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Critical Response

VI

On the Theory of "Against Theory"

Adena Rosmarin

Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels begin their argument "Against Theory" by announcing that "the object of our critique is not a particular way of doing theory but the idea of doing theory at all" (p. 723). The object of my critique is to show that what Knapp and Michaels are arguing against is indeed "a particular way of doing theory" and that their attack on *theory* fails precisely insofar as this is so.

They divide their argument into two parts. In the first they discuss what they call "the ontological side of theory—its peculiar claims about the nature of its object" (p. 736). In the second they discuss "theory's epistemological project": the attempt "to base interpretation on a direct encounter with its object, an encounter undistorted by the influence of the interpreter's particular beliefs" (p. 737). The purpose of this division is to enable an analogy: "If the ontological project of theory has been to imagine a condition of language before intention, its epistemological project has been to imagine a condition of knowledge before interpretation" (p. 737). The "mistake" of ontology is to imagine an intentionless language, the "mistake" of epistemology to imagine a beliefless knowledge. Knapp and Michaels argue that there are no such things: that language without intention is not language, it only "resembles" language; that knowledge separate from belief is not only not knowledge, it is not possible. Thus they conclude:

> The theoretical impulse, as we have described it, always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated. . . . Our point has been that the separated terms are in fact insepa-

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> rable . . . and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end. [Pp. 741–42]

As their definition of "epistemology" and "ontology" reveal, Knapp and Michaels take their notion of theory from philosophy as it was institutionalized by Kant's followers in the nineteenth century: a project whose business is the grounding and adjudicating of claims to knowledge, where "knowledge" is defined as the accurate representation of what is known. In this they are right. Our discipline *has* envisioned itself as the progressive acquisition of knowledge about literary texts, and literary theory *has* assumed the grounding and adjudicating role of philosophy. It asks: Where is the essence (ground) of literary meaning located? How do we most accurately represent it? Which interpretations are the most accurate representations? A set of answers to these questions is what we call a "poetics," and there are many such sets: affective, intentional, semiological, ideological, formalist, psychoanalytic, and so on.

Knapp and Michaels are wrong, however, to see this way of doing theory as more than a *way*. It is simply *our* way, and so it has come to seem the thing itself. Richard Rorty makes precisely this point vis-à-vis philosophy's image of itself as a theory of representation.[1] His massive and persuasive critique may be therapeutically transferred to the essentially philosophical enterprise of literary theory, demystifying its present and seemingly given embodiment, suggesting new and less vulnerable ways of talking about interpretation. The representational tradition begins with Plato's choice of an ocular metaphor for the process of knowing, with the notion that knowledge is the result of a face-to-face encounter with the object known. (Note that we still routinely say "I see" for "I understand.") The tradition grows increasingly epistemological as it moves through Descartes and Locke to Kant, the Platonic search for accurate representations of what is outside the mind modulating into a search for privileged inner representations and then into a search for the mental rules constituting those representations. Although Kant directed this search toward propositional rather than perceptual knowledge, his advance remained within the framework of such causal metaphors as "constitution," "making," and "synthesizing." Traditional philosophy continued—and continues—to define itself as a search for

1. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979).

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the ground or cause of knowledge and for the traceless way of representing or knowing that ground.

This, then, is the model of literary theory that Knapp and Michaels argue against: it aims to find the object which compels belief (hence the "peculiar claims"), to "base interpretation on direct encounter" with that object, to expunge the "interpreter's particular beliefs." One wonders, however, why Knapp and Michaels assume the separation of theory's ontological and epistemological projects since in the Kantian model that they attack the two are joined. One also wonders why in the ontological part of their argument they collapse the radical and currently ubiquitous distinction between positive and negative hermeneutics, between those who believe in the possibility of grounding interpretation and those who don't. For the latter move, at least, they give a reason.

According to Knapp and Michaels, "positive" theorists such as E. D. Hirsch and P. D. Juhl *add* intention (in the form of "authorial intention" or "speech acts") to language in order to ground meaning whereas "negative" theorists such as Paul de Man *subtract* intention in order to preserve "the purity of language from the distortion of speech acts" (p. 733). But despite their difference, both acts separate the supposedly inseparable; both make the "mistake" of the "theoretical impulse." Showing the similarity of these different acts is essential to showing that theory, not just a particular way of doing theory, is mistaken, but the similarity will only seem significant if we are made strongly aware of the difference. Realizing this, Knapp and Michaels devote the first two-thirds of their essay to displaying that "the positive theorist adds intention, the negative theorist subtracts it" (p. 736). They then direct us to a footnote:

> At least this is true of the present generation of theorists. For earlier theorists such as W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, the objective meanings sought by positive theory were to be acquired precisely by *subtracting* intention and relying on the formal rules and public norms of language. [P. 736 n.16]

While one must applaud the intellectual fastidiousness which led to the inclusion of this qualification, even in a footnote, one must wonder how the authors failed to see what its inclusion does to their argument. If negative hermeneutics is definitively distinguished from positive hermeneutics by its habit of subtracting intention from language, how can the same procedure define the positive theory of Wimsatt and Beardsley? Since the space of a generation can hardly alter what Knapp and Michaels present as philosophically definitive matters, one must fault the definition. But since it is this definition which enables them to argue that theory makes the same "mistake" across the hermeneutic board, that it is not just a way of doing theory but theory itself which is

mistaken, faulting the definition must render their entire argument suspect.

Let us focus this suspicion on their premises, the two points which Knapp and Michaels take as self-evident. First, they announce that "the issues of belief and intention are . . . central to the theoretical enterprise; our discussion of them is thus directed not only against specific theoretical arguments but against theory in general." Second, they announce that intention and language, like belief and knowledge, "are in fact inseparable." Since theory functions by mistakenly "splitting apart" these terms, and since these terms are "central to the theoretical enterprise," these two assumptions should give Knapp and Michaels their argument—but only if we accept them (p. 724).

Granted, intention and belief have been and are central to certain theoretical arguments—especially and not incidentally to those Knapp and Michaels use as examples—but they are by no means central to all. Many have thought that literary meaning is grounded in or, what is the same, explained by what it imitates. Such mimetic objects include *not only* authorial intention but also ideas, actions, "general nature," the feelings or imagination of the poet, and mental and natural processes. Others have thought that literary meaning is explained by its internal structures, or by the activity of reading, or by convention systems. Unless Plato, Plotinus, Aristotle, Johnson, Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, Holland, Fish, and Culler—to select but a few from among the advocates of such groundings—are to be seen as not doing theory, then arguing against "theory in general" by arguing against only intention and belief must be less than persuasive.

Equally unpersuasive is their claim that language and intention are "in fact inseparable." As their examples are meant to show, contemporary theory commonly separates them. Even if Knapp and Michaels are right to argue that such separation is wrong, the burden of proof still rests with them, and they rather too obviously attempt to unburden themselves by begging the question, by assuming what needs proving. If we leave the contemporary scene and recall, however briefly, the history of this issue, the burden even more strongly demands bearing. Would Plato in the *Phaedrus* be so concerned about writing were language and intention inseparable? Is it not the potential independence of the written word, its tendency to take off and lead a life of its own, that is the cause of so much ancient worry and so much recent delight? Recall also the Renaissance obsession with binding words (*verba*) to what they represent (*res*): "Ye man also take heid," warns King James, "to frame your wordis and sentencis according to the mater." "Those words . . . are best," cautions Fulke Greville, "which doe most properly expresse the thought." "It is the first distemper of learning when men study words and not matter," announces Francis Bacon, "for words are but the im-

ages of matter."[2] Why all the fuss if words and things or, to take the Knapp and Michaels version of this venerable dualism, language and intention are either inseparable or thought to be so? Their choice of premises displays—or assumes—an ignorance of the historical and contemporary contexts in which they write.

There must be a better way of talking about theoretical activity than that offered by Knapp and Michaels: that Hirsch "has failed to understand the force of his own formulation," that Fish "fails to recognize the force of his own discussion of belief" (pp. 725, 738–39). Rather than assuming that two of the most intelligent, sophisticated, and self-conscious practitioners of literary theory don't know what they are doing, let us assume that they—along with Wimsatt and Beardsley, Juhl, and de Man—do. And let us further assume—as Knapp and Michaels urge—that what these theorists are doing is essential to the theoretical project as traditionally defined. These assumptions make possible another way of talking about theoretical activity.

It would go something like this: Hirsch, Wimsatt and Beardsley, Juhl, de Man, and Fish are all seeking an interpretive ground, the cause of literary meaning. They find it in various places, places which are definitively needless of definition but definitively needy of protection against contamination from another ground or from a representing medium. For de Man, as for all formalists, however radical, this ground is the language of the text. He accordingly resists any other grounds—such as speech acts—which would constrain the independence and diminish the stature of his. He also resists the contaminating presence of the reader, arguing that "the reading is not 'our' reading, since it uses only the linguistic elements provided by the text itself."[3] Wimsatt and Beardsley find their ground in "the formal rules and public norms of language." Fish finds his ground first in the textual features which control the reader's experience and later in the "interpretive strategies" which control that experience and thereby constitute the text.[4]

Although interpretive grounds are always presented as self-

2. King James VI, "Ane Schort Treatise," in *Elizabethan Critical Essays,* ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London, 1904), 1: 217; Fulke Greville, "A Treatise of Humane Learning," *Poems and Dramas of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke,* ed. Geoffrey Bullough, 2 vols. (New York, 1945), 1: 181; Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning,* ed. William A. Wright (Oxford, 1970), p. 20. For a tracing of the *res/verba* pairing through the quattrocento see Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance,* 2 vols. (Chicago, 1961). For the later history of the pairing see A. C. Howell, "*Res et Verba:* Words and Things," *ELH* 13 (Mar. 1946): 131–42.

3. Paul de Man, "Semiology and Rhetoric," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism,* ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), p. 138.

4. See Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980) and, in particular, his introductory explication of these two groundings.

evident—indeed, they are powerful insofar as they seem to be so—in practice they must be argued for, defended against other contenders for the honor. The characteristic initial move of the theorist is accordingly an attempt to displace the institutionally "in place" ground. Thus Hirsch leads off his argument for "Objective Interpretation" by attacking René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature,* Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," and William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity.*[5] Thus Fish builds his case for "Literature in the Reader" by attacking Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Affective Fallacy."[6] Hirsch and Fish mount these particular attacks because, when they wrote, interpretive authority was lodged in the language of the text, and these were the theoretical texts which put it there.

The attack in both cases proceeds by dissociation and fusion. Hirsch does, as Knapp and Michaels argue, treat language and intention as if they were separate, but he does so only initially and with good reasons: first, his audience thought they were separate, and, like all good rhetoricians, Hirsch begins by standing with his audience; second, their supposed separateness enables his powerfully persuasive move of unification. As he himself tells us, his argument is "an attack on the view that a text is a 'piece of language' and a defense of the notion that a text represents the determinate verbal meaning of an author."[7] Fish initially discusses reader, text, and authorial intention as if they were separate, but like Hirsch he does so, first, because that is how his audience saw them and, second, because their seeming to be so enables the unification move: "This, then, is my thesis: that the form of the reader's experience, formal units, and the structure of intention are one, that they come into view simultaneously, and that therefore the questions of priority and independence do not arise."[8] My analyses are meant to suggest that what Knapp and Michaels treat as inherent and erroneous dissociations might be more subtly and profitably discussed as analytic strategies, effective ways of dismantling previous grounds and clearing space for new. They are also meant to suggest that theory, even representational theory, is hardly the unsubtle and unaware enterprise that Knapp and Michaels think it is.

Knapp and Michaels conclude by criticizing Fish's separation of knowledge and belief, a separation they find to be the epistemological analogue of the ontological separations perpetrated by Hirsch et al. They approve Fish's collapse of knowledge and belief but disapprove as Fish steps back to describe this collapse, a description that proceeds, as do all descriptions, under the aegis of "knowing" rather than "believing."

5. See E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Objective Interpretation," *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), p. 226.

6. See Fish, "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics," *Is There a Text,* pp. 21–67.

7. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* p. 226.

8. Fish, "Interpreting the *Variorum*," *Is There a Text,* p. 165.

They think that this procedure introduces conceptual wrinkles into Fish's literary theory but fail to note that Fish is no longer doing *literary* theory. He has moved up to a metacritical level (Knapp and Michaels record in a footnote that Fish tells us this) from which he looks down upon an explicitly *critical* ground, the "interpretive strategies" which determine our critical agreements and disagreements. His project now becomes the representation of this new ground, and to be persuasive he must seem to describe it without contamination from the representing medium or, what is here the same, *his* "strategies." Obviously, ground and medium have been collapsed, as they always are in theories whose represented objects are interpretive procedures—as in Kant, as in Fish. Although this collapse does not create the problems of representational theory, it does foreground them, drawing attention to the medium which always leaves contaminating traces, to the ground which is infinitely regressive, which can only be "stopped" by a methodological contradiction.[9] But Fish's project is self-consciously rhetorical rather than philosophical; it only masks as philosophical to appropriate persuasive clout. As a way of talking about literature, representational theory is powerful *because* it is seemingly philosophical, and it becomes mistaken only when we forget that this seeming is just that and no more. Fish is not thus forgetful, but his theoretical finesse escapes Knapp and Michaels. Because it does, it also escapes them that his project is as fully "ontological" or descriptive of a ground as those which they describe. Their separation of ontology and epistemology proves no more rigorous than their unification of positive and negative hermeneutics.

The Knapp and Michaels argument against theory fails, then, on several counts. It argues against a *way* of doing theory and not against "theory in general." While representational theory can be faulted logically, aesthetically, and ethically, Knapp and Michaels not only fail to show such faults, they fail to show that this way of talking is the only way that we have had or can have. Their attack proceeds by unifications and dissociations which their own (significantly footnoted) commentary reveals as faulty. Their premises beg their question. Finally, they engage in the very moves they find so mistaken in others. Thus they argue that language and intention are inseparable because words, once separated from intention, are no longer really words: "They will merely seem to *resemble* words" (p. 728). Now how do Knapp and Michaels know *this?* Well, of course, they don't. But in order to mount their argument they must make this move, just as Hirsch et al. must make similar dissociations in order to begin talking. The growing suspicion that Knapp and Michaels are engaging in the very enterprise that they are attacking is right: "Against Theory" is a thoroughgoing theoretical argument. It has

9. See Michael McCanles, "The Authentic Discourse of the Renaissance," *Diacritics* 10 (Spring 1980): 77–87, for an excellent unfolding of the "infinitely regressive ground" problem as it troubles historical criticism.

an object: the theoretical "impulse" or "mechanism" which "causes" our "mistakes." Their examples "represent" their ground and, as such, are meant to compel our belief: "Our examples are meant to represent the central mechanism of all theoretical arguments, and our treatment of them is meant to indicate that all such arguments will fail and fail in the same way" (p. 724). (Including theirs?) Their object suffers the reduction suffered by all objects in the process of representation, the only *complete* representation being a copy. Their medium is as transparent, as deferential to its object as possible—hence their strategically lucid, frequently ingenuous, at times condescending prose.

The question of alternative theories remains, and while a few paragraphs can hardly begin to entertain answers, I will suggest the direction one such answer might take. We could begin with Rorty's suggestion that we substitute *conversation* (with each other, including past "others") for *confrontation* (with the object) as "the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood."[10] Adapted to literary theory, Rorty's suggestion might unfold like this: rather than reducing literary texts and their readers to the stable and schematized constructs so necessary to representational theory, a theorist might postulate texts of both inexhaustible richness and affective power, and readers of unlimited imaginative sophistication. He would try to put together a theory which would make discussion of such texts and readers possible. He would be after a *way of talking* rather than (although it might include) a *way of looking*. Since richness and power are what attract us to literature, and imaginative sophistication is what results from that attraction, the only reason *not* to begin with these is representational theory's abhorrence of change, ineffability, complexity, uniqueness, and, in sum, all that makes reading and talking about literature interesting and important, all that makes them so difficult to *represent*.

One important result of freeing ourselves from the representational bind, from the compulsion to judge accuracy or correctness, has been noted by Fish. When reading the works of previous theorists and critics, we would be able to " 'regard those performances not as unsuccessful attempts to approximate our own but as extensions of a literary culture whose assumptions were *not inferior but merely different*' " (p.739). Knapp and Michaels quote this passage (I repeat their emphasis) and then comment:

> To imagine that we can see the beliefs we hold as no better than but "merely different" from opposing beliefs held by others is to imagine a position from which we can see our beliefs without really believing them. To be in this position would be to see the truth about beliefs without actually having any—to know without believing. [P. 739]

10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* p. 389.

To know without believing and, presumably, to believe without knowing are for Knapp and Michaels self-evidently impossible states. But where is it written that this is so? I'm sure that everyone can think of at least one place where precisely the opposite is written, for example, in Shakespeare's sonnet 138: "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her, though I know she lies." The relationships between believing and knowing, loving and misrepresenting (conflated in "lies"), cursing and promising (conflated in "swears") are vertiginous, but they are not beyond our capacity to enact or discuss, only beyond the capacity of representational theory.

The literary text is neither as simple as this theory requires, nor are we as simpleminded. Because it is only this *way* of talking that cannot cope with linguistic, emotional, and intellectual dexterity, with our capacity to read, talk, and live "as if," it is tempting to conclude as Knapp and Michaels conclude: by arguing that representational theory "should therefore come to an end" (p. 742).[11] But there is no need to call a halt to a powerful, if imperfect, enterprise. All we need do is recognize this way of doing theory as just that—a way. All we need do, in other words, is put it in its hermeneutic place.

11. The "as if" alludes to Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If": A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind,* trans. C. K. Ogden, 2d ed. (London, 1949).