Words about Words about Words

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Literary Invention, Critical Fashion, and the Impulse to Theoretical Change: “Or Whether Revolution Be the Same”

Dialogue

The desire to universalize our experience, to affirm the unity of being over the ever-changing variety of becoming, is as old as the philosophic urge, an urge we as thinking creatures have known since the dawn of humanity. Trapped within what our own experience permits us to see, we retain the need—as old as Plato’s in his war against the Sophists—to try to account for what we must believe is outside those limits, ready to be experienced by everyone. But the philosophic urge in us seems opposed by what Bergson saw as the temporal flow of our experience, which is constantly differentiating itself, though the universalizing impulse wants to prevent us from seeing that differentness. So we tend to reify the common elements we presume to find, treating them as universals that enable us to freeze the ever-changing flow of experience, and then we congratulate ourselves for our philosophic perspicacity.

But this universalizing is exclusively spatial because the very notion of time and its changes is enemy to the desire of our intellect to contain and give structure to the varieties of historical experience. Indeed, the intrusion of a precise and discriminating historical consciousness has long been a deconstructive act because, in introducing change, it gives the lie to our

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universalizing ambition by relativizing it, that is, by subjecting it to its place within our necessarily partial and contingent perspective. Change thus makes our universal claims no more than creatures of our historically determined needs; it reduces theoretical grandeur, built on a single, time-defying, all-inclusive structure, to the culture-bound relativism of permanent revolution. In the realm of pure temporality it is as hard to clutch at a constant as it was way back in the realm of paradox ruled by Zeno. For when it comes to our grasping at solid things, the realm of temporality is the realm of paradox.

To the extent that our theoretical ambition is undercut by the historical persistence of change, we must see universal claims downgraded from the truths we attribute to nature to the deluding reifications projected by the partisan interests of historically conditioned institutions and their agents. So change replaces theory, institutional sway replaces nature. And the language of theory, for all its ambition, is seen as responsive only to its self-serving assumptions rather than to the external data it pretends disinterestedly to account for. It can be treated, then, as just another expression of an archive preserved by its moment in history; it is not permitted to step outside that archive even long enough to explain either that moment in history or anything else. Where all is historically contained and controlled, there change will reign, an enemy to all universals but itself. Of course, the claim that change is the only universal is a self-denying one in that the dynamics of change should not allow even that single universality, since that would acknowledge a sameness about change. Still, our time-bound condition seems to encourage us to affirm change, in all its ever-changingness, as the only timeless truth we would, though with some embarrassment, allow to stand.

I have been assuming an either/or relationship between theory and change—to admit one is to exclude, even preclude, the other; but one could seek to bridge this disjunction by proposing a theory of change, such as the theory of progress or of cyclic repetition. There is a special temptation to absorb history’s moments within one narrative form or another. But I would put aside such proposals by pointing out that they are simply other theories, disguised versions of spatial thinking constructed out of closed, all-encompassing metaphors.

It is hardly new to observe the scholar’s necessary habit—because he has a theory—of converting history’s accidents into pattern. Once it has happened, history does appear irreversible. I prefer to treat change more radically, as a temporal particular which represents the errant moment in its momentous potential to disrupt the formation rules that govern all theories, antihistorical theories as well as theories of history.

Words themselves are major perpetrators of our self-deceiving habit of
reifying our experience, freezing its temporality into their own ontological space. Their very being militates in favor of theory and against a fluid experience. The substantives we use, with their deceiving implication that one word represents one thing, suggest constants beyond history’s changes. Even as we may describe radical changes from one historical moment to another, we retain the generic noun and with it the sense that it is a common, essentially unchanging entity that is undergoing minor, though untransforming, alteration. If we ask, “What is it that changes?”, the language of the question itself persuades us to a single, constant “it,” whether it be “art” or “the aesthetic” or “poetry” or “drama” or “fiction” or whatever, as we allow the nominal subjects to trick us into essentializing them. It may be, as some poststructuralists might argue, that the generic term, representative of a static nominalism of language, has indeed induced us into a false essentialism, so that we have, not the changing single entity (the “it”) we think we are talking about, but only a constantly shifting field of differences which we carelessly mislabel as if it were one thing.

Still the theoretical impulse in us persists and need not be altogether denied. Our discourse requires those very universals which may render that discourse untrustworthy because it blurs the facts of change. Nevertheless we can, in our antinominalistic description, point to the fact that culture does function and establish its continuity by means of the verbal genres it holds onto in spite of the shiftings of time. Culture takes its generic nouns seriously, even literally; it allows those generic nouns, as its linguistic norm, to shape its development: from the inside, culture uses its myths to function and to produce more culture. These are effects that the historian and the theorist must take account of, regardless of what the demythologizer may persuade us is really going on outside the comforts of those productive, if deceiving, constructs.

But I have now, by way of language, moved these issues into the realm of literary history and literary theory, and in no area is the conflict between continuity and revolution, between the designs of theory and the randomness of invention, more evident. Seen from the ambitions that give rise to it, literary theory exists to create a discursive unity that can accommodate history’s variety, to synchronize the diachronic. Making transhistorical claims, literary theory seeks systematically to account for a broad variety of works of many periods and literatures, flattening out the changes—even the apparent revolutions—that occur among them. Until recently, without self-questioning, literary theory has traditionally assumed that there is literature, and thus that there are peculiarly literary works; that consequently there is a legitimate discourse that creates a system to illuminate the performance of each of these works and—by extrapolation—of that body of works lumped
together as what we create as our literary canon. Critical discourse and theoretical discourse about criticism were thus legitimized, and the criteria for our judging the relative value of this discourse rested upon those secure assumptions concerning the primacy of those literary works to which such secondary critical discourse or tertiary theoretical discourse was ultimately to be beholden.

But these so-long-secure assumptions have been not only put in question but also utterly undermined in recent years. Instead of judging the face-value claims made by rival aesthetic systems to account with consistency for the special kind of writing to which they were responsible, we are to see these claims as contingent upon other-than-theoretical objectives. There has been a shift in emphasis from questions about the inside of theory—what does it account for? what does it leave out? does it, in the relations among its terms and propositions, argue acceptably?—to questions, apparently from outside, which put in doubt the theoretical enterprise itself: what are the pressures leading to the position taken? what is the relation between its principles and its favored literary works? what nontheoretical subtext leads it to the critical judgments it asks us to make? in other words, what are its historical contingencies, however transhistorical it wants its claims to be?

This shift reflects the recent transfer of interest from what we have called literary theory to what is today called critical theory. The earlier secure ambitions of literary theory have been turned problematic by the critical theorist who deconstructs it by exposing its contingencies. But as we gave vent to that deconstructive impulse, which I have here related to our consciousness of temporality, we created a theoretical discourse beyond what we had earlier thought of as theoretical discourse—a metatheoretical discourse, the only discourse that is now allowed to be genuinely theoretical. From this high ground we could view earlier so-called theories as bivouacked within their unchallenged parochial assumptions, assumptions that now could be demonstrated to be historically or linguistically or institutionally contingent; they could no longer be assumed without self-deception, the self-deception of a pre-theoretical naiveté. (For example, a movement that thought itself as theoretical as the New Criticism did can now be declared untheoretical in that it failed to undermine itself by acknowledging its own extratheoretical motives.) So critical theory (or metatheory) these days, perhaps in imitation of what the critical philosophy of Hume and Kant did to the metaphysics of the eighteenth century, means to put what we previously thought of as theory out of business by ungrounding it. And what we used to think of as “extraneous” issues, as issues irrelevant to the theoretical project, become those that are central to our concern.
Theory, then, is no longer to be treated as an insular, self-directed enterprise. Of the many kinds of pressures (social, political, literary, or whatever) that help shape what may masquerade as the pristine theoretical claim, rendering it anything but pristine, I’d like—in view of our subject here—to concentrate upon the influence of literary fashion in creating critical fashion, upon the role of literary invention in helping to justify critical invention. Literary and critical fashions can be interrelated, and their recent sequence traced, even as we seek to avoid an easy overall narrative for them. Since I earlier ruled out the assimilation of change—and hence of changing fashions—to an all-consuming theory of history structured according to any myth of progress, I must treat them—without hindsight—as a sequence of wayward accidents, each subject only to local forces and not to a rationalized, timeless pattern. In our present theoretical context, it is not impertinent, or an indulgence in idle academic gossip, to concern ourselves with fashion and, consequently, with the politics of criticism and even the imperialism of critical movements, along with their invented theoretical justifications.

Indeed, we can look at the history of recent criticism—especially as it is related to the privileging of one or another kind of literary work—as a succession of would-be empires, movements that have gone through similar stages in their rise and—too soon thereafter—their fall. If we take the word movement literally, in thinking of literary and critical movements, we find in it this group commitment to change, to forgo rest for activity itself. This need of a movement to keep moving finds itself in continuing conflict with its desire to establish itself as a dominant, unchanging institution.

Each movement, as a would-be empire, can be seen as deriving its force for change more from the kind of literary culture it wishes to bring into being than from its commitment to advance its internally directed argument toward theoretical truth. It is thus related to literary change as the latter stimulates the rise and fall of literary fashions, with a subservient literary criticism anxious to defend and expand the influence of a particular brand of literary invention. Does critical or theoretical invention follow upon literary invention in its attempt to justify it, does it anticipate literary invention, or is the relationship between the two symbiotic, the interplay of two sides of a single inventiveness? The answer to this question can hardly be determined, and in any case it is probably less important than our need to recognize the contamination of theory by the world of literary fashion.

1. The general subject of the Congress was the relationship among literary change, linguistic change, and critical change.
Some years ago Emerson Marks introduced a phrase, "pragmatic poetics," which I find extraordinarily helpful. Marks used the phrase to describe those poetic theories which derive much of their motivating force from the special kind of poetry that they are trying to license. This seems obvious enough: one cannot know Dryden without recognizing that much of his criticism was intended to validate specific poetry styles, that his "Essay of Dramatic Poesy" was written in part to justify the changes he introduced into dramatic styles and forms. Nor can one read Wordsworth's 1800 "Preface" without seeing the extent to which it is meant to serve as a document in poetic politics, so that it has the pragmatic function in the end less to create a new theory than to make way for a certain kind of poetry, a kind of poetry which Wordsworth is writing and which is not being admitted into the canon, to create—in other words—room in the canon for entries like his which are otherwise likely to be rejected. In order to change the criteria for entry into the canon, one must transform the theory, because each theory authorizes the inclusion of certain works and the exclusion of others.

Early in our own century T. S. Eliot's criticism undertakes a similar task. Eliot's important essay on the Metaphysical poets, his review of the Grierson anthology, sought to persuade readers to take this anthology and these poets seriously, although room had to be made in the canon in order to justify our seeing them as having a place within it. And this was the task of Eliot's essay. So, viewed from the role it seeks to play in the history of literary taste, poetics can indeed be seen as pragmatic. Though the critic's text is apparently addressed to the solution of theoretical problems—to finding adequate and coherent descriptions of the poet's creative act or the reader's poetic experience or the poem itself resulting from the poet's act or stimulating the reader's, together with the function of all these acts in society—it may actually be meant to create a taste which can sanction transformations in the kinds of poems that are written and read, to prepare poets to write them and audiences to read them. In such critical works we can glimpse the dream of literary empire.

Let me use the fortunes of the American New Criticism as a model of the history of critical empire. As I said, the movement begins by seeking to make room for a kind of poetry that until this moment has not been accepted, to authorize and justify changes that a new school of poetry is seeking to introduce. But first it has to get rid of the kind of poetry that has been the most readily accepted. So it attacks texts of that

kind, as Eliot and those who followed him into the New Criticism attacked poems of the romantics and Victorians and Edwardians and Georgians, viewing all these as a continuous hardly changing development without a disruptive theoretical moment in it. To counter these they reintroduced an entire school of poets, in this case the Metaphysicals, which had not been taken seriously as candidates for the canon for a long, long time. One could not take them seriously while holding the canon based on romantic and Victorian poetic values. And for the New Critics the two kinds of poetry seem mutually exclusive. Their preferences require and are accompanied by a literary theory that justifies them. If I seem to be cynically reductive in this account of the genesis of the New Criticism, it must be remembered that I am talking now as a historian might when he looks at the succession of critical movements rather than as a theoretical scholar might when he surveys a number of rival seekers after aesthetic truth. Still, the symbiotic relationship between revolutionary developments in literature and in literary theory seems hard to deny.

We can note, for example, that one of Eliot's major doctrines is that of impersonality, the need for the poem to avoid reflecting the autobiographical poet, so that when the word "I" is used in the poem, it must be seen as referring to a dramatically conceived character rather than to the poet's person. This is just the doctrine needed to reject the one kind of poetry—the romantic—in which the poet seems to invest himself autobiographically and immediately, without dramatic distance, in the "I" of the poem. The "I" in Shelley's lyric seems to be Percy Shelley himself and not an invented persona, just as the "I" of "Let us go then you and I" in "Prufrock" does not seem to be the living, breathing T. S. Eliot. Justifying this shift is a theory of romantic poetry in which the relationship between the "sincere" author and his poem can be utterly unproblematic, so that we can slip easily (too easily for the New Critics) from "the man who suffers" to "the mind which creates" (in Eliot's words). It is this distinction which, Eliot argues, the modernist poet must use his medium to reestablish. Since, for this theory and the contemporary poetry that accords with it, Donne and Marvell are much more acceptable precursors than anyone who wrote in the nineteenth century (or in the eighteenth, for that matter), what must follow is a rewriting of the whole history of English poetry with a new set of heroes and a new set of villains, and with a new poetic canon emerging out of it. The first step in the creation of the critical empire has been taken—knock down the old gods to set up the new—following the model of political revolution.

This opening stage of empire is forcefully undertaken by the New
Critics, as just about all authors from Milton to poets immediately preceding Eliot are newly excluded from the tradition which, having moved through the Renaissance poets to the Metaphysicals, is seen as having been suddenly disrupted, and, after a gap of centuries, at last as having its continuity restored with the coming of the modernist poets. This radical rewriting of the history of English poetry is formalized in 1939 by Cleanth Brooks, the model New Critic. In *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, his last chapter, “Notes for a Revised History of English Poetry,” is just the revision that Eliot licenses, with everything from the beginning of Milton until the beginning of Eliot somehow a mistake, a tradition gone wrong. But with Eliot we have a refreshing of what should have been the tradition all the while, so that we can now move along with it.

The first movement of the empire, then, is the most radical one. It is youthful, it is vigorous, and it is incautious, if not—from the distance of a future moment—a little silly, but it gets the job done of putting the new empire in place of its predecessor. Only eight years after *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Brooks published *The Well Wrought Urn*, and in this book we discover a second phase of empire. Eliot is just in the process of recanting his own attack on Milton, and Brooks is recanting many of the exclusions of his earlier book. *The Well Wrought Urn* is devoted largely to those poets who were excluded before: between the opening with Donne and the closing with Yeats, we find Milton, Pope, Gray, and even Tennyson himself. (I have overlooked Shakespeare and Herrick, poets who had always been acceptable.) Those previously excluded poets have now become candidates for *The Well Wrought Urn*. But we note that Brooks’s first chapter is on John Donne and bears the title “The Language of Paradox.” It sets forth a model for the striking discovery that Brooks has made: that he should not have excluded these other poets since they really were in the tradition after all, but only because, if one looks closely enough, they can be made out to be just like John Donne in being filled with paradox. The same names are now seen to have produced profoundly changed poems, though they are poems with the familiar titles and words.

Here is the second stage of empire: the empire relaxes, it learns to include, though always on its own terms. Those that the empire in its early vigor had turned out it now absorbs by way of a totally new reading controlled by the terms established by those privileged writers to whom those being newly admitted can be assimilated. The appearance of catholicity rests on a universal rereading, so that all literature reveals a universal sameness, a sure sign that the movement is about ready to disintegrate.
Catholicity, then, is a disguised form of hegemony: scholars working in every literary period on all sorts of poems are now enabled to find a renewed critical awareness, can write endless "reconsiderations" as the monolithic method accumulates its all-too-consistent interpretations. The ensuing weariness leads to a restlessness that will produce countermovements. We are well into the third stage, with the empire in decline. The pretenders to a successor empire derive their motivation from the desire to restore to primacy those poems at first rejected or at least neglected and later brought back only under what subsequently appears to be the false colors of an alien standard.

In the case of the dying moments of late New Criticism, it is the need to recover romanticism—in its unbounded vision and spirit—that stimulates first dissent and then overthrow. The year 1957, with the publication of Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, is properly thought of as the turning point. From this time onward there is a continuing desire for newer, revolutionary movements, although a common interest in opposing the New Criticism and recovering romanticism is at work in them all. In order to recover romanticism, it then seemed, one had also to recover the author, recovering consciousness as well as vision, so that in the late fifties and early sixties the interest in Frye is accompanied and surpassed by an interest in the "critics of consciousness." Frye and those who tried to create a school of Frye rejected the study of individual texts as microsystems, the New Criticism's self-sufficient contexts. Instead, for them literary works were conceived of as displacements of the universal archetypes themselves, all by-products of the single-quest myth that assimilates all works to its universal dream. This dream, the grand collective that is literature, must be treated as the capacious haven that converts all apparently particular works into its categories.

But Frye's prodigious project, despite the efforts of the apostles that it managed momentarily to capture, was challenged almost at once by the critics represented in America by Georges Poulet. J. Hillis Miller displays his conversion to the so-called Geneva critics from his work in the late fifties—at least until he is converted away from Poulet and to Derrida in the early seventies. Miller and other "critics of consciousness" are interested almost exclusively in just those questions that the New Criticism would have ruled out, namely, the extent to which the

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work reflects authorial consciousness, becomes part of a phenomenological horizon, projects the author's "feel" of his reality as it figures itself to him. There is a rhapsodic union among the author, the world of his work, the characters he creates, and the reader, as all pour into one great bath of consciousness. The critic ought not to distinguish for analysis the reader's experience from the author's consciousness, or either from elements in the literary work, because they all blend into one another. Such blending, such absorption of represented events and characters into a fused consciousness, is characteristic of the appeal of that romantic imagination which the New Critics had outlawed and which criticism in its wake was seeking to recover.

Shortly afterward, structuralism, borrowed from Paris, entered the scene as the new movement. It was committed to difference as its governing linguistic principle, and thus rejected the emphasis on identity fostered by consciousness critics, their bringing together of author, work, and reader into a single undifferentiated consciousness. Structuralism, in its reaction against existentialism, had to reject consciousness itself as a mystifying point of origin. The structuralist is committed to the primacy of language, so that, in his flight from origins, he sees the "I" not as a representation of authorial consciousness but only as the grammatical subject of an utterance that calls for a predicate. Instead of all verbal creation being traced to its origin in the author's cogito, as in Poulet, it is—as Roland Barthes would say—language itself that writes texts, so that texts are created by other texts, thanks to a notion of intertextuality that quickly turned structuralism into poststructuralism.

Each of these movements that follow the New Criticism has its own imperialistic ambitions, so that each begins by appropriating works with which it is most comfortable at the expense of others. Indeed part of the reason for the theory to press its claims is that it wants to account for the spirit of works that have been left out of the corpus associated with earlier criticism, especially the New Criticism. We know how exciting Northrop Frye is on Blake, and he should be, since it was his interpretation of Blake that expanded into his general critical system. The last portion of his book Fearful Symmetry sets up in miniature the categories out of which his Anatomy of Criticism will grow. So Blake is the figural subject for Frye, as will be other writers engaged in what he thinks of as the quest romance. While he deals persuasively with such writers, it is more difficult for him when he turns to Milton or to those works of Shakespeare which are less conducive subjects for him. Still, Frye and many of those who follow him put themselves in jeopardy as they move into the imperialistic stage of their enterprise, seeking to
extend what works so effectively with certain literary texts to authors and works we would think of as less hospitable and try to make them work as well. Or we may observe that Poulet seems to be writing over and over again about his ideal subjects, Proust and Mallarmé, even when his nominal subject shifts—even to as apparently alien an author as Balzac. In the transformation that Poulet—with imperial confidence—works upon Balzac, all becomes misty as Poulet dissolves Balzac's heavily furnished social reality by absorbing it into an airy vision formed through his primary commitment to other writers.

I do not mean to suggest—as perhaps I have—that it was the desire to supplant and reverse the American New Criticism that got these movements going. Some of the European origins of these movements occurred without any knowledge of who the New Critics were or what they were doing. And there are ample philosophical reasons related to developments in aesthetics, as well as in psychology, linguistics, and social theory, to explain why these movements came along as they did and when they did. Still, on the American academic scene the adaptation of these movements for domestic use in the classroom can be related to a general and severe reaction against the New Criticism, and, even more, a reaction against its privileged texts or its rereadings of texts to make them privileged, in favor of other texts and other rereadings.

In the United States structuralism moved to poststructuralism so quickly that the structuralist vision itself almost never took hold on its own. Beginning with a widely attended international seminar on “the structuralist controversy” held in the autumn of 1966 at Johns Hopkins, the transformation to poststructuralism was taking place. At that conference a young philosopher named Jacques Derrida, only a year before he was to publish three books that were to institutionalize deconstructionist thinking, delivered his blockbuster essay on “Free Play,” and poststructuralist deconstruction was here before structuralist construction could finish its work. From this point most writers whom people might identify as structuralist were busy demonstrating what made them poststructuralists as they dissociated themselves from what they saw as the somewhat mechanistic works of theorists like Genette or Todorov or Eco. The previous drift toward diagrammatic method and toward the false security of the social sciences turned another way; and to the name of Derrida the names of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan—a considerably older thinker suddenly now brought to center stage—were added. Foucault gave us a new way of thinking history, returning history to the structures of language that shape it in the
directions toward which the rhetoric of power presses its forces. Lacan
gave us a new Freud by rooting the unconscious in sign functioning.

But it was the Derridean and post-Derridean versions of deconstruc-
tion, as adapted to the literature classroom, that made the serious bid
for empire in this country, carrying many newly won followers with it.
And it is not difficult to find among many of those seeking to imple-
ment this thinking the desire to license some writing that the New
Criticism would not permit and that the modernist movement in litera-
ture would not sanction. As our modernist giants seem to call for the
New Criticism as a way of getting themselves read and adequately
interpreted, so the experimental postmodern forms we encountered
after World War II now seemed in the deconstructionists to find a
theoretical justification.

We see the easy companionship of modernist literature and the New
Criticism as early as the work of T. S. Eliot, their major precursor and
announcer both as poet and as critic. In Eliot and in his followers
modernist poetry and the criticism that licensed it walked hand in hand.
Further, the kind of poetry being sponsored in the university writing
workshops and the rapid growth of the workshop as an agency for
writing "official" poetry as well as novels reflected what was being
called for in the English departments by the younger New Critics who
had taken their place in the academy. But as the literary movement grew
tired, rich with its successes, other young scholars became as tired of
the so-called academic poets as they were of academic criticism, having
had a surfeit of both. They were ready to welcome a kind of criticism
which could license a poetry that had freed itself from what were looked
upon as our most neoclassical modernist formulas for closure.

The deconstructionist critics seemed to provide the justification for
finding a new, opening voice or—what became more common as the
movement grew—for imposing that newly discovered voice on those
older works we thought we knew under other guises for so long. In
their earlier days what happened, in effect, was that Wallace Stevens as a
modernist model was out, and William Carlos Williams as a postmod-
ern model was in. Similarly, the Ezra Pound associated with Eliot was
out, and the Pound associated with Williams was in. That is to say, they
abandoned the modernist tradition of poetry emblemized as the
well-wrought urn—whether the golden bird of Byzantium or the
Chinese vase of *Burnt Norton* or the jar of Tennessee. This was the
tradition that developed from the French symbolist poets through Yeats
and Eliot to the late formalism of Stevens, whose poetry represents in a
special way the modernist poetic because, as the ultimate act of closure,
his carefully wrought poems quite self-consciously become their own poetic. Instead, they embraced the radical postmodern attempt to turn poetry into a much freer, looser, open association of relaxed words, not so much wrought as merely talked, and thus, in their discontinuities, more closely in touch with everyday life and language. So the poetry that is sanctioned moves, as I have said, from the kind of verbal intensity found in Stevens to the casual prosaics found in Williams.

It must be conceded that in the modernist critical movement there was—for Hillis Miller, for example—another, more modernist version of Williams, less unfit for the company of Stevens, as later there would be for him another, postmodern version of Stevens. Indeed, for Miller both Stevens and Williams are his subjects, and made to serve his critical interests, at the several different stages in his theoretical development. These divergent readings of major modernist and/or postmodern voices, like the alternating emphases given to the widely varied work of Pound, help mark out the succession of literary and theoretical moments for other poets and for critics.

I can trace this theoretical succession, with Stevens and Williams used as respective model poets, more easily by using Joseph Riddel as our exemplary critic. Like Miller, Riddel had early been deeply influenced by the work of Poulet, writing his book on Stevens out of that attachment. Shortly after Miller, at the beginning of the 1970s, turned against Poulet to endorse the newly discovered Derrida, Riddel followed, turning to Williams and writing his second major book, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counter Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (1974), in which the treatment of Williams is introduced by a lengthy and controlling chapter on Heidegger, surely an unlikely precursor for Williams. Williams is presented as the “decentered poet” who practices “the poetics of failure” in order to counter the poetics of modernism. The replacement of the previously idolized Stevens by the previously neglected Williams is the expected first move toward empire. Riddel and others who share his deconstructionist commitment now license many writers—for example, a newly conceived Pound—and repress others.

But the second stage follows, that of imperialist expansionism, as they rediscover (among others) Wallace Stevens himself, who, it now turns out, is really postmodernist more than modernist, a riper subject for the deconstructionist than he had been for the New Critic or (later) for the consciousness critic. James Joyce, a modernist superstar, similarly becomes a welcome postmodern subject for other poststructuralist critics, for example, for Riddel’s student, Margot Norris. Even Ralph Waldo Emerson finds himself subject to Riddel’s transforma-
tions. So the canon, which is enlarged or even exploded at the start of
the movement, tends after awhile to turn out to be not so different after
all, even though the readings within it are. By now, in a development of
this revolution that makes it all too like the earlier revolution of the New
Critics that it seeks to undo, just about everything seems to have
become grist for the deconstructionist’s mill as the movement starts its
decline. Examining work after work in the infinite openness of litera-
ture, or of criticism as literature or theory itself as literature, the
deconstructionist finds in the very nature of writing the tendency to
turn against itself, to suffer—through “troping”—the necessary bur-
dens of “erasure” and “double inscription” (their terms) so that the
deconstructionist can do his work on an immense variety of subjects in
the different writing genres throughout the several historical periods.
Through the hegemony of theory, universal sameness conquers once
again, and the impatience of readers of criticism that leads to overthrow
seems sure to follow. And the newly reborn social-historical critics have
been waiting in the wings.

I acknowledge, however, that I myself have been guilty here of
turning recent academic experience into a theory, reducing history’s
sequence of changing moments into the march of sameness, thereby
denying each marcher’s claim to be different. I have converted the
temporal into the spatial structure of my narrative forms. For the human
mind cannot allow history to unroll without projecting a form upon it:
our formal, universalizing impulse would make theorists of us all. The
need to proclaim the differentness brought by each agent of revolution-
ary change is always in conflict with the sameness of the enterprise that
proclaims it. This need is in conflict also with the imperialistic desire—
and hence the program—to impose this special version of differentness
upon others, thus making it their sameness. There is always the tempta-
tion to allow the commitment to the phenomenon of change to freeze
into the commitment to a single, privileged change in an often self-
deceived attempt to universalize it.

The threat to the newness of present change by the compelling
uniformity of the past reminds me of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 59, the
twelfth line of which, as the climax of its three quatrains, expresses
succinctly the theme of this essay.

If there be nothing new, but that which is
Hath been before, how are our brains beguiled,
Which, laboring for invention, bear amiss
The second burden of a former child!
O, that record could, with a backward look—
Even of five hundred courses of the sun—

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Show me your image in some antique book,
Since mind at first in character was done,
That I might see what the old world could say
To this composed wonder of your frame:
Whether we are mended, or where better they,
Or whether revolution be the same.

"Or whether revolution be the same." It is indeed a most fitting title for me. The proclamation that something new has occurred, in light of which nothing can ever be the same, that here is a change that transforms history, is always threatened with the grudging concession that it has happened before, with as much ardor, and just this way. The Adamic dream of a new origin, though based on the denial of older "myths of origin," has its unintended inner irony too easily exposed. Even the specially strenuous claims of recent deconstructionism that it has undermined the ground for all previous thinking has been followed by a more skeptical awareness that sees it as a continuing element in history instead of as history's undoer.

The tendency of the self-proclaimed revolutionary to become the imperial expansionist reminds us that literary history and theory can—especially these days—be seen as slipping into the realm of the fashionable. Indeed, my own earlier reduction of theory to the contingencies of its extratheoretical motives has emphasized the dependence of theory on the historical march of changing fashions. It is this march to which I have already denied the rationalization of a progressive shape. Each new fashion, undermining theory as a stabilizing force by privileging only the most recent disruptive change, leads to the idolatry of the new, especially the new-as-revolutionary, as the changer, though by now our skepticism should keep us from thinking it necessarily, or even probably, better than what it seeks to replace.

Probably it was the New Criticism that initiated this obsession with being fashionable some decades back, just as the succession of rapidly moving theories—most of them with short lives—began only with the demise of the New Criticism. Fashion, as an extraneous but significant stimulant for theoretical allegiance, probably entered American literary institutions with the New Criticism by the late 1940s and the 1950s. That is, the New Criticism was the first of the movements to attract followers to itself as the fashionable movement, the movement of the moment. By the mid-1950s, large numbers of young people, often with uncritical alacrity, were jumping on the New Critical bandwagon, turning out explications by the dozens, like eggs. I suspect that was the beginning of the major role played by "fashion" in stocking movements in American criticism with followers.
The New Criticism was the last theoretical movement that enjoyed the great good fortune of having no important theoretical competitor on the scene, perhaps because it was the first American critical movement that meant to found itself on an explicit, though often poorly formulated, theory. To be sure, there were early versions of Freudianism and Marxism that offered themselves as alternatives, but these—in the early forms that marked their entry into literary criticism—pretty well wiped themselves out by being rather superficial and often simplistic in their claims and their readings. They are not to be confused with recent, theoretically serious uses of Freudianism and Marxism that coexist with poststructuralism and have become important participants in the theoretical debates. But their earlier versions were hardly competitive. So the New Criticism had the scene pretty much to itself and exercised a dominion that for years brought aboard it (or behind it) larger and larger numbers of derivative scholar-critics. The major arguments then used against the New Criticism were, almost entirely, arguments against theoretically based criticism itself, usually in the name of historical scholarship or social relevance, rather than arguments for an alternative theory.

Once past the New Criticism, perhaps we felt instinctively that we had made a mistake by trusting in one movement so long and so fully without any competitor. That may be one reason why we have, after the New Criticism, changed allegiances so often during the recent succession of movements I have been tracing here. A more likely reason is that once theory, having been introduced for the first time to an American academic audience, found itself in the academy, it began to pursue its concerns with such intensity that, inevitably, a considerable variety of competing theoretical kinds was to replace the relative hegemony of the single theory that the New Criticism represented. Once, thanks to the New Criticism, the Pandora's box of critical theory was opened, we became too overwhelmed by the flood of questionings and self-questionings for a single set of answers to satisfy very many for very long.

So either we learned not to be so monolithic in our theory and thus sponsored an increasing variety of competing theories, or our increasing interest in theory simply prompted more and more varied theoretical proposals to vie for supremacy. Or both. Whichever the case, since the decline of the New Criticism there has been this rapid succession of competing movements. Only a very few years ago many of us believed that finally a movement had thrust itself upon us—the first since the New Criticism—that might claim as general a following and as unquestioned a dominance, however vocal its antagonists. I am speaking, of
course, of the deconstructionists, represented in the United States most vividly by the so-called Yale School.

It did seem for awhile that deconstruction might well achieve the kind of broadly based following and lasting control that would permit it a reign that would last a little while, even if not as long as the New Criticism did in our earlier innocence. This succession was made the more ironic since some antagonists presently accuse the Yale deconstructionists of domesticating Jacques Derrida's practice of deconstruction—subjecting it to the Western literary canon and to American pedagogical habits—thereby turning it into a newer, if more reckless, version of the New Criticism. However, those expectations of an extended period of dominance by deconstruction were short-lived, because it has now become clear that it does not sustain anything like the sway that the New Criticism had: having barely arrived, it is already, I think, showing signs of being on its way out, even in the United States, which has held onto it longer than Paris did. Right now the threatening successor is a new social criticism, sometimes referred to as new historicism, which usually derives from the work of Michel Foucault and is sometimes reinforced by a neo-Marxism. Though Foucault clearly specifies his serious differences from Marxism, his work is seen by many Marxists as being compatible with their interests, even when they are anxious to assert their disagreements with him. These groups have been doing battle with the deconstructionists, treating the latter as lately arrived formalists trapped within textuality and hence cut off from the sources of social power. In its aggressiveness this group appears clearly to be in the ascendancy.

As we would expect from theorists so concerned with the role of power, the new historicists and their methodological allies—whether Foucaultians or neo-Marxists, or feminist versions of these—can be seen as also moving through the earlier stages of empire in accordance with my narrative model. Much of their initial energy was spent seeking to reshape the literary canon by introducing into it works previously excluded. From here they were led to question the grounds for the inclusion of all its members. They reviewed the canon in order to sensitize us anew to the role of dominant discursive formations in the shaping of its individual member-works, so that the latter are to be seen as reflections of the historical dispositions of power. Armed with these political claims, they could dispute the grounds used by our culture to support the selection of the members of the canon since these would require value criteria that were now to be rejected as politically suspect. The canon, erected on hierarchical principles, was seen as privileged by a power structure that excluded all that would challenge its dominance,
so that a newly arising power could persuasively argue for introducing works previously repressed by the supporters of the canon: from feminist, minority, and Third-World writings before excluded by sexist, racist, and ethnocentric pressures within the dominant culture. Now, these theorists were, presumably, not arguing for such writings to be canonized since they rejected the very notion of canonical value as an elitist deception. It would be a crucial tactical and historical error, they argued, to try to show that these excluded works shared desirable properties formerly seen only in works of the dominant culture, so that they could be admitted to the club only on the old terms. Their argument means to be far more destructive of their predecessors, all now seen as so many minor alternations with a hegemonic discourse serving a political unconscious in need of being confronted and redirected.

An egalitarian principle, on the other hand, would insist that these works be admitted for reasons of justice and the need to compensate for a political repression that previous claims of aesthetic value had served to disguise. Yet these moves have been following an imperial strategy like the one I suggested for the others: they begin by reshaping the list of works to be read and studied, and then, with an expanding ambition, enlarge upon the arguments for this reshaping in order to reread all the texts in the canon, re-creating them to accord with a universal claim that would change the way we approach all texts by revealing the primacy of the political unconscious. Of course, there seem to be reasons to think that the new historicism represents a movement more revolutionary than previous ones because it would undermine all the distinctions that allowed those others to vie with one another, seeing them all as trivial distinctions, inconsequential varieties within a middle-class series of competitive dances now unmasked by historicist analysis. But we have before seen such radical claims of total deconstruction (of all that preceded) appear from the distance of time as less than utterly disruptive after all. Rather than the undoer of previous theories, then, this one, too, may turn out to be only another competing theory to join the ever-enlarging dialogue.

So the conflicts among divergent critical theories in the United States continue, and we are not likely again to have a generally recognized commanding doctrine for an extended period of time. Too many of our younger would-be theorists, anxious to be in fashion, do not know which way to jump, or for how long. They too often try to be sure that it is onto the latest thing moving. Thus I have been led to take that word fashion seriously, however trivial it seems, because the trivial is serious in this matter so long as one is trying to record the history of contem-
temporary critical theory in the American academy, in which fashion, and the idea of the new, have become important motivating forces.

Our recent concern with whether or not a particular critical perspective is in “fashion” makes us argue over whether or not it is “new” or whether it used to be “new” but now is old, whether it has been superseded by a perspective that is “newer,” and whether the perspective I am about to pull out of my pocket is “newest” of all. It is amusing—but, I fear, more than that, too—to observe the failure of self-consciousness and of historical awareness in our critical theorists or historians of theory as they throw about that adjective “new” in dealing with the “old New Criticism,” the “newer criticism,” or—as some defenders of the Yale School (or those who would already claim to succeed them) sometimes use the phrase—the “newest criticism.” The adjective can be thus thrown about as if the user were not fated to live long enough to watch it fade, with the passage of time, into a joke that history helps it make upon itself. At earlier moments in the history of criticism, other movements of course have thought of themselves as new and even called themselves “new.” But it is self-evident that only the failure of a historical perspective could permit the pursuit of being fashionable—the latest thing going—to sanction the absurd appellation “new” which history must render vulnerable almost as soon as it is uttered. Only because what we used to think of as the “New Criticism” is now old is it necessary for its successors to be thought of as “newer” or, most absurdly of all, as “newest.”

The use of the qualifier “post” is at least as bizarre, if one views it within the precincts of history. “Post” has had to be invoked mainly because of the historical naiveté that permitted the use of other words, like “new,” which already represent the latest thing. But, once the latest has become only belated, something must come after it in order to give the lie to the most-up-to-date-ness of the word now being passed by. The now of the new has become then, in which case the new must become old. But since the word new is not changed, we now have to have something that is—paradoxically—post-new. Thus we have the “post-New Critical” or, more strangely, the current discussions of “postmodernism” as our rebellious successor to “modernism.” Those literary movements, I have suggested, are accompanied by the fashionable and new doctrine of “structuralism,” which has been succeeded—as we all know—by the post-fashionable, post-new doctrine of poststructuralism. What sort of conception of time is required to conceive of a postmodernism—as if modernism were not newness enough—I find difficult to describe, although it is clear that our commitment to the
pursuit of the newest fashion—in literature as in critical theory—has permitted us to use these terms without the embarrassment they ought to bring with them. Yet with the latest “newest” or the last claim of “post”-ness, must history stop now, now that its eschatology has been announced by the superlative beyond which there is to be no further “post,” nothing newer? For we must note that the prefix “pre-” is not in use, since there is no sign that current movements, for all their commitment to a continuing temporality, want to look beyond their own present to a future they might prepare for. After Matthew Arnold critics have not—like him—offered to sacrifice themselves for a movement yet to come. We rather have wanted self-consummation, not mere prefigurings.

Here we return to the central irony for all fashionable movements at the height of their imperial power: the rejection of the past for the new, newer, newest, and post-newest is accompanied by the desire for change to have a stop with this last—very last—change. So change does indeed seek—in each instance—to universalize itself. Even in its most radical undoing of the universal pretensions of theory, change manages to make a claim of its own privileged truth, applicable generally beyond the limited perspective, the time-bound contingencies it would impose on others in bringing itself into being. It is in this form that the theoretical urge persists even in its antagonist, even—that is—in spite of the antitheoretical critique which is a metatheoretical critique that would subvert this urge. And even the critic who as antitheorist would be a metatheorist, the critic who would use the contingencies of change to make the insulated objectives of theory no longer tenable, finds himself playing the theoretical game.

So whether in literature, in the theory that would accompany it, or in theory-as-literature, change is the blessed creature of invention, beyond all theories to predict; but fashion is the seductive betrayer of change, leading it into dogmatic fixity—and hence into theory—in spite of itself. Given the appetite of our theoretical urge, which victimizes would-be antitheorists as well as theorists, how could we not expect fashion, despite its dependence on temporal changes, to seek—however vainly—to bring change to a stop, to want not to be surpassed? Even the speaker in Shakespeare’s sonnet, having come down to the defeatist concession, “Or whether revolution be the same,” nevertheless concludes—in the spirit of the myth of progress—by affirming in the couplet the superiority of the newest arrival: “O sure I am the wits of former days / To subjects worse have given admiring praise.” We can reinforce this conclusion with the stronger claims of other sonnets.
(Sonnet 106 is perhaps the most brilliant example) that the superiority of the latest arrival makes him an ultimate consummation, a permanent realization, the end to history:

I see their antique pen would have express’d
   Even such a beauty as you master now.
   So all their praises are but prophecies
   Of this our time, all you prefiguring.

“Permanent revolution” has been converted to a revolution for permanence.

Whether in Shakespeare’s sonnet or in theory, where the claim to continuing difference thus ends in a single model for emulation that would produce sameness, a mental construct has been put forward, beyond history’s contingencies and secure against further change, with all the risks of that daring, positive act of construction. With each new movement, history is eventually revealed to have had a hidden agenda, a suppressed desire for an eschatological finality realized only now. Revolutions are not fought—with all their disruptions of the past or what is now being turned into the past—only to prepare for further revolutions that would turn this privileged present also into the past.

However, as in Shakespeare’s sonnet, the word revolution may be read another way, promising not disruption but the patterned turning of the earth itself in the circular movement suggestive of universal order. We have spoken of “revolution” only as the noun deriving from the verb, “revolt”; but by etymological accident it is also the noun deriving from the related verb, “revolve.” Though the act of revolting asks for no more than one turn—one reversal—it may be seen as but a part of a larger revolving which goes beyond by bringing the turns around, and turning yet again—and again. However paradoxically, “revolt” and “revolve” may equally claim the noun “revolution” as its own—or rather the noun “revolution” may be seen as encompassing both, absorbing the disruption of one into the larger continuity of the other.

So, “revolution” may, in spite of itself, be converted into the routine, taming change by taking its discontinuity out of it. Where “revolution” in this sense is found to be “the same,” there theory can with some dubious confidence begin again; and change—for all the temporal disruption it threatens—can, we hope, be accommodated after all. But even in going this far I speak not as a champion of theory so much as its victim, though a willing victim.
Epilogue

Because I am theory’s victim, I must carry these oscillations to one further swing. My treatment of these post-New Critical fashions in theory has emphasized their narrowly political character—that is, it has emphasized the role they seek to play in the politics of criticism in the academy and the rival claims to power within that limited domain. But within those modest, intramural, clubby empires, we have seen imperial ambitions shaped also by a serious and honest concern with the workings of literature, though workings shaped as each competing theory would shape them. Still, these interests, like the pragmatic poetics that they foster, enable us to view these movements not as attempts to answer theoretical questions within their own realm so much as attempts to re-create a history of literature and take control of the interpretation of literary texts.

Recent social and historical theorists, in a rush to replace the deconstructionists with their own new prominence, would be quick to point out that I have too narrowly restricted the extratheoretical motives of these movements to matters of literary preference, to questions about which works were to be valued and what in the works made them worth valuing. In other words, social theorists would charge that I treated the “pragmatic” in the pragmatic poetics that concerned me earlier as exclusively literary, despite the fact that many other pressures related to desire—social-political pressures, economic pressures, psychoanalytic pressures—drive critics to shape their theories as they do and, they would argue, are more crucially causative. We can see literary criticism and theory as the more deluded about the purity of their theoretical quest as we move the subtext of that quest further and further from the “literary” sphere, but critical theory in its social-political dimension is to set us straight. So these days the pragmatic motive is offered the more insistently as it leads us away from the ostensible objective of literary theory. Perhaps I have implicitly acknowledged as much in my free use of political metaphors (words like hegemony, empire, domain, revolution, etc.), thereby confirming the case with which the literary slides into the political and the political into the literary. The role of power in creating acts of repression and exclusion in the social-political metaphoricity of our language has been well established by Foucault, and recent theorists boldly expand his insights and ally them with Marx’s in order to bring deconstruction back to the material realms of power from the play of intramural textuality.

Having conceded as much as I have to the pragmatic as it diverts us from theoretical pursuits apparently addressed to problems strewn
across theory’s path, I still want to suggest the value of examining theoretical problems, and proposed answers to them, in their own right, as if they were independent of the hermeneutics of suspicion. In doing so I have been assuming that these are questions worth discussing in their own right, as if the critical texts, with their theoretical implications, had a speculative objective that made one more satisfactory than another: as if, in other words, the theoretical game is one worth playing. Yet my own earlier concern with the pragmatics of critical theory, and especially of recent critical theory, might well suggest that the hidden agenda or subtext undercut the pretensions of theories to mean what they ostensibly mean and to accomplish what they ostensibly accomplish. Does the interest in pragmatics, especially when shown to be insidiously directed by social-political institutions, preclude the theoretical enterprise as one that can be undertaken without self-deception?

This question becomes the more urgent with the increasing dominance of the new historicism as the latest post-New Critical theoretical fashion. Its own social-political focus leads it to see all theory as a surreptitious rhetoric, pursued out of a desire not to solve problems but to manipulate attitudes. At a colloquium in the School of Criticism and Theory not many years back I recall Stanley Fish (a new pragmatist more than a new historicist) exclaiming, “Power is the only game in town,” and Edward Said—from the other end of the political spectrum—shouting his assent. As we in the American academy saw in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it may not have been unreasonable for students to make the charge—and for faculty to respond sensitively to it—that the treatment of literature that bestows privilege upon self-consciousness and irony seemed a shrewd and efficacious tactic for ensuring political paralysis by undermining the clear lines of programmatic doctrine upon which political commitment and, ultimately, political action rest. Such a criticism, after all, permits in its canon of works only those whose thematic complexity ensures the evasion of any ideological commitment. Hence the New Critical theorist was seen as the servant of the status quo and of the military-industrial complex that guarantees the status quo. The poststructuralist school of textualist deconstruction today inherits the political charges previously leveled

4. I remind the reader that I want to apply this phrase to a group far broader than those Renaissance and other scholars in sympathy with the so-called Representations group. For my purposes here, various theorists, not only Foucaultian, but also Marxist and feminist, are included in my use of this term, despite important differences among them. For they share methodological similarities in attributing a deterministic role to the power relations within a culture that impose themselves upon its texts.
against the New Criticism, thanks to its own entanglements in the web of self undoing meanings which, it is claimed, cuts textuality off from the world. But, as we have seen, the charge of the social deconstructionist is still broader, claiming that the history of Western theory, up to and including textualist deconstruction, consists of so many staged debates all locked within a common set of exclusionary political assumptions that trivializes their differences.

This attempt at social deconstruction, which claims a rising popularity these days, would bring the enterprise of literary theory to an end altogether by relegating its announced mission to the realm of bad faith. For this rhetoric of power is, of course, using its argument to make its own bid for power, whether political or merely academic. The one difference between it and its predecessors is that its devotion to pragmatics as agent of both deconstruction and its own theory means that its bid for power is more naked than that of its rivals.

The arguments that could be used against such political reduction are the ones we have become familiar with when others have made similar moves in the history of theory. They depend, I fear, on resurrecting the author as a willful “subject,” if I may use a term now rejected as obsolete. Granted the hold that our moment in history and history’s institutions have upon us, have we no freedom of will to formulate and address a problem, and to construct our discourse in order to cast light upon that problem? Granted that we are often self-deceived in our belief that we think and write as utterly free agents, granted that the subjects we choose to write about are not “natural” subjects for us so much as they are institutionally imposed, is all that we work so hard to make our texts say only a disguise for the attempted manipulation of a reader by the subtext? If an effect of our reverence for literary interpretation should be that master texts would complicate the desire for a life of political action, does this destroy our analyses by turning us into agents of the counterrevolution? Even if it could be demonstrated that one extraneous effect of a given theory was that it restrained the revolutionary impulse, are we justified in arguing that such an effect was actually the reason the theory was being put forth, leading us to reject the theory as having been maliciously conceived as part of a general conspiracy? Or should we examine a theory’s claims, even if the hope of doing so disinterestedly is a scholar’s naïve ideal? To vitiate those claims by impugning their motives, and to impugn their motives by calling a subsidiary effect a primal cause—and, consequently, to impugn our motives as examiners—is to revert to a determinism that has been effectively refuted in the past. In other words, is this recent social theory, beneath its newly sophisticated language, finally distinguish-
able in the thrust of its argument from the political reductionism we remember from the “vulgar Marxism” in the America of the 1930s?

The easy dismissal of manifest content, the result of the writer’s labors at the surface and the interstices of his text, in the interest of the latent content supposedly unearthed by the highly motivated, strongly programmed interpreter, justly arouses the suspicion of other interpreters, although these latter had better also beware of their own motives, whether they search for other latencies or focus upon the so-called text itself. Our propensity to misread texts willfully in order to make them serve our goals, like the writer’s similar propensity to write texts that way, need not preclude our possibility of saying something about the text as our ostensible object, or the text’s possibility of saying something about its ostensible subject. Surely, we are the farther from those possibilities as we deny ourselves the chance to read the manifest text by asserting that only the latent text, together with the power relations to which it points, is “real.” The unabashed Platonism that denies manifest appearance for latent essentiality is no less objectionable for assuming a politically fashionable shape. Nor does the adding of a psychoanalytical turn of the screw help much to allay our concern for this rejuvenated simplification of the problem of verbal representation.

But what about the capacity of the text to generate a complex of oppositional meanings? In response to this, the best of the new historicists, like the best in any movement, are far less doctrinaire about their reductions. Many of them are sensitive to the problematic character of verbal representation, so that they would avoid the naïve simplism of the deterministic claim that a text must be treated as a reflection of the subtextual political pressures that create the dominant language of which it is an example. They prefer to respond to the capacity they find in a text not only to resist the hegemonic discourse, but also, through its own internal play—free play, perhaps?—to subvert it. I find such a response, in the spirit, say, of Theodor Adorno, persuasive, but is it still what is today called the new historicism? Such a conception of texts, and especially of literary texts, as internally cultivating their language of critique has been vital outside this group, to theorists whose concern with history and society is enriched and deepened by textual analysis rather than the other way round. I am thinking of those influenced by the rediscovered Bakhtin and his interest in the dialogical function of texts, in their carnivalesque effect, as they move toward the heterogeneity of the novel, the latter seen as both literary antigenre and index to social dispersion. It is this constant press toward textual resistance and opposition that has more recently been extended in the work of
Lyotard, a major voice with a significant following. Here, too, there is a ubiquity of political metaphors, though they are generated by the *différends* of the text.

This response to the text's power to sponsor resistance to the dominant discourse argues for a relationship between history and text that treats the text more as an agent and less as a servant—counter to the thrust of much new historicism. Still bound to history and its language, the text is yet free to affect, indeed to transform, history and its language. Of course, most new historicists would accuse those who would attribute this power to the text with cultivating aesthetic paralysis, with indulging in a flight from commitment all too similar to that indulged in by those in the tradition of romantic irony from Friedrich Schlegel to the New Critics to Paul de Man. (They might also have to include among these their apparent ally, Adorno.) So we must confront in the text either the reflection of the totalizing discourse of ideology or permanent revolution through the multiplication of discourses of opposition: either words to support action or words to create continual blockage, not so unlike the old doctrine of aesthetic equilibrium. Today we are witnessing a debate between these versions of textual relevance to political power. It would be bracing, if perhaps old-fashioned, to feel that we are free to choose between these latest competing bids to set the fashion.

I have made my way back to my concerns about the pursuit of fashion, the quest for the “new” which, once it becomes old as it shortly must, is followed by the quest for the newer and then the newest. And on and on, fostered by its historical naïveté, it will go. But the stakes become higher when, with an intolerant presumptuousness, the newest bidder for fashion would, like some of the new historicists, end the game altogether. In effect, they would put theory out of business: they would reject for good the claim of any theoretical discourse to possess an about-ness. Instead, this rejection of theory would wrap critical discourse about itself, narrowing its circles within its own hidden motives as revealed by its subtext, thereby creating its own form of closure from which no gleam can escape to illuminate what claimed to be objects of independent thought. Should we not resist allowing the power of fashion to dictate the end of our earnest habits of continuing our philosophic questing and questioning, whatever the limitations of an operation that has always proceeded as if it can indeed shed more light upon the old and new, but still dark, shadows of our doubts? I have respect for the fictional force of the “as if,” but I have more respect for the not altogether forlorn hope of light, even of the merest glimmer.