A Reply to Our Critics

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Critical Response

VIII

A Reply to Our Critics

Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels

What are the consequences of "Against Theory"?[1] According to E. D. Hirsch, the "most probable effect is to foster the comforting idea that there's no point in pursuing historical scholarship" (Hirsch, p. 746). According to Jonathan Crewe, "Against Theory," taken "seriously enough," "would entail a significant, and in my view retrogressive, change in professional attitude"; it would establish "an ideology under which a privileged status quo would be secured against fundamental questioning" (Crewe, pp. 748, 749). According to William C. Dowling, "Against Theory" shows the essential correctness of the New Critical distinction between author and speaker and therefore has the consequence of promoting a "formalist program of objective interpretation" (Dowling, p. 788). According to Daniel T. O'Hara, the "rhetorical effect" of "Against Theory" "is essentially nihilistic"; "by clearing the air of theory," we have "taken away from students the means necessary to do criticism at all" (O'Hara, pp. 732–33).

This list of consequences is interesting for several reasons. First, its diversity: the proposed consequences range from technical problems of critical method, to questions of professional politics, to fundamental issues in epistemology. More interesting than their diversity, however, are their problematic relations. Where Dowling thinks "Against Theory"

1. We wish to thank our respondents for their discussions of the issues raised in "Against Theory." Many of our friends and colleagues have commented less formally on our arguments; we would like to thank especially Paul Alpers, Donald Davidson, Frances Ferguson, Joel Fineman, Stanley Fish, Michael Fried, Catherine Gallagher, Gerald Graff, Stephen Greenblatt, Richard Grusin, Geoffrey Hartman, Jeffrey Knapp, Ruth Leys, Ralph Rader, and Jane Tompkins.

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supports arguments for a mode of objective interpretation, Hirsch thinks it discourages what he takes to be the only possible mode of objective interpretation, historical scholarship. Where Crewe thinks we defend the critical status quo (what he later calls "business as usual" [p. 753]), O'Hara thinks we make any critical practice impossible. But from our standpoint, neither the diversity nor the problematic character of these consequences is particularly significant. For the possibility of deriving *any* of these consequences from "Against Theory" would already amount to a radical objection to an argument that explicitly denies having any consequences for the practice of literary criticism. Since, in our view, theory precisely consists in the attempt to derive practical consequences from general accounts of interpretation, having such consequences would mean that "Against Theory" had inadvertently turned theoretical. If any one of the consequences alleged by our critics does indeed follow from "Against Theory," then our claims are mistaken, our arguments against theory should be abandoned, and our attack on theory should come to an end.

The consequences alleged to follow from "Against Theory" fall into three general categories: epistemological, methodological, and professional. We will address each of these in turn.

1. Epistemology

The only epistemological claim in "Against Theory" is that true belief and knowledge are the same. What follows from this claim, we argued, is that the traditional project of justifying beliefs by appealing to sources of knowledge independent of belief (e.g., sense data) is incoherent. We argued further that recognizing the incoherence of this project in no way affects our ordinary sense of the difference between true and false beliefs. Imagining that an identification of knowledge and true belief in any way prevents one from having true beliefs only makes sense if one remains committed to the project of justifying beliefs by appealing to independent sources of knowledge.

Most of our critics who are concerned with epistemology seem to

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agree that independent sources of knowledge are unattainable. But they disagree with our claim that nothing else follows from this fact. Crewe, for example, never argues for the possibility of grounding beliefs in some independent source of knowledge. Nevertheless, discovering the "ungroundedness" of belief constitutes, for him, a "traumatic shock" that "may even require that we reassess in general our position as authoritative interpreters, recognizing in it a presumption that needs to be either justified or abandoned" (Crewe, p. 759). Crewe, that is, thinks that "ungrounding" our beliefs jeopardizes our interpretive authority—our sense that we know what a text means. Since knowing what a text means consists in having true beliefs about it, Crewe presumably thinks that either we must be able to justify our beliefs (and hence our interpretations) by grounding them in something more fundamental than belief—or we must abandon them. And since Crewe makes no argument for the possibility of justifying our beliefs in this way, it would seem to follow that we should give them up.

In our view, while one can give up particular beliefs (i.e., change one's mind), one cannot give up beliefs in general. Crewe agrees that belief is inescapable. But whereas we are untroubled by the ordinary fact that people can change their minds, Crewe thinks that the possibility of replacing one belief with another reveals "the painful contingency of our practice" (Crewe, p. 759). Why "painful"? Because, he thinks, the fact of any one of our beliefs turning out to be false suggests the fundamental unreliability of *all* our beliefs. But why should a particular case of being wrong call all our beliefs into question? Why, for example, should discovering that what looked like a poem really wasn't require us to "reassess in general our position as authoritative interpreters"? For Crewe, discovering that an apparently true belief has turned out to be false means discovering that an apparently *grounded* belief has turned out to be *ungrounded.* A belief is true, according to Crewe, only if it is grounded, that is, secured against all possibility of correction. But since no belief really can be grounded (all beliefs are corrigible, any particular belief might turn out to be false), then, following Crewe's logic, no belief can really be true.

Crewe, then, ends up equating groundedness and truth. But for this equation to make any sense, we must after all be able to stand outside our beliefs in order to distinguish between the ones that only seem true and the ones that really are true—the ones that only seem grounded and the ones that really are grounded. Crewe, however, never offers any argument to show that a position outside belief is possible; in fact, as we have noted, he doesn't seem to think it is. This coincidence of a desire to escape belief and a conviction that we can't do so no doubt accounts for the unusual tone of his response to "Against Theory." Perhaps the most extreme symptom of Crewe's dilemma is his invention of the "negative belief ": to change one's mind, according to Crewe, is to replace a belief

"not by just another belief but by an inhibitingly negative belief *in relation* to the one first held" (pp. 758–59). Changing one's mind cannot, he thinks, be described as passing "through a simple succession of positive beliefs." But what Crewe calls a "negative belief *in relation* to the one first held" is simply a positive belief (in the way that all beliefs are positive) that the first belief was false. A belief that something is *not* the case is not a negative belief that something *is* the case. Only an intense desire to escape beliefs could make one imagine that calling them "negative" makes them any the less beliefs.[2]

Because "Against Theory" denies the possibility of escaping beliefs, Crewe thinks it has the epistemological consequence of condemning us to "precritical primitivism." Thus, he remarks at one point, what might have been "a timely move beyond theory turns out in fact to be a return to a condition 'before' theory" (p. 750). Earlier in the same paragraph, however, Crewe asserts that "the antitheoretical argument" could only "rank as a contribution . . . *in* the field of critical theory, from which it never escapes." And, in fact, several of our critics derive the epistemological consequences of "Against Theory" from a claim that our arguments remain theoretical. According to O'Hara, our "position against theory depends entirely on assumptions that are theoretical" (p. 728 n. 4); according to Adena Rosmarin, " 'Against Theory' is a thoroughgoing theoretical argument" (Rosmarin, p. 781); according to Steven Mailloux, "Against Theory," "like all theoretical discourse," attempts to "prescribe practice" (Mailloux, p. 766).

The claim that an argument against theory is itself theoretical seems odd, and neither Crewe nor O'Hara advances any argument to support it. Perhaps they think that to say anything at all about theory is to be a theorist. But this is like saying that to argue against astrology is to be an astrologer. Rosmarin and Mailloux, on the other hand, do provide arguments to support their characterization of "Against Theory" as theoretical.

For Mailloux, the very persuasiveness of "Against Theory" makes it theoretical. Mailloux is convinced by our argument that "all theories are based on logical mistakes" (Mailloux, p. 765). He denies, however, that such mistakes prevent theory from having practical consequences. Indeed, for Mailloux, theory is paradigmatic of "all discursive practices"—inevitably including "Against Theory" (Mailloux, p. 766). Theory, like all discourse, claims for its arguments the force of objective

2. In criticizing our account of belief, Jonathan Crewe complains that our sketches of realism and idealism are "unphilosophical" and "unrecognizable" respectively (Crewe, p. 758 n.5). They certainly are incomplete, but the distinction between regarding "the real object" as the external "cause" (*res extra animam*) of knowledge and as the "normal product of mental action"—of the "consensus or common confession that constitutes reality"—is a familiar one in philosophy. The account just cited is from the writings of C. S. Peirce (*Collected Papers,* ed. A. W. Burks, Charles Hartshorne, and Paul Weiss, 8 vols. [Cambridge, Mass., 1931–58], 8:15–17) but is by no means unique to Peirce.

demonstration; its logical mistakes belie this claim but in no way diminish its true power "*as persuasion*" (Mailloux, p. 766).[3]

There are several ways to interpret Mailloux's claim that mistakes can have consequences. If he means, for example, that people can have false beliefs and can act accordingly, we agree. People can believe in astrology and order their lives in accordance with astrological predictions. But the case of theory is different in at least one important respect from that of astrology. Believers in astrology can in fact follow the recommendations of their charts, but believers in theory cannot, in our view, follow the methodological prescriptions that theory claims to generate. Theoretical mistakes thus have no consequences for the practice of literary criticism, but they do of course bear on the practice of theory itself. Believers in a particular theory may write articles about it, give lectures on it, teach courses in it. And not only can theoretical mistakes have consequences; so can pointing them out. Thus "Against Theory" indeed has consequences—but only for the practice of theory. If this is what Mailloux means, we still agree.

But this cannot be what Mailloux means, since the conclusion he draws from "Against Theory" is the opposite of ours. According to us, "Against Theory" shows that theory should be abandoned; according to Mailloux, "Against Theory" shows that theory "will never be abandoned" (Mailloux, p. 766). What we think we have shown is that one way of talking about literary criticism is mistaken; what Mailloux thinks we have shown is that theory, in being mistaken, is like every way of talking about everything. Mailloux's position, in other words, is not merely that an argument against astrology is a form of astrology but that *every* argument is a form of astrology—that is, all arguments are equal and equally mistaken. For Mailloux, the consequence of this discovery, as we noted earlier, is that all arguments can only function as persuasion, never as demonstration. But once one knows that all arguments are equally mistaken, how can they function even as persuasion? In what sense can one be persuaded of something that one knows all along is false? How can one be persuaded and not persuaded at the same time? To imagine yourself in this condition is to imagine yourself being persuaded while looking at persuasion from the outside. And to imagine yourself looking at persuasion from the outside is to put yourself in the position we attributed to Stanley Fish—looking at your beliefs without really believing them. Having acknowledged the contradiction in Fish's theory,

3. Adena Rosmarin relies on essentially the same distinction but substitutes "representation" for demonstration and "conversation" (a term she borrows from Richard Rorty) for persuasion (see Rosmarin, pp. 776, 782). For Rosmarin, as for Steven Mailloux, all argument must be based on the illegitimate but necessary claim to "know" something: illegitimate because no one really *can* know anything, necessary because without the claim to know something, we cannot "begin talking." Since we indeed claim to know something, Rosmarin finds in "Against Theory" an example of the mechanism that makes all theoretical argument possible and thus takes us to be "engaging in the very enterprise that [we] are attacking" (Rosmarin, p. 781).

Mailloux thus repeats it, choosing demonstration over persuasion as Fish chose knowledge over belief.

It may seem paradoxical that Mailloux's announced preference for persuasion ends up committing him to demonstration—to argument independent of rhetorical inducement. But this choice is an inevitable consequence of separating what should not be separated. Once one thinks that persuasion has no relation to truth, its persuasiveness vanishes, leaving nothing but demonstration, even if the only thing that can be demonstrated is the emptiness of persuasion.

Mailloux, unlike Crewe, thinks himself content to settle for persuasion or belief. But in the end, like Crewe, he finds himself committed to the traditional ideal of objective knowledge, even if Mailloux's knowledge is as empty of content as Crewe's negative beliefs. Crewe, Mailloux, and Rosmarin are all negative theorists of the sort we described in "Against Theory" (see pp. 736–37). What their example shows is that negative theory requires a commitment to objectivity (knowledge without beliefs) as great as that of positive theory. With enemies like these, objectivity doesn't need friends.

As negative theorists, these critics have a particular view of the relation between theory and practice. Their hostility to the traditional project of grounding beliefs in knowledge makes them skeptical of the claims of interpretive method—that is, the claims of theory to guide practice.[4] But their continuing sense that beliefs are inadequate forces them to imagine an empty version of the position occupied by the traditional methodologist. From the negative theorist's position, theory cannot guide practice but merely testifies to its inevitable failure. For the negative theorist, the truth discovered by theory is that all interpretations are equally false, and the consequences of this discovery are purely affective: Mailloux is happy, Crewe is sad. But our position, which identifies true belief with knowledge, leaves untouched the ordinary notions of true and false and thus gives no occasion either for pleasure or regret.

2. *Method*

Not all of our critics are willing to surrender the traditional claims of method. Hirsch, Dowling, and Hershel Parker all agree with each other

4. Rosmarin claims to detect a confusion in our distinction between positive and negative theory (see pp. 777–78). She is puzzled by our footnote identifying W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley as positive theorists despite the fact that they recommend "*subtracting* intention and relying on the formal rules and public norms of language" ("Against Theory," p. 736 n.16). But Rosmarin has misunderstood our distinction. What makes someone a positive theorist is not a particular attitude toward intention but a belief that *any* recommendation about intention—whether to add or to subtract it—could provide a method for achieving correct interpretations. The source of Rosmarin's confusion seems to be the accidental fact that current anti-intentionalists, such as Paul de Man, tend also to be negative theorists.

and with us that there can be no meaning without intention, but they disagree with the argument of "Against Theory" at what Hirsch rightly calls "its most novel and crucial point": its insistence on "the practical nullity of the idea of intention" (Hirsch, p. 744). Far from accepting our claim that the idea of intention is useless as a guide to practice, each of these critics derives from this idea a methodological project. For Hirsch, the centrality of intention shows the importance of historical scholarship; for Parker, the "lesson" of intentionalism is that "literary criticism depends upon textual scholarship" (Parker, p. 774); for Dowling, our arguments about intention show that "interpretation must begin by positing something like the internal voice or speaker of formalist theory" (Dowling, p. 788). Clearly these projects fall into two categories, historical and formalist.

The historical project rests on a claim about evidence—namely, that certain kinds of documents (letters, diaries, manuscripts, etc.) are particularly relevant to determining the meaning of literary texts. It might seem plausible to suppose that an identification of meaning with the author's intention provides theoretical support for the historian's sense of the value of such documents. While historical evidence of this kind might well be valuable, nothing in the claim that authorial intention is the necessary object of interpretation tells us that it is. In fact, nothing in the claim that authorial intention is the necessary object of interpretation tells us anything at all about what should count as evidence for determining the content of any particular intention. To think, for example, that only the poem and no other document should count as evidence of the poet's intention is just as consistent with the thesis that intention is necessary. Recognizing the inescapability of intention doesn't tell us which documents, if any, are the important ones. One could believe that all poetry in every language and every age was written by a universal muse and that therefore no information about any other person could be of any possible interpretive interest—and this too would not be incompatible with the necessity of intention.

Given that there is no relation between recognizing the necessity of intention and knowing what should count as the best interpretive evidence, why does a historically minded critic like Hirsch continue to think that the idea of intention has any practical relevance? The answer is that Hirsch thinks that recognizing what he calls the "formal necessity" of intention "at every moment of interpretation" still leaves the interpreter free to choose between what the "composer of the text intended" and what " 'some postulated author is intending it to mean' " (Hirsch, pp. 744, 745). This seems to us a puzzling distinction. What can the word "author" mean if not the composer of the text? In our view, to "postulate" an author is already to commit oneself to an account of the composer of the text, and there is nothing to choose between them because they are the same. But Hirsch, whose central claim in his response to

"Against Theory" is that "critical practice" and "meaning" are "what we choose to make" them, needs the distinction because he needs the choice (Hirsch, p. 747). Hirsch needs, in other words, a counterexample to our claim that understanding the meaning of a text can only be understanding what its author intended.

Hirsch takes his example from the career of William Blake:

> When Blake re-authored his 1789 *Songs of Innocence* in 1794, he didn't change the texts of the poems at all. But his second interpretation was not the same as "what the author intended" in his first interpretation. In 1794 Blake believes that what he now intends is not what he then intended in 1789 by his text. [Hirsch, p. 746]

The fact that Blake's intention in 1794 is not the same as it was in 1789 shows, according to Hirsch, that it is possible to interpret a text while disregarding "what we believe its author meant in composing it."

But what does this example really show? If Blake in 1794 is viewed simply as the reader of the 1789 *Songs,* then he has merely misinterpreted his own earlier work. This doesn't show that we can interpret a text without interpreting it as what we believe its author meant. It only shows that we can misinterpret what the author meant. The example is complicated, however, by the fact that Blake in 1794 is not simply rereading the *Songs of Innocence* but rewriting them (though without changing the "texts" of the 1789 version). But if he is in fact rewriting them, then the poems of 1794 are different poems from those of 1789, and the meaning of the 1789 *Songs* is irrelevant. Why does Hirsch think it remains relevant? He must continue to think that the two works are the same. If they *are* the same, Hirsch believes he has found a genuine instance of an interpreter (Blake) knowing the author's intention and interpreting the text without regard to that intention. But why would one call this interpretation? What makes this any different from the case of the critic who, knowing what the text really means, nevertheless prefers his mistake?[5]

The difference in this case is that the critic happens to be the author of the original text—a fact that matters only if he is not simply rereading his text but is also, in Hirsch's formulation, "re-authoring" it. But to rewrite a text is not to reread it, and if the author is indeed rewriting, then the text he is now producing is, as we have noted, not the same as the earlier one. The fact that he meant something different in the earlier text, and that he knows that he meant something different, is irrelevant

5. As we noted in "Against Theory," the possibility of preferring one's mistake is irrelevant to the problem of interpretive method; such a preference "might affect what one does *with* an interpretation, but it has no effect on how one *gets* an interpretation" (p. 730 n.7).

to what he means now—just as what he means now is irrelevant to what he meant then.

All Hirsch's example shows is that you can either read a text or write one, and that the choice between interpreting the intention of the text's composer and "postulating" the intention of some other author is a choice between reading and writing. Of course, Hirsch is right to think that we might choose to re-author a poem instead of interpret it, but this possibility has nothing to do with the practice of interpretation. The distinction between reading and writing is clearly not a distinction between two methods of reading, one of them faithful to the historical author's intention and the other not.

In our view, the object of all reading is always the historical author's intention, even if the historical author is the universal muse. That's why we don't think it makes sense to *choose* historical intention—and why we don't think it's possible to choose any other kind of intention. Hence the formalist understanding of the consequences of "Against Theory" is as mistaken as Hirsch's and, interestingly enough, mistaken in the same way. Not only do Hirsch and Dowling both think that "Against Theory" allows a distinction between intention as a "*purely formal*" requirement in interpretation and the intention of a historical author (Dowling, p. 788)—they both think that "Against Theory" endorses a preference for the former. But where Hirsch regrets that the "most probable effect" of "Against Theory" will be "to foster the comforting idea that there's no point in pursuing historical scholarship," Dowling is pleased to find us providing a justification for a "formalist program of objective interpretation" (Dowling, p. 788).

In Dowling's perceptive account of American formalism, the New Critical rejection of intention was never absolute. Instead of dismissing intention, the New Critics recognized that "meaning must always *in purely formal terms* involve intention" and that "where there is an intention there must always be an intender" (Dowling, p. 788). The New Critics only meant to exclude "authorial intention" (Dowling, p. 789); in Hirsch's terms, they chose a "postulated" intention over a historical one. For Dowling, this choice means that interpretation begins "by positing something like the internal voice or speaker of formalist theory" (Dowling, p. 788).

Dowling is right to think that nothing in "Against Theory" rules out positing an internal speaker in the sense of a persona or narrator. But to posit such an internal speaker is not, as he thinks, to rule out an external authorial intention; it is simply to interpret that intention—in this case, an intention to produce an internal speaker. If, on the other hand, positing an internal speaker means *replacing* the authorial intention with some other intention, then this simply becomes another case of rewriting and is no longer interpretation at all. Thus, what Dowling calls the "for-

malist program of interpretation" is just like everyone else's program of interpretation: it consists in the attempt (sometimes successful, sometimes not) to find out what the historical author meant.[6]

To insist, as we do, that the object of interpretation is always a historical intention is, once again, not to justify or even to recommend the pursuit of historical scholarship. Textual editors, historical scholars, New Critical explicators, and everyone else—from the standpoint of intention—are all doing the same thing. Since it provides no help in choosing among critical procedures, the idea of intention is methodologically useless.

3. *The Profession*

Even if it is granted that our account of interpretation can have no methodological consequences, two of our critics are distressed by the possible effect of "Against Theory" on the profession of literary criticism. According to Crewe, "Against Theory," encouraging a "defensive adherence to the procedures and values of the guild," not only promotes "business as usual" but amounts to a "petty theodicy of the guild" (Crewe, pp. 753, 755). For O'Hara, the "practical effect" of "Against Theory" is not so much to promote "business as usual" as to restore it to the way it was, leaving "the field open to the long-established and well-heeled, native American, fly-by-the-seat-of-one's-pants, critical pragmatists and know-nothings, who have been waiting in the wings ever since the late sixties for such boring annoyances as critical theory, feminism, affirmative action programs, and so forth to disappear" (O'Hara, p. 732). Where Crewe thinks we are serving an "emergent ideology" of professionalism (Crewe, p. 749), O'Hara thinks we are inhibiting the growth of the profession: just as theorists are beginning to realize "the first fruits of their labors to institutionalize theory as a sub-

6. William Dowling's acknowledgment of an internal speaker's intention seems to modify the usual formalist insistence on the intrinsic meaningfulness of linguistic forms. But his discussion of the sentence "I was whipped" makes it clear that the modification is only apparent. According to Dowling, "I was whipped" can mean many things but not just anything, and this fact "shows that (1) certain rules of determinacy are already in force and (2) that an account of meaning *already* assumes that an intention . . . is also present" (Dowling, p. 788). But if "I was whipped" has no meaning in itself—if, in other words, it has meaning only as the expression of someone's intention—why can't it be used to mean anything at all? The antiformalist point of "Against Theory" is to insist that anything can be used to mean anything or, as Crewe rightly puts it, "quite radically to deny that the forms of language possess any defining power." Crewe objects that such a position ignores the importance of "convention," betraying "an obliviousness of the socially constructed and consensual nature of linguistic significance" (Crewe, p. 756). But to insist on the primacy of intention is not to deny the importance of convention; it is only to point out that conventions don't even count as conventions unless they are intended.

discipline within the critical profession," along comes our attempt to take theory away, or at least make it "less attractive" as a "career option" (O'Hara, pp. 727, 732).[7]

Our remarks on method may already suggest why we don't think these professional consequences follow from our arguments any more than the methodological ones did. Just as our argument against theory is compatible with (and indifferent to) all modes of critical practice, it is also compatible with and indifferent to all ways of organizing that practice. Nothing in "Against Theory" tells you whether programs in women's studies are a good thing, whether teachers should be tenured, or whether graduate programs should be maintained or cut back in response to the current job crisis. This is not to deny that we ourselves have views on these questions, just as we have views on the relative merits of historical scholarship and close reading; it is only to insist that such views have no relation to our account of interpretation.

Not only is "Against Theory" indifferent to particular ways of *organizing* the profession; it is indifferent to the *existence* of the profession. A certain reading of "Against Theory" might take our insistence on the inescapability of practice as a way of preserving the profession by purging it of theory. Thus Crewe understands our attack on theory as the expression of a kind of professional populism: an attempt to defend the traditional practices of the institution against a new "tool of institutional domination" (Crewe, p. 751). Crewe's point, of course, is that in defending practice we are merely substituting one form of institutional domination for another.

But in focusing on institutional politics, Crewe has missed our point. Crewe understands our account of interpretation as a description of the interpretive practice of a certain institution. But our account of interpretation, if true, describes the way interpretation *always* works, irrespective of its relation to any institution. Any interpreter of any utterance or text, within the institution of professional literary criticism or not, is, if we are right, attempting to understand the author's intention. The profession of literary criticism could utterly disappear, and this event would in no way alter the fact that texts mean what their authors intend.

If our arguments are true, they can have only one consequence (the single consequence they claim to have); theory should stop. If accepted, our arguments would indeed eliminate the "career option" of writing and teaching theory. Perhaps newly unemployed theorists could be retrained to teach courses in the history of theory. In fact, however, we don't think that theory is likely to end any time soon. But we do think that theory, like our arguments against it, will continue to have no consequences for the practice of literary criticism.

7. Bizarre as it sounds, Daniel O'Hara's careerist fantasy is more plausible than Crewe's assumption that theory subjects the profession to "fundamental questioning."