a medicine always ready to turn poisonous if the socialist dose falls short. Detractors and sympathizers of diverse persuasions will grant alike that the epistemes or mind-sets foreclosed by the capitalist/socialist teleology, defective for capitalism, survive in more or less habitable ruins in unenlightened sectors and enclaves of the planet, as more or less recognizable remain(s). Perhaps these are not ruins. The question to

> ask may be of the order of "'*what remain(s) of a Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down the shithole*.' [. . .] As the remain(s)." The memorable opening lines of the counter-hegemonic right-hand column of Derrida's *Glas*." (11-12)

What is unmistakable here is the *feeling* of a crucial point being presented, *but what is it?* For whom is this intended? More particularly, who could possibly read this? It is, in miniature, a virtual encapsulation of thirty years of theory, in the phase of critical romance, ticking off the points at which the hegemonic culture, that thought to have revealed its virtue in the work of the New Critics, has been found fundamentally wanting in practice. In order to follow this passage, a reader must first know Marx, by way of Gramsci and Althusser, including an acquaintance with Marx's 1844 manuscripts. Next is Derrida, from "Plato's Pharmacy" to *Of Grammatology*, and on to at least an opening of the pages of *Glas*—known not according to Derrida's excesses, from his partiality in interpreting Plato's *Phaedrus* to his imaginative flights in reading Hegel, but as a methodological master. So too any reader's understanding would be seriously impaired without at least some awareness of the post-war interpretations of Hegel by both Hippolyte and Kojeve by way of their influence on Louis Althusser, and cognizance of debates concerning subject positions, hegemony, subaltern studies, post-colonial discourse, and throughout, the cultural-political archaeologies that take their lead from Foucault's study of the early modern "episteme"—and so on, and on, and on. In short, the minimum pre-requisite for this passage is a prior knowledge of any of a dozen anthologies of criticism and theory that covers the period since the early 1960s.

I am not merely remarking that Spivak is preaching to the choir, though that is true. The larger problem is that these packed but desultory allusions to recent theoretical authorities completely overwhelm Spivak's purpose, such that it takes a supplementary commentary to unbury it. The seriousness of the loss can hardly be overstated. This extended set of metaphors sketches out a fragile stay against the corrosive hegemony of capital, maintained in "more or less habitable ruins" around the planet. Yet Spivak's point is that *it does yet survive*, and *may not be in ruins*. And *in what* do those alternatives, "defective for capital," survive? Not just in things like "*Rembrandt torn into small, very regular squares and rammed down the shithole*" as "the remains." These "remains" refer to a conception of cultural production as *not* a commodity, *not* a fungible object, but as a point of constitutive cultural resistance without which *everything* goes down the shithole of Capital. The missing signifier here is the concept of art, with no other qualifers than a conception of it as based on reflecive principles. If one wants to apprehend, let alone to understand, the cultural reality of the subaltern or of the less distant other, it *will* be necessary to learn another language, and in that language, to read the poems, the dramas, the narratives, literary formulations within which those cultural alternatives are actually constituted.[36]

But for a typical graduate student encountering this passage without the knowledge it presupposes, that point might as well refer to an

uninhabitable planet in a system orbiting in the Andromea galaxy: the apparent and immediate task of professional survival depends on getting up to speed on theory so as to master these moves in the game which one is, after all, aspiring to play. Not only is the centrality of the value form missed, the abstractions of all these desultory theoretical tropes serve to interpellate the initiate into a *career*, where the moves will be turned into articles and books, or, in other words, into professional and professorial money in the bank. So long as we perpetuate that cycle, the scene of the classroom will indeed remain a "sorry field," and we cannot assume our continued right to occupy it.

But I would argue that what is typical in this example from Spivak is not some infelicity, real or imagined, but the seriousness of what it attempts. It is, in the midst of the most discouraging professional conditions imaginable, a positively heroic effort to hold onto a point of great importance, wherein the critique of the actual material practices of global capitalism counts for everything. It is, simply, that cultural value is *not for sale*, and that it cannot be sustained without meticulous attention to the forms of cultural life that are embedded in texts, in stories, in practices that are not merely difficult for the *outsider*, but for anyone, even if not especially for the 'native informant' to see clearly. Those *texts* have to be *taught*.

The divisive state of the discipline, aflame with professional ambitions, presents us with a practical problem that is well short of the ethical. It is a machine for producing anxiety. The commonplace most frequent in the long series of gloomy books about the humanities is to depict the main division as between "theory" and "literature," but that fails completely to recognize that the second great success of theory has been the actual opening of the curriculum (the canon) to a vastly more representative range of writing. The main strategy, alas, has been to mime the typical *structure* of an English department of thirty or forty years ago, with a new curriculum of works by women, by writers of color, by authors from a much richer array of points of cultural origin. That is to say, we have added onto the list of departments that our universities are expected to support, created new branches and wings and tracks within the literature major—all requiring the hiring of new professors, the writing of new literary histories, the creation of new professional societies, and an imaginary professional future for students—moved to embrace the project of reading more diversely, more justly, to careers that in all particulars merely repeat the *form* of the very institutions we have been trying so diligently to deconstruct. Just as in Spivak's concern to teach the value form and not just a 'translation' of a new idea back into exactly the same old idea, we have created an unsustainable economic nightmare in which our professional desires, ethically driven, cannot be put into any balance with the resources actually at our disposal. We end up undone not by capitalism, but by our own ineptitude as managers of a real-time enterprise. Thus, every hiring meeting for a literature department in a typical PhD institution transpires on the verge of metaphorical mayhem. Let us say a department has lost a dozen positions, through a combination of death, retirement, or outside offers, with 'new' hires going elsewhere to the sciences, the college of engineering, and the business school, because of 'market pressures'

in those fields. The decimated department will therefore be permitted to hire *two* people as "replacements," against an inventory of work to which the whole department is ethically committed but which grows longer year by year—for a more diverse faculty, for people to 'cover' existing requirements for the major, for people to teach an ever expanding curriculum with fewer people. Spivak is absolutely right to labor with such intensity to make visible the value form, while we keep trying, counterproductively, to jam more content into a *form* that, being abstract, we do not see but has been *broken* for fifty years.

Here is a new task for theory, not to indulge in the repetition compulsion of critical romance, pointing out the ever farther range of instances in which the culture, under the depredations of capitalism, has gone wrong, but to re-invent the forms of our teaching. We know, for example, that it is neither possible nor necessary to teach *everything* produced by all the media of cultural production in our view. We know that the model which the New Critics confronted of 'historical coverage'—and which no one, evidently, has yet figured out how to get past—remains the core template for job titles in the MLA Job Information Lists to this day. We have been for at least three decades in a *real* zero-sum game while ourselves holding onto the consumerist desire for endless expansion.

I would suggest that calling for yet another high level professional task force to prepare and file away one more report about our practical problems—the major, the job market, the curriculum, the length of time to the PhD, the problem of evaluation for promotion and tenure, the exploitation of temporary faculty and graduate students—simply bypasses the fundamental theoretical problem that will absolutely have to be faced if theory is going to have another thirty years of work. Why do we teach what we teach? Why do we select the books we select? Is there any guarantee that just because a text or item of cultural production falls within the range of certain library classifications or generic definitions, that it needs to be added to the list of things for which we are responsible? If we have been even partly successful in diagnosing the *imaginary* relation to the real conditions of our collective lives, what do we think is the *real* relation between theory and the imaginative?

I come at length to the hardest problem, where the paradoxes of theory over the past thirty years have brought us to an impasse that requires new thinking, not about new objects, but about very old imperatives, presenting philosophical difficulties that cannot be encapsulated in tropes and catch phrases. The catch phrase of which I am guilty here is the idea of contemporary theory as 'critical romance,' designating the ironic, privative, and negative operations by which we have taken apart, demystified, and called into question historical institutions that cannot be put on the calendar on either side of a date between the "modern" and "post-modern" but extend as far back as literate documentary history can take us.

Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, in its way one of the canonical works of contemporary theory, clinched for us a preferred term of designation, though we may still be shy of accommodating Lyotard's eminently useful definition. Recall that he

framed the problem not in terms of knowledge, despite the post-Foucauldian title of the book, but as a *crisis of narratives*:

> Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth (xxiii).

The *postmodern* follows: it is the state of "incredulity toward metanarratives." The easy irony is in Lyotard's point that if ours is a "postmodern" age, then these metanarratives are, in effect, bankrupt. If that is so, then contemporary theory, I would argue, is neither modern nor post-modern (hence my torquing the term 'romantic') because it has built itself not starting from incredulity, but by constantly reviving and revising *old* and clearly already collapsed metanarratives, in particular those from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In Lyotard's view, the collapse of these metanarratives takes "the society of the future" beyond a "Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory"), to a "pragmatics of language particles" applicable only to fostering "institutions in patches—local determinism" (xxiv).

We have, for the most part, succeeded in deconstructing just about every ideology but our own, however, by not explicitly recognizing that the metanarrative that has legitimized criticism from the start is, to repeat the point, *a metanarrative of justice*—and we are by no means ready to give it up, even despite evidence that it may be "a fable," to treat it with the incredulity that the postmodern enforces. If we did, we would simply put ourselves in exactly the condition of Thrasymachus, in Plato's *Republic*, who argues not just with incredulity but violent cynicism that justice is no universal and necessary virtue, but the merely contingent "advantage of the stronger" and thereby cancel the very history that has led us to the commitments that have defined us culturally and professionally. The reason is that this narrative is not contingent, but can and does claim universality, for anyone who recognizes the paradox in the position of Thrasymachus. The axiological risk is that the story theory appears to be telling young people today is that though they may yearn for it, everything about justice *is* in the hands of the powerful. And far from being *liberated* by theory, they are being carefully instructed in the myriad ways in which their decisions are overdetermined by forces in the social field, while their naïve desire for *meaning* is to be put on permanent and infinite deferral. Yet, as all of us who teach theory know, this message does not dissuade our most eager students or send them all off to engineering or business administration, precisely because they already hear the call of fairness, of an ideal of justice, which, when

it is denied, serves at the very least to piss them off, and in the extreme cases, to become critics and theorists themselves, willing to devote their lives to it.

But to repeat an earlier point for emphasis, there is nothing in the nature of the world that automatically brings us to assent to the idea of justice. Doubting the privilege of one's own position does not come naturally. It has to be taught, like the onset of puberty. It has to be taught, and it comes to awareness only in explicit and formally constructed *reflection*. Part of the metanarrative of critical romance is the tacit acceptance of the idea that this *is* one of the primary cultural functions of the imaginative—for why else would we have ever thought that some good would be done just by having students read stories and novels, poems and plays, written by people who are "like them"? Cultural formations, once again, are not inculcated by abstract lectures, but start in moments of imaginative recognition and assent. When Plato's two brothers, Glaucon and Adimantus, the main interlocutors of Socrates in *Republic*, have observed Socrates sweet talk Thrasymachus out of his elitist and oligarchic rage, they recognized perfectly well that Socrates' merely dialectical showing that justice is a transcendent virtue of the soul was no answer to what they themselves had learned—from *Homer and the poets*. The simple point here is that Plato's objection to the poets—to what we have designated (without ever getting clear how many incommensurable things may be meant by the word) "aesthetic"—was as deadly serious as we have been in our efforts to demystify an elitist and inherently *unjust* ideology that has clung to the notion of the aesthetic since the Romantic period. As the brothers observe, if one believed the poets, it is far better to merely *seem just*, but actually *be unjust*: one will make more money, so as to bribe the gods (and don't the poets tell us that the gods are eminently bribable?) so as to get off scot free in the afterlife (*Republic* 364-66).

The point of this episode, moreover, is pretty much what Plato makes of it: the fact that something is said by a poet, or is "poetic" does not in any way guarantee that it is good. What Plato assumes, and this assumption is exactly the one that we, in our time, have been compelled to deconstruct, is that the dialectical illusion that one *can* get to a knowledge of justice as a transcendent form is nothing else than an invitation to endless logical paradoxes and the ultimate *différance* of an infinite regression.

But at the height of the phase of critical romance, this circumstance counted for less than feeling caught between the New Critical elitism, on the one hand, and conservative alarmists on the other, who were opposed to any opening up of the universities, the literary canon, or society itself. In a colossal category mistake, the aesthetic ideology we associate with the New Criticism (mirrored in structuralism), was the belief that what constituted the aesthetic was either some phenomenal or analytical set of *properties* of poems, or in continental traditions, in *poetic language*, such that we could read off goodness by attention to formally or structurally accessible properties of objects, sufficiently tractable by the practices of close reading, or attention to literary devices. Turning away from such narrow conceptions of the literary, then as now, opened literary critics in the universities to the

fatuous charge by such antagonists as Lynne Cheney or William Bennett that we were somehow abandoning Shakespeare, neglecting the "masterpieces," and allowing barbarians into the temple. By now one would hope it is clear enough that including Toni Morrison or Chinua Achebe does not mean that students are prevented from reading Faulkner or Conrad—and indeed, in the argument of Gayatri Spivak noted above, teaching such authors in the same class is just what we are now more likely to do.

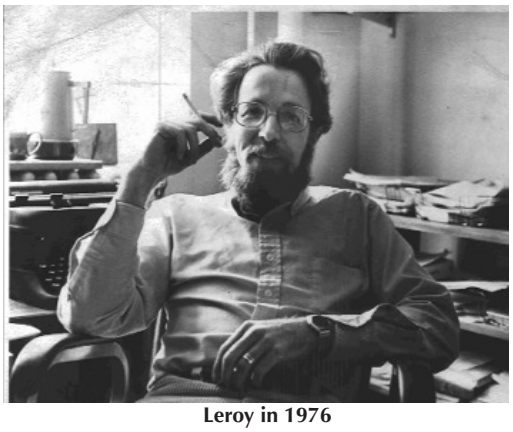
Clearing the pathway even to that result, however, required not just a good deal of thinking but no small amount of finesse in defending theory against the attacks of the reactionary pests. It is in that context, I would argue, that Barbara Herrnstein Smith's very influential *Contigencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* can most generously and fairly be placed, for it was a very effective controversialist's answer to conservative and reactionary tradition. But Smith's argument concerning the contingent character of value judgments, is an almost perfect example of what happens when the contingencies of history are taken as if they could be converted to universal claims, ironically enough, about contingency, which quite widely has been taken to constitute a proof that all value judgments are contingent, emphatically with relation to aesthetic judgments.

As Plato's 'deconstruction' of the claims of poetry was grounded on a metaphysical theory that we in turn have had to deconstruct, the very problem he had with making his case about justice hinged on a too simple view of the nature of philosophical reasoning. Thus Plato, taking a poem to be an *object*, premised his reasoning on the erroneous assumption that one could locate transcendental and universal *forms* like Justice, such that imitations of them were less real and, in the case of poetry, degenerate besides. But the metaphysical error is twofold: first, in taking the poem to be an imitation (indeed, the objection to it is not that it is an imitation, but that it is not, since there is no plausible "original" that could be located for it—just as we would hardly complain of Shakespeare that his portrait of Hamlet was inaccurate, since "Hamlet" is a fiction)—and second, in taking the poem to be physical artifact like a painting. The obvious solution is to recognize that constructions in words like poems—or philosophical dialogues—are inherently forms of reasoning and thinking; they are intentional, and rely fundamentally on the trinary quality of signification such that figures like strict logical equivalence (a=a) to specify a relation that is, in its fundamental structure, the same as metaphor (a=b); we, however, make the differentiation by specific attention to the attributes or the ground that is singled out first to give *point* (and thereby meaning) to the relation.[37]

The critique of the conception of the aesthetic characteristic of the New Criticism—and before it, an entire tradition of *belle-lettristic* writing going back to Edmund Burke and Coleridge—was necessary precisely because that entire tradition tended to treat the issue of the aesthetic as consisting in the identification of the phenomenal qualities that gave rise to pleasure. But after deconstruction, it ought to be no great strain to recognize that the central problematic in the aesthetic is not a point about poetry or art, but about *our own power of judgment*—which is exactly what Kant argued in his third critique. Thus, Smith begins her central chapter on "Axiological Logic," with the very sensible

observation that "No illusion is more powerful than that of the inevitability and propriety of one's own judgments"(54) but quite conspicuously offers nothing to suggest that she applied the observation to her own argument, and in what follows, clearly took Kant as if he *were* David Hume.

The book itself is staged to present in its central chapter what purports to be an analysis of Hume and Kant on the idea of the standard of taste, but is actually merely following the lead of Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Barely touching the philosophical literature on Kant's third critique, the argument offers no analysis of the place of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as the final part of his critical philosophy and virtually no attempt to place Kant's argument in the context he elaborates in either of the two extant versions of the philosophical introduction to the work.[38] Instead, Smith merely gestures toward "the extent to which [Kant's] axiological argument mirrors that of Hume" in "Of the Standard of Taste," despite the fact that Kant not only offers a proof for why arguments such as Hume's *cannot* claim universality because they fail entirely to meet the cognitive criteria upon which Kant insists, and why his argument is *not* subject to that objection.[39] Kant's third critique, part of a full-out effort to locate an *a priori* principle legislative *not* for "taste" but for *the power of judgment itself* is therefore not about works of art, but about our own powers of cognition that are uniquely revealed by them. Thus, what is missed entirely is Kant's implicit acknowledgement that the cognitive faculty involved in all predication, the power of judgment, had not been adequately grounded by *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which omission would make it impossible to account for the fact that we can know not only a mechanical universe, but one that includes the kind of self-organizing systems we call "organisms," and could not hope to account for our ability even partly to understand ourselves as creatures capable of *choice*. That is to say, Kant's turn to works of art in the third critique is not for the purpose of grounding a practical criticism of specific works, but to show exactly why it is that in finding *purposiveness* to be the *a priori* principle of the reflective judgment, nothing *other than* a work of art could provide the conditions under which reflective judgment itself can be seen clearly. It is, in other words, the only way for the eye to see itself. What is offered in *Contingencies of Value*, on the other hand, is a skeletal argument that is sufficiently summarized in this now familiar claim, thought to show the groundlessness of aesthetics:



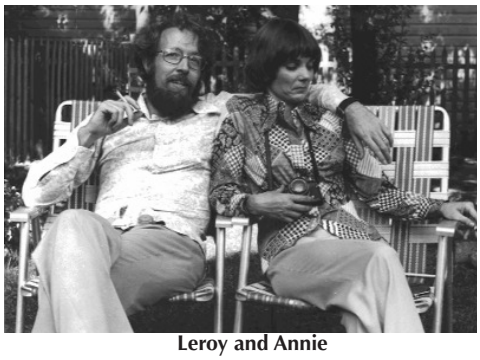
Leroy in 1976

> The project of axiology—that is, the justification of the claim that certain norms, standards, and judgments to objective validity, which is to say the demonstration of the noncontingency of the contingent—must, by the definition of it just given, fail. (54)

The 'failure' here lies merely in the rhetoric of substituting unanalyzed terms treated as logical opposites, thereby begging the question and arguing with perfect circularity that the contingent cannot be shown to be otherwise. So sweeping is this error as to rule out any norm that is contingent on choice, even that pertaining to the axiom of non-contradiction.

But in the present context, vacating any ground for justifying choice has a direct bearing on the eminently practical and moral choices we all have made in acting as if there already *were* a universal claim to validity to be made for the idea that all people should be treated like people, without respect to matters of race, gender, religion, or culture of origin. So where did we get the idea that we ought to be just? Again, the obviousness of the answer is the very thing that keeps us from seeing it: from the imaginative occasions—the function of which is *to make us think and allow us to see* crucially without the immediate pressure of experiential events—to the instances when we mistake common understanding for common sense and fail to recognize the profound importance of reflective judgment—not just for poetry but for all of our thinking. We do not merely reason our way to justice, we have to *imagine* it first, so to recognize, not by virtue of persuasive rhetoric, but by placing ourselves in the position of the other.

My argument is that the prospects for theorizing do not in any way require us to choose between theory or literature, or between an "aesthetic" or cultural studies orientation. The next phase of theory—and I am convinced that there will be one—does not require jettisoning our commitment to social justice as "a fable," but rather to recognize that the narrative that created a consensus about it as a value is not an ideology like any other. It is an historical achievement that can continue only to the extent that we teach it. To the extent that our classrooms remain a sorry field or scenes of relentless ideological indoctrination, we undermine and inhibit the very condition of free assent that confers value on what we do. The metanarrative (in Lyotard's sense) for literacy, encompassing both imaginative writing *and* criticism, has everything to do with *cultural legitimation*.



Leroy and Annie

To say it briefly, this isn't a matter of discourse: it is the irreplaceable social function of art to provide for us the imaginative occasions

wherein reflective judgment can be fully and fairly engaged. But it follows directly that there can be no automatic claim of assent just because a text is "imaginative." For the irreplaceable social function of *criticism* is to provide us the occasions to examine the whole economy of assent, exactly as theory has taught us to do, to discern the contradictions, mystifications, and misdirections to which it is always subject. If reflective judgment is ruled out as part of an impossible axiological project, it isn't that we thereby privilege nothing: we are simply thrown back on privileging what we already are inclined to believe, as if it were inevitable and absolutely proper.

In the first thirty years of SCE, it should be a matter of considerable satisfaction that the organization has maintained fidelity to its original aim, to establish and protect venues for authentic critical exchange. If we have the collective patience to insist on the same purpose for the next thirty years, there is absolutely no reason for discouragement or despair.

NOTES

[1] That was 1965, so there was no way to know that what I assumed was a stable view of criticism was already coming apart. Even by 1968, I had expected to show that Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* was, or should have been, the theoretical realization of the hopes of the New Critics, but that hypothesis did not survive a careful reading of even the first essay in Frye's *Anatomy*, and led me to suspect that the typical process of theoretical concept formation in literary criticism at that epoch rose only about as far as the seat of the pants. See Searle "Basic Concepts." In the sequel, it has appeared that "controversial" instances are still the rule, not the exception.

[2] Though late, too late, I note my deep thanks and appreciation to the late Professor Thomas Kuhn, who sponsored my visit, and to the late Professor Gregory Vlastos, Professors Earl Miner, Jonathan Arac, Stevan Harnad and many others for conversations, brief and extended, that remain as vivid and provocative in recollection as they were then.

[3] At least in that I was exactly right: "Critical Situations," which at a length of about a thousand pages, attempted to trace the concurrent emergence of literary criticism and formal philosophy from problems in the texts of Plato and Aristotle, with chapters on classical tradition, renaissance criticism, Dryden, Coleridge, I. A. Richards, and modern criticism. It has since been parceled out into essays, and other projects, including *Plato, Aristotle, and The Poets*, in process. Work that has followed has kept to the same general pattern of reading as comprehensively as possible in philosophy and intellectual history, but with particularly intensive investment in the development of new courses in English, in Comparative Literature, but particularly in the UW's Comparative History of Ideas program. One course in particular has benefited from the work on that overly long manuscript, a course entitled "Method, Imagination and Inquiry," which includes major texts by Plato, Aristotle, Bruno, Bacon, Descartes, Shakespeare, Hume, Kant, Coleridge, Emerson, C. S. Peirce, James Clerk Maxwell,

Thomas Kuhn, and William Faulkner. Despite the daunting reading list (undergraduates, not knowing it is impossible, will just do it) the course has been offered every year for 25 years, always filling to the capacity of the room. The course materials and lectures of the latest iteration are available online, at http://uwch4.humanities.washington.edu/classes/205.

[4] The particular occasion was "Epistemological Relationships between Science and the Humanities," held late in 1975, where I was invited to present a paper on "Epistemological Mediation," focused mainly on the work of Thomas Kuhn and Gerald Holton. Conference proceedings, unfortunately, were not published. Here too, I owe thanks not only to the people mentioned who had been at the heart of planning this conference, but to other participants, particularly Dennis O'Connor, Clifford Hooker, and Harold Brown both for short and decisive conversations and later occasions, particularly a conference organized by Jeff Plank at USC several years later. See resulting publications in *Humanities in Society 3* (Summer, 1979). There were others, later on, among very many more, whom I really must mention: Wallace Martin of Toledo, Vince Leitch, who was there from the very first MLA meeting, my colleagues Hazard Adams and Charles Altieri, and Richard Macksey, whose example in founding and running the Humanities Center at Hopkins was invaluable.

[5] See "Crisis and Criticism" in Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism, 2nd edition* revised (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, org. 1971), 3-19.

[6] See Kuhn, *The Road Since Structure*, 307-09. Concerning this distinction, adopted by Thomas Kuhn from Peter Hempel, the critical issue is that taking a term or concept as "theoretical" is already dependent on the antecedent tradition in which one is working and has already been trained. Ideas have no impact if they do not circulate, but the fact of an idea already being in circulation does not guarantee its soundness.

[7] See note 9 below.

[8] As of the last ADE survey, 2001-2002, the overall percentage of English majors awarded among all baccalaureate degrees has fallen (with ups and downs) from about 7.5% in 1970 to about 4 % in 2001—a decline of about 45%. See http://www.ade.org/reports/index.htm "The Undergraduate English Major. . ." fig. 3. When factored for gender, the steepest decline is among male English majors.

[9] See, for example Janny Scott, "The Self-Destruction of the English Department at Duke," *The New York Times*, November 21, 1998. Stanley Fish's observation that the evident absence of "an over-arching mission" for an English department was nothing peculiar to troubles at Duke, because if was a "feature [. . .] now of the profession" remains entirely applicable today. It is just that it is no longer newsworthy. At about the same time, Nicolas Delbanco's omnibus review of ten depressing books under the title, "The Decline and Fall of Literature," begins by quoting Carol Christ of UC Berkeley, that "there is one department whose name need only be mentioned to make people laugh;" and goes on to complete Professor Christ's tactful forbearance in naming it, in this wise: "everyone knows that if you want to locate the laughingstock on your local campus these days, your best bet is

to stop by the English Department." *New York Review of Books* XLVI #7, Nov. 4, 1999, p.32. Meanwhile, Delbanco's own book, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997) appeared and went to the remainder tables in a couple of months, in company with a host of titles lamenting hard times for literature and the humanities. See, as a short sample, Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP,1996); John Guillory, "Pre-professionalism; What Graduate Students Want" in *Profession* 1996 (New York: MLA, 1996), 91-99; Alvin Kernan's *What's Happened to the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997); Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *What's Left of Theory: New Work on the Politics of Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Vincent Leitch, "Theory Ends," in *Profession* 2005 (New York: MLA, 2005), 122-28. These are works by our friends. See also Lynne V. Cheney: *Tyrannical Machine: A Report on Educational Practices Gone Wrong and Our Best Hopes for Setting Them Right* (Washington, DC: The National Endowment for the Humanities, 1990); Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); William J. Bennett, ed. *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted our Higher Education* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1998). Lest anyone suppose that this pattern, already fairly set fifteen years ago is over, consider the unhappy case of Ward Churchill, or the campaign of David Horowitz against the classrooms and the professional reputations of 'liberal' faculty members, to mention only two instances that have made it into the news.

[10] Opposition by the adherents of an older model, that is to say, does not constitute viability for continuing the research sustained by it. Priestley's refusal to accept oxygen, for example, did not validate his theory of phlogiston: it only made him effectively irrelevant to the field. See Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1969), 150-51. See also, Thomas Kuhn's reflections on these issues in *The Road Since Structure*, 253 ff.

[11] This has been a subject of public comment and concern for over a decade. See especially John Guillory's "Pre-Professionalism: What Graduate Students Want" in *Profession* 1996 (New York: MLA, 1996), and the unprecedented letter to the entire membership of MLA from Stephen Greenblatt, as President, about five years ago, calling attention to the crisis in publication. It has, at length, come to a fulsome MLA report on some of these troubles published in *Profession* 2007 (New York: MLA, 2007). Included is a digest with notes of the virtual meltdown of the publishing of books and monographs in the humanities by university presses, which are now selling an average of fewer than 300 copies per title, with about half going to libraries. See especially note 8, p. 65. Particularly germane is Lindsay Waters' essay, "Tenure, Publication, and the Shape of the Careers of Humanists," 93-99; and James Slevin's "Academic Literacy and the Discipline of English," 200-09 also in *Profession* 2007.

[12] See Marc Angenot, *Critique of Semiotic Reason*, trans. F. Collins (New York: Legas, 1994), quoted from Robert F. Barsky, "Introduction: Marc Angenot and the Scandal of History," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*

17.2 (2004):163-82. Parenthetically, we should remark the irony in the linkage of deconstruction and Saussure, given Derrida's critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology*. There is here a meta-theoretical issue of reception, where what becomes accessible in circulation may or may not reflect the details of the source.

[13] Here is the relevant passage from the section of *General Course in Linguistics* (1913) on "Linguistic Value," p. 120: "A linguistic system is a series of differences of sound combined with a series of differences of ideas; but the pairing of a certain number of acoustical signs with as many cuts made from the mass of thought engenders a system of values; and this system serves as the effective link between the phonic and the psychological elements within each sign. *Although both the signified and the signifier are purely differential and negative when considered separately, their combination is a positive fact; it is even the sole type of facts that language has, for maintaining the parallelism between the two classes of differences is the distinctive function of the linguistic institution*" (emphasis added). In our haste to conclude that the sign is arbitrary, in other words, we have almost totally ignored "the distinctive function of the linguistic institution."

[14] For the proofs of the trinary nature of signification, see especially C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), "The Reality of Thirdness," 1.345-347; and "A Guess at the Riddle," 1.363; 1.369-372. See also Peirce's comments selected by Hartshorne and Weiss under the title "Lessons from the History of Philosophy," *CP*, 1.1-41. The critical aspect of Peirce's work is not to adopt a segment of his later semiotic speculations, but to follow his work in what he called "the logic of relatives," and his recognition at every stage of his career that problems in logic invariably reflect problems in a postulated theory of reality. Compare the typical comments concerning Peirce in Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981), pp. 22-25. Culler is clearly and avowedly baffled by the "swarm of neologisms spawned to characterize the thirty-six types of signs" and says merely that it has "discouraged others from entering his system and exploring his insights" and simply opts for Saussure's "practical program."(23). Something a little better than this acknowledgement of 'discouragement' can be found in Derrida's remarks on Peirce in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), pp. 45-50 which at least indicate an acquaintance with some of Peirce's work on the logic of signification—enough to know, for example, that the taxonomic luxuriance to which Culler restricts his attention is an illustration of Peirce's view of the extensibility of the interpretant and in no way a principle of his view of semioetic, but definitely not enough to see the extent to which Peirce's conception of the sign makes a great deal of Derrida's project redundant. See Peirce's "On a New List of Categories" for the logical grounding of this point.

[15] See especially the posthumous work of Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), which elides all other theoretical linguistic distinctions to assert that his view of "literary theory comes into its own [. . .] as the application of Saussurean linguistics to literary texts"(8). That may be, and arguably has been

the case, but the fundamental question de Man does not even entertain is the rationale for adopting so limited a theory of language as a model in the first place. The key point is that when we are inclined to accept what is *available*, as, for example, Saussure's *General Course* was, whereas Peirce's papers had at that time not even been competently *edited*, we tend to neglect serious theoretical evaluation of what we want to use. But if we do so in the face of really obvious liabilities, it is a failure of critical regard, not merely a historical exigency of publication. Peirce's proof of the trinary nature of the sign was, after all, available, and had already been incorporated in such fields as the design of semiconductors, the modeling of neurological circuits, and speculations on modal logic, and was familiar in such areas as axiomatic set theory. See especially Warren McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1988, c 1965), and note 14 above. In any event, it does not take refined linguistic insights to recognize Saussure's historical importance, particularly in distinguishing between synchronic and diachronic linguistics, or to notice that the terms of his own account barely make it possible to define or discuss consistently a concept as fundamental as *syntax*. In Saussure's consistently philological view, morphology, syntax, and lexicography overlap and "blend," leaving a view of grammar that is entirely circumscribed by his general terms, the syntagmatic and associative. From the perspective of subsequent linguistic theory in English, at any rate, the idea that Saussure's *General Course* is a sufficient guide to language only betrays indifference to standards of theoretical adequacy in the field. De Man's argument in *The Resistance to Theory* as a whole depends on other assumptions about the task of theory that are themselves no better grounded, particularly in his notion that "literariness" can be identified "by analysis" with the "negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance," which de Man identifies with "the autonomous potential of language." This is simply an error in analysis provoked by assuming that there is something against which to measure the presumed unreliability of linguistic utterance. That is to say, without the notion of untroubled signification or direct intellectual intuition, establishing one to one correlation between signifier and meaning, or intuition and truth, de Man is merely trading in a distinction without a difference. The entire point is that meaning (or "literariness") is *not a property* of anything, but the outcome of intentional strategies of mediation. De Man's treatment of the aesthetic, in a parallel way, takes for granted the very point in question by merely assuming (but stating that it is a "fact") that aesthetics is a "phenomenalism of meaning and understanding" which "postulates a phenomenology of art and literature."(7). While this may be true of certain critical practices in the reading of specific works (de Man's, for instance, including the assumptions just noted), the claim fails entirely even to address the question of judgment, necessarily implicated in any determination about "meaning and understanding" in the first place. As I will argue in more detail below, this reflects, among other things, a widespread and common misunderstanding of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that has vexed and still vexes the possibility of arriving at any clarity of the nature of the relation between literature

and philosophy. It should be noted in passing that my phrasing of the sentence to which this note is appended alludes directly to de Man's 1971 essay, "Crisis and Criticism" (in *Blindness and Insight*) where he identifies "genuine criticism" with putting "the act of writing into question by relating it to its specific intent"(8). The bleak truth is that the position to which de Man comes in "The Resistance to Theory" is entirely dependent on failing to question or forgetting altogether that the writing we call "literary" does have a specific intent.

[16] For an almost perfect example, see the double exchange on very old themes, recycled, in *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:1 (2002), consisting of three pieces: Barbara Herrnstein Smith's "Cutting Edge Equivocation: Conceptual Moves and Rhetorical Strategies in Contemporary Anti-Epistemology," 187-212; a reply by Paul Boghossian, "Constructivist and Relativist Conceptions of Knowledge in Contemporary (Anti) Epistemology: A Reply to Barbara Herrnstein Smith," 213-27; and Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Reply to an Analytic Philosopher," 229-42. What is most remarkable about this round-about of 55 printed pages is that every issue, every position argued has been in more or less constant circulation for at least twenty years, and the discussion ends exactly where it started. In a metaphor of Thomas Kuhn's from "Reflections on My Critics," this is a clear case of people not talking to each other but "through each other." See Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970). The essay is also reprinted in *The Road Since Structure*, 123-75.

[17] For a useful discussion of this problem in the context of theory choice in natural science, see Thomas Kuhn's "Objectivity, Value Judgment, and Theory Choice" in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1977), 320-39. Kuhn argues that five familiar criteria are critical in matters of theory choice: accuracy, consistency, broad scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness of future research results. These, he argues, as "criteria that influence decisions without specifying what those decisions must be," do not function as rules because in a more familiar idiom, they are "maxims, norms, or values."(330). This entire essay is particularly relevant to debates that carve out a role for Kuhn on matters of philosophical relativism without sufficient attention to the nuanced positions he characteristically takes.

[18] See Altieri "Judgment and Justice," 61.

[19] Althusser, "Ideological State Apparatuses" qtd. from *Critical Theory since Plato, 3rd ed*, 130.

[20] To this should be added Horkheimer and Adorno, whose *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1941) offered an early discursive model for analysis that has arguably affected virtually all subsequent cultural criticism. I have addressed this issue in general terms in "Literature Departments and the Practice of Theory," *MLN* 121:5, 1237-61. Althusser's creative adaptation of "interpellate," fusing the ordinary meaning, to be called out, to be interrupted (as by the police shouting at you before you try to jimmy a locked door) and to pose a question of the government in parliament, is actually introduced in three parallel examples, of a person who "believes in God, or Duty, or Justice [. . .] If he believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels,

prays, confesses, does penance [. . .] and naturally repents and so on. If he believes in Duty, he will have the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices 'according to the correct principles'. If he believes in Justice, he will submit unconditionally to the rules of the Law, and may even protest when they are violated, sign petitions, take part in a demonstration, etc." The "interpellation," then, occurs when the individual is "called out" or interrupted and called to account, *to be subject* to the ideology in question; and, not surprisingly, his first named example is St. Paul.(243-44). Being so "hailed" or "called," whether it is on the road to Damascus or "called" to preach to the people at Ephesus or anywhere else, illustrates precisely the nature of this process: it is, through and through, axiological, and presupposes ideology as the "imaginary representation of the real world" but in which the paradigmatic form *is religious*. In Gramsci's discussion of hegemony in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, the same principle holds, only more explicitly. Hegemony is not, as it later became (partly by hybridization with the use of the term in post WWII diplomatic discourse in both England and the United States) a term of direct disapproval, but on the contrary, exactly what the Communist party in Italy had to achieve if it were ever to come to power—and the model of that is the Catholic Church, where the apparently "spontaneous" assent of the population comes without coercion. (See esp. 941). Gramsci's particular critical value in this regard is that in all such cases of "spontaneous" assent, he urges much more particular examination of the social and political forms through which it is expressed. Again, the main point is that when graduate students and professors respond to the 'call' from a writer like Foucault, for example, what almost never happens is asking *why* we give assent. Instead, in a shock of recognition, we begin immediately to look for signs of a dark warp in the *épistémè*, or ideological evidence of the ubiquity of a disciplinary Panopticon having us all under surveillance, particularly so as to punish or "discipline" us.

[21] See Coleridge, I, 72.

[22] See Williams, Book V:iii, 233.

[23] I have discussed this issue briefly elsewhere: see Searle, "Literature Departments" 1237-61.

[24] This is, I would argue, the most fruitful way to argue the value of Kant's notion of autonomy. It is never absolute, but always framed in just this way. One cannot *teach* or *preach* anyone into virtue or to making, short of that old fashioned standard, the "right choice." The connection to Gramsci's positive sense of hegemony as the social condition of assent without coercion should be obvious. What has not been obvious is the necessity of including in the argument the exemplary use of the reflective judgment of the aesthetic, guided *not* by the phenomenal properties of objects, but by the principle of judgment, purposiveness, identified in Kant's third critique. See the concluding section of this essay.

[25] It may be simply that the answer seems so obvious that it is neglected. These are practices targeted because, once identified, they strike us as immoral, unethical, harmful to human beings, and above all, *unjust*.

[26] Peirce's focus throughout his career was on the conditions

necessary to develop a community of inquirers. In the indispensable "On a New List of Categories," Peirce lays out in exact and meticulous terms why it is that an interpretant is not a final product, but what we may think of as a conceptual site, upon which further inquiry can be built. Thus, instead of an infinite chain of signifiers, as in Derrida, there is a concrete material future in which ideas are actually incorporated into specific conceptual networks. See especially, "The Law of Mind"(1892), most conveniently available in *The Essential Peirce, Volume I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 312-23. As indicated in notes throughout this essay, from his earliest lectures at the Lowell institute to his last published lectures, Peirce insisted on the philosophical imperative: "Do not block the way of inquiry." The selection of essays and excerpts, with headnotes, in *Critical Theory since Plato 3rd edition*, ed. by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), pp. 652-72, provides a minimum of materials to make these points accessible, especially the essay to which Peirce himself directed his readers, "On a New List of Categories." A simple preface to Peirce is provided by my contribution on Pierce in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Criticism and Theory*, ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2005).

[27] See Kant, *Critique of The Power of Judgment*, sections 18-22, pp. 121-24.

[28] Richard Macksey, "Anniversary Reflections," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man, Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2007), ix-xiv. See also, Macksey and Eugenio Donato's 1971 edition foreward, "The Space Between-1971), xv-xix. I have also discussed this elsewhere (see, especially, "Afterword: Criticism and the Dream of Reason," in *Critical Theory since 1965*, edited with Hazard Adams (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 856-59), but would add just a note concerning the original title of the Macksey and Donato volume that became *The Structuralist Controversy*. The now restored title, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man," is partly borrowed from the last major book by R. S. Crane (*The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Chicago, 1953). Whereas Frye's attempt was not at all to perpetuate a congenial but inherently weak notion of "Critical Pluralism," a view stiffly championed by R. S. Crane, the Hopkins Conference was an acknowledgement that at the very least, there was no practical danger of Critical Monism breaking out very soon. For the English Institute essays on Frye, see Murray Krieger, editor, Northrop Frye in *Modern Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

[29] The phrase is de Man's, from *Blindness and Insight* (1971; 1983), p. 103.

[30] The headnotes to these philosophers included in *Critical Theory Since Plato, 3rd edition* offer contextualizing discussions and bibliographies. See also entries on Peirce and Husserl.

[31] The practical result, similar to the recognition that Chomsky's notion of "deep structure" or a presumably stable "base component" always turns into another surface structure in any case, is that the idea of "meaning" as a set of words that defines another set of words,

or as an intentional object that could be grasped by immediate intellectual intuition, a condition sought by Western philosophy since Parmenides and Plato, always conveys us to more words. See in this context, Spivak, "The Setting to Work," pp. 423-31. My argument here is that Derrida's recognition of this as a fundamental problem of *metaphysics*, and not merely an attribute of signification, systematically stops one step short, in assuming that the relation between language and logic and a metaphysical theory of presence could not possibly be changed or overpassed, thereby requiring perpetual and perennial deconstruction. On the contrary, what is at stake is a fundamental but *local and contingent* limitation in a particular metaphysical theory as a theory of reality or "being," that has held almost unbroken sway in the West from the earliest Greek philosophers through Heidegger. C. S. Peirce is virtually unique among more recent philosophers in insisting (following Kant of the third critique and Duns Scotus) that formal logic is the only effective instrument for addressing metaphysical speculation, and that it cannot be identified either directly with language or with presumed powers of intellectual introspection. The philosophical metanarrative of Truth as correlative with Being, to be arrived at by dialectical means, is among the casualties of the Post-Modern as Lyotard presents it. Deconstruction does not attempt to go beyond it, but rather memorializes the consciousness of its failure. But it is perfectly obvious that this does not create a new metaphysics, a new theory of reality. See especially Pierce's "On a New List" and "Questions," pp. 49-58; 193-210.

[32] But consider the discouraging results of the most recent large survey, in which about half of the adult population cannot read and interpret texts no more complex that the product labels in a grocery store: see the 2003 Assessment of Adult Literacy (which also reports that fewer than 31% of college graduates and only 13% of the general population are "proficient"). For a summary of the results see http://nces.ed.gov/naal/kf_demographics.asp.

[33] See my essay, "Institutions and Intellectuals," pp. 15-25, where I have addressed this subject in an avowedly ironic mode but with a serious intent.

[34] See Staten, pp. 362-64 for a very incisive review of Walter Benn Michaels' *The Shape of the Signifier*, particularly his remarks on the concept of art in Aristotle's sense.

[35] See Butler, Guillory, and Thomas, pp. 1-40.

[36] Without burdening these notes any farther, this is the underburden of a great many of Spivak's essays, from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to *Death of a Discipline*: if we suppose we can rely entirely on the abstractions of theory, we ironically narrow the distance between our own work and the abstract machinery of capital. See especially her discussion of the intertextual density of relations among Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Tyeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, and Mahasweta Devi's "Pterodactyl, Purna Saha, and Pirtha" which she proposes as a model of a "project that fits the new Comparative Literature." See *Death*, pp. 54-66. For that as yet uninstitutionalized invention presupposes that we facilitate the passage of theory through and out of the phase of critical romance, to a much more rigorously critical engagement of the imaginative.

[37] A full treatment of this assertion obviously goes beyond the

scope of an essay, but see my "The Conscience of the King," pp. 289-315.

[38] Only one footnote appertains, in which brief dismissive mention is made of Paul Geyer's *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), and a completely unspecific mention of Ted Cohen and Paul Geyer's Essays in *Kant's Aesthetics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982). Here is, unfortunately, a thoroughly representative example of Herrnstein Smith's approach to the study of Kant and the third critique of Smith's approach in particular: "It is, perhaps, this very combination of rigor and incoherence that is so addictive to commentators, the rigor continuously attracting their intellectual energies and the incoherence continuously eluding their exegetical skills. It is as if the *Critique* were always on the verge of making the most utterly airtight sense, if only one worked at a bit harder" n.13, p. 196. It would be one thing if Smith had simply said, 'I don't get it,' or gave evidence of an even moderate attempt to place, for example, the third critique in the context of issues in the first and second critiques, or even had gone beyond sections 56 an 57 in her own text. But as it is, it is merely a casual reflection of what a student of English literature would have been most likely to have supposed, in thinking that the main issue in Kant's critique was the critique of taste, following an English model shaped most immediately from Burke, largely followed by Coleridge, and then deeply embedded in a local English tradition by the touchstone theory of Matthew Arnold, continuing on unbroken through I. A. Richards to the New Criticism. This is an understandable fall-through, but it is also one that is predictable. At stake is a relatively simple issue of philosophical modesty: if a philosophical argument is hard (and Kant's are notorious) why would one assume that a failure to understand is the result of a deficiency in the argument? The point at issue here is somewhat more accurately foregrounded in the decision in the new Cambridge edition of Kant's works in translation in restoring Kant's original title (the only prior commentator I know of who got this point clearly was Peirce) *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Both the first and the second versions of the Introduction make abundantly clear Kant's rejection of Hume's notion of the aesthetic, which reduces it to a judgment of sense, that the *Analytic of the Beautiful* and the *Analytic of the Sublime* function both as examples of how reflective judgment must function, and as a propadeutic to the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* which comprises the second half—and the conclusion—of the argument of the third critique as a whole. Neither the introduction nor the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, however, have never been included in anthologies of literary criticism and theory, or anthologies of philosophical aesthetics. While this is the curse of the anthology, it is knowable in advance that if one does not read the whole work, one is exceedingly likely to miss the architecture of the whole argument—a point that since the 1780s has been absolutely clear about Kant in particular.

[39] For example, Cambridge edition, p. 39: "If, however, a judgment gives itself out to be universally valid and therefore asserts a claim to necessity, then, whether this professed necessity rests on concepts of the object *a priori* or on subjective conditions for concepts, which

ground them *a priori*, it would be absurd, if one concedes to such a judgment a claim of this sort, to justify it by explaining the origin of the judgment psychologically. For one would thereby be acting contrary to one's own intention, and if the attempted explanation were completely successful it would prove that the judgment could make absolutely no claim to necessity, precisely because its empirical origin can be demonstrated."

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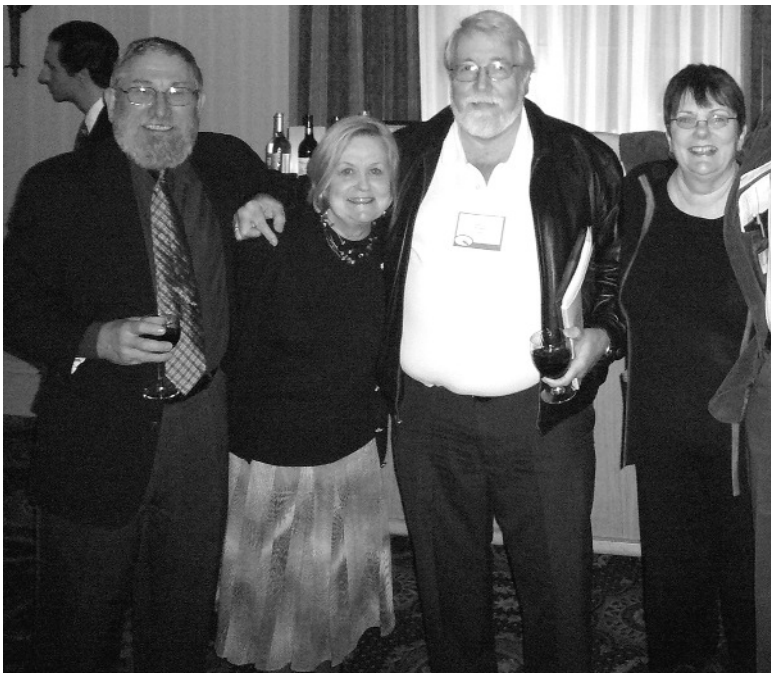

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"Beyond Interpretation"

". . . The most important and insidious legacy of the New Criticism is the widespread and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that the critic's job is to interpret literary works."

Jonathan Culler, "Beyond Interpretation," Comparative Literature 28 (1976), 246

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