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Pragmatism and Literary Theory

I

Consequences

Stanley Fish

Nothing I wrote in *Is There a Text in This Class?* has provoked more opposition or consternation than my (negative) claim that the argument of the book has no consequences for the practice of literary criticism.[1] To many it seemed counterintuitive to maintain (as I did) that an argument in theory could leave untouched the practice it considers: After all, isn't the very point of theory to throw light on or reform or guide practice? In answer to this question, I want to say, first, that this is certainly theory's claim—so much so that independently of the claim there is no reason to think of it as a separate activity—and, second, that the claim is unsupportable. Here, I am in agreement with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, who are almost alone in agreeing with me and who fault me not for making the "no consequences" argument but for occasionally falling away from it. Those who dislike *Is There a Text in This Class?* tend to dislike "Against Theory" even more, and it is part of my purpose here to account for the hostility to both pieces. But since the issues at stake are fundamental, it is incumbent to begin at the beginning with a discussion of what theory is and is not.

"Against Theory" opens with a straightforward (if compressed) definition: "By 'theory' we mean a special project in literary criticism: the attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general" (p. 723). In the second sentence the authors declare that this definition of theory excludes much that has been thought to fall under its rubric and especially excludes projects of

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a general nature "such as narratology, stylistics, and prosody" (p. 723). On first blush this exclusion seems arbitrary and appears to be vulnerable to the charge (made by several respondents) that by defining theory so narrowly Knapp and Michaels at once assure the impregnability of their thesis and render it trivial. I believe, on the contrary, that the definition is correct and that, moreover, it is a reformulation of a familiar and even uncontroversial distinction. In E. D. Hirsch's work, for example, we meet it as a distinction between general and local hermeneutics. "Local hermeneutics," Hirsch explains,

> consists of rules of thumb rather than rules. . . . Local hermeneutics can . . . provide models and methods that are reliable most of the time. General hermeneutics lays claim to principles that hold true all of the time. . . . That is why general hermeneutics is, so far, the only aspect of interpretation that has earned the right to be named a "theory."[2]

By "general hermeneutics," Hirsch means a procedure whose steps, if they are faithfully and strictly followed, will "always yield correct results";[3] "local hermeneutics," on the other hand, are calculations of probability based on an insider's knowledge of what is likely to be successful in a particular field of practice. When Cicero advises that in cases where a client's character is an issue a lawyer should attribute a bad reputation to "the envy of a few people, or back biting, or false opinion" or, failing that, argue that "the defendant's life and character are not under investigation, but only the crime of which he is accused," he is presenting and urging a local hermeneutics. But when Raoul Berger insists that the meaning of the Constitution can be determined only by determining the intentions of the framers, he is presenting and urging a general hermeneutics.[4] In one case, the practitioner is being told "In a situation like this, here are some of the things you can do," where it is left to the agent to determine whether or not he has encountered a situation "like this" and which of the possible courses of action is relevant. In the other case, the practitioner is being told "When you want to know the truth or discover the meaning, do this," where "this" is a set of wholly explicit instructions that leaves no room for interpretive decisions by the agent. In one case, the practitioner is being given a "rule of thumb," something

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that would in certain circumstances be a good thing to try if you want to succeed in the game; in the other, he is being given a rule, something that is necessary to do if you want to be right, where "being right" is not a matter of being in tune with the temporary and shifting norms of a context but of having adhered to the dictates of an abiding and general rationality. A rule is formalizable: it can be programmed on a computer and, therefore, can be followed by anyone who has been equipped with explicit (noncircular) definitions and equally explicit directions for carrying out a procedure. A rule of thumb, on the other hand, cannot be formalized, because the conditions of its application vary with the contextual circumstances of an ongoing practice; as those circumstances change, the very meaning of the rule (the instructions it is understood to give) changes too, at least for someone sufficiently inside the practice to be sensitive to its shifting demands. To put it another way, the rule-of-thumb reader begins with a knowledge of the outcome he desires, and it is within such knowledge that the rule assumes a shape, becomes readable; the rule follower, in contrast, defers to the self-declaring shape of the rule, which then generates the correct outcome independently of his judgment. The model for the "true" rule and, therefore, for theory is mathematics, for as John Lyons points out, if two people apply the rules of mathematics and come up with different results, we can be sure that one of them is mistaken, that is, has misapplied the rules.[5]

Lyons turns to the analogy from mathematics in the course of an explication of Chomskian linguistics, and the Chomsky project provides an excellent example of what a model of the formal, or rule-governed, type would be like. The Chomskian revolution, as Jerrold Katz and Thomas Bever have written, involved "the shift from a conception of grammar as cataloguing the data of a corpus to a conception of grammar as explicating the internalized rules underlying the speaker's ability to produce and understand sentences."[6] Basically this is a turn from an empirical activity—the deriving of grammatical rules from a finite body of observed sentences—to a rational activity—the discovery of a set of constraints which, rather than being generalizations from observed behavior, are explanatory of that behavior in the sense that they are what make it possible. These constraints are not acquired through experience (education, historical conditioning, local habits) but are innate; experience serves only to actualize or "trigger" them. They have their source not in culture but in nature, and therefore they are *abstract* (without empirical content), *general* (not to be identified with any particular race, location, or historical period but with the species), and *invariant* (do not differ from language to language). As a system of rules, they are "independent of the features of the actual world and thus hold in any possible one" ("FRE," p. 40).

It follows that any attempt to model these constraints—to construct a device that will replicate their operations—must be equally independent in all these ways, that is, it must be formal, abstract, general, and invariant.

It is Chomsky's project to construct such a device, a model of an innate human ability, a "competence model" which reflects the timeless and contextless workings of an abiding formalism, as opposed to a "performance model" which would reflect the empirical and contingent regularities of the behavior of some particular linguistic community. Once constructed, a competence model would function in the manner of a "mechanical computation" ("FRE," p. 38); that is, to "apply" it would be to set in motion a self-executing machine or calculus that would assign, without any interpretive activity on the part of the applier, the same description to a sentence that would be assigned by "an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly."[7] If such a speaker were presented with the sentence "He danced his did," he would reject it as ungrammatical or irregular or deviant. Accordingly, a grammar modeled on his ability (or intuition) would refuse to assign the sentence a description—the generative device would find itself blocked by an item that violated its rules. If such a speaker were presented with the sentence "Flying planes can be dangerous," he would recognize it as ambiguous; accordingly, a generative grammar would assign the sentence not one but two structural (or "deep") descriptions. And if such a speaker were presented with the pair of sentences "John hit the ball" and "The ball was hit by John," he would recognize them as being synonymous, and, accordingly, the generative grammar would assign them a single structural description.

It is important to realize that this ideal speaker and the grammar modeled on his competence would perform their tasks without taking into account the circumstances of a sentence's production, or the beliefs of the speaker and hearer, or the idiomatic patterns of a particular community.[8] The speaker who knows the language of his community "perfectly" in Chomsky's idealization knows that system independently of its actualization in real-life situations: that knowledge is his competence, and the grammar that captures it divides strings in a language "into the well-formed and the ill-formed just on the basis of their syntactic structure, without reference to the way things are in the world, what speakers, hearers, or anyone else believe, etc." ("FRE," p. 31). That is why, as Judith Greene puts it, "the only real test . . . of a grammar is to devise a set of formal rules which, if fed to a computer operating with no prior knowledge of the language, would still be capable of generating only correct grammatical sentences."[9]

This is precisely the goal of Chomskian theory—the construction of "a system of rules that in some explicit and well-defined way assigns structural descriptions to sentences," where "explicit" means mechanical or algorithmic and the assigning is done not by the agent but by the system (*ATS,* p. 8). Needless to say, there has been much dispute concerning the possibility (and even desirability) of achieving that goal, and there

have been many challenges to the basic distinctions (between competence and performance, between grammaticality and acceptability, between syntax and semantics, between grammatical knowledge and the knowledge of the world) that permit the goal, first, to be formulated and, then, to guide a program of research. But putting aside the merits of the Chomsky program and the question of whether it could ever succeed, the point I want to make here is that as a program it is theoretical and can stand as a fully developed example of what Knapp and Michaels mean when they say that theory is a *special* project and what Hirsch means when he insists that only such a project—a general hermeneutics—"has earned the right to be named a 'theory.' " The Chomsky project is theoretical because what it seeks is a method, a recipe with premeasured ingredients which when ordered and combined according to absolutely explicit instructions—instructions that "[do] not rely on the intelligence of the understanding reader" (*ATS*, p. 4)—will produce the desired result. In linguistics that result would be the assigning of correct descriptions to sentences; in literary studies the result would be the assigning of valid interpretations to works of literature. In both cases (and in any other that could be imagined), the practitioner gives himself over to the theoretical machine, surrenders his judgment to it, in order to reach conclusions that in no way depend on his education, or point of view, or cultural situation, conclusions that can then be checked by anyone who similarly binds himself to those rules and carries out their instructions.

Thus understood, theory can be seen as an effort to govern practice in two senses: (1) it is an attempt to *guide* practice from a position above or outside it (see pp. 723 and 742), and (2) it is an attempt to *reform* practice by neutralizing interest, by substituting for the parochial perspective of some local or partisan point of view the perspective of a general rationality to which the individual subordinates his contextually conditioned opinions and beliefs. (Not incidentally, this is the claim and the dream of Baconian method, of which so many modern theoretical projects are heirs.) Only if this substitution is accomplished will interpretation be principled, that is, impelled by formal and universal rules that apply always and everywhere rather than by rules of thumb that reflect the contingent practices of particular communities.

The argument *against* theory is simply that this substitution of the general for the local has never been and will never be achieved. Theory is an impossible project which will never succeed. It will never succeed simply because the primary data and formal laws necessary to its success will always be spied or picked out from within the contextual circumstances of which they are supposedly independent. The objective facts and rules of calculation that are to ground interpretation and render it principled are themselves interpretive products: they are, therefore, always and already contaminated by the interested judgments they claim to transcend.

The contingencies that are to be excluded in favor of the invariant constitute the field within which what will (for a time) be termed the invariant emerges.

Once again, a ready example offers itself in the history of Chomskian linguistics. In order to get started, Chomsky must exclude from his "absolute formulations . . . any factor that should be considered as a matter of performance rather than competence." He does this, as Katz and Bever observe, "by simply considering the former [performance] as something to be abstracted away from, the way the physicist excludes friction, air resistance, and so on from the formulation of mechanical laws" ("FRE," p. 21). This act of abstracting-away-from must of course begin with data, and in this case the data are (or are supposed to be) sentences that depend for their interpretation not on performance factors—on the knowledge of a speaker's beliefs or of particular customs or conventions—but on the rules of grammar.[10] The trick then is to think of sentences that would be heard in the same way by all competent speakers no matter what their educational experience, or class membership, or partisan affiliation, or special knowledge, sentences which, invariant across contexts, could form the basis of an acontextual and formal description of the language and its rules.

The trouble is that there are no such sentences. As I have argued elsewhere, even to think of a sentence is to have already assumed the conditions both of its production and its intelligibility—conditions that include a speaker, with an intention and a purpose, in a situation.[11] To be sure, there are sentences which, when presented, seem to be intelligible in isolation, independently of any contextual setting. This simply means however, that the context is so established, so deeply assumed, that it is invisible to the observer—he does not realize that what appears to him to be immediately obvious and readable is a function of its being in place. It follows, then, that any rules arrived at by abstracting away from such sentences will be rules only within the silent or deep context that allowed them to emerge and become describable. Rather than being distinct from circumstantial (and therefore variable) conditions, linguistic knowledge is unthinkable apart from these circumstances. Linguistic knowledge is contextual rather than abstract, local rather than general, dynamic rather than invariant; every rule is a rule of thumb; every competence grammar is a performance grammar in disguise.[12]

This then is why theory will never succeed: it cannot help but borrow its terms and its content from that which it claims to transcend, the mutable world of practice, belief, assumptions, point of view, and so forth. And, by definition, something that cannot succeed cannot have consequences, cannot achieve the goals it has set for itself by being or claiming to be theory, the goals of guiding and/or reforming practice. Theory cannot guide practice because its rules and procedures are no more than generalizations from practice's history (and from only a small

piece of that history), and theory cannot reform practice because, rather than neutralizing interest, it begins and ends in interest and raises the imperatives of interest—of some local, particular, partisan project—to the status of universals.

Thus far I have been talking about "foundationalist" theory (what Knapp and Michaels call "positive theory"), theory that promises to put our calculations and determinations on a firmer footing than can be provided by mere belief or unjustified practice. In recent years, however, the focus of attention has been more on "antifoundationalist" theory (what Knapp and Michaels call "negative theory"), on arguments whose force it is precisely to deny the possibility (and even the intelligibility) of what foundationalist theory promises. Antifoundationalist theory is sometimes Kuhnian, sometimes Derridean, sometimes pragmatist, sometimes Marxist, sometimes anarchist, but it is always historicist; that is, its strategy is always the one I have pursued in the previous paragraphs, namely, to demonstrate that the norms and standards and rules that foundationalist theory would oppose to history, convention, and local practice are in every instance a function or extension of history, convention, and local practice. As Richard Rorty puts it: "There are no essences anywhere in the area. There is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize or underwrite the course of inquiry. . . . It is the vocabulary of practice rather than of theory . . . in which one can say something useful about truth."[13] (Notice that this does not mean that a notion like "truth" ceases to be operative, only that it will always have reference to a moment in the history of inquiry rather than to some God or material objectivity or invariant calculus that underwrites all of our inquiries.)

The fact that there are two kinds of theory (or, rather, theoretical discourse—antifoundationalism really isn't a theory at all; it is an argument against the possibility of theory) complicates the question of consequences, although in the end the relationship of both kinds of theory to the question turns out to be the same. As we have seen, those who believe in the consequences of foundationalist theory are possessed by a hope—let us call it "theory hope"—the hope that our claims to knowledge can be "justified on the basis of some objective method of assessing such claims" rather than on the basis of the individual beliefs that have been derived from the accidents of education and experience.[14] Antifoundationalist theory tells us that no such justification will ever be available and that therefore there is no way of testing our beliefs against something whose source is not also a belief. As we shall see, antifoundationalism comes with its own version of "theory hope," but the emotion its arguments more often provoke is "theory fear," the fear that those who have been persuaded by such arguments will abandon principled inquiry and go their unconstrained way in response to the dictates of fashion, opinion, or whim. Expressions of theory fear abound (one can find them now even in daily newspapers and popular magazines), and in their more

dramatic forms they approach the status of prophecies of doom. Here, for example, is Israel Scheffler's view of what will happen if we are persuaded by the writings of Thomas Kuhn:

> Independent and public controls are no more, communication has failed, the common universe of things is a delusion, reality itself is made . . . rather than discovered. . . . In place of a community of rational men following objective procedures in the pursuit of truth, we have a set of isolated monads, within each of which belief forms without systematic constraints.[15]

For Scheffler (and many others) the consequences of antifoundationalist theory are disastrous and amount to the loss of everything we associate with rational inquiry: public and shared standards, criteria for preferring one reading of a text or of the world to another, checks against irresponsibility, and so on. But this follows only if antifoundationalism is an argument for unbridled subjectivity, for the absence of constraints on the individual; whereas, in fact, it is an argument for the situated subject, for the individual who is always constrained by the local or community standards and criteria of which his judgment is an extension. Thus the lesson of antifoundationalism is not only that external and independent guides will never be found but that it is unnecessary to seek them, because you will always be guided by the rules or rules of thumb that are the content of any settled practice, by the assumed definitions, distinctions, criteria of evidence, measures of adequacy, and such, which not only define the practice but structure the understanding of the agent who thinks of himself as a "competent member." That agent cannot distance himself from these rules, because it is only within them that he can think about alternative courses of action or, indeed, think at all. Thus antifoundationalism cannot possibly have the consequences Scheffler fears; for, rather than unmooring the subject, it reveals the subject to be always and already tethered to the contextual setting that constitutes him and enables his "rational" acts.

Neither can antifoundationalism have the consequences for which some of its proponents *hope,* the consequences of freeing us from the hold of unwarranted absolutes so that we may more flexibly pursue the goals of human flourishing or liberal conversation. The reasoning behind this hope is that since we now know that our convictions about truth and factuality have not been imposed on us by the world, or imprinted in our brains, but are derived from the practices of ideologically motivated communities, we can set them aside in favor of convictions that we choose freely. But this is simply to imagine the moment of unconstrained choice from the other direction, as a goal rather than as an abyss. Antifoundationalist fear and antifoundationalist hope turn out to differ only in emphasis. Those who express the one are concerned lest we kick ourselves

loose from constraints; those who profess the other look forward to finally being able to do so. Both make the mistake of thinking that antifoundationalism, by demonstrating the contextual source of conviction, cuts the ground out from under conviction—it is just that, for one party, this is the good news and, for the other, it is the news that chaos has come again. But, in fact, antifoundationalism says nothing about what we can now do or not do; it is an account of what we have always been doing and cannot help but do (no matter what our views on epistemology)—act in accordance with the standards and norms that are the content of our beliefs and, therefore, the very structure of our consciousness. The fact that we now have a new explanation of how we got our beliefs—the fact, in short, that we now have a new belief—does not free us from our other beliefs or cause us to doubt them. I may now be convinced that what I think about *Paradise Lost* is a function of my education, professional training, the history of Milton studies, and so on, but that conviction does not lead me to think something else about *Paradise Lost* or to lose confidence in what I think. These consequences would follow only if I also believed in the possibility of a method independent of belief by which the truth about *Paradise Lost* could be determined; but if I believed that, I wouldn't be an antifoundationalist at all. In short, the theory hope expressed by some antifoundationalists is incoherent within the antifoundationalist perspective, since it assumes, in its dream of beginning anew, everything that antifoundationalism rejects.

Of course it could be the case that if I were shown that some of my convictions (about Milton or anything else) could be traced to sources in sets of assumptions or points of view I found distressing, I might be moved either to alter those convictions or reexamine my sense of what is and is not distressing. This, however, would be a quite specific reconsideration provoked by a perceived inconsistency in my beliefs (and it would have to be an inconsistency that struck me as intolerable), not a general reconsideration of my beliefs in the face of a belief about their source. To be sure, such a general reconsideration would be possible if the source to which I had come to attribute them was deemed by me to be discreditable (hallucinatory drugs, political indoctrination)—although even then I could still decide that I was sticking with what I now knew no matter where it came from—but human history could not be that kind of discreditable source for me as an antifoundationalist, since antifoundationalism teaches (and teaches without regret or nostalgia) that human history is the context within which we know. To put it another way, an antifoundationalist (like anyone else) can always reject something because its source has been shown to be some piece of human history he finds reprehensible, but an antifoundationalist cannot (without at that moment becoming a foundationalist) reject something simply because its source has been shown to be human history as opposed to something independent of it.

All of which is to say again what I have been saying all along: theory has no consequences. Foundationalist theory has no consequences because its project cannot succeed, and antifoundationalist theory has no consequences because, as a belief about how we got our beliefs, it leaves untouched (at least in principle) the beliefs of whose history it is an explanation. The case seems open-and-shut, but I am aware that many will maintain that theory *must* have consequences. It is to their objections and arguments that I now turn.

The first objection has already been disposed of, at least implicitly. It is Adena Rosmarin's objection and amounts to asking Why restrict theory either to foundationalist attempts to ground practice by some Archimedean principle or to antifoundationalist demonstrations that all such attempts will necessarily fail? Why exclude from the category "theory" much that has always been regarded as theory—works like W. J. Harvey's *Character in the Novel,* or Barbara Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure,* or William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*—works whose claims are general and extend beyond the interpretation of specific texts to the uncovering of regularities that are common to a great many texts? The answer is that the regularities thus uncovered, rather than standing apart from practice and constituting an abstract picture of its possibilities, would be derived from practice and constitute a report on its current shape or on the shape it once had in an earlier period. It is possible to think of these regularities as rules, but they would be neither invariant nor predictive since they would be drawn from a finite corpus of data and would hold (if they did hold) only for that corpus; each time history brought forward new instances, it would be necessary to rewrite the "rules," that is, recharacterize the regularities. In Chomsky's terms, the result would be a succession of performance grammars, grammars that reflect the shifting and contingent conditions of a community's practice rather than capture the laws that constrain what the members of a community can possibly do. The result, in short, would be *empirical generalizations* rather than a general hermeneutics.

Still, one might ask, Why not call such generalizations "theory"? Of course, there is nothing to prevent us from doing so, but the effect of such a liberal definition would be to blur the distinction between theory and everything that is not theory, so that, for example, essays on the functions of prefaces in Renaissance drama would be theory, and books on the pastoral would be theory, and studies of Renaissance self-fashioning or self-consuming artifacts would be theory. One is tempted to call such efforts theory in part because they often serve as models for subsequent work: one could study self-fashioning in the eighteenth century or self-consuming artifacts as a feature of modernism. Such activities, though, would be instances not of following a theory but of extending a practice, of employing a set of heuristic questions, or a thematics, or a trenchant distinction in such a way as to produce a new or at least novel description

of familiar material. Much of what is done in literary studies and elsewhere conforms to this pattern. If we like, we can always call such imitations of a powerful practice "theory," but nothing whatsoever will have been gained, and we will have lost any sense that theory is special. After all, it is only if theory is special that the question of its consequences is in any way urgent. In other words, the consequentiality of theory goes without saying and is, therefore, totally uninteresting if *everything* is theory.

And yet the argument that everything is theory is sometimes put forward in *support* of theory's special status. Those who make this argument think it follows from the chief lesson of antifoundationalism, the lesson that there are no unmediated facts nor any neutral perception and that everything we know and see is known and seen under a description or as a function of some paradigm. The conclusion drawn from this lesson is that every practice presupposes a structure of assumptions within which it is intelligible—there is no such thing as *simply* acting—and the conclusion drawn from that conclusion is that every practice is underwritten by a theory. The first conclusion seems to me to be correct—any practice one engages in is conceivable only in relation to some belief or set of beliefs—but the second conclusion is, I think, false, because beliefs are not theories. A theory is a special achievement of consciousness; a belief is a prerequisite for being conscious at all. Beliefs are not what you think *about* but what you think *with,* and it is within the space provided by their articulations that mental activity—including the activity of theorizing—goes on. Theories are something you can have—you can wield them and hold them at a distance; beliefs have *you,* in the sense that there can be no distance between them and the acts they enable. In order to make even the simplest of assertions or perform the most elementary action, I must already be proceeding in the context of innumberable beliefs which cannot be the object of my attention, because they are the content of my attention: beliefs on the order of the identity of persons, the existence of animate and inanimate entities, the stability of objects, in addition to the countless beliefs that underwrite the possibility and intelligibility of events in my local culture—beliefs that give me, without reflection, a world populated by streets, sidewalks, telephone poles, restaurants, figures of authority and figures of fun, worthy and unworthy tasks, achievable and unachievable goals, and so on. The description of what assumptions must already be in place for me to enter an elevator, or stand in line in a supermarket, or ask for the check in a restaurant would fill volumes, volumes that would themselves be intelligible only within a set of assumptions they in turn did not contain. Do these volumes—and the volumes that would be necessary to their description—constitute a theory? Am I following or enacting a theory when I stop for a red light, or use my American Express card, or rise to speak at a conference? Are you now furiously theorizing as you sit reading what I have to say? And if you are persuaded by me to alter your understanding of what is and is not a theory, is your

new definition of theory a new theory of theory? Clearly it is possible to answer yes to all these questions, but just as clearly that answer will render the notion "theory" *and* the issue of its consequences trivial by making "theory" the name for ordinary, contingent, unpredictable, everyday behavior.

Now it may be easy enough to see the absurdity of giving the label "theoretical" to everyday actions that follow from the first or ground-level beliefs that give us our world. The difficulty arises with actions that seem more momentous and are attached to large questions of policy and morality; such actions, we tend to feel, must follow from something more "considered" than a mere belief, must follow, rather, from a theory. Thus, for example, consider the case of two legislators who must vote on a fair housing bill: one is committed to the protection of individual freedom and insists that it trump all competing considerations; the other is some kind of utilitarian and is committed to the greatest good for the greatest number. Isn't it accurate to say that these two hold different theories and that their respective theories will lead them to cast different votes—the first, against, and the second, in favor of, fair housing? Well, first, it is not at all certain that the actions of the two are predictable on the basis of what we are for now calling their "theories." A utilitarian may well think that, in the long run, the greatest number will reap the greatest good if property rights are given more weight than access rights; a libertarian could well decide that access rights are more crucial to the promotion of individual freedom and choice than property rights. In short, nothing particular follows from the fact that the two agents in my example would, if asked, declare themselves adherents of different theories. But would they even be theories? I would say not. Someone who declares himself committed to the promotion of individual freedom does not have a theory; he has a belief. He believes that something is more important than something else—and if you were to inquire into the grounds of his belief, you would discover not a theory but other beliefs that at once support and are supported by the belief to which he is currently testifying. Now, to be sure, these clustered beliefs affect behavior—not because they are consulted when a problem presents itself, however, but because it is within the world they deliver that the problem and its possible solutions take shape. To put it another way, when one acts on the basis of a belief, one is just engaged in reasoning, not in theoretical reasoning, and it makes no difference whether the belief is so deep as to be invisible or is invoked within a highly dramatic, even spectacular, situation. The sequence "I believe in the promotion of individual freedom, and therefore I will vote in this rather than in that way" is not different in kind from the sequence "I believe in the solidity of matter and therefore I will open the door rather than attempt to walk through the walls." It seems curious to call the reasoning (if that is the word) in the second sequence "theoretical," and I am saying that it would be no less curious to give that name to the

reasoning in the first. The fact that someone has a very general, even philosophical, belief—a belief concerning recognizably "big" issues—does not mean that he has a theory; it just means that he has a very general belief. If someone wants to say that his very general belief has a consequential (although not predictable) relationship to his action, I am certainly not going to argue, since to say that is to say what I said at the beginning of this section: it is belief and not theory that underwrites action.

It is simply a mistake, then, to think that someone who identifies himself as a believer in individual freedom or in the greatest good for the greatest number has declared his allegiance to a theory. But there are instances in which it is indeed proper to say that someone who takes this rather than that position is opting for this rather than that theory, and in those instances the question of the consequences of theory is once again alive. Here, a recent essay by Thomas Grey of the Stanford Law School provides a useful example. Grey is concerned with the consequences for the judicial process of two theories of constitutional interpretation. Those who hold the first theory he calls "textualists," and in their view "judges should get operative norms only from the text," that is, from the Constitution. Those who hold the other theory he calls "supplementers," and in their view "judges may find supplemental norms through [the] interpretation of text analogs" such as previous judicial decisions or background social phenomena.[16] I regard these two positions as theoretical because they amount to alternative sets of instructions for reaching correct or valid interpretive conclusions. Someone who says "I am committed to promoting individual freedom" still has the task, in every situation, of deciding which among the alternative courses of action will further his ends. But a judge who says "I get my operative norms only from the text" knows exactly what to do in every situation: he looks to the text and restricts himself to the norms he finds there. On the other side, his "supplementalist" opponent also knows what to do: he looks for norms not only in the text but in a number of other, authorized, places. Grey forthrightly identifies himself as a supplementer, arguing that if lawyers and judges come to think of themselves as supplementers rather than textualists, as one kind of theorist rather than as another, they "will thereby be marginally more free than they otherwise would be to infuse into constitutional law their current interpretations of our society's values."

For Grey, then, the consequences of theory are real and important. It seems obvious to him that (1) if two judges, one a textualist and the other a supplementer, were presented with the same case they would decide it differently, and (2) the differences in their decisions would be a function of the differences in their theories. This assumes, however, that the two theories give instructions that it is possible to follow and that someone *could* first identify the norms encoded in the text and then choose either to abide by them or to supplement them. But as Grey himself acknowledges, interpretation is not a two-stage process in which

the interpreter first picks out a "context-independent semantic meaning" and then, if he chooses, consults this or that context; rather, it is within some or other context—of assumptions, concerns, priorities, expectations—that what an interpreter sees as the "semantic meaning" emerges, and therefore he is never in the position of being able to focus on that meaning independently of background or "supplemental" considerations. The semantic meaning of the text does not announce itself; it must be decided upon, that is, interpreted. Since this is also true of contexts—they too must be construed—the distinction between text and context is impossible to maintain and cannot be the basis of demarcating alternative theories with their attendant consequences. In short, no text reads itself, and anything you decide to take into account—any supplement—is a text; therefore interpreters of the Constitution are always and *necessarily* both textualists and supplementers, and the only argument between them is an argument over which text it is that is going to be read or, if you prefer, which set of background conditions will be specified as the text. Those arguments have substance, and on many occasions their outcomes will have consequences, but they will not be the consequences of having followed one or the other of these two theories because, while they truly are theories, they cannot be followed. If the two judges in our example did in fact happen to reach different decisions about the same case, it would not be because they have different theories of interpretation but because they interpret from within different sets of priorities or concerns, that is, from within different sets of beliefs. It is entirely possible, moreover, that despite the declared differences in theoretical allegiance, the two could reach exactly the same decision whenever the text to which the one has confined himself is perspicuous against the same set of supplemental concerns or perspectives that forms the other's text.

And yet it would be too much to say that declarations of theoretical allegiances—even allegiances to theories that cannot be made operative—are inconsequential. As Grey notes, such declarations have a political force: "Most lawyers," he points out, "share with the public a 'pre-realist' consensus that in doing judicial review, judges should generate their decisive norms by constitutional interpretation only." In short, there is a consensus that they should be textualists; therefore, Grey contends, "For me to call my views 'noninterpretive' [supplementalist] will obviously not improve my chances of winning the argument." Now one could dismiss this as a piece of cynical advice ("Call yourself a textualist no matter how you proceed"), but it seems to me to point to a significant truth: rather than dictating or generating arguments, theoretical positions are parts of arguments and are often invoked because of a perceived connection between them and certain political and ideological stands. That is, given a certain set of political circumstances, one or another theory will be a component in this or that agenda or program. So, for example, in a struggle for power between the judiciary and the legislature, one party

may gravitate "naturally"—that is, in terms of its current goals—toward one theory while the other party—just as naturally and just as politically—identifies itself with the opposite theory. Moreover, in the course of a generation or two, the identifications may be reversed, as new circumstances find the onetime textualists now calling themselves supplementers (or legal realists, or "noninterpretivists") and vice versa. In short, declaring a theoretical allegiance will often be consequential—not, however, because the declaration dictates a course of action but because a course of action already in full flower appropriates it and gives it significance.

Thus we see that even when something is a theory and is consequential—in the sense that espousing it counts for something—it is not consequential in the way theorists claim. Indeed, on the evidence of the examples we have so far considered, the possible relationships between theories and consequences reduce to three: either (1) it *is* a theory but has no consequences because, as a set of directions purged of interest and independent of presuppositions, it cannot be implemented, or (2) it has consequences but is not a theory—rather, it is a belief or a conviction, as in the case of the promotion of individual freedom, or (3) it is a theory and does have consequences, but they are political rather than theoretical, as when, for very good practical reasons, somebody calls himself a textualist or a supplementer.

Nevertheless there still is a position to which a "consequentialist" might retreat: perhaps theory, strictly speaking, is an impossible project that could never succeed, and perhaps beliefs and assumptions, while consequential, are not theories—but, Isn't the foregrounding of beliefs and assumptions "theory"?—and, Doesn't the foregrounding of beliefs and assumptions make us more aware of them?—and, Isn't that a consequence, and one which will itself have consequences? In short, theory may be just an activity within practice, but—as this position would have it—Isn't it a special *kind* of activity? This claim has two versions, one weak and one strong. The strong version is untenable because it reinvents foundationalism, and the weak version is so weak that to grant it is to have granted nothing at all. The strong claim reinvents foundationalism because it imagines a position from which our beliefs can be scrutinized; that is, it imagines a position outside belief, the transcendental position assumed and sought by theorists of the Chomsky type. The argument against the strong claim is the antifoundationalist argument: we can never get to the side of our beliefs and, therefore, any perspective we have on one or more of them will be grounded in others of them in relation to which we can have no perspective because we have no distance. The weak claim begins by accepting this argument but still manages to find a space in which theory does its special work: although we can never get an absolute perspective on our beliefs, we can still get a perspective on *some* of our beliefs in relation to some others; and if this happens, it may be that from within the enclosure of our beliefs we will spy contra-

dictions of which we had been unaware and, thereby, be provoked to ask and answer some fundamental questions. In short, and in familiar language, theory—or the foregrounding of assumptions—promotes critical self-consciousness.

Now it is certainly the case that people are on occasion moved to reconsider their assumptions and beliefs and then to change them, and it is also the case that—as a consequence—there may be a corresponding change in practice. The trouble is, such reconsiderations can be brought about by almost anything and have no unique relationship to something called "theory." Some years ago Lawrance Thompson published a biography of Robert Frost in which the poet was revealed to have been a most unpleasant, not to say evil, person. The book produced much consternation, especially among those who had assumed that there was (or should be) a correlation between the quality of a man's art and his character. Underlying this assumption was a traditional and powerful view of the nature and function of literature. In that view (still held by many today), literature is ennobling: it enlarges and refines the sensibility and operates to make its readers better persons. It follows, then, that those who are able to produce nobility in others should themselves be noble—but here was an undeniably great artist who was, by all the evidence Thompson had marshaled, perfectly vile. Presumably, Thompson's book induced some who held this view to reconsider it; that is, they had been made aware of their assumptions. What moved them, however, was not theory but a work of traditional scholarship that did not even pretend to be criticism.

The impulse to reexamine the principles underlying one's practice can be provoked, moreover, by something that is not even within the field of practice: by turning forty, or by a dramatic alteration in one's economic situation, by a marriage, or by a divorce. Of course, it can also be provoked by theory—but not necessarily. That is, you could engage in the exercise of foregrounding your assumptions and even come to see that some of them were incompatible with some piece of your practice and, nevertheless, respond with a shrug, decide to let things be. The man who declares himself committed to the redistribution of authority and the diffusion of power may be an absolute autocrat in the classroom, and when this is pointed out to him or when he points it out to himself, he may mutter something about the limited attention span of today's youth and go on as before. Even when theory produces self-consciousness, it need not be "critical"; it need not be the prelude to change. Once again, we reach the conclusion that there is no sense in which theory is special: it can not provide us with a perspective independent of our beliefs, and the perspective it can occasionally (but not necessarily) provide on some of our beliefs relative to others can be provided by much that is not theory.

If one has followed the argument thus far, it begins to be difficult to understand why anyone has ever thought that theory should have

consequences. Yet, since many have thought so and will continue to think so even after I have done, it is time to inquire into the reasons for their conviction. One reason, and a very powerful one, is the institutional success of philosophy in persuading us that the answers to its questions are directly relevant to everything we do when we are not doing philosophy. As Richard Rorty has put it:

> Philosophers usually think of their discipline as one which discusses perennial, eternal problems—problems which arise as soon as one reflects. . . . Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims.[17]

The idea, then, is that whatever the surface configurations of our actions, *at bottom* we are being guided by principles of the kind that philosophy takes as its special province. Thus, it is to philosophy that we should look to get a perspective on those principles and on the actions we perform in everyday life.

The relevance of philosophy to every aspect of human culture has been assumed for so long that it now seems less an assertion or an argument than a piece of plain common sense. But it is, in fact, an argument, and one whose content is the debatable proposition that almost everything we do is a disguised and probably confused version of philosophy. That proposition will begin to seem less plausible if we remember that philosophy is not the name of a natural kind but of an academic discipline and, moreover, of a discipline whose traditions are so special as to constitute a prima facie denial of its territorial ambitions. Philosophy is that area of inquiry in which one asks questions about the nature of knowledge, truth, fact, meaning, mind, action, and so forth, and gives answers that fall within a predictable range of positions called realism, idealism, relativism, pragmatism, materialism, mentalism, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Kantianism, and so forth. Of course, other areas of inquiry are similarly well developed and articulated and come complete with their own array of positions, problems, solutions, and decorums. One of these is literary criticism, where the task is the description and evaluation of verbal artifacts and the categories of interrogation are historical (Is it Romantic or neoclassic?), generic (Is it masque or drama?), formal (Is it episodic or organic?), stylistic (Is it Senecan or Ciceronian?).

Now although the traditions of philosophy and literary criticism display certain points of intersection and occasionally refer to each other, they are for all intents and purposes distinct, so much so that it is perfectly possible for someone wholly ignorant of one to operate quite successfully in the other. It makes no sense then to think that one is radically dependent on the other, to think, for example, that since there is something called "the philosophy of action" and since literary criticism is an action, anyone who wants to know how to do literary criticism should consult the phi-

losophy of action. A literary critic already knows what to do simply by virtue of his being embedded in a field of practice; it is hard to see why his performance would be improved or altered by bringing to bear the categories and urgencies of another field of practice. Of course, it is always possible to step back from a field and put to it the kinds of questions that belong properly (that is, by history and convention) to philosophy, to ask, for example, what literary critics must believe about the world, truth, meaning, fact, evidence, and so forth, in order to go about their work in a way that seems to them at once routine and natural. But the lessons learned from such an interrogation would be philosophical, not literary, and the fact that it was possible to learn them would not prove that those who do criticism are really doing philosophy any more than the fact that every activity is potentially the object of philosophical analysis means that every activity is at base philosophical and should be ruled by philosophy's norms.

The point is obvious and, one would have thought, inescapable: philosophy is one thing and literary criticism is another. But the point has been obscured by the fact that in the past twenty-five years philosophy has become something that literary critics also do or attempt to do. That is, they attempt to do theory, which is another name for philosophy; and if the argument for the consequences of theory seems strong when theory is a separate discipline, it seems even stronger when theory is a component of the field it purports to govern. But if theory (or philosophy) is now a practice in literary studies, it differs more from its fellow practices than they do from each other. A formalist and a critic of myth may be at odds, but they are in the same line of work and contesting for the same privilege, the privilege of saying what this poem or novel or play means. Theory, on the other hand, disdains particular acts of interpretation and aspires to provide an account of interpretation in general—and just as a philosophical analysis of an activity is not an instance of that activity but of philosophy, so an account of interpretation is not an interpretation but an account. They are different games, and they remain different even when they are played by the same person.

That is to say, as things stand now, a worker in the field may hold this or that theoretical position—think of himself as a foundationalist or an antifoundationalist—and *also* be a practicing critic—think of himself as a Wordsworthian or a Miltonist. *But,* when he is performing as a Wordsworthian or a Miltonist, he will be asking the questions and giving the answers that belong to that tradition of inquiry and his theoretical position will quite literally be beside the point. I may be convinced, as in fact I am, that my sense of what is going on in a literary work is a function of my history, education, professional training, ideological affiliation, and so on, but that conviction will be of no effect when I set out to determine who is the hero of *Paradise Lost;* for at that moment all of the categories, distinctions, imperatives, and urgencies that might at

some other time become the object of a metacritical investigation will be firmly in place and form the enabling conditions of my actions. In short, theory is not consequential even when the practitioner is himself a theorist. Indeed, the practitioner may cease to be a theorist or may awake one morning (as I predict we all will) to find that theory has passed from the scene and still continue in his life's work without ever missing a beat.

This conclusion may seem to fly in the face of the evidence provided by those critics who, apparently, changed their practice when they changed their theory, who now discover aporias and radical de-centerings where they used to discover irony and unity. Doesn't this evidence itself constitute a strong empirical case for the consequences of theory?[18] Not at all—what it indicates is that thematizing remains the primary mode of literary criticism and that, as an action, thematizing can find its materials in theory as well as in anything else. In thematic criticism a work is discovered to be the literary expression or consideration of such and such concerns, be they economic or psychological, political or military, sexual, culinary, or whatever. What the thematic critic then produces are economic or psychological or sociological or political or philosophical readings. He does *not* produce—that is, he does not do—economics, psychology, sociology, political science, or philosophy. He may *quarry* these and other disciplines for vocabulary, distinctions, concerns, and so forth—indeed, it is hard to see what else he could do—but to quarry from a discipline is not to become a practitioner of it. If I propose a religious reading of George Herbert's lyrics, am I practicing religion? If I read Gustave Flaubert in the light of medical knowledge in the nineteenth century, am I practicing medicine? Obviously not—and neither, when I find that a work is "about" the limits of language, or the conditions of assertion, or the relativity of truth, am I doing theory. If I were practicing religion, I would be urging, chastising, and preaching; if I were practicing medicine, I would be setting bones and handing out prescriptions; and if I were practicing theory, I would either be arguing for a set of formal and explicit rules or arguing that rules of that kind are never available. I would not be analyzing the way in which such arguments are distributed over a range of characters in a novel or underlie the dramatic structure of the Romantic lyric. It is only because theory as a form of practice now shares an institutional or disciplinary home with literary criticism that its thematization is taken as evidence of its power to alter literary criticism. In fact, the power flows in the other direction: like any other discipline or body of materials that is made into thematic hay, theory is not so much the consequential agent of a change as it is the passive object of an appropriation.

We have now achieved what appears to be a dramatic reversal. At the outset, the strong thesis in the field was that theory has consequences and that they are far-reaching and fundamental, but now theory has been deprived of any consequentiality whatsoever and stands revealed

as the helpless plaything of the practice it claimed to inform. But certainly we have gone too far, and it is time to admit what everyone knows: theory has consequences; not, however, because it stands apart from and can guide practice but because it is itself a form of practice and therefore is consequential for practice as a matter of definition.[19] That is, any account of what now makes up the practice of literary criticism must include theory, which means that there was a time when theory was not a part of criticism's practice, and the fact that it now is has made a difference, has been consequential.

Of course, as consequences go, this is pretty low-level, but there is more. As a practice, theory has all the political and institutional consequences of other practices. Those who do it can be published, promoted, fired, feted, celebrated, reviled; there can be symposia devoted to it, journals committed to it; there can be departments of theory, schools of theory; it can be a rallying cry ("Give me theory or give me death!"), a banner, a target, a program, an agenda. All of these (and more) are consequences, and they would not be possible if there were no theory. But although these are certainly the consequences of theory, they are not theoretical consequences; that is, they are not the consequences of a practice that stands in a relationship of precedence and mastery to other practices. There is a world of difference between saying that theory is a form of practice and saying that theory informs practice: to say the one is to claim for theory no more than can be claimed for anything else; to say the other is to claim everything. So, even though the thesis that theory has no consequences holds only when the consequences are of a certain kind, they are the only consequences that matter, since they are the consequences that would mark theory off as special.

We can test this by thinking about the consequences that would satisfy a theorist. Surely Chomsky's theory has had consequences: it has revolutionized a discipline and extended its sway; its terms and goals structure everything that happens in the field; but it has not had (and, by my argument, could not have) the consequences of its claims—it has not provided the formal and algorithmic model of language acquisition and use whose promise generated all the activity in the first place. The theory's success, in short, has been largely political; as such, it is a success that can hardly be comforting to Chomsky since the political is what he, like every other theorist, desires to rise above. Paradoxically, the triumph of Chomskian theory from an institutional point of view is an illustration of its failure from the point of view of its fondest hope, the hope to transcend point of view by producing a picture of the language that holds for any or all institutions and is beholden to none. Chomsky is in the position of every other theorist: the consequences he seeks are impossible, and the consequences to which he has clear right and title make him indistinguishable from any other political agent and render theory a category about which there is nothing particular—because there is nothing general—to say.

There is nothing either particular or general to say about theory's political consequences because, while they are palpable, they are not predictable; they do not follow *from* theory but are something that *befalls* theory—although, again, not necessarily and not always in the same way. As a practice, theory will cut a different figure in different disciplines; only in philosophy will changes in theory receive immediate and consequential attention. But that is because philosophy (at least in the analytic tradition) *is* theory, is the foundational project Rorty describes. Thus, to say that in philosophy a change in theory will change practice is only to say that when practice changes, it changes. In literary criticism, on the other hand, theory is only one practice among many, and its impact has varied with different locations and universities. In some places in the United States, the appearance of a theoretical manifesto in *New Literary History, Diacritics,* or *Critical Inquiry* will be Monday-morning news to which one must respond; in other places it will be heard, if it is heard at all, as the report of a minor skirmish on a foreign field of battle. In a discipline of such diversity with respect to theory, the question of its consequences cannot even be meaningfully put.

In the world of legal studies, the case is different again. There theory has recently become the center of debate, in large part because of a single issue, the legitimacy of judicial review, or, as it is sometimes called, the "countermajoritarian difficulty."[20] The difficulty takes the form of a question: How, in a democratic system, can one justify the fact that a group of men and women, who are appointed for life, pass judgment on the validity of legislation enacted by the elected representatives of the people? This question is quite literally a demand for theory, for a justifying argument that does not presuppose the interests of any party or the supremacy of any political goal or borrow its terms from the practice it would regulate. For the foundationalists, only such an argument will guarantee the coherence of the legal process—it simply *must* be found; the failure so far of the efforts to find it leads the antifoundationalists, on the other hand, to conclude that the legal process is political through and through and is therefore a sham. Both parties agree that the issue of judicial review is "the most fundamental in the extensive domain of constitutional law" and that the stakes are very high.[21] As long as that agreement continues, theory is likely to flourish as a consequential form of legal practice.

Here, then, are three disciplines, in each of which theory is differently consequential, and those differences themselves are not stable but contingent and changeable. Philosophy and theory have not always been one, and still are not in some parts of the world—and may not even be so in our part of the world if Rorty and some others have anything to say about it. Theory has not always been a glamour stock in literary studies and has already ceased to be a growth industry; if the urgency attached in the legal world to the issue of judicial review should ever fade, theory could fade with it (although if it has become well enough

established, it might migrate to another issue). Will it fade? Will it rise in other disciplines hitherto innocent of it? Will the consequences of its appearance or demise be large or small? These and other questions could be answered only if there were a general account of theory's career, but since the determining factors will always be local and contingent—who could have predicted that the emigration of European scholars in the late 1930s would bring literary theory to the United States or that marketplace conditions in the humanities would bring it (by way of disgruntled Ph.D.'s) to the law—no such account is available and we must wait upon the event. If the question of theory's consequences is itself not theoretical but empirical, it can only receive an empirical answer in the form of specific and historical investigations into the consequences that this or that theory did or did not have. The result of such investigations will vary—in some cases, there will be virtually nothing to report and, in others, the report will fill volumes—but in no case will the chronicling of theory's consequences demonstrate that theory has—by right, as an inherent property—consequences.

Will there be consequences to an argument against theory's consequences? Since that too is an empirical question, the answer is "Time will tell," but there are some consequences that would seem to be either likely or unlikely. A likely consequence attaches to the issue of justification. Should it happen that everyone were persuaded by the "no consequences" argument (an outcome that is itself extremely unlikely), the search for certain kinds of justification might very well cease or, at least, be carried on with altered hopes, and that would be a consequence. To return for a moment to the context of legal studies and the "countermajoritarian difficulty," the issue would lose its urgency and the debate would continue, if it continued, on different terms, if all parties were brought to see (1) that the demand for a justification of judicial review which did not presuppose but bracketed the interests, goals, agendas, lines of authority, and so on, already in place was a demand for something at once unobtainable and empty, and (2) that the unavailability of such a justification proved not that everything was a sham but that justifications are always interested and acquire their intelligibility and force from the very practices of which they are a public defense. That is, if both parties could be brought to see that political justifications are the only kind there is and that this fact does not render argument nugatory but necessary, they might fall to recommending their contrasting agendas for the frankly political consequences they would be likely to have and not for a theoretical purity they could never achieve. Such a turn of events would not change very much, since, if I am right, every argument is already interested and political no matter what its theoretical trappings—but at least certain kinds of objections would no longer have very much force and certain kinds of appeals would no longer seem tainted.

On the other side, there is at least one consequence of the success of the "no consequences" argument that is not only unlikely, but impossible,

and can be ruled out in advance. The case for theory's inconsequentiality, even if it is persuasive, will not return us to some precritical state, whether it be thought of as a state of innocence or of know-nothing ignorance. The consequences of theory as a form of practice are real even if the consequences of theory as a foundational or antifoundational project could not possibly exist—indeed, theory's "practical" consequences are real *because* its "theoretical" consequences could not exist. The discrediting of theory could have the consequence of returning us to some uncontaminated or unredeemed practice only if theory were the independent and abstract calculus of its strongest claims. The fact that theory is not and could not be that calculus and therefore could not have the consequences of its claims assures that it will always have the political consequences I have been describing. Although theory cannot be a lever for change from the outside, its existence on the inside—within the field of practice—is evidence that a change has already occurred, a change in which its mode of interrogation has now joined or displaced others. That change cannot be reversed, and its effects will continue long after the formal program of theory has been abandoned.

Will it be abandoned? Will theory stop?—certainly not as a result of arguments against it, mine or anyone else's. Arguments against theory only keep it alive, by marking it as a site of general concern. Theory will stop only when it has played out its string, run its course, when the urgencies and fears of which it is the expression either fade or come to be expressed by something else. This is already happening in literary studies, and there could be no surer sign of it than the appearance in recent years of several major anthologies—by Josué Harari, Jane Tompkins, Robert Young—and of series that bear titles like New Accents but report only on what is old and well digested. The fading away of theory is signaled not by silence but by more and more talk, more journals, more symposia, and more entries in the contest for the right to sum up theory's story. There will come a time when it is a contest no one will want to win, when the announcement of still another survey of critical method is received not as a promise but as a threat, and when the calling of still another conference on the function of theory in our time will elicit only a groan. That time may have come: theory's day is dying; the hour is late; and the only thing left for a theorist to do is to say so, which is what I have been saying here, and, I think, not a moment too soon.

1. See my *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 370. For a response to the "no consequences" claim, see Mary Louise Pratt, "Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations: On Anglo-American Reader Response Criticism," *Boundary 2* 11 (Fall–Winter 1982–83): 222.

2. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1976), p. 18. I should note here that while I agree in general with Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels on what is and is not a theoretical enterprise, I think them mistaken in their choice of particular

examples. Stylistics, narratology, and prosody are, it seems to me, paradigm instances of theory in the strong sense. As I have argued elsewhere (see *Is There a Text?*, chaps. 2 and 10), the entire project of stylistics is an effort to produce a taxonomy of observable formal features which can then be correlated in some mechanical or rule-governed way with a set of corresponding significances and/or effects. In short, if stylistics were ever to succeed (and I am certain that it will not), it would be an engine of interpretation, a method, a theory. One sure sign of a theoretical enterprise is the lengths its proponents will go to in order to pursue it. It seems to me extremely unlikely that stylisticians would have built their formidable apparatuses and worked out their complex formalizations only so as to be able to produce a new reading of James Joyce's "Eveline." The same goes for narratology and for prosody, at least in its transformational or Halle-Keyser version.

3. Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation,* p. 18.

4. Cicero *De inventione* 2. 11. 37; and see Raoul Berger, *Government by Judiciary: The Transformation of the Fourteenth Amendment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977).

5. See John Lyons, *Noam Chomsky,* rev. ed. (New York, 1978), p. 37.

6. Jerrold J. Katz and Thomas G. Bever, "The Fall and Rise of Empiricism," in Bever, Katz, and D. Terrence Langendoen, *An Integrated Theory of Linguistic Ability* (New York, 1976), p. 12; all further references to this work, abbreviated "FRE," will be included in the text.

7. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), p. 3; all further references to this work, abbreviated *ATS,* will be included in the text.

8. In the jargon of the trade these are called "performance factors" and belong to the study of utterances as opposed to sentences: "Sentences are abstract objects which are not tied to a particular context, speaker, or time of utterance. Utterances, on the other hand, are datable events, tied to a particular speaker, occasion and context" (Neil Smith and Deirdre Wilson, *Modern Linguistics: The Results of Chomsky's Revolution* [Bloomington, Ind., 1979], p. 45). Utterances are ranked on a scale of "acceptability" according to the conditions—cultural and, therefore, variable—of their production; sentences, on the other hand, are ranked on a scale of grammaticality or well-formedness according to the invariant rules of a formal system. On this point, see F. R. Palmer, *Semantics: A New Outline* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 8.

9. Judith Greene, *Psycholinguistics: Chomsky and Psychology* (Baltimore, 1972), p. 28.

10. That is, one must begin, as Smith and Wilson observe, by "separating linguistic from non-linguistic knowledge" (*Modern Linguistics,* p. 32), but it is precisely the possibility of that separation that is denied by the argument I am mounting here.

11. See my *Is There a Text in This Class?,* pp. 281–92.

12. That is why the history of Chomskian linguistics is a history of counterexamples to what are offered as *the* rules: since rules have been extrapolated from an assumed (if unacknowledged) context, the descriptions they assign will not seem perspicuous to someone who is operating from within *another* assumed (if unacknowledged) context. Of course any proposed alternative system of rules will be vulnerable to exactly the same challenge.

In a searching and rigorous critique of a draft of this paper, Joseph Graham of Tulane University objects that I misrepresent the Chomsky project in several respects. Echoing some of the arguments in Chomsky's *Rules and Representations* (Woodbridge Lectures, nos. 3, 11, 78 [New York, 1980]), Graham contends, among other things, that the notion of "theory" as it appears in my discussion of Chomsky is far too strong and does not correspond to any claims Chomsky actually makes; that I fail to distinguish between "universal grammar" as an innate biological constraint on the set of possible "core" grammars and one or more of those possible grammars; that I blur the crucial distinction, on which so much depends, between grammatical and pragmatic competence and, thereby, ask more of the grammar than it could ever deliver; and that no theoretical enterprise is "demonstrative" in the sense that I use the word, for all scientific inquiry proceeds on the basis of "abduction or inference to the best explanation." To this I would reply, first, that my account of the Chomsky project and its claims is derived from statements made by Chomsky and some of his more

faithful followers and that even if, as Graham says, the theory has been modified and clarified in recent years, the euphoria with which it was received and promoted in its early stages shows that it was for many the basis of what I call foundationalist "theory hope." Moreover, some of the differences between Graham and me stem from the different and opposing traditions in which we stand—he in the tradition of cognitive psychology with its interest in innate properties and inaccessible mental operations, and I in the practice and convention-centered tradition that includes Ludwig Wittgenstein, W. V. Quine, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, and Donald Davidson, in addition to Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and other continental thinkers. Presumably, for example, Graham would hear with equanimity and even with approval Chomsky's suggestion that knowledge and certainty may have little or nothing to do with grounding, justification, reasons, habits, skill, induction, and learning, and everything to do with genetic mechanisms that have yet to be specified, while to my ears the same suggestion sounds counterintuitive and even uninteresting (see Chomsky, *Rules and Representations,* pp. 92–109, 134–36, and 234). To be sure, there is more to be said about these matters, and Graham promises to say them in a series of forthcoming essays, but for the time being I will stick with my present formulations.

13. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972–1980)* (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 162.

14. Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford, 1974), p. 17.

15. Israel Scheffler, *Science and Subjectivity* (Indianapolis, 1967), p. 19. For similar statements, see Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation,* pp. 152–55, and Owen M. Fiss, "Objectivity and Interpretation," *Stanford Law Review* 34 (Apr. 1982): 763.

16. Thomas Grey, "Supplementing the Constitution"; unpublished paper, quoted with permission of the author.

17. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), p. 3.

18. This is the argument made by Steven Mailloux in "Truth or Consequences: On Being Against Theory."

19. See Mailloux, pp. 765–66. Mailloux also asserts that theory is a form of practice, but we differ in our conclusions. He concludes that "theory does change practice" and cites as two examples the "theoretical assumptions" that "guide" Edward Said's "practical analyses of Orientalism" and the "New Critical proscriptions against the intentional and affective fallacies" which led critics to avoid "extrinsic approaches" and focus instead on "intrinsic elements in the literary text itself" (Mailloux, pp. 765, 764, 765). To take the second example first, the Wimsatt-Beardsley injunction against taking into account the intentions of the author or the responses of the reader is exactly parallel to the injunction in the legal institution against looking beyond the Constitution itself to supplemental contexts: both make the same impossible recommendations and give the same unfollowable advice. That is, one may *say* "Consider only the text and not its extrinsic circumstances or the accident of its variable effects," but in fact any text one considers will have come into view only against the contextual—including intentional and affective—circumstances that are supposedly being excluded or bracketed. In short, someone may well think that he is adhering to Wimsatt and Beardsley's theoretical strictures, but the truth is that he could not possibly do so. What he can do is present his argument in terms that make no mention of intention or affect; although that will certainly be a consequence of the pressure exerted by Wimsatt and Beardsley's pronouncements, it will not be a consequence of their theory in the sense of being answerable to its claims and hopes. One cannot, as I have said above, attribute consequences of a theoretical kind to a program that cannot be executed.

The example of Said and *Orientalism* can be assimilated to the discussion of the two legislators who are committed respectively to libertarian and utilitarian principles. It is certainly the case, as Mailloux asserts, that Said's assumptions guide his practice, but assumptions aren't theories, that is, they are not systematic procedures for generating valid conclusions—they are the *assertion* of conclusions which, when put to work as an interpretive "window," will generate or validate themselves. Said's assumption—or conviction, or belief—is that Western discourse, including diplomatic and academic as well as fictional texts, has projected an image of the Orient that has, for all intents and purposes, become its reality.

Armed with this assumption, indeed operating as an extension of it, Said proceeds to redescribe texts as instances of a colonialism that does not know itself and is therefore even more powerful and insidious in its effects. But in producing these redescriptions, Said is not consulting a theory but extending a belief: when he urges his redescriptions on others, he is saying "Try on this belief; make it, rather than some other assumption, the content of your perception, and see what you see." It is a recommendation no more theoretical than a recommendation to think of the prefaces to Renaissance plays as part of the texts they introduce; either recommendation, if it is persuasive, will certainly alter practice but only because it will be a *practical* (not theoretical) recommendation, a recommendation to look at it this way rather than that way. To return to a formula used above, the Said example is an instance of something that has consequences but isn't a theory, and the Wimsatt-Beardsley example is an instance of something that is a theory and has consequences but not theoretical ones.

20. For a review and a discussion, see James A. Thomson, "An Endless but Productive Dialogue: Some Reflections on Efforts to Legitimize Judicial Review," *Texas Law Review* 61 (Dec. 1982): 743–64.

21. Ibid., p. 745.