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Critical Response

I

Revisionary Madness: The Prospects of American Literary Theory at the Present Time

Daniel T. O'Hara

For if I triumph I must make men mad.
—W. B. YEATS, "The Tower"

1

Now must be the time to turn our backs on literary theory. Signs are everywhere that such a move would be advisable. Such distinctive American theorists as Harold Bloom, Stanley Fish, and Edward Said, each for his own reasons, have recently warned the critical community about the dangers of doing theory in a post-structuralist mode. Everyone now knows or should know what M. H. Abrams and Gerald Graff—to identify just two of the more prominent and persistent opponents of theory—have been saying for years. The elusive, purely theoretical quest for the hidden rules governing *the system* of production, dissemination, and interpretation of texts, a quest generally informed by an essential concern to revise the academic study of literature, can lead only to the foolish positing of some single, all-determining principle of critical practice (Language, Power, Influence, etc.)—that is, to a speculative trap of self-indulgent rarefaction, in short, to an intellectual dead end. For the notion of there being a "system" reducible to a single magical formula is

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at best a hypothetical construct and at worst each theorist's fetching chimera, the fantastic image of his possible sublimity, his will to power over other theorists writ large and alone in the intense inane. In this light, doing theory now, in however self-conscious and ironic a fashion, would represent a radical and wasteful break with the American tradition of pragmatically oriented, intellectually skeptical, and socially aware (if politically uncommitted) scholar-critics.[1]

This strange turnabout, in which the leading literary theorists and their disciples join hands with representatives of the loyal, neo-humanist opposition, is a paradox. It even smacks of the willfully perverse.[2] As I observe this spectacle of a new antitheoretical consensus forming right before my eyes, the question that strikes me is this: Why should American literary theorists—marginal figures with respect to the larger culture—appear to be so determined to wipe themselves out of the picture entirely, so to speak, just as they are witnessing the first fruits of their labors to institutionalize theory as a subdiscipline within the critical profession?

For one of the most immediately accessible examples of this revisionary exercise of turning against theory—one that, for me, suggests a plausible answer to my question—consider the following conclusion on the dangerous delusions of theory made recently in "Against Theory" by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, two of theory's most perceptive students: Theory "is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without. Our thesis has been that no one can reach a position outside practice, that theorists should stop trying, and that the theoretical enterprise should therefore come to an end" (p. 742).[3] What is one to make of this provocative and deeply problematic conclusion?

1. See, e.g., Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York, 1982), pp. 16–51; Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); Edward W. Said, "Travelling Theory," *Raritan* 1 (Winter 1982): 41–67; M. H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (Spring 1977): esp. 426–29; and Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself* (Chicago, 1979).

2. The situation is so bad as to provoke Paul de Man to write a book on the topic, *The Resistance to Theory;* an important piece from it has recently been published in *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre, Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 3–20.

3. I am not concerned with all the particulars of their argument; rather it is the overall rhetorical strategy and effect that concern me. To borrow Bloom's notion, their essay in its entirely negative stance embodies the latecomer's resentful psychology rather too clearly.

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The point that Knapp and Michaels make is an important one, especially in these revisionary days of Reaganomics and other such ills. They reach their conclusion after arguing that in order to get the theoretical project off the ground and then keep it aloft, the theorist, no matter what his stripe, whether he is an intentionalist like E. D. Hirsch and P. D. Juhl or a deconstructive ironist like Paul de Man and Fish, must assume that some "ultimate" vantage point beyond the discursive field under scrutiny can in principle be envisioned and separated out from the realm of practice and what they call "true belief."[4] Only if the theorist assumes that such a synoptic view and such an apocalyptic separation are possible (even if that view is of the abyss and that separation is really a self-incarceration) can the theorist pretend to knowledge and so to a command of the underlying rules governing the field. Whatever such "knowledge" may portend—man's freedom or some depersonalizing fate at the hands of Power, Language, or Precursor—makes little practical difference to the success of the theoretical project. The only thing that matters is the theorist's belief in his prospects of attaining that all-determining higher ground, however "fictional" that position is programmatically said to be by any particular theorist.

Clearly, Knapp and Michaels do not believe that such a vantage point is possible and, furthermore, that belief in such a possibility is anything more than an act of bad faith, whether made in the good taste of ironic self-consciousness or not. Consequently, for them, questions like whether man masters language or language masters man are meaningless, akin to the theosophists' disputes about the possibility of the dead experiencing sensual pleasure in the afterlife. In this respect, Knapp and Michaels follow Fish. For their master Fish, all objectivist, idealist, or transcendental tendencies to posit a position beyond the strident intricacies of critical practice and its wars of true belief are merely projections of the theorist's desire for such an ideal vantage point. This is the case, for Fish, no matter how hedged about such tendencies may be by ironic qualifications, opaque terminologies, and deconstructive posturings. Such tendencies, then, produce a wish-fulfilling bit of phantasmagoria, a dream of escape from the arid conflicts involved in the actual world of strenuous critical argument. One needs relief, so one simply spells it "o-a-s-i-s," or "i-s-l-a-n-d," or "t-o-w-e-r."[5]

But Knapp and Michaels do not stop with their repetition of Fish. They go on to claim that he who originally made possible their critical insight into the mechanisms of theory-production has recently suffered

4. The sources for their notion of "true belief" are various. Hans Gadamer's idea of "prejudice," for example, comes to mind. The point is that if one did a genealogy of their ideas one would discover that their position against theory depends entirely on assumptions that are theoretical.

5. Or "t-h-e-o-r-y."

an acute lapse from his formerly rigorous position.[6] By trying to establish his view of the reader's share in the constitution of the text as the best theory of interpretation, Fish has attempted to set up his hermeneutics (and so himself as well) as the governing principle of mediation operating among the different conflicting interpretive communities. Knapp and Michaels contend, therefore, that Fish, who had once assumed he could eradicate the crime of critical theory—with the help of his ironic theory of the reader's imaginative response to the self-consuming text—has instead perpetuated that crime. After using Fish to deconstruct Juhl and de Man and, in turn, using Fish's own arguments to deconstruct Fish himself, Knapp and Michaels, true to their principle of repressing "the theoretical impulse," refuse to offer a theory—or even an antitheory—of their own to account adequately for either the interpretive practices they have partially discussed or those they have implicitly employed. Instead, as seen by their conclusion, they end up calling for the death of theory. Or it might be more appropriate to say that they retreat from the sublime abyss (or is it the revisionary void?) and offer to the poor pathetic figure of the literary theorist a good old hefty, Anglo-Saxon broad sword upon which to fall: "Despite his explicit disclaimers, [Fish] thinks a true account of belief must be a *theory* about belief, whereas we think a true account of belief can only be a *belief* about belief" (p. 740).

This ironic spectacle of "the self-dispatching genius," quite explicit here, is now being staged repeatedly throughout the profession, with more or less subtlety, for other theorists by their former students and allies.[7] I point to this development not to blame or to praise anyone. Nor am I interested in the phenomenon as a clue to new trends in intellectual fashions. Rather, I find this recent oppositon to theory representative of the manner in which the revisionary imagination operates generally in our "post-modern" culture. That is, it exhausts, virtually as it opens up, those all-too-briefly viable alternatives of intellectual production outside the normal range of conventional procedures. In light of this ironic style of the revisionary imagination, I want to propose a deliberately dramatic analogy between revisionism and madness, a self-mocking "theory" of their mutually penetrating interplay. I do so not so much to explain Knapp and Michaels or others away as to offer provocation in return. What follows, then, is meant to be taken as a caricature of the revisionary imagination of American literary theorists.

6. Whether or not Knapp and Michaels' argument against Fish is at all plausible is not my concern. I suspect that he will take care of his own defense.

7. For one of the best discussions of this recent development, see Paul A. Bové, "Intellectuals at War: Michel Foucault and the Analytics of Power," in a forthcoming issue of *Sub-stance*. Bové analyzes Said's recent criticism of Michel Foucault (see n. 1) as a representative case.

2

Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* characterizes madness as a traumatic derangement of the memory. In so doing, he provides us with a useful analogy for the more extreme forms of the revisionary imagination as they appear throughout modern culture. The madman, according to the great pessimist, remembers the past only in a highly selective, discontinuous manner, while the future appears to him as a looming blank. Ironically enough, the present appears to him more or less exactly as it does to the rest of us. As a result of his memory lapses, the madman must invent an illusory continuity for himself and an illusory context for everyone else, a textual identity and a textual world, essentially metaphorical and associative in nature and wholly rhetorical in effect. As he fills up the gaps in his memory with consoling or terrifying fictions and presses them into service, the madman begins to take these unsuccessful transfigurations of certain unbearable aspects of an irrational reality for "truthful" (i.e., "pragmatically" useful) representations of a (to him) ultimately comprehensible world. Such mad inventions quickly fall into one of two basic pathological categories: that of the melancholic's ruling obsession or fixed idea; or that of the maniac's or fool's purely random improvisations. "The madman," Schopenhauer remarks, "always carries about in his faculty of reason a past in the abstract, but it is a false past that exists for him alone, and that either all the time or merely for the moment. The influence of this false past then prevents the use of the correctly known present."[8] Like Freud after him, Schopenhauer traces in psychological terms a mode of interpretive activity that informs the shape and significance of critical practices.

One could argue, then, that each would-be revisionist structures his reading of a particular precursor or of an entire tradition of precursors in such a way as to suggest that at a certain point in the precursor's writing career or in the development of a tradition, he or the tradition went wrong and started to resemble Schopenhauer's madman.[9] That is, the precursor or tradition begins to become, for the revisionist, a dangerously destructive, even self-destructive, influence that either cannot be contained or rehabilitated without resorting to exorbitant, even violent, interpretive measures.

Thus the more systematic and theoretical the revisionist, the more he appears to be like the chronically anxious melancholic trotting out his master obsession at every opportunity so as to provoke and then ward

8. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols. (New York, 1966), 1:193.

9. Bloom's revisionary theory of the anxiety of influence is the closest contemporary notion, as Bloom himself knows; see esp. his *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, Conn., 1976).

off another saving attack of his self-defining anxiety. The more practically oriented "pluralistic" interpreter, who makes the most of all critical means, would accordingly become the pure fool or jolly maniac. And, of course, one can imagine some really "disturbed" critic, with little or no identity of his own—a monster of deconstructive irony, moving "playfully" between these dialectical extremes. In any event, no matter how one construes the underlying conditions for this process—whether in figures drawn from individual psychology, communal ideology, economic theory and practice, or the various histories of institutions, disciplines, and cultures—the textual consequences and the rhetorical effects appear to be the same: in case after case, the critical reader witnesses in the revisionist's text the past being condemned in the name of an enlightened ideal of "liberation" or "sanity" that is to be fully realized in some future time; this ideal, humanistic, even utopian in its dimensions, is derived by the revisionist from what are, ironically enough, essentially literary images lifted out of an even earlier fabulous or mythic past.[10] In other, more metaphorical words, the dialectic of modern revisionism runs the gamut from Don Quixote inflation to Sancho Panza reduction and back again, without any apparent end in sight. In Nietzsche's prophetic words from *Zarathustra,* words which as sublime parody illustrate perfectly both the pattern I have described and the appropriate attitude to it, "Not only the reason of millennia, but their madness, too, breaks out in us."[11]

I don't think that the point has to be belabored. In "Against Theory" Knapp and Michaels, no matter what their intentions, act rhetorically like so many others these days, in a manner that suggests Schopenhauer's understanding of madness as a systematic derangement of the memory. Knapp and Michaels selectively recall portions of texts by Juhl, de Man, and Fish and fill in the gaps between them with their own cleverly argued inventions, drawn from various incompatible and generally unnamed sources (Gadamer, Foucault, Bloom, etc.), all so that they can point out exactly where the critical theorist repeatedly goes wrong. In this way they can make a "valid" call for him to close up shop. What they have done, in order to triumph over their tradition, is to revise it into oblivion.[12] But their triumph is a hollow one, since in place of it they offer only the same old spectacle of critical practice we have known for years. It is as if in fulfilling the dialectical pattern of re-

10. For a discussion of this dialectic of revisionism as it works itself out in deconstructive and Marxist critical texts, see my review of *The Political Unconscious* by Fredric Jameson and *Saving the Text* by Geoffrey Hartman, "The Ideology of Romance," *Comparative Literature* 23 (Summer 1982): 381–89.

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, The Portable Nietzsche,* trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1954), p. 189.

12. For a further analysis of this self-destructive psychology, see my "The Prophet of Our Laughter: Or Nietzsche as—Educator?," *Boundary 2* 9 (Spring-Fall 1981): 1–19.

visionary interpretation, by playing in their essay the Panzaic critics to the entire tradition of Quixotic theorists, Knapp and Michaels have destroyed the world of their fathers, only to return us to that of our grandfathers, the world of the New Critics and the gentleman-scholars of literary history (that is, the world of true belief par excellence, before the advent of Northrop Frye). The irony of such a fulfillment is, of course, Knapp and Michaels would not fit into such a world.[13]

The effect of their polemic is that it leaves the field open to the long-established and well-heeled, native American, fly-by-the-seat-of-one's-pants critical pragmatists and know-nothings, who have been waiting in the wings ever since the late sixties for such boring annoyances as critical theory, feminism, affirmative action programs, and so forth to disappear; we then can go back to doing business as usual, waging our polite and sensible battles over the sources and significances of some line in Pound's *Pisan Cantos* or Joyce's manuscript drafts of *Finnegans Wake*.[14] I am not saying that Knapp and Michaels consciously intend, as Richard Rorty apparently does, to take us back to John Dewey, William James, and "Ol' Virginie," only that the effect of their argument, especially on students, is likely to make unavailable, or at least less attractive and ever so much more difficult, a career option that has only recently been introduced in the profession and that has been so strenuously fought for—namely, doing critical theory.[15] It is almost as if the attitude informing their essay were: "Well, we are making places for ourselves, so the hell with all those coming after us." But perhaps this is too harsh a characterization, and their attitude would be better characterized as that of a latter-day Samson in the temple of his enemies, blind, self-destructively powerful, and full of the Lord's righteous anger at all the degradation he senses around (and in) him. I suppose, however, that whether the antitheoretical impulse underlying the essay is cynical or moral makes little practical difference. For the rhetorical effect is essentially nihilistic, and so even in the best possible light the essay aids and comforts the champions of the status quo.

Yet even this conclusion would not be so bad. After all, we have been living so long with one apocalyptic nihilism after another appearing in our culture that one more hardly seems to matter. The problem with Knapp and Michaels' argument lies in its antidemocratic, genius-will-out assumption that one can just do criticism. What they fail to realize is that by clearing the air of theory they have also taken away from students the

13. Their continued interest in questions of theoretical implication suggests as much. This seems especially true of Michaels; see, e.g., his "Is There a Politics of Interpretation?," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 248–58.

14. For the most succinct history of recent criticism, see A. Walton Litz, "Literary Criticism," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing,* ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 51–83.

15. For the most virulent form of this return to the American pragmatist tradition of thought, see Bloom, *Agon,* pp. 38–41.

means necessary to do criticism at all. They fail to realize, in other words, that the primary function of critical theory is not to make the theorist king of the hill but to submit to others for evaluation models for doing criticism. The questions of intention and meaning, of knowledge and belief, do not center around the possibility of apocalyptically envisioning an absolute vantage point separated from critical practice. The critical theorist need not aspire to become the pope, nor need he be seen as the Antichrist. Theorists' models are always experimental, "proved," if that is the right word, by the fact that they aid in getting certain kinds of intellectual work done. (And only some form of "truth" or effective knowledge can ever provide such aid.)[16] While we may want to quarrel with a particular model, as long as we are engaged in teaching students how to read and understand texts, then we must provide them with models of critical activity that they can assimilate and learn to execute successfully, with the ultimate sign of success being, of course, the student's production of his or her own more workable model. At the very least, we must provide students with a style of intellectual production that they can admire and find morally satisfying.

The question, however, is not primarily one of educational self-interest—that to stay in the big business of higher education we need to do certain things to maximize our position vis-à-vis the sciences. Rather, the question is more broadly educational. Given that we have a certain number of students who are still committed to the study of literature and its relations to the entire range of cultural production, how do we meet our responsibilities to service their needs and to reinforce that commitment? Do we attempt, in short, to preserve, develop, and enlarge their access to all the means whereby they can express and establish themselves as critical thinkers in their chosen vocation? Or do we allow the nihilistic implications of theory to combine with the economic fiats coming from Washington, the various state capitals, and college administration offices to destroy the profession by reducing the study of literature to an adjunct of the teaching of composition? Shouldn't we try to defend the profession or, if not, propose viable alternatives to it? It is all too easy today to succumb to cynicism and despair or, worst of all, to become reconciled to the silly spectacle of professional opportunists, old and young alike, anxious for their careers, perpetually jockeying for position, just like a bunch of drones buzzing around their one and only queen.

3

What, then, should the critic do? What is the critic's role? What ought it to be? What can it be? To begin to answer such questions, I want

16. That this notion betrays a lingering realist theory of truth I freely confess.

to examine now the interpretive practices of two of our most influential critics, Emerson and Frye. By focusing on these figures from the distant and the more recent past, I hope to abstract from the rhetorical strategies in two of their central works those underlying principles of critical activity which may provide us with the basis for a viable model of doing criticism that we can learn to practice for our own collective benefit. My project, then, would be an example of "monumental history" in Nietzsche's sense of the term in "Of the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life." I turn to the past not to find some all-determining overview but rather to recover from other bad times inspiring possibilities of imaginative survival that may be applicable in this time of revisionary nightmares.

The two works by Emerson and Frye are "The Divinity School Address" (1838) and "The Imaginative and the Imaginary" (1962). Both are lectures, given from generally unconventional points of view to potentially hostile audiences composed almost entirely of experts on the topics. Emerson and Frye both attempt to distinguish the principle of authentic creativity in religion and in literature from the degraded conventional forms available in their cultures. And both attempt to convert their audiences to their points of view. To this end, they argue synoptically, ranging widely over the entire sweep of religious and cultural history for their examples, and conclude their performances on an emotional, even prophetic note, as they defend the freely creating mind against the enormous pressures of society, in a valiant attempt to make possible a more enlightened, free, and humane future. In other words, they embrace the dialectic of revisionism, refuse to remain stuck in its reductive phase, and attempt to turn it to their own visionary purposes, against the background of darkening hopes in the times that saw, respectively, the beginnings of the Mexican War and the debacle in Vietnam.

The differences between the pieces are of no less interest. Emerson, of course, eschews all mediating structures standing between the individual soul and its visionary prospects as he separates the true religion of moral sentiment from its fallen embodiments in historical creeds, including that of Christianity. In trying to convert his audience of newly ordained Unitarian ministers to his "doctrine of the soul," Emerson condemns as preposterous impositions all the dogmas, rites, and traditional practices to which these young ministers plan to devote their lives. For Emerson, such degraded and degrading forms encourage a self-defeating imitation of outworn practices. For this reason he admonishes his audience, in a more radical fashion than even his heirs Knapp and Michaels do, "to go alone; to refuse the good models. . . . Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it because it was natural to him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator something else is natural, and he

bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's."[17] Following from this radical advice ("dare to love God," he also enjoins us, "without mediator or veil"), Emerson concludes that not even a new religion can be efficacious, since one cult more or less makes little difference (p. 81). All cults are gratuitous obstacles to the freely creating soul, that genius of the race that acts through the genius of individual men. Only the new Teacher of the venerable but always fresh doctrine of the soul can make a real difference. For only such a Teacher will be able to unite in his visionary oracles the various fragments of the religious and scientific cultures of Emerson's time:

> The question returns, What shall we do?
>
> > I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty which ravished the souls of those Eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also. . . . I look for the new Teacher that shall follow so far those shining laws that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy. [Pp. 82, 84]

Emerson would thus complete and make whole the fragmentary oracles of past beauty by replacing the educational apparatuses of American institutions with this immediate vision of spiritual reality, a vision which the inspiring presence of the prophetic Teacher, who glows with truth, will represent in the minds of his auditors.

Frye, on the other hand, not only concedes to his psychiatric audience an important mediating role (they help the suffering individual adjust to the harsh realities of social life), but he assumes that all institutional operatives should ideally stand in a similar position. Unlike Emerson, who proposes his antinomian, radically revisionary doctrine of the freely creating soul, Frye barely sketches in but nonetheless heavily relies on the solid "doctrinal" basis of his theoretical system as adumbrated in the *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). In fact, as he traces the development of Renaissance literary notions of melancholy and mania to the psychoanalytic complexes of anxiety neurosis and mass hysteria, one observes how his own essay repeats in miniature the major visionary theme and form of the larger, genially satiric work. Finally, Frye turns not to the idea of a prophetic educator who will radiate a new vision of health and spiritual freedom but to the implicitly moral visions embedded in two canonical texts, *Don Quixote* and *The Prelude,* visions so subtle

17. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Selected Writings,* ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York, 1968), p. 81; all further references to this work will be included in the text.

and refined that only the discerning if self-effacing literary critic can make them manifest to others, thanks to his powerful historical memory. The critic is able to discern and then teach others to discern "the solid core of moral reality in the middle of [Don Quixote's] fantasy that holds the loyalty not only of Sancho but of the readers of his adventures."[18] Thus, the critic enables us to recover "the child's vision" of "a golden age," "something that makes Quixotes of us all, and gives our minds, too, whatever dignity they may possess" (p. 165). Similarly, it is the critic in Wordsworth that can read in his dream of the "semi-Quixote," who flees from "some unimaginable catastrophe" while carrying a stone and a shell that are also books representative of words and numbers, a parable of the plight facing any imaginative person living in apocalyptic times. Wordsworth's semi-Quixote bears the emblems of "the two great instruments that man has invented for transforming reality" (p. 166). That is, the critic, like the fictional visionary, must seek to preserve human culture, no matter what the odds.

Frye concludes his lecture by endorsing and updating Wordsworth's remarkable vision of the semi-Quixote in order to win over his audience of tough-minded psychiatrists. First, Frye quotes Wordsworth as the latter testifies to having realized how much akin to this Don Quixote figure he actually is, how fully he identifies with "a Being thus employ'd." Wordsworth goes on to say that given a similar intimation of apocalypse he could go upon "like errand," leaving all else behind and come to share completely in "that maniac's anxiousness." Second, Frye rounds out his elucidating commentary on the apparently apocalyptic vagaries of the visionary imagination by revising Wordsworth and Cervantes and making them appropriate for our time: "Perhaps in the age of the useless bomb-shelter it may be easier for us than it was even for Wordsworth to understand that if the human race is to have any future at all, it can only obtain it through a concern for preserving its powers of creation which it will be difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish clearly from a 'Maniac's anxiousness' " (pp. 165–66). Subtly, carefully, Frye insinuates into the mind of his audience this possible distinction between the authentically creative visions of the truly imaginative creator and the anxiety-ridden phantasmagoria of the neurotic, only to end up suggesting that, given such an age as ours, so literally apocalyptic, this distinction, so important to preserve, may turn out to be moot, as the visions of the creator and the nightmares of the madman come to seem, to neither's benefit, in the glittering shadow of the mushroom cloud, identically eerie.[19]

The differences between Emerson and Frye could not be any more striking than in their conclusions. Emerson stands proudly at the begin-

18. Northrop Frye, "The Imaginative and the Imaginary," *Fables of Identity* (New York, 1963), p. 165; all further references to this work will be included in the text.

19. Frye, of course, not only "lowers" vision to the position of madness here, he also "raises" the torments of the madman to the heights of vision—or at the least leaves the question in suspense.

ning of the historical processes which formed the institution of literary study, and he freely projects his prophetic image of the Teacher to come, the Messiah figure to whom he sees himself as precursor.[20] This quite open self-portrayal accounts for the self-conscious circular structure of his talk. For what at the end of the lecture he predicts for the Teacher, he himself has already partially fulfilled in his rhapsodic, biblical-sounding opening:

> In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. . . . One is constrained to respect the perfection of this world in which our senses converse. How wide; how rich; what invitation from every property it gives to every faculty of man! . . . it is well worth the pith and heart of great men to subdue and enjoy it. The planters, the mechanics, the inventors, the astronomers, the builders of cities, and the captains, history delights to honor. [P. 67]

Clearly, Emerson is doing here what he calls for at the end of his talk and creating a vision, apparently like that of the Hebrew prophets, which, in uniting the laws of the spirit with those of matter, goes much further than any biblical precedent. In short, Emerson structures his performance as a self-fulfilling prophecy by playing Christ to his own John the Baptist.[21]

Everything crucial about Emerson's lecture is in the Protestant, Romantic, visionary tradition; and everything crucial about Frye's lecture fits the Anglo-Catholic, commonsensical, modernist tradition of criticism.[22] Whereas Emerson not only sounds like a prophet and projects himself as the precursor of the new, strangely sensual, and materialistic Messiah to come, Frye not only sounds like a professional academic but projects himself as the Sancho Panza–like appreciator (rather than denigrator) of all the semi-Quixotes in our Western literary tradition:

> In Part Two of the book, Quixote and Sancho come into the dominions of a duke who has read Part One, and who, to amuse

20. The materialistic and imperialistic overtones of this entire passage are quite striking. Space prohibits, however, further discussion.

21. That Walt Whitman came along to interrupt this romance of interpretation is one of those accidents of literary history that one must be grateful for.

22. Totalizer that Frye is, it is not surprising that he should work within the reserved, neoclassical prose idiom of Samuel Johnson, Matthew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot in order to revive the Romantic tradition.

> himself, makes Sancho the governor of an island. We are perhaps less surprised than he to learn that Sancho rules his island so honestly and efficiently that he has to be pulled out of office in a hurry before he starts to disintegrate the Spanish aristocracy. We are even less surprised to find that Quixote's advice to him is full of gentle and shrewd good sense. The world is still looking for that lost island, and it still asks for nothing better than to have Sancho Panza for its ruler and Don Quixote for his honoured counsellor. [Pp. 165–66]

If Frye in his more genial manner would play, as do Knapp and Michaels in their reductive fashion, Sancho Panza to all our quixotic visionaries, he must know that he appears to his audience of plain honest men like the "honoured counsellor" in his reading of *Don Quixote*. Frye's sense of his possible self-images and of his audience's possible self-recognitions is every bit as powerful and acute as Emerson's, only in a different register—that of critical irony rather than that of the critical sublime. Such self-conscious art unites Emerson and Frye, despite the differences previously underlined.

In fact these works now begin to resemble each other again. When Emerson adopts the prophetic mode and strikes the heroic stance as he points to the early version of the central man trope, he stresses how this new Teacher is to be incarnated in his own texts by means of the self-fulfilling circular structure of his talk. Similarly Frye, although he adopts the plain-speaking mode and strikes an ironic posture, also points to a great facilitator of the moral vision now implicit in literary texts—that reflexive critic who is cut, subliminally at least, in the minds of his auditors as they attempt to follow his authoritative citations and interpretations of texts not immediately available to everyone's memory. My point is not, however, that Emerson and Frye are the same and that both of them are touched in the head because, à la Knapp and Michaels, they set themselves up as hermeneutic gods; nor is it that Frye fulfills Emerson's prophecy of the new Teacher and Knapp and Michaels fulfill Frye's worst fears concerning a "Maniac's anxiousness"; rather, what I hope to suggest by comparing Emerson and Frye is that some experimental, yes, even "theoretical," generalizations about their practices can be made, generalizations that could suggest the outlines of a model of doing criticism that one could characterize—good heavens!—as rational and affirmative.

4

But can one really abstract common critical principles from these related but also very different works? Naturally, I believe that one can.

As far as I can see, there are six such principles of critical activity.[23] I term the first one "the principle of opposition." Whatever the religious, political, or aesthetic ideology of the critic, he should strive to maintain an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the dominant conventions in his discipline and, more generally, in his society. This principle should not be implemented blindly, of course, nor in a reflexlike manner. The critic's opposition must arise from the particular situation of the profession. Consider, for example, how Emerson confronts directly the bankruptcy of the clerisy with his doctrine of the freely creating soul, a prophetic provocation, as it were. Or take Frye. He patiently and wittily traces the origins of psychoanalysis back to its roots in the literary imagination and so disarms in advance the audience's potential critique of literature. In both cases the critic opposes the specter of historical or psychological determinism in behalf of the human imagination. Such a stance must continue to be adopted given the various determinisms of the Right and the Left, of the old guard and the deconstructive cutting edge.

My second principle is that of "accommodation." It follows naturally from the first. It requires the critic, in turning to past or future for inspiration, to address directly and honestly, without the coy evasions of self-conscious irony, the intellectual needs of the interpretive community. Frye, for instance, gives his lecture in 1962 amidst the bomb-shelter craze, a time that saw not only the beginnings of American escalation in Vietnam but, as well, the Cuban missile crisis. This background explains, in part, Frye's manner of updating the moral vision embedded in the texts of Wordsworth and Cervantes.[24] Frye accommodates the vision of these texts and the situation of his time to one other. Similarly, Emerson enunciates his "doctrine of the soul"—that there are immutable spiritual laws arising out of man's moral nature that can make prophets of us all—in order to rouse his audience from its dogmatic or cynical slumber. Thus, the principle of accommodation means more than just topicality. It means, as well, that the critic must attempt to comprehend in as systematic a fashion as possible the relationship between his profession and the needs of the community at large, a task that one could argue defines the theoretical enterprise Knapp and Michaels want to bring to an end.

The third principle is "the principle of judgment." However difficult it may seem today to draw any hard-and-fast distinctions between the authentically creative imagination and the merely conventional, degraded, or empty form, the critic must make the attempt, especially if he is going to ask others to devote their lives to a vocation dedicated to the appreciation and analysis of cultural productions. If the

23. That Bloom's revisionary ratios also total six in number is, I believe, no accident.

24. I prefer to use the weak term "updating" instead of "revising" because what is involved is not a willful misreading and distortion of the text but the use of the inherent semantic indeterminacy (usually, quite limited) of any text for topical purposes.

last principle is crucial to the theoretical enterprise, then this one is crucial to the practice of criticism. Even Emerson, for all his antinomianism, does not ask his audience to abandon Christianity in despair or to found a new religion. Rather he enjoins them to infuse the old forms with the new spirit of his doctrine of the soul. Similarly, although Frye claims that it may become increasingly difficult to distinguish a maniac's anxiousness from creative energy, he does not propose to stop trying to do so, as the title of his piece indicates.

The fourth principle, that of "programmatic action," means that whether the critic points to the living examples of particular individuals or holds up models of a critical system, he ought to propose some program of intellectual activity, no matter how experimental, provisional, or revisionary. This principle is obviously the hardest to define to everyone's satisfaction. But given the examples of Emerson and Frye, let me attempt to speculate on some practical suggestions. Both Emerson and Frye in their talks provide occasions for what in "Spiritual Laws" Emerson calls our moments of "revisal" or "correction." These are "epochs of our life" in which "a silent thought by the wayside as we walk . . . revises our entire manner of life and says—'Thus hast thou done, but it were better thus' " (p. 206). In other words, Emerson and Frye act on our imagination in a way that calls us to judgment. They suggest why we must convert to a faith in the creative power of the human imagination. Whether or not we can summon up the will for such a faith is an open question.

The fifth principle, that of "formal self-effacement," means that no matter how obviously or subtly one presents oneself as either a cultural Messiah or a plain honest man ("one of us"), the critic should subordinate the impulse to promote himself to the larger communicable vision he is proposing for critical evaluation. On the face of it, this principle would seem to be the one that needs little or no comment. We all detest the critic who encourages a cult of personality to spring up around him, no matter what kind of cult or personality may be involved. Both the later Eliot's studied modesty and Bloom's chronic afflatus often detract from the fine points they would make.[25] Neither Emerson nor Frye, despite their self-projections, seems like either the sly priest with an insidious doctrine to insinuate or the great man with the big voice. However one sees their textual identities, Emerson and Frye put themselves forward as heralds of a positive vision of spiritual laws and imaginative creation. They are trying to articulate a vision for their particular communities. Their styles, which facilitate rather than frustrate communication, testify to this motivation. But their representative status

25. Clearly I recognize the powerful self-projections in both Emerson and Frye. However, such self-displays do not appear to be the primary motivating factor.

does not depend solely on the authority of their styles. Rather it depends as much, perhaps more, on the quality and care that their styles reveal.

Finally, the sixth principle is that of "self-revision." However unpropitious the times, however alike he makes critical idealism and critical nihilism seem, the critic should try to ground the education of his students on a heuristic or regulative ideal of critical activity that can lead them out of their apprenticeship to any particular system or methodology into their scholarly maturity so they may become the originators of their own stances and accommodating theories.[26] Recall Emerson and Frye once again. They do not turn against the soul or the imagination, nor even against the ministry or the profession of psychiatry, simply because the age seems to demand an ironic image of its accelerated grimace. Instead they critique the present decadence in the name of an intentionally open-ended, admittedly prophetic vision of human potential, a vision clearly derived from the cultural past. That is, they too practice monumental history in Nietzsche's sense and take the risk that their "modest proposals" *for* something might also make them seem eligible, in some people's eyes, for the madhouse.

I offer these six principles in barest outline. I do so not simply for provocation's sake. The profession is in horrible shape, and we must begin addressing the situation seriously. If you were a graduate student now and had just finished reading "Against Theory," would you willingly choose to belong to a profession that appears to be openly and irremediably nihilistic? Whoever *did* enter the profession would help to turn it into a haven for the hopelessly neurotic, at best, or, at worst, an asylum for the purely pathological. And unless one has some perverse, self-destructive need to play (whether intentionally or not) Sancho Panza to one's own Don Quixote, or Emerson of "Experience" to Emerson of "Self-Reliance," or even Knapp and Michaels to their own Fish, the question of the function of criticism at the present time demands to be treated and not left to the sublime cynicism of Schopenhauer or any of his belated avatars: "The mind, tormented so greatly, destroys, as it were, the thread of its memory, fills up the gaps with fictions, and thus seeks refuge in madness from the mental suffering that exceeds its strength, just as a limb affected by mortification is cut off and replaced with a wooden one."[27] Could it be, I wonder, as Schopenhauer's remarks ironically suggest, that what, for the sake of argument, one can fairly characterize as revisionary madness could also be seen as an uncanny

26. With this latter qualification, I believe that I avoid the risk of simply repeating the revisionary pattern previously discussed, at least as it works itself out in such essays as "Against Theory." Without offering a vision of their own to replace theory, Knapp and Michaels can more easily be assimilated by the old guard, who do have a certain vision of what the future of literary criticism and theory should be.

27. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation,* 1:193.

restoration to health? Could it be that our profession had to go through its deconstructive phase in order to begin over again, what was apparently lost in New Critical method having been supplemented by even more powerful interpretive techniques grafted from continental sources? Would this mean that the critic best embodies Freud's image from *Civilization and Its Discontents* of man as a prosthetic god? Or does this mean only that the would-be revisionist who entertains such a vision is possessed by a "gaiety transfiguring all that dread," because he may soon become as plainly mad as the next university don?[28]

28. W. B. Yeats, "Lapis Lazuli," *The Collected Poems* (New York, 1956), p. 292.