The Institution of Theory
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In examining the process of creating academic institutions, I will be dealing with the relations between theoretical concepts and the development of operational university structures. More bluntly, I will be exploring the intellectual accompaniments to, and the intellectual consequences of, academic politics. There is a politics at work, for better or for worse, in the creation of institutions within the university; and the career of important ideas is to a great extent dependent upon what the institutional forces will permit. We have therefore in recent years been witnessing in the United States an intense struggle among a great variety of ideas to get footholds in those academic establishments that might permit them, first, to exist at all, even in a minor way, and, as a next step, to foster institutional structures that would be expected to encourage them to flourish. This continuing struggle creates an unusual situation in the history of the academy in the United States, and I intend to pursue it in these chapters.

When I delivered the original version of these observations at the Institute of American Culture of the Academia Sinica in Taipei, I could not help remarking that my host institute was a general—by which I meant a multidisciplinary—organization.¹ Such an interdisciplinary notion, still seen as somewhat revolutionary, would frighten, and has seriously begun to frighten, those deeply entrenched elements that still are the principal shapers of the humanistic institutions within the academy in the United States.

That academy continues to trace its roots to the nineteenth-century German model for organizing university structures, based on careful distinctions among the disciplines. Still recog-
nizable in this conservative model is the conception of the so-called liberal arts inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Prussian education minister and disciple of Immanuel Kant, who is to some degree the source of what we think of as the modern university, with its carefully demarcated divisions within the human sciences. In academic administrations and among many faculty in the United States, one can even now observe a steadfast attempt to hold onto the distinctness of the agreed-upon disciplines without seriously questioning their authority.

For example, one longstanding effort to loosen that rigidity was the development, some decades back, of what then were new interdisciplinary programs of comparative literature, which, after overcoming many attempts to discredit them, were finally admitted into the federation of disciplines we call the humanities. But this newly accredited hybrid, comparative literature, was, after all, only limitedly interdisciplinary, restricted as it was to literature, and to a few Western literatures at that. So, however hard comparative literature had to fight to gain general acceptance, it scarcely represented a radical concession to interdisciplinarity, at least as we look back upon it from our present institutional climate.

This traditional academic need for disciplinary security has not wanted its exclusionary definitions to be questioned, but assumes each of the disciplines has its own boundaries, which have been imposed upon them as if they were essential distinctions created by “nature” instead of by a limited philosophic line generated from the Aristotelian to the nineteenth-century German academy. Recent theoretical perspectives have reminded us that, as the development of too many societies has demonstrated, firm distinctions that have been confidently proclaimed as “natural” are later revealed as tremulous indeed, as no more than the projections of a very uncertain but power-driven set of human institutions that insist upon a certainty produced by ethnic and gendered and sociopolitical precommitments.

I want here to trace some of the history leading to the tensions within the American academy that I have begun to describe. Looked at from afar, some very strange things seem to have been going on recently: in some quarters a radical threatening of boundaries that seemed so solidly established, and in
others a resistance, just as radical, against such threats. Institutional conflicts like these confuse us in other ways, too, as we seek to determine what they mean for the future of humanities and how they affect the recent ascendancy of theory as a shaping force within that future.

These recent developments may be viewed as having promising consequences for interdisciplinary and intercultural studies and thus for a newly broadened view of the humanities; yet they may also be viewed as having potentially destructive consequences for what we used to think of as the humanistic dimension of those same humanities. Further, these developments may be seen as resulting from the total triumph of the newest versions of literary and critical theory, while at the same time—and this, too, seems contradictory—they may also be seen as producing an end to theory, at least to theory as we have known it. This strange state of affairs, this set of recently visible contradictions, is not easy to straighten out, though I intend here to do what I can.

In the United States today it is difficult to recall that, not so many years ago—as late as just after World War II—in our universities neither literary theory nor even literary criticism was permitted to have a recognized role within either the literature or the broader humanities curriculum. For a variety of reasons, what was then called literary history—by which was meant the study of different historical periods and their total formative power to shape, first, literary “movements” and from them the interpretation of individual texts—was looked upon as the sole guardian over the discipline of literary study in any of the major Western literatures. I say it is hard to believe because today, within literature and the humanities, theory—as distinguished from, if not opposed to, history—has become not only an institution but also a potentially dominant institution, one that now threatens to reshape all the disciplines and indeed the very nature of what we think of the humanities themselves, though at the cost of, or perhaps with the express purpose of, driving literature itself (as we have known it) out of business. Strangely, this dominant role of theory persists even as theory itself has of late become threatened by the resurrection of history as a controlling force.
As one who some time back played a role in the systematic invasion of literature departments by theoretical concerns, I concede that I have a personal as well as a professional stake in this turnaround. More than once, people have approached me in recent years and said, in effect, “Look what you started! How do you like your monsters now?” And there are moments when I confess to feeling a bit like the sorcerer in *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, who, as all the brooms come marching, no longer under any control and in numbers that can no longer be counted, wonders about what he has set in motion and what, consequently, has happened to the house that they were created in order to maintain. Yes, I concede that I was holding onto a fealty to the structure itself, though I wanted it to be commodious enough to contain elements that would subvert—though not quite deconstruct—it. This concession (or confession), I am aware, makes me an instrument of the power structure, which might well be using my aberrations to strengthen itself even as it admits and, indeed, encourages this liberality.

In the 1950s, when the New Criticism had not only invaded but begun to take over literature departments in the United States, universities had to come to terms with the general acknowledgment that we had entered what was called an “age of criticism.” That phrase—and the word *criticism* here meant only literary criticism—was frequently used to describe what had taken place, just as today it is widely suggested that this is an age that is ending, or, more likely, that has already ended.

For many years—indeed, since at least the mid-nineteenth century—many of those speaking for American literature had been working to establish its own special character and its independence from the dominant literature in England or on the Continent. They wanted American literature to be viewed as nourished by its own specially American social roots in its own special ground. This desire was related to the myth about which much has been written—and which I will address at greater length in the next chapter—the myth of America as the New Jerusalem, the home of a collective American Adam, citizen of a new paradise, in its newness and innocence disconnected from the fallen Old World. What the dream of such a society required was the
creation of an indigenous literature that would be true to this unique national destiny.

This kind of thinking was not altogether unlike some of what we hear today from those speaking on behalf of minority and Third World literatures. In the nineteenth-century United States it often led to a criticism that sought to separate what was happening, or should happen, in American literature from whatever had happened anywhere else. There was, then, to be no concern shown for the literary forms, conventions, or sources that had been controlling forces in the long existing tradition of literature in English that in imperialistic fashion would contaminate the literature of the New World. Rather, free of such hangovers, there was to be a continuing attempt to encourage and value only a literature that was responsive to the unique soil of this new, unique civilization. Such a mission meant a commitment to a sociohistorical criticism, which would treat literature as that which directly reflected the special properties of American life. The last thing it needed or wanted was any sort of aesthetic interest, and thus any sort of aesthetic criticism that suggested the refinements of another tradition, whether British or European. So, naturally, the emphasis was seen to fall on sociohistorical and cultural studies, concentrating on the environment as that which produced the character of the authors who produced the literary works.

This exclusive emphasis on historical context pretty well precluded an interest in any theory to guide the reading and interpretation of texts as specially literary, and hence aesthetic, "objects." Consequently most practitioners of what we now think of as the Old Historicism not only ignored theoretical concerns but also were irritated at any attempt to introduce them, little suspecting their own dependence on unquestioned assumptions that, grouped together, might properly be thought of as constituting their theory. And all I mean by "theory" here is the systematic rationalization of a set of guiding assumptions about the text and its relations to its author, its audience, and its culture at large.

As I insist in the next chapter, this was not the only kind of thinking, or criticism, that we find in the United States of the
nineteenth or the earlier twentieth centuries. The aesthetic concerns of British and European traditions since the late eighteenth century also play a major role in the United States, but in the universities, at least through World War II, the historical concern with the social context of literature becomes an increasingly dominant force at the expense of the aesthetic. Ironically, this very tendency was only reinforced by its appeal to the tight philological disciplines disseminated by the German academic tradition as it applied "the higher criticism" to literary study. In this way European styles were indeed being invoked, though only because they could validate the native desire to permit Americans to argue for that kind of study which could reveal the special organic growth that their soil could alone cultivate. And the study of other literatures than their own was to be similarly dominated by concerns with biographical and more broadly historical contexts.

This situation in American departments of literature, in which the study of the special properties of the literary art as art, as literature, was de-emphasized, is what young scholars came upon when they returned from the war. Out of their frustration, their reaction against the lack of interest in the literary values of literature and, hence, in what later was referred to as "close reading," arose the rebellion that found its voice in an extra-academic movement, developing since the thirties, that came to be called the New Criticism and that, after the war, invaded and took over the teaching of literature in the universities. The focus now shifted to the literary art as consisting of a special collection of privileged pieces of discourse: all that had been bypassed, or even rejected, in the study of the peculiarly American character of American literature was now to be reasserted. It is well recognized that the New Criticism undermined the historical emphasis and instead sought to find formal and, more precisely, structural principles that could account for the special character of any literary work. Of course, this procedure would hardly single out American literature, but would treat any American text as just another contribution to a cosmopolitan Western tradition, subject to transcultural principles of analysis. The very source of this criticism came out of Europe: out of Russian and Czech Formalism and, earlier, out of the German organicism and the Eng-
lish romanticism that, in the United States, we have come to associate with the name of Coleridge.

The literary was to be a privileged mode of discourse calling for specially devised analytic techniques usable for no other kind of discourse. So the literary text was not to be studied for its relations to its origins. The politics of criticism had now turned from the attempt to relate the author to a rootedness in a personal and cultural environment or to any of the historical facts of the text's genesis, in order to concentrate on the formal internal interrelations that could account for the power of a literary work, as literary, to affect its audience. This way of reading the text could, in addition, help establish the claim for a theoretical structure of universal reading principles that might be then applied to other similar texts, thereby leading to a general theory of how to read all such texts.

Literary criticism was moving toward literary theory. It was moving from the study of a text to be read to a text that should be read closely and analytically to reveal its underlying structure and then, beyond, to reveal the relations between that structure and others in order for us to generate a theory of literary texts that could account for their literariness, that which makes them different from other, presumably nonliterary texts, with that difference to be pressed as strongly as possible. So criticism was to move from the single casual reading of any individual text to a criticism of that reading—that is, to the creation of a privileged or model reading, rationalized by a systematic notion of how such readings should be done—and from there to a formulation of that system; the formulation, in other words, of a literary theory that could account for such readings and in turn for texts being read in this manner.

In trying to describe the spirit of such criticism, at one time I described this tradition in literary theory as "words about words about words": theoretical words that were to account for the words of the critic that were to account for the words of the literary text itself.2 The procedure moved from a given text to any random reading of it, to an authorized reading of it that was called criticism, and to the authorization for such readings that was called theory. It all used to seem quite simple and inevitable. This cultivation of a special aesthetic domain isolated literary
texts from all other sorts of written texts, isolated literary study from the study performed by other reading disciplines, and thus isolated departments of literature from all the other departments within that collection of disciplines we call the humanities. Yet literature was also licensed to play a unique social role by being granted a special power, a way of functioning and of meaning unavailable to other kinds of texts, which enabled it in its own way to open a culture for its readers.

This was the beginning of literary theory as a professed academic discipline. That is, the New Critics wanted to read in a certain way, wanted to make texts valuable in a certain way, and in the course of doing so discovered that they were reading one text after another in certain authorized ways and that those ways were easily generalized into what passed for a literary theory. But theory as it was practiced by the New Critics had not yet been institutionalized; that is, theory was still not studied for its own sake. Theory, for the New Criticism, was at the service of the literary text; it existed only for the text. It was valued to the extent that it aided in the systematic exploration of that text, both in itself and in relation to its fellow texts. There was at that time a general agreement among the New Critics against treating literary theory as what T. S. Eliot called “an autotelic discipline,” which functioned in order to serve only itself. On the contrary, it was insisted, the purpose of theory was not to be found within itself; instead, it was to serve criticism as criticism was to serve the canon of literary texts, and this service, presumably, was the justification for the interpretation of poetry as an academic activity.

So theory was looked upon as exclusively directed toward practice, toward the literary text—or, more candidly, toward a specified way of reading the literary text. There was to be no theory without immediate practical application, the practice of criticism. Theory required practical application; it was to function as an aid to systematically responsible reading. At the same time it must be conceded that the New Criticism justified what it was doing as having the large, democratic objective of improving the close-reading capacity, the critical-reading capacity, of an entire culture. You were to go to the university, learn the basic analytic methods, and proceed to read the great literary works of your culture in order to be a trained reading citizen, a citizen-reader. The
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justification of literary study and the reading discipline that defined it did not go beyond that social objective.

All theory, then, proceeded from a naively empirical assumption. The text was seen as an objective stimulus, loaded with structures waiting to be perceived and interpreted as such. That interpretation of the present text was similar in kind to others, and together they would constitute a system, a theory that would guide future readings. So one builds up from the particular to the universal, from the individual reading of a single text to the criticism that produces a rationalized or principled reading of that text—how we ought to read it to yield the best interpretive results—to a general theory that enunciates those principles so that we may go on to read other texts that have not yet been read for us this way. Theory was thus conceived as the systematic rationalization of the general presuppositions that underlie the reading of texts as literary texts. Theory begins and ends with those texts in their literary function and lives only for them.

Literary theory, thus defined and used, reinforces disciplinary distinctions and reinforces existing institutions without in any way moving toward creating a new institution for itself. It is not permitted to be freestanding, at least not in the late fifties and early sixties. Nevertheless, it would seem to be inevitable that, once this attitude toward literary texts flourished, the “age of criticism,” as it was called, would gradually be transformed, even if against its will, into the “age of theory.” That is where we have been for some time now, although that is not where critics writing in defense of theory thirty to forty years ago intended us to be. The impulse to theory, to generalization, and to the grouping of our experiences together in accordance with certain rational principles seems—from the commonsensical, empiricist perspective—to be an inevitable impulse. But once that theorizing impulse is let loose, it will, even if gradually, move toward shaking free of its dependence on experience in order to set up shop on its own.

This movement to set up theory as an independent discipline had its beginnings in the United States in the late 1960s, with the help, it must be conceded, of influences blowing across the Atlantic Ocean from France, first from what was called structuralism and later from poststructuralism. This is when theory could be
seen as breaking loose and developing itself as an independent discipline—although, presumably, its function had previously been to act only with respect to individual texts and to be justified only to the extent that it could help, through the criticism it authorized, to illuminate them.

Once freed from that dependence on the readings of literary texts, theory quickly and easily—at times far too easily—moved into interdisciplinary mixtures within the humanities and, more recently, even into the social sciences. Surely without meaning to do so, the New Criticism had opened the door to the independent theorist, a theorist free of texts. Of course, to the extent that it could be persuaded to admit theory at all—if only to justify its own practices—the New Criticism was thinking exclusively of literary theory, little believing that, once admitted, theory would have its own imperialistic impetus and would spread beyond the literary, indeed would subsume the literary. Once the New Criticism had sought to justify its interpretive practices, to generalize those practices by enunciating a theory that called for them, that theory was then out there in all its vulnerability, exposed to the epistemological and semiotic critique that overtook it and encouraged other and opposed theories to be promulgated. As fashions changed, those challenging theories eventually won the competition and in consequence broke through the isolation that the New Criticism had imposed on literary texts and on literature departments alike.

During the years in which the dominance of the New Criticism went largely unchallenged, much internal pressure had been building in reaction against the continual emphasis on the closedness of the individual precious, incomparable literary work that in its self-sufficiency too often seemed to speak to nothing but itself. With the rejection of the New Criticism, newer theories forced literary texts to be opened up to the interests of discourse at large, in all its disciplinary variety, at once humanistic and social-scientific. From that time many older as well as newly developed disciplines have been rushing into the mix, leaving us today with a confused arena of struggle among more wide-ranging humanistic and social theories, but all of them displaying a radically interdisciplinary emphasis, which has completely
reversed the direction in which literary studies had been going and the way in which they would relate to the pursuit of what came to be called the “human sciences,” a phrase that neatly joined the humanities and the social sciences.

The use of the phrase “human sciences” also indicated a shift in the domain of theory that turned out to be a major expansion of it. In assuming that theory, to the extent that it was permitted at all, was restricted to the domain of the literary, the New Critics could even authorize the phrase “critical theory” without conceding that they were moving beyond literature. For their willingness to countenance a “theory of literature” or “literary theory,” which authorized them to read as they wished, could even be extended to a “theory of criticism” or “critical theory,” which was used to validate the superiority of their theory over the others that had preceded theirs over the centuries.³ They could not have expected that this latter phrase, with a different ideological history sponsored by its earlier use by the Frankfurt School, would serve the movement that would obliterate the “literary” in the interest of the an enlarged notion of the “critical.”

For those later theorists who took up the Frankfurt School notion of the “critical” in “critical theory,” the move beyond the New Criticism into the human sciences was accompanied by one principal motive from the time that their notion of theory was out there creating its own arena of debate. Once within that arena, it was inevitable that these newer theories—or newer versions of older theories—would seek to create their own institutionalized projections within the university; and that is what we have seen happening. Their one principal motive was the desire to tear away the privileged—indeed, the sacred—character of the literary, to “demystify” it (to use a favorite word), in order to argue, instead, for the primary force of the politically and historically contingent in both writer and reader.

There had indeed been something absolute and thus immutable in the assumed “objectivity” of the literary text as the New Critics instructed their students to read it, with its structures presumably out there waiting to be discovered. They thought it absolute in its power to override all contingencies: its meanings were universally present for any reader informed enough and
astute enough to uncover them, in accordance with the stern commitment to the "disinterestedness" required by the post-Kantian aesthetic.

The reaction against such a conception by successors to the New Critics championed the return of the historically contingent and, consequently, the return of an interest in the social, economic, and political structures of value preferences that, at any moment in culture, condition how language works, how institutions work, how ideas are being developed and changed. All these create the text as a moving, changing entity, to be read differently at different times, to be conceived as having different meanings for the author as well as the reader from moment to moment. This is indeed the return of the text to the domain of contingency that controls all human activities alike. For well over a decade now critics have been concerned, not about the discovery of literary value, but rather about the socialized process of evaluation—the pressures to which it is responsive—in our different societies at different historical moments.

Consequently, we now must confront the argument that everything that earlier critics had claimed to find in texts, according to what their theories permitted them to interpret, they, like all readers, had themselves put into those texts. That argument runs counter to my earlier description of the empirical order, that naive empirical sequence: the reading of the text, then criticism as the model or privileged way of reading the text, and finally theory as that structure of principles which would allow the authorization of such readings, moving from the particular to the universal. All those so-called objective claims that our infant theorizing had, in uncritical self-confidence, sought to justify were now to be deconstructed along with that theorizing itself, with the effect that the empirical order had to be inverted: the first shall be last. We were made aware of both critical and theoretical circularity in our arguments: the extent to which all the answers proposed by us as literary interpreters were predisposed by the way we framed our questions, which were largely determined by who and what and when we are, and, consequently, by what we, in advance, want and expect our answers to be. This predisposing is what I was assuming when I spoke of the inversion of the empirical se-
quence, because the so-called conclusion determines what we are looking for.

It is in this sense that what would-be empiricist criticism saw as the first now is seen as the last: the reading of the work is determined by the criticism, which is determined by the theory, rather than the other way around. And theory is itself determined by sociopolitical ideology. Thus, questions that turn out to be highly ideological will reveal in advance what, as interpreters, we have been seeking to find; and—lo and behold!—there it is, as we end up finding what we have been searching for; and we invariably do. We always manage to do so in how we read what we read. So our discourse is largely about itself; there may be no greater narcissism than in the delusion that we are seeking disinterestedly to learn about the discourse of another, only to learn that we have discovered the object that our own interests have led us to project.

In these newer theorists there is an acknowledgment, usually more elated than grudging, I fear, that there are no texts out there that are, properly speaking, primary texts, literary texts; no points of origin, when all texts, the poem and the commentary upon the poem, so-called literary and nonliterary texts alike, are similarly intertwined in the web of intertextuality, all controlled by the contingencies of the reader’s preoccupations, primarily ideological, even if subliminally so. Consequently, if I may repeat the by now common argument, we do not first, as innocent readers, experience a text and then move to the interpretation of it and further to the general theory behind that reading, but instead we come loaded in advance with conscious or unconscious notions of what we are looking for, and then we manage to “discover” it.

Those notions serve as our theories, whether incipient or fully formulated, and are from the first in control of what we see and how we see it. The so-called empirical sequence that was to govern our perception—from text to a reading of the text to criticism of the reading to the theory behind the criticism of the reading of the text—that empirical sequence is now seen as a deception, produced by the need to gratify the controlling ideas in us that sponsor what we may think we are perceiving freely. Any theoretical structure comes to be exposed for what it is: a ration-
alization of our preferred way of seeing and judging, preferred for various reasons that have been impressed upon us by any one of the outside pressures that have shaped our seeing. Viewed this way, the entire aesthetic enterprise that was expressed by a text-centered approach like that of the New Criticism came to be reduced to nothing more than the prejudice of a leisure class, which would use this self-interested isolation of art to serve its own gendered, Eurocentric purposes.

In the universal skepticism for which such theorists argue, historical contingency is allowed to produce a theory that would undermine all theorizing except, of course, its own, because it would reduce all theories to their sociopolitical genesis sponsored by the dominant language of their culture, which governs them by means of its prior, subliminal, historically conditioned commitments. This is the primary thrust of various versions of New Historicist theory—whether in its Foucauldian, Marxist, Feminist, or minoritist forms—that have come along and completed the unseating of the New Criticism. It is this radical historicist transformation that throws theory into business for itself, because it is the one theoretical thrust that would preclude all competition. Yet, by its very dedication to historical contingency, in the end it must argue against the need to theorize at all.

According to this recent thinking, several emphases, either singly or in combination, are required of us as interpreters if we are to understand the texts thrown up by the discourses of any culture: first, the primary role of the historically contingent, and second, the constant formative pressures of political power as expressive of class or ethnic or gender power—the power that would authorize the language generated by those whose interests we represent, in contrast to the language of those they would repress. These pressures shape the discourses of criticism and so-called literature alike. To these may be added the impositions of the psychoanalytical, of desire as socialized in discourse, which creates its own projections onto the language that both makes and controls culture. All these work to replace interpretation with a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Because no text is to be seen as innocent in its claim to mean what it says, one should read it only to search for clues to its subtextual agenda emanating from what Fredric Jameson has termed “the political unconscious.”
Consequently, this theory announces the end of any claim to value that is independent of party interest. We must remember that the establishment of value was a major element, if not the principal objective, of the New Critical reading. It was the intention of the New Critics to establish literary value, to establish a canon of literary works that were especially blessed with value—that embodied value—thanks to the verbal manipulations of their author. That is the quest for value that is now at an end; our most influential theorists now urge us, instead, to look into the sociological, psychological, and political processes that prompt the strange action we undertake when we evaluate. We are to study how and why we evaluate, rather than to determine what is worth valuing, what actually contains value, because evaluation merely reflects an imperialistic attempt to impose one’s own prejudices upon others by claiming that the parochial values one supposedly discovers are universal, and universally available.

The circularity of the literary criticism and literary theory of high modernism, together with what is today charged with being its hidden political agenda, was thus unmasked. We came to realize that the confidence in the practice of previous literary criticism was, in circular fashion, backed by a theory that was developed solely in order to justify that criticism in its commitment to unlock for any reader the secrets of our most “valuable” literary texts (that is, those most responsive to, and hence “worthy” of, that criticism). This theory of literature, or literary theory, had easily slid into a theory of criticism, or what it called critical theory, to justify a dominant place for itself in the history of criticism and its theory. But it now was confronted, demystified, and overcome by a forcefully “critical theory” new style, which could override—by denying the force of—all literary criticism and the idea of the literary itself, which is to say, all literary theory.

Once the self-justifying notion of “critical theory” put forth by defenders of the New Criticism was replaced by a use of the phrase that had deconstructive force, it could not help reflecting also the earlier use of that phrase by the Frankfurt School to reflect the primacy of that school’s political commitments. Looking well beyond the literary to all texts as similarly expressive of the sociopolitical (even if surreptitiously and thus subtextually
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so), and thus denying any distinction among kinds of texts that would privilege the literary, this postmodern theory was indeed critical of the claims for the transhistorical, uncontingent character of the theoretical impulse itself. In this sense, once it had done its work (in the interest of a single theoretical deconstruction of all other theoretical claims), this recent approach to critical theory, in being critical of theory, turned against the theoretical enterprise itself as necessarily metaphysical or, worse, essentialist in its appeal to transhistorical and uncontingent universals. Of course, it was implicitly excluding itself from these charges by denying any similar appeal to a grounding of its own claims. But this theory could proceed from such an exemption only while being insufficiently self-critical. Somewhere within its own principles of procedure and critique, but actively promulgating them, was a historically shaped political agenda serving as a universalizing subtext smuggled into the writings it controlled.

What motivates this radical shift to a theory that has been putting theory into a more and more powerful institutional place within American universities—even though, strangely, it happens to be a theory that denies both theory and the theoretical enterprise—is the larger movement in the humanities that has generically come to be called “antifoundationalism.” This movement is perceived by our departments of philosophy, which seek to conserve the grounds of their traditional mission, as a threat from which they are in flight.

What is the foundation that this movement would question or, more devastatingly, deconstruct? What must be deconstructed, according to the early argument of Jacques Derrida, who is credited with being the father of Deconstruction, is the very foundation of Western philosophy: the logocentric assumption that behind our words and controlling their meanings are the independently existing concepts of “real” entities that those words seek to point us toward. This “reality” is the foundation, the ground, of our discourse. The foundationalism that authorizes our philosophical tradition springs from this uncritical logocentrism, this commitment to a “reality” that presumably precedes and directs discourse, a “reality” that constitutes a neutral realm of references, which transcends discourse and helps us judge any claim to “truth” that a piece of discourse might make. This neu-
tral "reality" is to serve as arbiter in resolving competing claims about it made by competing discourses, each expressive of a partial and hence distorted perception. It is this set of epistemological assumptions that Deconstruction seeks to invalidate. To deconstruct that too easily assumed connection between the word and its stable referent is to pull down the foundation of Western philosophy.

This foundationalism, built into our philosophy since Plato, found in Immanuel Kant's monumental philosophical construct a fulfillment that could contain the modernism that followed. The post-Kantian construct rests on numerous assumptions, some of which I have anticipated: that there can be a "disinterested" pursuit of "truth" (if I may still use "disinterested," a word that is altogether rejected, and even resented, these days); that such a pursuit is very difficult, but theoretically possible, not to be ruled out in advance; that there is a neutral something out there, whether in the world or in the text—out there before any of us perceives it, something uncontingent—about which any dispute is at least potentially resolvable; in sum, that there is this foundation, this ground or origin, an ultimate point of reference behind each of our differing perceptions and our differing, or even our opposed, claims about it. Somehow, when all of our partial perceptions are subtracted from it, there is still some kind of "it" left, about which we can argue, which therefore constitutes a ground for debate. All these assumptions make up the meta-assumption of foundationalism, what many of the philosophies in the history of the Western world, philosophies long in disagreement with one another about most things, still would agree upon as the basis or ground—the stalwart foundation—for their debate. How can there still be a humanities or a notion of theory on the new grounds, or rather on the new groundlessness, of the antifoundationalism I have been tracing?

This radical epistemological skepticism (I hesitate to say "nihilism," as others too easily do) becomes dominant just at the time that theory is being institutionalized, largely because the antifoundationalist victory helps clear the way for that institutionalization. The way for theory has been cleared because texts themselves have been put "under erasure" (as it is said these days) by theory—even theory masquerading as history. There
is, then, little to compete with theory, except perhaps history, which has been swallowed by theory. Or is it rather that theory is now being swallowed by history? If it is the latter, what is being promulgated is an antitheory theory. In the name of historical contingency, it rejects any theory that asks us to read and stay with the text instead of diving at once through it into a historically determined subtext. It rejects any theory that asks us to examine the validity of its statements as if they mean what they say within a system of meaning that stems out of the relationships of its parts to one another. We are rather to account for theory totally as an effect of historically contingent causes and the language constituted by them.

In view of the postmodern removal of the agency of the personal subject, it could be argued that there is no danger that this procedure can lead to the reduction that we used to call the “genetic fallacy” (literary critics, following W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, called it the “intentional fallacy”): those charged with it had presumably been guilty of reducing arguments to the motives apparent in the author’s biography as a point of origin. This so-called fallacy was rejected long ago by the New Critics, but only in order to allow for the examination of verbal structures as if they were worthy of systematic analysis on their own. But, in flight from origins and trapped in the network of language, historicist theorists today, instead of treating individual author-subjects, treat “discourse formations” within language—these being driven by history’s sociopolitical “realities”—as determining the subtext whose rhetorical power uses the text to sway the reader. I will consider in Chapter 2 whether one sort of genetic reduction has not been substituted for another.

To reject a priori the long-established methods of analyzing systematically what texts apparently (that is, as they come through surface analysis) intend to mean, as recent socio-historical-political commentators do, is to reject theory and the disciplined institutions that theory could traditionally authorize. As we have long known them, theories, as systems, have been the foundation of institutions; indeed, they themselves have become institutions. The antifoundational assault on theoretical constructs must be seen as an assault on institutions, although in the present case, however paradoxically, it is being conducted in
In order to replace one institution with another, an anti-institutional institution. Thus, strangely, the institutionalization of theory in the United States is most fully achieved when theory, except for its socio-historical-political reduction, is being deprived of its theoretical power.

What remains, a commitment to cultural theory (perhaps most forcefully represented in the movement called Cultural Materialism), seems hugely imperialistic in the hegemony it would extend to all the texts in a wide array of discourses—from traditional humanistic disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and history, to the law and a number of the newly softened social sciences, to the great variety of media we associate with popular culture and practices—all now run together under its aegis. This assault on academic structures of long and previously unquestioned standing would merge them into the single set of theoretical categories that would replace institutionally imposed disciplinary distinctions and dissolve their varied methods into a single set of reductive procedures.

Of course, there is no argument here that would claim a substantive unity among these disciplines; instead, the argument rests on a claim for the primacy of the principle of difference, which displays itself in the crucial verbal differences among classes, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations. There appears to be an obvious contradiction in this attempt to elevate a single principle into an absolute, as if it were an essential methodological and substantive truth, even if—or especially if—it is a single principle intended to sponsor only endless differentiation. What we have, then, in this ultimate institutionalization of theory in the academy is a globalizing monolith of a theory, which gains ascendancy over the disciplines that it would transform in order to dissolve, in the process rejecting any less globalizing theories, which, locked within what had been firmly established disciplinary boundaries, had to be more modest in their claims.

Theory becomes institutionalized, then, at the expense of literature as an institution, at the expense of the literary as a privileged category, or indeed as any sort of a separate category to be distinguished from undifferentiated textuality. Early in my narrative I spoke of the conception of the literary text as a special kind of verbal structure, to be read closely for the intricacy of its inter-
nual relations that allowed it to become a mode of representation unlike that of any other kind of verbal structure—mainly because the literary text was not intent on doing anything but creating a self-involved fiction. But now we have seen that entire institution of literature dissolved and the literary text adrift with all others in a sea of textuality, or, to change to a currently more acceptable metaphor, interwoven with all other sorts of texts in the seamless web of textuality. A governing monolithic theory places these many varieties under the control of the sole agency of a sociopolitical subtext through which history’s language speaks, usually repressively.

This egalitarian reduction of texts has stimulated—and has been used to justify—the recent mushrooming of humanities centers and institutes in our universities. Because this universal deconstruction has dissolved the boundaries among all the kinds of discourse and all the disciplines of the university, suddenly these radically interdisciplinary centers can begin to flourish. Such centers were a new sort of entity that seemed an appropriate companion to this recent foray into a theoretically inevitable multidisciplinarity—or, to put it more strongly, a theoretically inevitable move beyond disciplinarity altogether. Speaking as one who has created a major, well-funded institute and has helped to found an international consortium of such institutes, I can say with assurance that, as they address their ever-enlarging combinations of subjects, most of these are indeed institutes guided by theory, or even more by a theory, for the most part socially and politically defined.

Recently, when Ralph Cohen, the editor of New Literary History and founder of the Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia, and I, founder of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, were planning what we thought would be a small conference of the few people who were creating or had created humanities centers or institutes in universities around the country and abroad, we discovered that such centers had been cropping up everywhere. Indeed, we assembled what is probably a partial list of about one hundred fifty of them. Some were officially supported by their universities and thus were institutionalized, and some were self-selected groups of scholars of many disciplines who had gotten
together on their own. Almost without exception, they were intended to function as anti-institutional growths within the academic establishment, collectives composed of individuals who, impatient with the inadequacy of what they felt to be the current state of the disciplines, were engaging in experimental intellectual collaboration in order to sew the varied discourses together.

Most such humanities centers have institutional ambitions. Even if they started as groups of intellectually disaffected individuals meeting informally, and even in a way subversively, their hope was to reach a size and quality that could allow them an intervention in the organization of their university in order, at the expense of the still reigning disciplines, to make it reflect their own theoretically sanctioned mission. Their pressure often led their administrations to give them the support that could lead toward institutional status. As they developed they served as what I have referred to elsewhere as “hidden universities.” These were ad hoc enterprises of mutual instruction: beneath the recognized institutional structures and sanctions, without catalogue or curricula, faculty from widely disparate disciplines came together to educate one another and to subject themselves and their disciplines to the wider theoretical perspective that allowed them to become interwoven and thus to move beyond disciplinarity and its restraints. What was to emerge, first for the self-proclaimed center and then for the university structure it was to sponsor, was a reorganization of the way in which language and culture were to be studied and talked about. Some of this reorganization has occurred or is occurring in many institutions, with only a few that are total holdouts.

That much of this activity results from a healthy rethinking of unexamined or insufficiently examined academic dogmas is unquestionably true. The broadening of awareness in the human sciences and the loosening both of textual canons within disciplines and of disciplinary boundaries are producing new and salutary features in our universities, long in need of putting into question what had been held as sacred and thus as beyond question. They have also moved both philosophy and the social sciences as academic disciplines toward a new humanization, as well as bridging the often deep chasms that had developed be-
between them and what we usually think of as the humanities.

It is also too frequently true that this new institutionalization of anti-institutional theory—as history tells us is so often the case—threatens to lead to new institutions as repressive in their own way as those they have sought to replace. Indeed, the rhetoric of these recent claimants speaks again and again of “the return of the repressed” or, worse yet, “the revenge of the repressed.” Surely the latter only ensures a continuation of the sequence of repressions, and of the struggle for power that confers the power to repress with every momentary victory. Further and yet worse, this unfortunate sequence is pronounced inescapable, because everything rests on the theoretical insistence that there can be no outside appeal to any authority except that conferred by the force that comes with institutional power. Such are the consequences of pronouncing the total bankruptcy of any judgment that one claims is “disinterested,” that is, not defined by an interest.

These consequences of antifoundationalism are indeed at a great distance from the high hopes of the modernist’s claim for letters and for “high culture” (currently rejected as “elitist culture”). The modernist defenses of literature, and of art in general, we must remember, had insisted on privileging the arts because of their special powers, supposedly found within their complex structures, to contribute to our understanding of our human predicament as social creatures. Literary texts had thus been conceived as making their special contribution, beyond the power of other texts, because they could act as correctives to the monolithic, exclusionary directions that other texts, including theoretical ones, followed. As I argue in Chapter 3, they were to function as a culture’s discursive resistance to the repressions of ideology.

Such a continuing oscillation of theoretical and ideological extremes as my narrative in this chapter has sought to recount seems to cry out for the hope of the balance of a tertium quid, some attempt at good will that, despite our limitations as “interested” creatures, would seek what Lionel Trilling had called a “liberal imagination.” Whatever its weaknesses, the early commitment to theoretical enquiry, now almost half a century ago, had seemed dedicated to just such a liberality of imagination.
The sort of art and literature that had been highly valued showed itself—for the sake of broader human awareness—always sensitive to hearing the voice of the "other" as qualifying, if not undermining, what would otherwise have seemed to be the dominant voice of the text as an ideological instrument. And criticism and theory in those days tried to follow in the wake of such art and literature with a similar balance and sensitivity. Indeed, it was the restoration of this balance, producing a sensitivity to the value of the "other," that had been urged as a principal objective of the humanistic (hardly a popular term these days) as an enemy both to the repressive and to the repressive enemy of the repressive.

What was being urged was a renewed championing of the counterideological character of literature and, beyond literature, of literary criticism and a protective literary theory—in contrast to the recent transformation of literary theory into a more general critical theory. This interest in the counterideological, which has its own lengthy theoretical history, is the subject of Chapter 3.