The Institution of Theory

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In May 1991, I delivered a set of three lectures at the Institute of American Culture (later renamed the Institute of European and American Studies) of the Academia Sinica, Taipei, Republic of China, Taiwan. I later converted my informal presentations into essay form for publication as a book by the institute for distribution in Taiwan. It bore the title *The Ideological Imperative: Repression and Resistance in Recent American Theory* (1993).

The invitation I originally received from the institute had asked me to speak on the rise of theory to institutional status in the United States, as well as the current state of that theory. Because so much of my career was dedicated to institutionalizing theory in the university, I had to acknowledge that my role in stimulating its rise made me an obvious candidate to undertake this report. In my lectures I tried to respond to what the invitation specified, tailoring my remarks to an audience from a distant culture, though one that had access to Western publications and was well informed.

My subsequent decision, made with the aid of good advice from the Johns Hopkins University Press and its editor-in-chief, Eric Halpern, to adapt these lectures into a book for a Western audience has led to significant transformations in the materials and the argument. I have thoroughly rewritten and expanded the three major chapters, inverting the order of two of them for the sake of what I now see as a developing, unified presentation; and I have added an epilogue, what I call a hortatory conclusion, to complete my summary of the paths that have led to the current state of theory as an institution, balancing our gains and losses in its attaining that state, and casting a wistful—I do not quite
dare say hopeful—glance toward its future, while conceding the threats presently being leveled at theory's very authority to function.

Although I have made many changes and additions in bringing this volume across the Pacific, I have tried to preserve what I saw in Taipei as the general, that is, nontechnical, nature of its appeal. I must confess to enjoying the opportunity to indulge myself in these observations and their accompanying pronouncements about these past four decades, during which I have been an active participant in the growth of theory into a formidable institution, even perhaps in its decline during what may well be these post-theoretical days. In the past decade we have witnessed the polarization of almost all discourse concerning the humanities, as even moderate statements have been charged with being representatives of one extreme or the other. Despite this risk, I decided to add another more moderate voice, my own, in hopes of attracting a balanced, good-will response—one that would encourage the expansion of our range of texts and our ways of treating them, such as we have seen during the past two decades, while still recognizing and responding to the special powers of the literary text to help keep us and our culture—or should I not today say our cultures?—open to such an expansion of vision.

So I have tried to maintain the character of this treatise as a brief and direct statement, without burdening that statement with more than a few references to authors and works. There are of course many, probably too many, critical and theoretical movements that I have had to discuss or mention in passing. In order to distinguish their programs clearly for the reader as theoretical movements that have been accorded special names, I have consistently marked them by introducing each of their titles with a capital letter, even though in most instances doing so runs counter to the usual practice.

I have used rather interchangeably the terms or phrases literature, poetic fiction, fictional text, and literary text to signify what, following Aristotle, the history of literary criticism has termed poetry—of course, without restricting it to works written in verse. Indeed, I do not mean the reference of these terms to be restricted to any officially designated genres. Rather, I mean by them any text to which a reader attributes a fictional func-
tion, which a reader “intends” as a fiction in Aristotle’s sense. This definition, generated out of reader reception, will include ostensibly nonfictional texts, as well as those that more obviously belong in it—although any of them may be read with or without being taken as “poetry.”

I again thank the director and the staff of the Institute for European and American Studies in Taipei—especially Dr. Shan Te-hsing—as well as the receptive audiences they provided, for creating the occasion that sponsored the original lectures and encouraged their further development. And, as always, I am deeply grateful to my wife, Joan, who is my toughest and best audience.