The Institution of Theory

Krieger, Murray

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I began this volume by tracing the academic commitment to theory: its emergence out of the intense practice of literary criticism after that criticism had earlier flourished as the antagonistic successor to traditional historical scholarship. In this past half-century we have seen theory move from an auxiliary role, in which it sought to justify the practice of literary criticism, to the status of a self-conscious discipline, and then into its imperialistic phase, in which it would doom that which it had been created to protect. For clearly, in the development of the theoretical enterprise into what is the present industry of theory, we have seen the extent to which it has become increasingly antagonistic to the practice of literary criticism.

My own career has run parallel to these developments in their earlier stages, springing as it has from my original attempt to put theory into the controlling position I thought it should have in literary studies, so that it could weigh and put in place the roles of criticism and history as it sought to make systematic sense of the creation and reception of literary texts. In accord with the title of this book, I was unwittingly promoting nothing less than the institution of theory, though only for the sake of enhancing our understanding of literature itself and its function in the human economy.

At the outset of my career, theory in the American academy was in a nascent stage, without power and with very little recognition. Even the New Criticism, a movement that was the major influence on my early work, preferred not to look into its relation to theory. At such a moment of neglect, I could not then anticipate that, in pressing for the just claims of theory, I was setting in motion forces that, once let loose, would impose themselves
imperialistically upon all the discourses of the "human sciences," even to the point of dissolving the self-privileging claims of literary texts and their defenders.

I concede that, almost forty years ago, when I first undertook my own early battles on behalf of theory against a recalcitrant scholarly establishment—against, that is, the institution of the sort of historical scholarship I now refer to as the Old Historicism—I did so primarily in order to press theory's special claims on behalf of the workings of literature. I identified theory with the "apology for poetry," which had assumed a number of forms throughout the history of criticism, and I saw myself as a "new apologist." Behind my aggressive defense of what was then termed poetics was the assumption that there was then a special need for theory to be pushed forward aggressively so that it could let loose the repressed power of poetry—because I saw that it was poetry whose power was being repressed by what I have been calling the Old Historicism.

However ambitious I was for theory, my efforts on its behalf, I now know, were to be self-limiting: I thought I was intending theory to be an instrument, not an institution. I hardly intended to replace one institution with another—the institution of historicism with the institution of theory—while poetry would suffer from one not much less than from the other. But subsequent developments have carried theory far beyond my intention, and with others I—and my culture—now have to face the consequences. I could not, in my early struggles on behalf of theory, be aware of the extent to which, by becoming a rival institution to historicism, it could develop the potential eventually to inhibit, if not to stifle, the poetry that it had been supposed to set free.

So my championing of theory was originally limited to the service of the literary functions of the text that historical scholars were not giving a chance to display themselves, so anxious were they to press only the text's historical—and hence derivative and reflective—function. But, as I have argued at greater length in Chapter 1, once theory, as a generalizing discipline, went into business for itself and itself became an institution, it had to reduce, or attempt to reduce, all that the individual literary text might perform, in order to prevent that text from display-
ing any powers that might subvert the a priori claims of a theory. In a number of places in my work I have referred to this excess, or diversion or subversion, in literary texts as "those more things on heaven and earth" than are dreamt of in any theorist's philosophy. I have seen the poem and its antireductive interpreters as playing Hamlet to the theorist's Horatio. Perhaps from the beginning I should have been more wary of the potential antagonism between the claims of poetry and the claims of theory, unless a theory could be cultivated that, in self-denial, would declare its need to give way before the performance of the poem.

In my early book The Play and Place of Criticism (1967), I worked toward a criticism and a theory that, at the risk of being paradoxical, would fix a place for poetry while allowing it the freedom to play within that place. And, as late as my Theory of Criticism: A Tradition and Its System (1976), I tried to respect the tension that exists, and should exist, between literary theory and the literary work by acknowledging the "limits" necessarily placed on the "capacities" of theory to contain the individual works it would account for; by acknowledging, in other words, the "vanity" as well as the "value" of theory. By reserving for the literary text the chance to provoke a radically new response, unanticipated by a prior theory that would seek in vain to account for it in advance, I must confess that I was conferring a unique privilege upon what the internal complexities of a literary text might perform. But, alas, theory now sees "privilege" as the self-exposing word whose metaphorical implications open such thinking to the ravages of the political critique, which sees in it the self-protective prejudices of those who are socially empowered.

In its allegiance to organicism, the theory of reading and evaluation behind the practice of the New Criticism exclusively privileged the internal manipulations of the language of the individual literary work. In so doing it was implicitly arguing for the power of the poem to thwart, by exceeding, any bounds set for it by the universal characterizations of any theory; in other words, arguing for the power of the poem to surprise even the most theoretically armed reader. The task of the interpreter-critic was to perform the poem, or rather to allow the poem to perform itself: to set free its uniqueness, its newness, which any prior theory would force into the channels of a more generic dis-
course. Thus the critic arrogated to himself or herself an extraor-
dinary and indispensable role, that of playing the middleman-interpreter between the poem and the reader, while resisting fall-
ing into the universalizing traps of the theorist. This was the
function that the critic, specially equipped, was to fulfill in bring-
ing the work—as R. P. Blackmur put it—to its full performance
potential by bringing “to consciousness the means of perfor-
manace.” Despite the conservative and classical instincts of the
New Critics, theirs was an unabashed romantic defense of the
poem’s potential originality, of its power, through what it per-
forms, to make culture even while it appears to have been made
by culture.

The New Critics were often charged with self-aggrandize-
ment in urging a theory of reading that, by elevating the single
work into a sacred mystery of which they were the self-appointed
priests, made their own function indispensable, as we have seen
in my reference to Blackmur. Devoted as they were to poetic com-
plications, and thus bestowing the highest value upon the most
intricately patterned works, they argued, in the wake of T. S.
Eliot, for poetry’s need to be “difficult.” So strongly did they
press the need to find complexities in the interpretation of poems
whose “difficulties” they insisted on searching out that the belle-
tristic establishment, doubting that poetry was as complex as
they would have it, attacked them under the group name “the
cult of obscurantism,” a stigma that today may sound familiar.
The New Critics seemed to be arguing, in a self-inflating and self-
erving way, for a poetry that needed the critic to probe within
it for us, a poetry that could not merely stand on its own before
the common reader. This was indeed a priestly function. If
poems were to be evaluated in proportion to their difficulty, then
for the best of them we would need the critic (that is, those
uncommon readers trained to be New Critics) to explicate their
complexities. The cultural need for this sort of critic as teacher
would be assured.

I concede that this charge, beyond its being one among the
many anti–New Critical weapons being wielded for some time
now, may be worth thinking about seriously, as having an impact
upon theory. To require the interpretive apparatus of the critic to
read a poem tells us something about the special, otherwise un-
decipherable, way in which poems speak. It is a way that would elude the dictatorial forms of our usual speech, our easy historical generalizations, and the universal pretensions of theory. If we grant the ideological character of theory on the one side, and on the other the counterideological propensities that much of our critical tradition has bestowed upon the literary, then the argument for literary complexity can be seen as just another of the many versions of the argument, which I have traced across the centuries in Chapter 3, for poetry's potential to undermine the language of any theory or any historical epoch that, by pre-determining the poem, would limit its reach.

The only theory that would tolerate this claim of the poem's counterideological power is one that would undo both itself and the very theoretical urge, by acknowledging its own impotence before all that the poem performs, all that it makes happen on its own. Such a theory would empower poetry to undermine the no-longer-altogether determining forces of history, as well as the universalizing claims of theory, even while poetry is partly explained by both of them. But only partly, and for the more modest theory the "partly" is not strong enough to account for, or to preclude, poetry's performative power, which calls for the specially trained perceptions of the critic.

However, the version of theory that we have been watching emerge during these past decades was far less modest and self-effacing as it pressed forward with its imperialistic ambitions. In its present institutional role, that sort of theory would overwhelm the full performance potential of the individual poem no less than historicism did when it took the form of the Old Historicism that first prompted, by way of opposition, the rise of the early literary theory that would authorize the New Critics to unleash poetry's powers.

More recently, as an addendum to this narrative of theory's fortunes, theory has been having its own struggle for survival against the resurrected dominion of historicism, whose all-reducing determinism threatens to undermine the universalizing pretensions that have guided theory's rise to institutional power. I am defining historicism, old or new, as a mode of interpretation that inflates sociohistorical contingency until it is seen as the universally exclusive shaper of our discourse—until it becomes what
Aristotle would have deemed a “sufficient” as well as a “necessary” cause of all we write. Thus the transformation of the discipline of history into the dogma of historicism, despite the latter’s distrust of the transhistorical claims of theory, elevates historical causality to theoretical status, carrying with it all of theory’s hegemonic pretensions against which historicism complains. Nevertheless, the reborn historicist industry gains much of its impetus because of its claim to replace the theory industry. By introducing the one universal of contingency, historicism argues that in its newer form it precludes the possibility of theory, thereby delegitimating theory as we have known it and ushering in what it sees as a post-theoretical period.

This recently renewed dedication to the relativizing hand of historical contingency would, of course, undermine poetry no less than theory, so that both poetry and theory are now struggling to defend themselves against the claims of New Historicism, even in its more sophisticated guise of neopragmatism. Not only would theory as we have known it lose its license, but poetry would be at least as disenfranchised by this historicism as it was by theory in its over-reaching moments. Of course, apologists for poetry would argue that the literary way of dealing with language shows its resistance to the one, history, as freely as it does to the other, theory. So, whatever the mutually destructive rivalry recently generated between theory and historicism, it is a combat in which poetry can have little stake, because recent history demonstrates that it cannot hope to be empowered by either, even as it resists both. But, as a postlude to the institution of theory, I have to examine that rivalry and its consequences.

From the eighteenth century until now, we can observe a succession of oscillations between the dominance of theory at the expense of historicism and the dominance of historicism at the expense of theory. These have been oscillations between approaches built on spatial models to the exclusion of historical contingencies, and approaches built on temporal models to the exclusion of transhistorical universals. The philosophic urge to universalize our experiences sometimes has overpowered, and sometimes has been overpowered by, our awareness of contingency, of the temporal flow of our experience, which is constantly differentiating itself.
Hence one kind of distrust, our distrust of the philosopher's claim that we can attain a standing from which we can transcend the time in which we—always a differentiated "we"—drift along, is matched by another, opposed sort of distrust, our Socratic distrust of the historicist who would doom us to a Heraclitean flux. Spatializing theorists have reified the common elements they presume to find, whereas historicizing skeptics have worried about the constraints those theorists have had to impose upon the always differentiated moments that they want to merge into that commonality. Historicists have deconstructed the theorist's universal by subjecting it to the contingencies of the self-differentiating moment, but could do so only by universalizing the dominion of the culturally relative. So perhaps even in the extremes of historicism the temporal has been captured by the spatial, the historicist by the theorist within.

I have pointed out that, in its current form, the struggle between the rival institutions of theory and historicism, which I have suggested may well be viewed as just another struggle between rival theoretical institutions, seems to have proceeded with the undisputed understanding by both sides that the literary has no distinctive license. In this agreement the combatants reveal that they are participating in a single swing of a second succession of oscillations that we have undergone these past two centuries: that between moments in which the literary is the subject of a romantic idolatry because of the special visionary power it is granted, and moments in which the literary is taken as just one among many manifestations of a culture, without special entitlements. These days both theorists and historicists usually join in the second of these, often even to the point of claiming that the category "literary" no longer has any authority or even, perhaps, any meaning, beyond being the projection of an elitist's nostalgic wish. With a contempt reminiscent of Thomas Love Peacock's *Four Ages of Poetry* (1820), the protective attitude toward the literary is declared obsolete.

To propose that what is happening is only an oscillation in an extended series of oscillations is itself, of course, to take the long historical view. As I have suggested elsewhere, the historian might well unite with the theorist as joint ironists in asking, with Shakespeare, the double-edged question, "Whether revolution
be the same.” Embedded in the question is the ambiguity of “revolution,” a single substantive extension of the two very different verbs, “revolt” and “revolve,” thereby suggesting at once utter disruption and bland continuity, both a breakthrough of the different and just more of the same.

The exhilaration surrounding a new conception that claims to transform for good all that had been thought is greatly diminished by the suggestion that we are only engaging in the repetition of what has gone before. Yet every revolutionary movement is encompassed by the rhetoric that would expunge, or at least radically revise, all that has preceded it through the centuries. Indulging the myth of progress as a narrative form that is more spatial than temporal, the self-proclaimed new movement announces with its advent the end of the history of error. Even when the appeal is to a historicity that proclaims no constancy except the constancy of change, it carries the implication that it has arrived at the final truth and that theoretical history can at last have a stop.

Of course history does not have a stop. Nor is it always necessarily moving upward as it moves onward. Nor, if we are to believe historicist arguments, is history moving in accordance with any definable shape, lest it also be subject to a theoretics of space. Still, one cannot historicize away all theory except by using a historicist model that itself turns out to be theoretical. So the attack by historicism on the possibility of theory—the denial of the very theoretical urge, as some sort of transhistorical, universalizing impulse—is made from a self-indicting position once historicism itself proves to be just another theory. Even if, in self-defense, one claims that historicism is only a method rather than a theory, it must be asked whether anyone, Deconstructionist or Historicist, can have a method that does not, almost by its own momentum, grow into a transhistorical theory; and then whether there can be any theory that does not, at some point, persuade its propagator to essentialize, and hence to thematize, it into an implicit metaphysic. Put this way, the questions themselves imply the response.

Any essentialized theoretical program (including the historicist program, I now can say) imposes severe limits on a text whose emerging language system, wrapped in fictionality, would
generate potential meanings beyond the a priori predictions of the program. The history of literature is the story of certain texts (and, happily, their number and their sources, especially in recent days, are being constantly and often radically enlarged) that remain teasingly out there, with a fullness in a part or the whole of them that challenges all we think we have known until we meet them; that keeps them beyond the confining reach of anything that theory and history have allowed us to bring to them; that contradicts all efforts to level them into common discourse.

It is, then, hardly enough to replace theory as an institution with historical contingency as an institution because the latter also precludes the independently generative power of the text. The universal pretensions of theory are countermanded not only by historicist contingency, but also—together with historical commonplaces—by the holdout pressure of every resistant text. Theory should again be called upon to protect the literary text's resistance against ideology's repression, even though it is alien to theory's own universalizing interests to do so. It is not easy. The text as anti-ideological is, in its antiuniversal dedication, anti-institutional: a theory that elevates the text (and the act of reading it) to the institutional level has an anti-institutional safeguard—its commitment to resistance—built into it. As an institution, this sort of theory would be resisting its own institutional ideology in order to find a suppleness to match that of its endlessly restive subjects. In other words, theory must resist enjoying the institutional status it has achieved, but can do so only by bowing to the countertheoretical pressure of the poem. In this self-denying mood, it may discover its answer to historicism as well.

Such a theory bids that we hold it lightly, so that we can return to the text, reading as free agents, open to being surprised by a verbal sequence that we can endow with the seductions of a fictional containment that resists whatever we bring with us to capture—to contain—it with. And we have been taught that there are many texts besides what are called "literary" texts upon which we can work—or do we allow them to work?—such an all-disarming magic. Where the freedom of a self-conscious fiction encourages the play of action, of characters, of trope, of language, it gives literature (or at least what we read as literature) a
special—I dare say privileged—place among the discourses, because it leads us to read momentary excursions into the literary by the other kinds of discourse: literature proper thus functions as a model for our reading the others, in part or whole, as literary. In this way, too, the study of the literary can resist any self-enclosures and can break beyond any discursive boundaries, though only while it continues to cherish the uniqueness of its own project.

Mine is a plea for theory to reengage the lingering promise of the aesthetic, despite all that has been said to delegitimate it, and to provide a place for a literary theory again. Of course we no longer speak today of aesthetic “objects” as if, in some ontological sense, they had the requisite characteristics in them, whether we choose to discover or ignore them. Instead, we speak of a reader’s or an observer’s receptivity that has been shaped by a set of expectations about what should be there for that reader. It is that receptivity that I hope will open up to the aesthetic, which, in the verbal arts, is to say the literary fiction, whose self-consciousness as fiction has been constituted as a conventional pattern that our cultural tradition, in its aesthetic mode, has made available to our responsiveness.

The literary may function as this self-conscious fiction as long as the reader (in response to what is taken to be the text’s encouragement) chooses to read it that way. And different readers may well argue about which texts, or portions of texts—ostensibly poetic or not—do or do not encourage such a reading, though we must be careful not to rule any of them in or out on merely generic grounds. For those of us anxious to preserve this way of reading, in distinction to others, the power we claim to find in any of these texts is related to our willingness to indulge its capacity to move us beyond the demarcations of its historically ordained period values—related, that is, to the counterideological way we read it.

We have become accustomed, these days, to find that many texts, long revered on these grounds, are now condemned by being reduced to unsavory political motives, conscious or unconscious. Their literary capacity is being dissolved into the ugly political ramifications of discursive practices they may well have absorbed from the language habits that surround them. And
surely it must be granted that many literary works we have long
admired were composed and appreciated under political condi-
tions we now properly find most indefensible. Does it necessarily
follow that our affection for these texts is now to be demystified,
and perhaps altogether abandoned? that these texts are them-
selves similarly indefensible? This would be the case only if they
did not go beyond reflecting the sociopolitical world around
them. But instead, can we not still read them closely enough to
discover how much of what we now detest in the value system
that surrounds them is being challenged and even undercut by
what we find in them? And can we not then admire them still?

What, after all, can be more repressive than the wholesale
rejection, or rejection piece by piece, of texts whose richness has
functioned as literary for other historical moments (up to as
recently, perhaps, as three decades ago), simply by taking cri-
teria from current ideology, bestowing universal authority upon
them, and then applying them retroactively upon those texts?
Does not this rejection display an arrogance, a lack of self-
awareness, that rests on the exemption of ourselves from the his-
torical and political contingencies that we insist upon for all
others? My complaint might be answered by an insistence that
until now, with the current strain of right thinking that we pride
ourselves on sharing, no historical moment, and hence no one
until us, had got it right. Such a naïve attachment to the idea of
progress implies, if it does not say explicitly, that latest is best:
that our history of thinking and writing is the history of igno-
rance and error—and worse, of prejudice and oppression. Would
it even then follow that our literary works of the past are just as
inferior to what, from our privileged position, is now being pro-
duced? One would not have much difficulty in producing empir-
ical evidence to the contrary, I fear.5

Too many current interpretations are stunted by the desire to
bring down older works by tracing them to predictable political
causes and finding them productive of predictable political con-
sequences, from both ends thinning their meaning. These only
make more evident the need for the interpreter to indulge read-
ings that allow the potential in the text for the resistance to ide-
ology to display itself. This indulgence can occur only to the
extent that the reader grants to the text the freedom to play with
the givens of its inherited discourse, a freedom that derives from a fictional, and hence aesthetic, separateness from what is usually expected of discourse.

Among the arts, the literary may be the most vulnerable version of the aesthetic because it depends upon a material, just words, that is the common vehicle of all discourse: it can wear any privilege bestowed upon it only through an act of faith by the bestower. And it is the self-consciousness of those projected fictions as aesthetic entities that induces us to make that act of faith. In making it, we would have to respond to the literary play of language that leads us to avoid the monolithic; that allows this language, as we open ourselves to it, to complicate itself in ways to which Deconstructionists have newly alerted us. Through this sort of reading we open ourselves to a verbal world that, through excess, transgresses what our language, as forced upon us by our culture and by our theories, has until then provided for our vision. That vision, moral and political as well as aesthetic, is redefined accordingly. And so is our language, sometimes even to the point of rewriting the language of our cultures.

The language of a culture has constantly to be rewritten if it is to be responsive to the intricacies of our consciousness, which resist the attempts of the existing cultural discourse to represent them. It is the failure of our usual sort of verbal representation that makes verbal representation in its several disfiguring, but highly figured, forms anthropologically necessary. In the literary text, words are, after all, not about themselves—as Deconstructionist theory these days is too often, and often inaccurately, charged with saying—but about that in the world of our consciousness, of our inner experience, which ordinarily resists being represented by them. The extraordinary text, or the extraordinary in texts, manages, for those who read for the extraordinary, to come close to opening that world for us.

My argument may well be just another plea to allow a chance for the extraordinary particular, which is not already contained within a ruling universal, to disclose what without it we could not have anticipated. I look forward wistfully—though not hope­fully, I fear—to a criticism in which sociohistorical and literary critics make common cause in illuminating a culture’s conscious-
ness, not by resting in the more secure assertions found in its other discourses, but by searching out those problematic clusters of meaning complexes that only literary discourse—or discourse read as literary—can yield. How can literary texts find the freedom to generate attitudes toward ideology, or counterideology, if they themselves are ideology-determined? The answer may be found in the special configurations of their language—which also encompasses both figuration and disfiguration—as it has been made historically available, but also as it has been manipulated by the subject as author. Must we abandon the hope for human subjects, by means of such texts, to drive history, once we concede the extent to which it is history and its institutions, with their ideological basis, that drive our texts, and us by means of them? Despite the persuasive challenge that historicism in its political mode presses upon literature, can a theory of reading ignore the power we grant to literature to expose the existential paradoxes at the base of the human condition of every subject, regardless of the specific political context?

This may hardly seem the time, given recent tendencies in theory and historicism alike, to put forward the power of the subject—by way of a transcendental self, post-Kantian style—because that vision has been rejected as a self-delusion cultivated to protect the bourgeois dream of a private freedom. But how can we attribute to the text, during the scrupulous act of our reading it, such powers as I have suggested, without reintroducing the authority of human consciousness—yes, the exiled human subject—despite the denials that acute epistemological and semiotic skepticism has recently and often persuasively imposed upon us? This consciousness must, more than ever today, seek to contain multitudes—still the multitudes that Walt Whitman's ego would contain—even while watching them disperse into historical contingencies. Or is this not to confess that, perhaps, as Frank Lentricchia charged, mine is "the last romanticism" after all?6

Nor may this be the final irony that history visits upon me. As I look back over the many years and books to the start of my career, now four decades ago, I hope my argument has grown and changed, or at least that it has thickened with qualifications,
so that it rests on very different grounds from those from which it emerged originally. Still, how should I respond if one were to turn the words of my own earliest title against me now and charge me with being, after all these years and books, a renewed apologist for poetry? Guilty.