

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Theory For Life
by
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draft version

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Poets would make pronouncements about these Movements in an expansive tone of voice, like that used when offering one another drinks, and as a rule they could look after themselves. But when an earnest logical student takes up this line of talk he gets bogged down very rapidly; I have seen it happen.

– W. Empson¹

I.

Phil: Good morning, Socrates. What is that you are reading by the shores of this picturesque lake?

Socrates: Oh, hello, Phil. An essay by Nabokov in which he declares it is *impossible* to read a book. It is *only* possible to *reread* one.

P: Can any argument to this conclusion be *sound*?

S: *And* fury.

P: Not so good, then?

S: The argument is a cocktail of sweeping over-generalization and shameless redefinition, stirred to an enviably smooth inconsistency. The essay is a tissue of falsehoods and fallacies – a very agreeable, diaphanous tissue, letting in welcome shafts of light at regular intervals. Now that you are here it would be unsociable not to make this a game for two. Consider this: “We should always remember that the work of art is invariably the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.”² How many falsehoods?

P: Not *all* art is representational and so can hardly ‘invariably’ constitute the creation of a ‘new world’.

S: True.

P: It is also mistaken to insist that ‘every’ new representational artwork represents a new world, ‘having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know.’ Every Harry Potter book is set in the ‘same’ world as the last.

S: And?

P: It is equally mistaken to assert that even the world of a fantasy novel – in which there are trees and rocks and human beings – has *no* relation to the world we live in.

S: Some things will have been altered, for aesthetic and entertainment purposes, but not beyond all relation. "When this new world has been closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge."

P: First, the strict temporal order Nabokov posits is artificial. Second, the implication that *each* book is its own *perfectly* hermetic branch of knowledge is doubtful, to say the least.

S: Nabokov has in mind a quote from Flaubert, with which he opens: "What a scholar one might be if one knew well only some half a dozen books." But you are right. The development made of this epigraph is absurd. What about this next bit? "Can one expect to glean information about places and times from a novel? Can anybody be so naive as to think he or she can learn anything about the past from those buxom best-sellers that are hawked around by book clubs under the heading of historical novels?"

P: Here is not *one* question but *two*. Nabokov is sliding from the first to the second in shameless fashion, as though there were no such thing as logic. Also, although he clearly means for the reader to answer 'no' to both – the rhetorical weight on the implicit 'no' is palpable – the right answer is 'yes, yes'. It is perfectly *possible* to learn historical facts from novels, including – I have no doubt – *some* buxom best-sellers.

S: This next bit presupposes what you rightly deny. On we go: "But what about the masterpieces? Can we rely on Jane Austen's picture of landowning England with baronets and landscaped grounds when all she knew was a clergyman's parlor? And *Bleak House*, that fantastic romance within a fantastic London, can we call it a study of London a hundred years ago? Certainly not . . . The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales."

P: The rhetoric is getting heavier and heavier. One can almost hear a chorus of 'no, no!' ringing out. In fact, if one doesn't hear it ringing in the mind's ears, the passage makes no sense. As to the claim that great novels are fairy tales: this is a plain falsehood, a radical revision of the canon of great novels, or 'fairy tale' is being used in a non-standard sense. This game of yours is easy. I think almost anyone could play. Does it have a point?

S: Let me give you a longer stretch. Reading one sentence at a time – what with all this shin-kicking – is keeping our man from getting his pins under him. You should watch him go once he gets up to speed!

Time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds, all these are for writers of genius (as far as we can guess and I trust we guess right) not traditional notions

which may be borrowed from the circulating library of public truths but a series of unique surprises which master artists have learned to express in their own unique way . . . The art of writing is a very futile business if it does not imply first of all the art of seeing the world as the potentiality of fiction. The material of this world may be real enough (as far as reality goes) but does not exist at all as an accepted entirety: it is chaos, and to this chaos the author says 'go!' allowing the world to flicker and to fuse. It is now recombined in its very atoms, not merely in its visible and superficial parts. The writer is the first to map it and to name the natural objects it contains. Those berries there are edible. That speckled creature that bolted across my path might be tamed. That lake between those trees will be called Lake Opal, or, more artistically, Dishwater Lake. That mist is a mountain – and that mountain must be conquered. Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever.

P: By Zeus: *wow!*

S: My thoughts exactly! How many flagrant philosophical fouls?

P: I lost track.

S: Seldom have I heard so much dubious gossip and hearsay about the nature of time, space, color, atoms and reality.

P: And yet – I hope you will not be angry with me – I wish I could write like that. What is wrong with me that I should wish to become so – unphilosophical?

S: Who but a philosopher wishes to *become* unphilosophical? I have read – pardon me, *pre-reread* – Nabokov's lectures many times. They are *charming*. What enables an essay or lecture to be charming if it is, in a sense, nonsense? It is certainly not the case that *all* pseudo-argumentative essays and lectures are charming. Most are the very opposite of charming.

P: The question is odd.

S: I think our favorable response has to do with the fact that if Nabokov were here today to see us picking at his essay with analytic tweezers, he would flick them from our fingers with a smart gesture, employing few muscles above his wrist. He would do so with perfect right.

P: But his arguments are *bad*. His claims are *false*.

S: Nabokov is a true aristocrat, and what Nietzsche says about aristocrats is true; at any rate, worth quoting. Before a *certain moment* in Greek intellectual history,

The dialectical manner was repudiated in good society: it was regarded as a form of bad manners, one was compromised by it . . . All such presentation of one's reasons was regarded with mistrust. Honest things, like honest men, do not carry their reasons exposed in this fashion. It is indecent to display all one's goods. What has to be proved is of little value. Wherever authority is still part of accepted usage and one does not 'give reasons' but commands, the dialectician is a kind of buffoon: he is laughed at, he is not taken seriously.³

P: But Nabokov gives reasons, only they are *bad*. He cannot be an aristocrat in Nietzsche's sense.

S: Yes, Nietzsche ought not to have said aristocrats never wear their reasons on their sleeves. He ought to have said that when they do, it is because they are no longer functioning as reasons but as . . . cufflinks. *This* is why you and I like Nabokov: we admire how *handsomely* he dresses. We understand all this is just outworks of an out-sized personality. Nabokov has the knack for overbearing with bad reasons while making one feel it would be bad manners not to submit.

P: Are you saying any bad argument will do in life, so long as it is handsomely tailored? That seems sophistical.

S: In a sense it is just *descriptively true* that bad arguments will do in life. They have always worked before – gotten most people through. There are too few good arguments to support the population.

P: And that makes it right for the aesthetic gentry to stiff the thinking poor?

S: But I am making a point about *manners*. Aristocrats decline to jostle and be jostled in the bustling free market of dialectic, where one is constantly obliged to count the small change of counter-examples, which is grubby and demeaning. All the same, our betters are not above adopting dialectical forms as superficial bodily adornments. Nabokov appreciates that the *point* of fine ideas, like fine clothes, is to permit one to cut an authoritative swathe through the mass of lesser humanity. One does not dress up *just* to submit to a dialectical dressing-down. I am quite sure Nabokov would respond to anyone who ventured *serious, philosophical* criticism of his views in much the same way a nobleman pays his tradesmen's bills in a Russian novel: namely, he wouldn't.

P: I *would* inquire after Nabokov's deduction of the non-existence of readers, but I fear I would gain no satisfaction. Another question suddenly interests me more. I could not help noting Nabokov's complete failure to *problematize* the 'union' of author and reader – excuse me, pre-rereader.

S: By the shores of Dishwater Lake? What do you think he is leaving out?

P: For one thing, *theory*. We may start with theory.

S: Where should it go?

P: *Between*.

S: For prophylactic reasons, or to spice things up?

P: Out of necessity. Theory stands between reader and text because it is naive to presume one can confront a text *immediately – innocently*. I suppose I want to know what you think about the very widely subscribed thesis that those who *resist* theory *commit* it by other means. Therefore, theory is *necessary*.

S: But Nabokov has plenty of theory.

P: I don't mean the ornamental variety.

S: What about this? "In reading, one should notice and fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization when it comes *after* the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected."⁴

P: This is just the sort of naive view I am talking about.

S: See whether the following adequately expresses your outrage. I quote from the preface to Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory, an Introduction*:

The economist J. M. Keynes once remarked that those economists who disliked theory, or claimed to get along better without it, were simply in the grip of an older theory. This is also true of literary students and critics. There are some who complain that literary theory is impossibly esoteric – who suspect it is an arcane, elitist enclave somewhat akin to nuclear physics. . . . Some students and critics also protest that literary theory 'gets in between the reader and the work.' The simple response to this is that without some kind of theory, however unreflective and implicit, we would not know what a 'literary work' was in the first place, or how we were to read it. Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people's theories and an oblivion to one's own. One purpose of this book is to lift that repression and allow us to remember.⁵

P: This is *more or less* the argument I had in mind. As a response to Nabokov this seems strong. On the other hand, before today I have never detected in you any allergy to argument or analysis. Are *you* inclined to resist theory?

S: Eagleton anticipates *this* argument: literature is green and spiritual, organic and alive; arguments and analysis are rigid, unliving, soul-desiccating things. In short: art *good*; science *bad*. Literary *theory* equals *bad*. Eagleton's point is that this seems weak?

P: Yet it seems to me there is more *force* to Eagleton's point, potentially, than a nudge to a patent straw man. I like the Keynes quip. It expresses a potentially central insight, if only I could say what that insight is. Can you help me?

III.

S: I am willing to try. It strikes me one of the most helpful things I can do may be to say some words at the start about the *relevance* of this whole question to the state of contemporary literary studies. In the beginning was the New Criticism, and the New Criticism was –

P: – Perhaps you can abbreviate the history lesson.

S: 'Theory' – *that* thing, which evolved to the point where its traditional appendix, 'of x', became vestigial and fell clean off; *theory* rose to its highest heights in the 1980's, declined in the 1990's. Its ascendancy was undeniable; the *degree* of its decline remains hard to gauge. There are, I think, at least two reasons. First, 'theory' – again: that with which literary studies was locked in an 'ofless' embrace – has always been liquid; or semi-liquid. Here is a quote from Derrida, famousest of 'theorists': "It doesn't consist in anything, it doesn't have any status, it simply doesn't take place, doesn't have an exclusive place which could be attributed to it."⁶

P: Is 'it' theory?

S: Strictly, 'the jetty'. Etymologically, a thing 'thrown' out over a large body of liquid. Bit of a Heideggerian wheeze. But we may project from 'jetty' to 'theory', or at least its deconstructive aspect. Derrida does so:

There is no manifesto for it, no manifestation as such. Those who set themselves against it know this very well . . . I was told last week that Searle, once he had explained his views on literature, announced to his audience that for twenty years deconstruction hadn't existed, or, more precisely, that it has consisted of, and here I quote Searle, a 'mist' hiding everything. This is true, it has neither consistency nor existence, and besides, it wouldn't have lasted very long anyway if it had.

P: Searle would be vexed at this transvaluation of his values.

S: But it is important to note that defenders and resisters of theory alike can probably agree its nature and force demand hydrodynamical treatment. Not a 'mist', perhaps; something *stiffer* may be needed. Borrowing a fine line from Empson, who I feel confident would not disapprove of it finding a new home: theory *may be* "a steady iron-hard jet of absolutely total nonsense, as if under great pressure from a hose, and recalling among human utterances only the speech of Lucky in *Waiting For Godot*."⁷ This Empson-inspired view is by no means to be *assumed* correct, of course. We note only that hydrodynamism may be our watchword. As Adorno writes: "an aspect under which it might well be fruitful to treat the history of modern philosophy is how it managed to cope with the antagonism of statics and dynamics in its systems."⁸ The same goes for modern literary criticism and theory, I should say.

P: What *else* – apart from fluidity – makes this thing so difficult to grasp?

S: Here is a passage from Jonathan Culler, written as a state-of-the-discipline piece for the MLA's 1993 *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*:

The widespread notion that theory has "taken over" literary studies in the United States since the late 1970's comes not from the number of scholars or critics who consider themselves theorists or who "work in theory" but from the fact that, increasingly, for a piece of critical writing to appear generally significant, it has to seem theoretically significant.⁹

This is still true and, in light of theory's decline, crucial. An analogy: everyone knows Nietzsche's madman declared 'God is dead'. But a few may have forgotten or never noticed that the madman cried out to a group of avowed atheists, who laughed at him not because what he said was shocking but because they regarded it as old hat. They missed the madman's point that their manners and morals made sense only on the assumption of a living God.

P: You wish to make an analogous point about theory? There is a tendency to dismiss attacks on it as *passé*; but many *still* feel the obligation to exhibit 'theoretical significance'.

S: Perhaps a non-trivial comparison can be drawn with Matthew Arnold. In *Culture and Anarchy*, also in *Literature and Dogma*, he retreats while keeping the troops in decent order. He would never put the point so indelicately, but he gives up on the truth of Christianity while holding the line at the good *emotions* and high *ethics* inspired by Christian art and works of literature. One might speak analogously of a *pathos* of theory: one cannot *believe* the stuff; but ethical improvement is assuredly derivable from the genre taken as a whole. Above all, it is a source of *authority*. As when Arnold speaks of how 'criticism' is especially requisite in an age without a natural 'intellectual aristocracy'.

P: I suspect you are working up to a paradox. The will to theoretical *significance*, chained to faithlessness in *theory*, constitutes a return to a pre-dialectical, or pre-

theoeretical state when giving reasons was regarded as bad manners – when *authority* commanded, as Nietzsche says. If you are serious it is a serious charge.

S: You are right to demand evidence. Yet you see how I am awkwardly equipped. ‘Theory’ would seem to be not so much an intellectual position as cultural energy. It is hard to *refute* a culture. How to proceed, when one’s bag of tricks bulges with tools of the *refutation* trade?

P: Only a bad craftsman blames his tools. Our socratic ancestors overcame the *aristos* with nothing more sophisticated than the law of non-contradiction.

S: That’s the spirit! But perhaps you will first indulge me in some large observations I believe will clarify my outlook. What defines a discipline – makes it what it is, not another thing? See if you do not think the answer is something like this: a discipline is defined by some subset of its content, form, and function. That is, its subject matter, and/or methods, and/or the good of pursuing it.

P: This triple-jointed meter-stick seems unwieldy.

S: I don’t mean to go laying it against every discipline. I doubt the results would be illuminating. But don’t you think some disciplines seem to be defined much more by one of these elements than the others? Statistics is defined by its methods, which apply to many subjects, usefully or not. Forestry is defined by the good of having well-managed forests, so any subject or method that serves that end may apply for and expect admission. History is defined by its subject matter, by and large. What about literary studies – the discipline English professors practice and profess? Like any discipline it has a subject matter, methods, and some point. It cannot wholly lack any of these three. Is it defined *more* by one than the others?

P: The question seems vague.

S: I’m afraid you are right. Very well, let me answer my own question, not pretending to draw it out of you. I think there was a time when the disciplinary thing done by English professors was defined *primarily* by its subject matter.

P: Someone is sure to object that ‘the Canon’ is a veritable scratchpad of crossed-out names and hasty additions, written in many different hands.

S: Perhaps it is not such an illegible riot. But I grant the point, for the sake of argument. I retreat to a weaker claim: until recently, people *thought* – or at least convincingly pretended to think – that the discipline was defined by its tolerably well-defined subject matter. Let me illustrate the drift away from this thought with reference to a passage from a chapter entitled “What Is Criticism?” It fronts a sub-section of a recent textbook-style anthology, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ergo, the chapter is by design modest and uncontroversial. Yet I wonder whether it really is so:

Students of literary and cultural studies find that they are significantly advanced in their work by coming to terms with “criticism” as a concept as early in their studies as possible. There is no surer division between the casual reader of texts and observer of culture and the serious student than the willingness to engage in the task of understanding in its self-consciously critical dimensions. There are many possible definitions of criticism, but the general one central to the study of literature and other forms of discourse and language involves giving self-conscious attention to the method of understanding.¹⁰

P: It is notable that the ‘serious student’ is not described as a student *of* texts and culture, as the casual reader and observer is.

S: Excellent catch! Do not let this one go, though it twists and changes in your grasp like Proteus himself!

P: This might be thought just an avoidance of verbal repetition. But in fact the passage strongly implies that advanced students learn better than to be interested in literature or even culture. What they become interested in are not texts, not even the *experiences* caused by reading texts; nor yet are they occupied with *understandings* of those experiences that may arise from reading texts. Perhaps they are occupied with *methods* of understanding experiences. But actually I think *understandings* of the methods of understanding the experiences might be closer to it.

S: Why?

P: “Understanding in its self-consciously critical dimensions” implies understanding *of* understanding. And perhaps we are not done yet. No doubt there are *many* methods of understanding the reader’s methods of understanding – *many theories*, as per the textbook – yet one must somehow compass them, which necessitates *understanding* how to do that. Perhaps we will have no rest until we arrive at: understanding the methods of arriving at an understanding of what those methods of understanding understandings of experiences of literary works *are*.

S: And study of *this* is termed ‘the study of literature’? It is perhaps possible for a student of literature, in the course of advanced study, seldom to pass within four or five degrees of analytic remove of a work of literature? It seems these advanced readers – if they *are* students *of* literature – must be as sensitive as the young female aristocrat who felt the pea through all the mattresses.

P: It does seem a controversial view.

S: Yet you were the one complaining about Nabokov trying to dispense with ‘theory’.

P: *One* mattress may be no misfortune. *Five* seems like carelessness.

S: Perhaps some sleep more soundly on *five*.

P: I take your point. Before 1965, this passage would have been deemed absurdly slighting of the *subject matter* of literary studies, yet now it can pass as bland and uncontroversial. We see evidence here of a major shift in conceptions of the discipline. But I fear there is another angle you are neglecting.

S: I have not said enough about *politics*, have I? The Holy Trinity of race-gender-class concerns. It might be argued that literary studies has moved from being defined mostly in terms of subject matter to being defined mostly by methods – by ‘theory’ - to being defined mostly by political, social and cultural concerns. If so, my formulations are out of date. I think they are not because politically activist literary academics have sought to realize their ends by setting themselves up as *authority figures*. Their authority has ostensibly derived from mastery of *theory* – though it tends to intertwine with personality and celebrity. Ergo, as faith in theory dies, the authority of theorist-activists diminishes, which I think has been the case. This is a sign the discipline has precisely *not* moved beyond theory. This is complicated, of course; nothing I am saying is remotely adequate. The *nature* of the authority claimed by theorists is especially slippery to come to grips with. Since this authority appears to be diminishing, it may hardly matter. But perhaps some brief observations are in order to help us understand theory itself. An instructive case in point is Judith Butler’s op-ed in the *New York Times*, on the occasion of receiving her ‘bad writing’ prize from the journal *Philosophy And Literature*. Butler argues that writers are being labeled ‘bad’ simply because what they write is difficult and challenging. She quotes Marcuse imagining an intellectual called on the carpet by the man of common sense, who says things about distrusting foreigners as tricky-types.

The accused then responds that "if what he says could be said in terms of ordinary language he would probably have done so in the first place." Understanding what the critical intellectual has to say, Marcuse goes on, "presupposes the collapse and invalidation of precisely that universe of discourse and behavior into which you want to translate it."¹¹

P: Butler envisions the intellectual on the defensive, yet seems to assume that works of critical intellectuals are *properly* above critical scrutiny.

S: And why would that be?

P: Either one cannot understand them – in which case one cannot criticize them. Or one can – in which case one cannot criticize them. The act of understanding is *stipulated* to require the collapse of common sense, which would provide the grounds for dissent. I suppose it is possible *one* critical intellectual might criticize *another* on independent, non-commonsensical grounds. But no non-critical, non-intellectual –

S: - How about ‘commoner’? From the same root as common sense?

P: No *commoner* can legitimately challenge *any* critical intellectual. This seems to be the view. But what if Butler really means to forge an analogy with science? No one calls physicists 'bad writers' just because their works are covered with squiggly equations only they understand. Why should Butler's 'critical intellectuals' not enjoy the sort of authority scientists do?

S: The answer will have to do with the fact that science does not *presuppose* that common sense is collapsible, though it often *concludes* it is. It is common sense that common sense *may* be wrong. So common sense and science get on well enough. What do you make of Butler's claim that she would use plain language if she could?

P: She might be sincere.

S: Suppose I offered you a talisman of great power.

P: Is that the sort of thing you are likely to do?

S: I am afraid not. But suppose it is a shiny thing and when you wear it no one – or *very* few – can disagree with what you say. Do you think, if you had to choose between this charm and a dull, ordinary ornament, you would prefer the latter?

P: I might be tempted by the former, though I think it must be wrong to charm away reasoned dissent. But surely if Butler is really claiming *authority* in this strong sense she corrupts the proper sense of 'theory'.

S: What sense is that? Let us reconsider my image of the Nietzschean madman announcing the death of God. *Mutatis mutandis*, 'Theory is dead'. This has no effect because the madman's audience thinks it is pretty sophisticated on this point. Indeed, a great many of those most vocal 'against theory' – Stanley Fish, for example – remind one far more of the madman's interlocutors than of the madman. We find Fish declaring – already in the late 80's, in madmanish tones – "theory's day is dying; the hour is late; and the only thing left for a theorist to do is to say so." While out of the other side of his mouth, in a footnote, he locates himself snugly enough, "in the practice and convention-centered tradition that includes Ludwig Wittgenstein, W. V. Quine, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, and Donald Davidson, in addition to Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and other continental thinkers."¹²

P: The very idea that there *is* a unified tradition that encompasses these figures, let alone a practice and convention-centered one –

S: - Is *silly*. More to the point, if it were *half* true, which it is not, it would be *confusing*. What can it *mean* to disavow 'theory' by climbing on board with a whole raft of squabbling philosophers?

P: Some slippage with 'theory'?

S: Some slippage with more words than that. Let me read a passage from Marjorie Garber's recent book, *Academic Instincts*. Like Butler, she defends theory 'jargon' against the charge it is an affront to common sense. See whether anything is out of order in the following:

Jargon marks the place where thinking has been. It becomes a kind of macro, to use a computer term: a way of storing a complicated sequence of thinking operations under a unique name.¹³

P: I can anticipate how Garber would respond to the madman. She would say he sees death because he seizes a dead husk – where thinking 'has been'; meanwhile the living seed has blown elsewhere to start the cycle over. By 'thinking operation', does she just mean *thought*?

S: In a jargony sort of way.

P: Why not say 'thought'?

S: Jargon might be more a matter of *doing* work than *meaning* something.

P: Shouldn't it work *by* meaning something?

S: "The energy that once went into its design, its act of thinking, is represented only by a sign. By a word. By a vocabulary. The presence of a sign does not prevent, but also does not guarantee, the presence of a thought."

P: Language does not *necessarily* prevent thought. That's true. The rest is puzzling. Garber seems to be claiming that language – or jargon – may represent not *ideas* but the *energy* that causes the jargon itself.

S: Think about Matthew Arnold: the high ethics and emotion of good Christian art and literature.

P: Garber's academic instincts tell her the 'energy' associated with literary critical jargon is *good*? So jargon is good. Yet she seems to have some instinct it would be wise to distance herself from what the jargon *means*?

S: And so the challenge she should answer is Nietzsche's, adapted to suit the case:

When one gives up Christian belief one thereby deprives oneself of the *right* to Christian morality. For the latter is absolutely *not* self-evident . . . Christianity is a system, a consistently thought out and *complete* view of things. If one breaks out of it a fundamental idea, the belief in God, one thereby breaks the whole thing to pieces: one has nothing of any consequence left in one's hands.¹⁴

P: This is hardly a self-evident view of Christianity or Christian morals.

S: But it focuses one's *energy* to see the gauntlet thrown down – despite the dust kicked up. Nietzsche's keywords are the right ones: consistency and consequence. The instinctive academic defender of theory will most likely not take the obvious line: namely, defend some theory. Which leaves two oblique lines: to get by without *consistency*; to get by without *consequence*. They ought to be mutually entailing, and Stanley Fish seems to regard them as such. But I think most people prefer to emphasize crafty inconsistency as the best route to consequence. Here one might usefully distinguish between beliefs '*having consequences*', in a logical sense, and being '*of consequence*', in a social sense.

P: May I attempt a return to our starting point? It seems irresponsible simply to *assume* one can safely throw oneself 'directly' into the arms of any passing text.

S: Nabokov never promised you would be *safe*.

P: At any rate, theory is supposed to make us safer. But I do admit throwing oneself directly into the arms of just any passing 'theory' – the more energetic the better - hardly *seems* safer.

S: To adapt Nietzsche: he who hunts amateurs must see to it he does not become an amateur himself.

P: Yet my initial statement still seems solid. In *some* sense those who resist theory commit theory by other means. Therefore theory is *necessary*.

S: In an age in which gestures of theoretical significance are backed by strangely few theories, anti-theoretic gestures by strangely many, this slender reed of an argument may be grasped on all sides. The all-consoling thought: even if my theory is little better than a set of hand-me-down mannerisms – or if, on the other hand, I seem to have inherited an embarrassment of philosophic riches – yet *something of the sort* is quite in order. For theory is *necessary*. It would be of considerable interest to know whether this reed *holds*, bending this way and that in post-theory winds.

IV.

P: May I take up the defense of theory in a manner consistent with the *spirit* of the Keynes quip you quoted? The idea is this: anyone who refuses theory is *really* doing it *anyway*. The call to theory is no more nor less than the call to *self-knowledge*. To any philosopher this is a resistless call. A certain someone once said he would rather the whole world disagreed with him than that he should disagree with himself. Is this not a *noble* sentiment?

S: Theory may allow me to *know myself*? This is a *winning* advertisement! Shall we see if it is a true one?

P: We must.

S: I can tell you wish to leave Eagleton out of it, but let us lock arms with him a while longer while we stroll. He pushes the 'theory is necessary' line as hard as anyone; he also makes the story of 'the rise of English' – and theory - a tale of the overcoming of *amateurism*, a category whose significance you have noted:

The genteel amateurism which regards criticism as some spontaneous sixth sense has not only thrown many students of literature into understandable confusion for many decades, but serves to consolidate the authority of those in power.¹⁵

For Eagleton, the *Ur*-amateur authoritarian is Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, champion of an untaxing 'taste'. Against him stand F. R. Leavis and his scrutineers, demanding rigor and emphasizing the centrality of literature to spiritual crisis. And so the battle rages even into the 1980's:

Literary criticism is rather like a laboratory in which some of the staff are seated in white coats at control panels, while others are throwing sticks in the air or spinning coins. Genteel amateurs jostle with hard-nosed professionals, and after a century or so of 'English' they have still not decided to which camp the subject really belongs.¹⁶

P: Rather a silly image. I still like the thesis that theory is *necessary*, even if it does not entail that anyone is seated in white coats at any control panels.

S: Theory – i.e. that which some *resist*, as per the title of a famous essay by Paul de Man – is that which Eagleton *introduces*? Reading down the table of contents: hermeneutics, phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, political criticism. Do you mean that theory is necessary, lest through failure to practice, say, hermeneutics, we may perpetrate the latest semiotics *unawares*. Alternatively, through a failure to study semiotics, we may end up *inadvertent*, up-to-the-minute psychoanalysts?

P: I think this is not the idea.

S: But if theory *is* what Eagleton discusses; and if everyone does *it*, consciously or unconsciously –

P: – You have exposed an ambiguity in 'theory'. *One* sort of theory has existed only since – oh, let's say 1965. As per that de Man essay you mentioned, as per your Culler quote, there has been a watershed shift in *theoretic* sensibility in literature departments.

S: What about the *other* sense of 'theory'?

P: It concerns something ubiquitous, existing in all times and places there are human beings.

S: Can we define these evidently distinct senses of 'theory'?

P: The first is what Eagleton discusses in his book –

S: – And other things of the same *kind*. Suppose Eagleton were to rewrite his book. What *additional* entries might find their way into the table of contents?

P: Post-colonial criticism, race and gender studies, cultural studies, the New Historicism? A great many post-this and post-that's I could mention.

S: I agree. We evidently have a *shared* sense of what we mean by, 'that which Terry Eagleton *introduces*, and other things of the same kind.' That will do for now.

P: What about 'theory' in the other sense?

S: As Coleridge remarks: "The meanest of men has his theory; and to think at all is to theorise."¹⁷ Here again I think we both know more or less what is meant. But let us say – to have something in our mouths, if not quite yet our minds – that 'theory', in this Coleridgean sense, refers to any set of propositions concerning a subject matter exhibiting any moderate degree of generality, internal connection and coherence.

P: Is this a *good* definition?

S: Since it will let in political constitutions and poems – which we probably do not wish to term 'theories' – no. But we can narrow as we go. Being two *things*, it will be convenient if these two types of theory have two *names*. Let us call them 'big' and 'little'. Eagleton introduces big theory. Little theory has been around forever. All big theories are little theories. Not all little theories are big theories. Let us now reconsider. I *do* like your pithy formulation: those who resist theory commit it by other means. But there are two appearances of 'theory' here, fore and aft; and two senses of 'theory'. How is the formula to be interpreted? We have already ruled out the following: those who resist *big* theory commit *big* theory by other means.

P: This would imply, absurdly, that everyone always secretly does things that, for the most part, have only ever been done unsecretly by academics, mostly English professors, only since about 1965.

S: What about: those who resist *little* theory commit *little* theory by other means?

P: This is hardly to the point, though it tends to be true. To *not* think one way is mostly to think a *different* way.

S: Will matters improve if we switch to: those who resist *little* theory commit *big* theory?

P: Worse yet! That would mean something like: to knock oneself unconscious is to become Terry Eagleton!

S: One never knows. How about: those who resist *big* theory commit *little* theory.

P: This is the right reading.

S: But consider: can the following be a *good* argument against resistance to theory? Those who object to the sorts of things Eagleton introduces do so on the basis of beliefs about a subject matter that are at least modestly integrated, interrelated, systematized?

P: I admit this falls short of being damning. Something has slipped.

S: We have canvassed the possibilities meticulously.

P: I think my mistake came at the start. I dismissed the possibility that those who resist *big* theory commit *big* theory by other means. You made sport of the prospect. But the idea could be that those who *think* they get by fine with 'little theory' – common sense, as it is called - in fact have secret *big* theories. These will be comparable in scope, complexity and operation to the big theories Eagleton introduces, but less credible since unconscious and unexamined. Those who resist theory, in Eagleton's sense, do so not merely on the basis of a few beliefs about literature and criticism. They have, additionally, *values* they are committed to, *interests*.

S: *Thick* cultural stuff? Theory resisters are *implicated* in a wide range of concrete institutions and practices? In Eagletonian terms the thing you seek to define – if I have understood you – is probably 'ideology'. Those who resist big theory do so on the basis of some portion of an *ideology*, or 'dominant ideological formation'. And I quote:

A dominant ideological formation is constituted by a relatively coherent set of 'discourses' of values, representations and beliefs which, realized in certain material apparatuses and related to the structures of material production, so reflect the experiential relations of individual subjects to their social conditions as to guarantee those misperceptions of the 'real' which contribute to the reproduction of dominant social relations.¹⁸

P: This sounds *Marxist*. It also sounds *vague*. What is it, *exactly*, to be 'constituted by a relatively coherent set of 'discourses' of values, representations and beliefs'?

S: I suppose the recipe might run like so: take your discourses of values, your discourses of representations and your discourses of beliefs, *quant. suff.*; 'realize them' – I think this means, 'stir until thick and opaque.' Garnish with reserved material conditions; serve.

P: What is a 'discourse of values'? Or, for that matter, a 'discourse of representations', or a 'discourse of beliefs'?

S: To give the full picture I would really have to quote Eagleton's definitions of 'authorial ideology', 'aesthetic ideology', 'general mode of production', 'literary mode of production' and 'text'. Without that, you could hardly begin to understand how GI and AI are constitutive of literary texts, let alone how GMP and LMP –

P: Wait! What do these acronyms stand for?

S: Sorry to dunk you in the alphabet soup! 'GMP' is short for 'General Mode of Production'.

P: What is the *definition*?

S: "A mode of production may be characterised as a unity of certain forces and social relations of material production. Each social formation is characterised by a combination of such modes of production, one of which will normally be dominant."¹⁹

P: I think *further* definitions are in order: of 'unity', 'force', 'relation', 'social formation', 'combination', 'mode of production' and 'dominant'.

S: One cannot define every word.

P: Yet these are all obviously going to be *technical*; they cannot be left undefined. And flimsy locutions like 'may be characterised as' will definitely have to be replaced by something load-bearing.

S: But are you not too strict? When Wordsworth declares poetry is 'emotion recollected in tranquility', you *do* understand what he is *getting at*? And when Matthew Arnold synthesizes a compound of sweetness and light, do you have the temerity to inquire as to the precise wavelength of the latter?

P: I do not. But –

S: – *Nor*, when Arnold declares that, "it is of itself a serious calamity for a nation that its tone of feeling and grandeur of spirit should be lowered or dulled" –

P: But Eagleton – *unlike* Wordsworth, *unlike* Arnold – is evidently proposing a sort of *scientific* theory; at any rate, a *theory*.

S: But it would be easy enough to start holding forth, in authoritative tones, concerning ERT-type events; in Arnold's case, TOF and GOS-o-meters might be constructed.

P: Emotion-recollected-in-tranquility-type events? Tone-of-feeling and grandeur-of-spirit meters? I think such abbreviations and devices would hardly suit the *spirit* of these authors.

S: That is hardly *theory's* fault. Its rigors are not for *everyone*. Perhaps this is the source of our problems with Eagleton's shiny, technical devices. Perhaps you and I are like that man with the catapult who 'only wanted to show how it worked,' who is singled out in Aristotle's *Ethics* as deserving of pity on account of what happened next; which event – or events – Aristotle neglects to narrate. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch makes this tantalizingly incomplete ballistic tableau the basis of a salutary discussion of the art of *reading*, by the by.

P: I do not think this stretch of Eagleton's writing is much like a complex machine one must be an *expert* technician to work properly. And we seem to have strayed from the path. I am not *dogmatically* opposed to Marxism. I *do* think my thesis about the necessity of theory should not *presuppose* the truth of some particular formulation of Marxism.

S: We could presuppose the truth of *Freudianism*. Then a doctrine of repression would do the same spade work, burying things.

P: It is not interesting to be told that *if* Marxism is true, anti-Marxists are in the grips of ideologies; or that *if* Freud is right, anti-Freudians are repressing a thing or two. There should be some way of defining the relevant sense of 'big theory' without strongly *presupposing* the truth of any *particular* big theory.

S: All the same, you see the difficulty. We seek to isolate a *thing* – some feature of the mental life and/or practice of those who resist theory – that is at once a *necessary* component of resistance and *necessarily* discreditable to it. If both conditions are not met, the thesis that those who resist theory commit it by other means is a non-starter as an *objection*. The thesis that those who resist theory commit it by other means – *if* this is an objection, not a falsehood or truism – attributes substantial and sinister *false consciousness*. How are you planning to make this blanket accusation of false consciousness *stick*, in the absence of 'big theoretic' backing?

P: Thank you for limning the contours of the problem so clearly. The essential point is this. There are those who resist theory. They say they can get along fine without a certain *kind* of thing. But they are in possession of the *kind* of thing they say they want no part of: to wit, theory. Thus, they suffer from a *degree* of false consciousness. And it is reasonable to assume that *unconscious*, unexamined theories will be less worthy, on average, than those that have been brought into the light and examined – seen for what they are.

S: But these propositions of yours are running in circles, like statues of Daedalus on short leashes. You are *assuming* there is a *kind* of thing: theory. Everyone has *some*. Therefore, it is irrational to *pretend* to refuse it. But for many minutes now we have been proceeding on the opposite assumption: there are different *kinds* of theory – at least *two*. Who knows? Perhaps there are as many as three kinds of theory. Is it not plausible that those who resist theory are only resisting certain *kinds* of theory? For instance, they are not opposed to the having of *beliefs* – nor to the having of *several* beliefs; nor, in a pinch, to the having of *general* beliefs related to other beliefs. Opponents of theory are not opposed to *mentality*. It seems, then,

the evidence of false consciousness you are prepared to adduce may be evidence of nothing more sinister than a mild case of having sized up the situation accurately. Resisters of theory may have noticed there are distinct senses of 'theory' in play, some of which they object to.

P: I suppose this might be so.

S: We have been oscillating back and forth for some time now. May I, with your permission, expose what I take to be the *primus motor* of this ticking clockwork?

P: I would like to see and know the mechanism for what it is.

S: Those who resist theory commit it by other means. As an objection to theory-resistance, this formula depends for its *force* on there being a *unitary* sense to 'theory'. There must be *one* sense in which *everyone* does theory, like it or not; otherwise, false consciousness cannot be convincingly demonstrated in resisters without the addition of further premises. But the formula depends for its *truth* on there being at least two, perhaps more, *distinct* senses of 'theory'. Unless there are at least two senses of 'theory', it would be ridiculous to say that theory is a rarified recent development and then to add – almost in the same breath – that everyone everywhere, at all times, does theory whether they like it or not. Therefore, the *force* of the objection and its *truth* are mutually exclusive.

V.

P: But is it not *plausible* that any critic who says he 'needs no theory' can in fact be described as having a quite elaborate one?

S: Indeed, if it comes to that, *inanimate* objects can quite readily be described *as if* they have 'theories'. A dropped beer mug can be described *as if* it were theorizing physics all the way down, in bootlicking obedience to the law. Yet I think panpsychism is not a *trivial* truth of the philosophy of language.

P: This seems to me a frivolous deflection of my point. Beer mugs are one thing, human minds another.

S: Look at it this way. We are in a bit of a muddle. We don't know what 'theory' means – how many senses it bears, how they relate. And now, apparently, you are prepared to assume *without argument* that the minds of human beings work by means of hidden *theories*?

P: I suppose it just seems obvious that, in order to represent the complexities of the world and life – in order to do all the wonderful and sinister things it does – the mind must do something worthy of the name 'theory'.

S: No doubt – so long as one takes care not to mean anything in particular by 'theory'; so long as one allows this term to range freely over all senses it might bear, and a few besides.

P: Nevertheless, practicing critics will decline to attribute mentality to beer mugs. So your logical point has little practical bearing. Good critics have a *sense* for when they are attributing theories *plausibly* and when they are not.

S: Some have the *knack*? The *eye* for unconscious theory, the *nose* for buried ideology? An almost ineffable aristocratico-intuitive sixth sense? The *right* people – the *good* people, the *better* people – have it bred in their bones and blood to be able to say when someone is in the grips of a hidden theory?

P: I can see Eagleton is in no position to say yes.

S: I did not pick up my beer mug at random. It is Eagleton's. Let me explain how it all comes to pass. In a lecture, "The Significance of Theory", Eagleton begins by anticipating a charge of irrelevance. For first there is life, then literature, about life; then criticism, about literature; then theory, about criticism; then meta-theory, about theory.

P: Meta-theory and life are at opposite ends of the spectrum?

S: Yet Eagleton is sure he can *feel* the pea: "this sharp polarity between 'theory' and 'life' is surely misleading."²⁰ Because:

All social life is in some sense theoretical: even such apparently concrete, unimpeachable statements as 'pass the salt' or 'I've just put the cat out' engage theoretical propositions of a kind, controvertible statements about the nature of the world. This is, admittedly, theory of a pretty low level, hardly of an Einsteinian grandeur; but propositions such as 'this is a beer mug' depend on the assumption that the object in question will smash if dropped from a certain height rather than put out a small daintily coloured parachute, and if it did the latter rather than the former then we would have to revise the proposition. And just as all social life is theoretical, so all theory is a real social practice.²¹

P: This is problematic. What Eagleton appears to be doing – by means of the phrase 'such as' – is delimiting the class of all propositions *like* the proposition 'this is a beer mug.' He is asserting that *all* P's that are members of this class 'depend' on a certain something.

S: Curious consanguinity! Would the class include such P's as 'this is *not* a beer mug' and 'this is a wine glass'?

P: Eagleton is obviously not the least bit concerned with defining any subset of the set of all propositions. He is enjoying the fact that his phrase has a nice, authoritative, technical *ring*. The next difficulty concerns the dependence relation said to obtain between 'this is a beer mug' and an *assumption*. Eagleton does not make clear what the pendant item is. He says it is 'the proposition'; but does he mean P's *existence*, its *truth*, its *sense*? Two out of three? We may as well add that Eagleton fails to specify the nature of the dependence relation. Nor does he so

much as hint as to what he supposes a proposition *is*. This gives the passage a peculiar aspect. Rather as if one flamboyantly insisted on measuring all lengths to three decimal places, then neglected to settle on a unit of measure.

S: It would make one's technical-*seeming* measurements useless, for technical *purposes*. Almost as if the appearance of technicality were only ever an idle, ornamental indulgence? An eight-day holiday garden of Adonis – not a real, farmer's garden? I hereby hearken to what I trust is a familiar image from Plato's *Phaedrus*? But perhaps we can deduce solutions to some of these puzzles you pose from the specifics of the case Eagleton considers – to wit, the beer mug.

P: This is the next problem. Let P be 'this is a beer mug'. It is not *obviously* the case that the truth *or* sense of the proposition depends on the thing's not putting out a parachute if dropped – let alone on anyone's *assumption* such a thing will not happen.

S: I would be *pleased* if any dropped mug of mine proved so providentially equipped. I would deem it the best of all possible dropped beer mugs.

P: The *real* problem is that the carelessness of Eagleton's exposition suggests he is not actually interested in the meaning, implications, or truth of his own philosophical claims. So there does not seem to be much *point* in *our* picking at them with logical tweezers.

S: I am sure if Eagleton were here he would flick them from our fingers smartly enough.

P: If he did not one would have to conclude the man was on the verge of proving beer mugs have an active social life.

S: Beery dregs of an Althusserian monadology!

P: It simple enough that even I can see it instantly. Eagleton begins by declaring, "all social life is in some sense theoretical." The proof he offers is that even the simplest social interactions – e.g. utterances of simple sentences – "engage theoretical propositions of a kind." The argument therefore must be: everything that engages theoretical propositions is theoretical; all social life engages theoretical propositions; all social life is theoretical.

S: You object to this syllogism?

P: It is trivially true that absolutely everything in the universe 'engages theoretical propositions'. Take this book you put in my hands: the fact that it is *here* implies it is *not* there. Implication is, I take it, 'engagement'. Therefore, everything in the universe is theoretical, which is well and good. But if we are going to use 'theory' in this broadest of all possible senses, it will hardly be prudent to follow Eagleton in taking the next step: 'all theory is real social practice'. I do not think panpsychism about beer mugs sounds like a promising bend in the royal road to metaphysics.

S: What to conclude?

P: The more heads that roll, the more daunting the hydra becomes. Even so, I am inclined to push a point I advanced earlier. You deflected it deftly, perhaps not justly. Eagleton's pseudo-technical use of terms is so slipshod and inconsequential as to be most charitably deemed ornamental. But it seems to me this is actually a reason for suspecting Eagleton's philosophy does little harm to his critical practice. It is one thing to notice that, logically speaking, a beer mug can be always described *as if* it has a 'big theory'. It is quite another to infer authorial ideologies on the basis of *evidence*.

S: Just because beer mugs have no minds it does not follow human beings have no ideologies? Allow me to quote from a review, by Eagleton, of a book by Harold Bloom:

Bloom, on the threshold of his seventieth birthday, has reverted to the quote-and-dote school of criticism. Indeed, he has fallen back to a level of critical banality which might even have embarrassed Quiller-Couch. *How to Read and Why* takes us on a Cook's tour of some of its author's favourite poems, plays and novels, boring the reader with plodding plot summaries or ludicrously long quotations and then adding a few amateurish, undemanding comments.²²

I hereby set up what I trust will be an instructive methodological contrast. Eagleton – getting on for sixty, for all I know – is a long-time devotee of a *theoretical* alternative to quote-and-dote, namely elide-and-deride, a.k.a. interrogate-and-derogate. Not to be confused with amateurish quote-and-dote, glossy elide-and-deride involves no long, boring quotations; in fact, few *short*, boring ones. For example, in chapter four of Eagleton's *Criticism and Ideology* the reader is ushered through a sort of Tussaud-style waxworks of minor ideological horrors: Arnold, Eliot, Dickens, Conrad, James, the other Eliot, Yeats, Joyce, Lawrence, in a row, in almost lifelike poses. Thanks to Eagleton's brisk, scientific manner, the spectator is brought back to the point where he purchased his ticket in just over sixty pages.

P: Each literary eminence is found to be in possession of an illicit ideology? In each case, their faults prove traceable to material conditions obtaining in English society?

S: However did you *guess*?

P: Your description rather gave it away.

S: Only *in part*. How did you deduce this particular, telling *detail*: each author's faults can be traced to material conditions in society? Eagleton himself evidently takes this point to be quite crucial.

P: As you obviously see yourself, amenability of literary figures to Eagleton's ideological imputations is explicable as being wholly due to the fact that his terms – 'ideology', 'theory', 'mode of production' and so forth – are so equivocal and vague as to be applicable to any subject or object, up to and including beer mugs. These terms are, at the same time, sufficiently technical-sounding to afford their user an aura of knob-twiddling, dial-spinning authority.

S: As Montaigne writes:

I see most of the wits of my time using their ingenuity to obscure the glory of the beautiful and noble actions of antiquity, giving them some vile interpretation and conjuring up vain occasions and causes for them. What great subtlety! Give me the most excellent and purest action, and I will plausibly supply fifty vicious motives for it. Gods knows what a variety of interpretations may be placed on our inward will, for anyone who wants to elaborate them. In their calumny they play at ingenuity not so much maliciously as clumsily and crudely.²³

P: I begin to appreciate better how what struck me at first as an idle, logical point is potentially a serious problem for what might be termed 'applied hermeneutics of suspicion'.

S: In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* Eagleton makes the case plainer still. "Those trained in literary critical habits of thought are usually enamoured of 'concrete illustration'; but since I reject the idea that 'theory' is acceptable if and only if it performs the role of humble handmaiden to the aesthetic work, I have tried to frustrate this expectation as far as possible by remaining for the most part resolutely silent about particular artefacts."²⁴ This comment applies to one book. But hostility to illustration has been characteristic of Eagleton's method for years, as per his criticism of Bloom.

P: This 'humble handmaiden' talk is misleading. Concrete illustrations are not just aesthetic coloratura. They are the *evidence* for the *truth* of views about texts.

S: A thing rendered conveniently dispensable *by* theory. Otherwise Eagleton's manner of approach would be grossly illegitimate.

P: Now *you* are being misleading. Having so carefully distanced himself from old-fashioned critics like Quiller-Couch who preen themselves on rarified sensibilities, Eagleton is hardly going to be so incautious as to brag that he has X-ray vision. And if he does say things that seem to imply he enjoys the royal privilege of ignoring evidence, he will hardly be so unwise as to say so in so many words.

S: I quote again from "The Significance of Theory":

Literary critics do not in my view divide most importantly between those who are enthusiastic about theory and those who regard it as the final death rattle of the Free World. They divide, rather, between those who understand what Walter Benjamin meant when he declared that there was no document of civilization which was not also a record of barbarism, and those who do not. You do not need 'theory' to understand the meaning of this claim . . . You may, however, require theory to work out some of its implications.

P: But Benjamin mints a *slogan* – like Wordsworth's 'emotion recollected in tranquility', or Arnold's 'sweetness and light'. It is not an *axiom* or *law*. It is not to be taken *literally*. How could it be we will need 'theory' to work out its implications?

S: "Benjamin did not presumably mean by his statement that documents of civilization were nothing *but* records of barbarism. He meant that there is a way of reading – difficult and delicate –." ²⁵ Since the verdict is decided before the trial, we will want to edit this, for accuracy, to 'crude and clumsy'. "There is a way of reading – crude and clumsy – which can, so to speak, X-ray the text in order to allow to emerge through its affirmative pronouncements the shadowy lineaments of the toil, misery and wretchedness which made it possible in the first place." So you see: for Eagleton the practice of 'theory' rests explicitly on an almost mystically ineffable intuitive sensibility or 'sixth sense' – hence the naturalness of X-ray vision metaphors. There are, rigidly, two sorts of people in the world. Those who have an immediate 'understanding' of the deep rightness of certain 'theoretical' judgments about texts; those who do not.

P: But Benjamin emphasizes that judgment must arise out of a careful examination of texts. This seems to leave some room for 'immanent critique'.

S: Eagleton has a way around this potential threat from below. He favors readings that emerge not 'through' but 'in spite of' the text. Let me quote a typically Eagletonian critical judgement on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "To any unprejudiced reader – which would seem to exclude Shakespeare himself, his contemporary audiences and almost all literary critics – it is surely clear that positive value in *Macbeth* lies with the three witches. The witches are the heroines of the piece, however little the play itself recognizes the fact, and however much the critics may have set out to defame them." ²⁶

P: What is the evidence and argument?

S: You have now heard them. I do not say the man's conclusion is wrong. I note only the high-handed manner of the delivery. You begin to see, I take it, why Eagleton is instinctively so revolted by the likes of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who is often little better than a rabble-rouser:

I conclude then, Gentlemen, by answering two suspicions, which very likely have been shaping themselves in your minds. In the first place, you will say, 'It is all very well for this man to talk

about “cultivating an increased sensibility,” and the like; but we know what *that* leads to—to quackery, to aesthetic chatter: “Isn’t this pretty? Don’t you admire that?” Well, I am not greatly frightened. To begin with, when we come to particular criticism I shall endeavour to exchange it with you in plain terms; a manner which (to quote Mr Robert Bridges’ *Essay on Keats*) ‘I prefer, because by obliging the lecturer to say definitely what he means, it makes his mistakes easy to point out, and in this way the true business of criticism is advanced.’ . . .

‘But,’ you will say alternatively, ‘if we avoid loose talk on these matters we are embarking on a mighty difficult business.’ Why, to be sure we are; and that, I hope, will be half the enjoyment.²⁷

P: Does Quiller-Couch live up to these high democratic standards?

S: He has a class conflict raging inside him. He has his aristocratic side and, on the other hand - in passages like this - a more democratic side shines through. On the other hand, perhaps Eagleton is always right. Perhaps all the literary figures he discusses in his books have all and only the precise ideological faults he attributes to them. Perhaps Eagleton is a true aristocrat. At any rate, even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

P: I am puzzled by this sudden retreat.

VI.

S: Nothing of the sort. I hope I am not *naive*. My resistance to theory – such as it is – does not stem from a determination to preserve the reputations of artists, who can be very nasty at times. I want to *know myself*.

P: You think theory is a *hindrance* to self-knowledge?

S: I quote the second Eliot from Eagleton’s rogues gallery:

When there are so many fields of knowledge in which the same words are used with different meanings, when every one knows a little about a great many things, it becomes increasingly difficult for anyone to know whether he knows what he is talking about or not.²⁸

Putting it another way, in *Great Expectations* that great-hearted hermeneut of suspicion, Charles Dickens, has his hero marvel concerning the mysteries of ideology:

All other swindlers upon the earth are nothing to the self-swindlers. . . Surely a curious thing. That I should innocently take a bad half-crown of somebody else’s manufacture is reasonable enough; but that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make as good money!²⁹

We begin to suspect there may be little to Eagleton's methodology that was not quite old-hat by old Montaigne's time? Certainly not every box or panel festooned with dials, knobs, lights and a 'Warning: X-Rays' sign is worthy of the name 'scientific instrument'?

P: There should be something *inside* the box.

S: Yet Eagleton himself works the dials and knobs with all appearance of faith and industry. Putting the point another way: if *every* day were a holiday, we would hardly remark the things characteristic of holidays; the ornaments, the lights; the hollow, ritual objects. But every day should *not* be a holiday, should it?

P: Suppose I object that the holiday ended years ago. There is not much point mocking literary theorists for their hollow, scientific pretensions; they stopped pretending to be scientists by the mid-70's.

S: "I passed through a euphoric dream of scientificity."³⁰ That is how Roland Barthes describes how he came to write *The Fashion System*. A great many critics, including Eagleton, shared in that dream. You are right it is over. Eagleton has a new book out, *After Theory*.

P: Then why are we shooting at him if he has surrendered his shiny devices and agreed to come quietly?

S: The book opens: "The golden age of cultural theory is long past." Even so, "there can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit . . . If theory means a reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions, it remains as indispensable as ever."³¹

P: 'Reasonably systematic reflection' would be 'little theory', according to our definitions. So 'theory' meant *little* theory all along?

S: Skipping ahead: "Not many of the standard objections to cultural theory hold water. Some of it has been intolerably jargon-ridden; but the impulse behind it is attractively democratic."³²

P: Once again we see jargon – theory, at any rate – defended *principally* in terms of the good *energy* behind it.

S: You begin to see, then, why I bother to raise up Eagleton's long-dead scientific dreams only to beat them to death again. Whatever the propriety of defending philosophical positions on grounds of posterior good 'impulses', Eagleton's assessment of the *impulses* behind theory seems mistaken. *Science* may be democratic – or at least egalitarian – in that it feels obliged to give reasons. But 'dreams of scientificity' are *aristocratic* wish-fulfillments about *avoiding* giving reasons. Thus, despite its blandness, Eagleton's latest gloss on theory – 'reasonably systematic reflection on our guiding assumptions' – is radically at odds with what he himself has explicitly identified as his own impulses and

assumptions in the past. For example: “radical critics are . . . open-minded about questions of theory and method: they tend to be pluralists in this respect. Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of ‘better people’ . . . is acceptable.”³³

P: I see the paradox. Reflecting on your assumptions is a waste of time unless you have doubts as to their correctness. Yet the radical critic, by hypothesis, has no such self-reflective, self-critical doubts. Otherwise it would be mad to pick and choose theories *solely* on the basis of their capacity to serve as unquestioning slaves to his assumptions about who the ‘better people’ are, and how to promote their interests. If we conjoin Eagleton’s latest view of theory to his earlier *impulses*, we must conclude that theory must be useful if and only if it is useless.

S: In his new book, Eagleton excoriates theory for past failings. His new proposal is that we should aim a solid blast of truth, virtue, objectivity – so forth - from the hose. But I have my doubts whether handling these concepts *energetically* will be enough. I commend Eagleton for his willingness to speak out against past failures but I fear he will do no better, philosophically, until the day he takes a page from a less *aristocratic*, more *democratic* book than his own – Quiller-Couch’s, if none other can be found: “If the great authors never oppress us with airs of condescension, but, like the great lords they are, put the meanest of us at our ease in their presence, I see no reason why we should pay to any commentator a servility not demanded by his master.”³⁴

VII.

P: Even if Eagleton is a self-deluded aristocrat, might it not be that you, too, suffer from some sort of pernicious ideology or failure of self-knowledge? You have not *disproved* the hermeneut of suspicion who attributes to you bad motives, hidden from your consciousness, perhaps assuming the form of a ‘theory’? Some counter-‘theory’ could be a purgative for your ideological condition.

S: Some dietary regime to slim down my *plumpes Denken* so they can slip into something more revealing? Naturally I have not disproved this. I suspect I *do* have an ideology or two! Few of us are placid, simple creatures. We are complex, Typhon-like monsters. What to *do*? Suppose some sympathizers with theory and/or Eagleton were to overhear all we have said. Would they be *dismissive* of the rudely mechanical objections I have raised? Or do you think they would applaud my dexterity in juggling two balls at once: big theory and little theory?

P: I think they would be dismissive. And I myself am unclear what you mean by ‘rudely mechanical’, though I am familiar enough with *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

S: Do you recall the drunken panegyric in *Symposium*? Alcibiades talks about how this one man’s arguments,

strike you as totally ridiculous. . . He’s always going on about pack asses, or blacksmiths, or cobblers, or tanners; he’s always making

the same tired old points in the same tired old words. If you are foolish or simply unfamiliar with him, you'd find it impossible not to laugh at his arguments. But if you see them when they open up like the statues, if you go behind their surface, you'll realize that no other arguments make any sense.³⁵

P: What does this have to do with *Midsummer Night's Dream*?

S: Shakespeare is teasing out the implications of Alcibiades' speech. We have in Plato an assortment of 'rude mechanicals' – blacksmiths, tanners, cobblers and such. In Shakespeare, we have: a carpenter, a joiner, a weaver, a bellows-mender, a tinker, and a tailor. Coincidence?

P: I am hesitant to deploy objections against this motley levy. You are holding some force invisibly in reserve that will presently be worrying my flanks.

S: You are right to guard your flanks. The ass trumps all! Alcibiades talks about pack-asses, and about how these arguments seem to be covered in hairy hides. And is not Bottom transformed into such a being, with the head of an ass? The analogy is complete, for Shakespeare's Silenus opens up as gloriously! Bottom is full of 'bottomless dreams'? What else is a philosopher, if not one who *appears* to be coarse – even to have the head of an ass – yet is subject to bottomless dreams? I half fancy this is why Titania loves him: for his *mind*. Let us then be rude mechanicals, that we may dream *bottomless* dreams, even if the aristocrats laugh behind their hands at our crudity! All our rudely mechanical objections and nit-picky counter-examples take no account of the great *spirit* of the *theory enterprise* – its *energy*. Compared to theory, you and I seem not to breathe courage, nor drink sunlight!

P: The problem may be, rather, that the alternatives to theory are felt to be *worse-are* worse. We should stop pretending these alternatives are mysterious, undiscovered ideological formations. Everyone will *think* they know where this is going – namely, backwards into rather obvious forms of naivete.

S: A fair concern. Consider a remark by Derrida:

I remember having gone to bed very late after a moment of anger or irony against a sentence of Proust's . . . which says: "A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag," and I find nothing more vulgar than this Franco-Britannic decorum . . . the grimace of a good taste naive enough to believe that one can efface the labor of theory, as if there wasn't any in Pr., and mediocre theory at that.³⁶

P: We have heard this before. Resistance to theory is symptomatic of unconscious or unacknowledged theory. Ergo, resistance to theory is hypocritical naivete.

S: Here is similar expression of distaste from *Reading After Theory*, by Valentine Cunningham. The author has many worthy things to say about the failings of

theory. In the end he defends it largely on the grounds that the alternative is intolerably naive:

There is, of course, a common fantasy of the independent, the natural reader, of men and women quite alone with the text, making sense of it by their own unaided efforts, uncontaminated by givens and presuppositions, by prejudices and doctrines, especially not anything that might be called theory, or (especially) Theory. This dream fires many a whinge against current literary education. But no one ever did read *de novo*, raw, naturally; understanding never came that easily.³⁷

P: The man is right. There are no pure readers.

S: But the awkwardness of it is: no one thinks otherwise. It is a naive but surprisingly common fantasy that people actually are naive enough to believe in pure readers in this strong sense. The dream that people believe in pure readers fires many a defense of current literary education. This thin red whine may be the last *general* line of defense for theory – with a capital T.

P: But Nabokov, Proust – a great many – *say* there are such pure readers. Are we not *urged* by them to *become* pure, innocent, immediate embracers of texts?

S: But you must understand that people – infernal things – do not always *mean* what they say. You cannot read off ‘real’ meaning in some simple, presuppositionless way – raw, naturally, *de novo*. Theorists too easily overlook this. Proust, for example, is not *seriously* advancing a thesis ‘against theory’ he is prepared to defend against counter-examples – no more so than Nabokov is prepared to defend his outlandish allegations about space, time and atoms. Proust is saying *some* people are vain in a rather comic way. Their vanity is a mask of anxiety about whether certain things they have are worth anything. That *some* people are vain in this way is a point that can be faulted, if at all, for sheer obviousness. Speaking of which, who can believe the trouble with Proust and Nabokov is that they are superlatively naive about life, language, the subtleties of the human mind and spirit? Who thinks the trouble with these authors is their unshakable common sense conviction that *it is all terribly obvious* – the simple, immediate truth invariably dangling from the lowest hanging branch, fruit to be plucked by any passing hand?

P: These *are* implausible accusations. But the theorist may shift ground. Novelists can get away with murder, but in an academic context these undisciplined gestures towards ‘pure reading’ will encourage a lazy, intellectually complacent, old-fashioned sort of scholarship. Theory, whatever its troubles, is justified in light of the fact that the *academic* alternative – call it, ‘traditional humanism’ – is clearly worse.

S: Again, from Eagleton’s *After Theory*:

Those to whom the title of this book suggests that 'theory' is now over, and that we can all relievedly return to an age of pre-theoretical innocence, are in for a disappointment. There can be no going back to an age when it was enough to pronounce Keats delectable or Milton a doughty spirit.³⁸

Yet it seems fair to point out no age has been so Keats or Milton-mad that it was considered *sufficient* for a lecturer to drool an idiot 'delectable!' or 'doughty spirit!' then expire across the lectern in a slump of tweed and elbow patches. So Eagleton is telling us some sort of fable, or myth – perhaps with the intention of improving our moral character, I do admit.

P: I admit it is not *quite* clear what the charge of naivete is supposed to come to, minus the flourish for rhetorical effect.

S: I suspect Eagleton's odd rhetoric can be explained as the conclusion of a simple, unsound deduction. Not that Eagleton would advance it, yet it may be rattling around in the old attic unseen. Theory *used* to mean 'big theory'; traditional humanism, by contrast, was an eclectic, amateurish mess – mere little theory. So theory was better than traditional humanism, due to its greater rigor and philosophical sophistication. But now theory has been craftily downgraded to little theory. Theory these days is just moderately systematic reflection on one's subject. But it remains an article of faith that theory is, in terms of self-critical philosophical rigor, a clear step up from traditional humanism. Ergo, traditional humanism must be stepped *down* on the ladder. Since to think at all is to theorize, and traditional humanism is *less* than theory, traditional humanists are hereby obliged to be incapable of scratching two premises together to see the spark of a conclusion. Hence these strange, Eagletonian fantasies about semi-conscious Miltonists.

P: This is too ridiculous.

S: But this argument is the one you yourself just proposed as likely to appeal to theorists *generally*: namely, whatever its faults – even if it is not *necessary* - theory is *less* objectionable than the *only* alternative, 'traditional humanism', which is inherently naive and uncritical. The crudity of my formulation highlights the crudity of the argument. How can 'theory', if it is as eclectic as everyone admits it is these days, be *automatically* superior to resistance to theory?

P: What if we narrow and sharpen our focus, returning to the question of 'pure readers'? What about the New Critics, who might be accused of taking mistaken notions about textual immediacy and 'pure readership' *seriously*? Theory might be credited with inherent intellectual superiority relative to this dominant school of criticism it supplanted.

S: Gerald Graff makes this very point, it so happens. He is a good example of a critic who pushes the line that theory should be defended as preferable relative to traditional humanism. But the 'humanist' target turns out to look rather like New Criticism in particular. It goes like so. Graff criticizes Helen Vendler, a

paradigm-case traditional humanist. Graff specifically disapproves of her plea that literary studies not lose touch with 'literature itself' – that is, the 'taste on the tongue', together with "that early attitude of entire receptivity and plasticity and innocence before the text"³⁹ –

P: - When we were ravished by the shores of Dishwater Lake?

S: Exactly! 'The taste on the tongue' is traditional humanism – delectable! – but innocent by no means. *All* traditional humanism, Graff hints, is guilty of the original sin of New Criticism. Only *theory* can wash that away; and *all* theory can.

P: It seems a bit odd to *equate* traditional humanism with New Criticism.

S: Graff does not come out and assert it baldly, but he hints at a strong connection. The non-theory-minded, i.e. *traditional* humanist thinks of literature as so much fine wine in bottles; the New Critics have their metaphors of well-made vessels. And all this is *wrong*, hence the importance of theory. "If there is any point of agreement among deconstructionists, structuralists, reader-response critics, pragmatists, phenomenologists, speech-act theorists, and theoretically minded humanists, it is that texts are not, after all, autonomous and self-contained, that the meaning of any text in itself depends for its comprehension on other texts and textualized frames of reference."⁴⁰

P: This is true, of course. Just for starters, every text has the meaning it does in virtue of being written in a language. The whole business is highly relational.

S: Do you think Vendler will drop this taste-on-tongue nonsense if someone takes her aside and explains that, not only has she been speaking *prose* all her life, but some sort of *language*?

P: I think Graff will want to insist there is a bit more to it than that. Let us keep the focus on the New Critics. They do *say* that texts – poems, in particular - are autonomous, self-contained monads.

S: As Leibniz writes in the *Monadology*:

There is also no way of explaining how a Monad can be altered or changed in its inner being by any other created thing . . . The Monads have no windows through which anything may come in or go out.⁴¹

P: The New Critics say *this* sort of thing about texts. It is absurd.

S: Nevertheless, what the New Critics *did* was skirmish with historicists and others; when conflict escalated, they went atomic – *monadic*, if you like. Rhetorically speaking.

P: Why assume it is just *rhetoric*?

S: I have read as far as the Preface to Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn*. He anticipates the objection that he is anti-historicist and responds he is sorry for misunderstanding caused.

We have had impressed upon us the necessity for reading a poem in terms of its historical context, and that kind of reading has been carried on so successfully that some of us have been tempted to feel that it is the only kind of reading possible. We tend to say that every poem is an expression of its age; that we must be careful to ask of it only what its own age asked; that we must judge it only by the canons of its age. Any attempt to view it *sub specie aeternitatis*, we feel, must result in illusion.

Perhaps it must. Yet, if poetry exists as poetry in any meaningful sense, the attempt must be made.⁴²

P: But if poems are *not* monads, and Brooks knows it, Graff and Eagleton and others can point out he is throwing dust in everyone's eyes, including his own. *Pure* reading is not even like *perfect* justice – that is, something one might at least *think* one has *some* notion how to approximate by stages.

S: Or one could argue: since it is manifestly impossible to view texts *sub specie aeternitatis*; and since whatever the New Critics did – for decades – must not have been, *per se*, impossible, it must be that Brooks and others *liked* the results of asking for the impossible thing. If you know the kitchen has no steak, and the result of ordering it will be baked chicken – prepared with apologetic extra care, and 25% off the bill? And if you *want* the chicken? I would advise declaring in a loud voice to one's companion: 'You simply *must* have the steak. Anything less would be an *intestinal* fallacy.'

P: You are cynical. What if someone points out that telling lies, even over wine, is *bad*?

S: In the first place, anyone who cannot see through a few lies has no business sitting down with Proust and Nabokov. In the second place, protesting that one is too good to do something bad is well and good, but in the long run tends to expose you to charges of hypocrisy. Suppose you were asked to name the contemporary critical school – and figure – who stands most forthrightly *against* New Criticism and *for* historicism?

P: New Historicism and Steven Greenblatt.

S: Greenblatt is great believer in monads. Greenblatt's whole literary *corpus* demands that the reader take up the proper perspective *sub specie aeternitatis*.

P: Really?

S: Not *really*. But if the New Criticism is intolerably Leibnizian, so is New Historicism. In "The Touch of the Real" Greenblatt talks candidly about his signature method – the *telling* anecdote: a few seemingly unrelated empirical

scraps juxtaposed to generate a potent sense of the holistic unfolding of a social, cultural world, in all its material solidity and richness. This *sensibility* – the touch of the real – is the source of Greenblatt’s fame and notoriety as critic and essayist. He says he learned this ‘characteristic opening gambit’ from Erich Auerbach: “the isolation of a resonant textual fragment that is revealed, under the pressure of analysis, to represent the work from which it is drawn and the particular culture in which that work was produced and consumed.”⁴³ One might wonder: how do the fragments *do it*? Leibniz offers the only *possible* explanation: “Now this interconnection, relationship, or this adaptation of all things to each particular one, and of each one to all the rest, brings it about that every simple substance has relations which express all the others and that it is consequently a perpetual living mirror of the universe.”⁴⁴

P: Sweet Apollo! Greenblatt believes in monads!

S: Of course he does *not*. And please note: I am not *refuting*, on the grounds that Greenblatt’s procedure presupposes metaphysical nonsense. I am pointing out that the quarrel between New Criticism and New Historicism is a competition between *sensibilities*, not philosophies. As Greenblatt himself says: “we wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent.”⁴⁵

P: I see the point. But you are defending one side by hinting that neither side feels obliged to mean what it says. Is this a *proper* defense, rather than the basis for a blanket indictment? Is there no harm in making exaggerated – even consciously deceitful – philosophical claims?

S: Exaggerated rhetorical gestures, indulged in repetitively over long periods of time, can induce stress and injury. One leans far to one side – to shrug off the dead hand of some dogma – and sticks. This is what finally wore everyone down regarding New Criticism. As Kierkegaard writes, *á propos* of that great self-made counter-weight, Martin Luther, ‘a corrective made into a norm is *eo ipso* confusion.’ Nevertheless, correctives are sometimes in order, confusion not always harmful.

P: It seems to me confusion is always a little harmful, particularly when one is doing philosophy and it is a question of deluding oneself about one’s own beliefs.

S: This is what Kierkegaard is thinking when he remarks that what makes a philosopher comic is that he builds “a huge, domed palace,” while himself living “in a shed alongside it, or in a doghouse, or at best in the janitor’s quarters.”⁴⁶ But one could say as well that what makes a philosopher comic is that he builds a ludicrous ramshackle edifice that sways perilously in any light breeze, while he himself lives in a snug, ordinary house a safe distance off. Such time-share arrangements can even border on genius. “If Hegel had written the whole of his logic and then said, in the preface, that it was merely an experiment in thought, in which he had even begged the question in many places, then he would

certainly have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. As it is he is merely comic."⁴⁷

P: Could you be a bit tedious and explain the joke?

VIII.

S: Let me introduce a term of art, due to Empson. He has a wonderful little piece in which he explains why he and others liked Donne when he was young: "We all said we admired him because he was so metaphysical, but I can see now that I really liked him because he argued, whereas the others felt that this side of him needed handling tactfully."⁴⁸ It needed handling tactfully because the others thought words in poetry should suggest vivid sensory images.

P: It is not *tactful* to lack a touch of the real, as Greenblatt might say?

S: Poems should not contain words like 'therefore', there being no good picture of the relation of logical consequence. This is as bad a theory of good poetry as one might hope to meet. Empson is not interested in saving it, but it amuses him to mount a defense of 'therefore' in poetry consistent with it. He calls what such metaphysical poetry does 'argufying':

'Argufying' is perhaps a tiresomely playful word, but it makes my thesis more moderate; I do not deny that thoroughly conscientious uses of logic could become a distraction from poetry. Argufying is the kind of arguing we do in ordinary life, usually to get our own way; I do not mean nagging by it, but just a not specially dignified sort of argument. This has always been one of the things people enjoy in poems; and it can be found in every period of English literature.⁴⁹

Because *arguments* in poetry tend to be *argufments* – pardon the barbarism – "arguing in poetry is not only mental; it also feels muscular. Saying 'therefore' is like giving the reader a bang on the nose; and though it may be said that 'intellectualised' poetry feels stale and unreal, a bang on the nose does not feel stale and unreal."⁵⁰ Do you see the relevance of this notion of 'argufying' to our discussion?

P: Now that you mention it, we have discussed hardly anything else. Greenblatt and the New Critics are argufying for the existence of monads, in opposite directions. When we agreed we liked Nabokov, we could have said it is because he is a heavyweight champion argufier. We do not like Eagleton because he is an incorrigible argufier. But this deepens my confusion. Why should it be pleasant to be banged in the nose one way, not another? In any case, would it not be better *not* to get punched – to construct arguments instead? What if Derrida were to make *this* objection against Proust's 'anti-theory' philosophy, at which he is so eager to cast stones? One should take philosophy *seriously*.

S: The difficulty with obliging philosophers to *live* in their own houses, which is what you are suggesting, has to do with predictably glassy repercussions of the stone-throwing impulse. Consider, for example, the opening sentence of Derrida's own essay, "Signature Event Context": "Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, rigorously controllable and transmittable: in a word, communicable?"⁵¹

P: I suppose I am supposed to say 'yes'; after all, one can *communicate* the concept of communication? But 'communicable' clearly does *not* mean 'unique, rigorously controllable and transmittable'. You can perfectly well communicate non-unique, non-rigorously controllable things. So the question is nonsensical and nothing can really follow from any answer to it.

S: And yet the first word of the *next* sentence is 'thus'.

P: A bang on the nose?

S: Such, such is the *labor* of theory, on which Derrida insists so strenuously.

P: I would think it was more reasonable to note that you cannot knock down all of theory by knocking Derrida. Ergo, we have a *general* defense for theory: for all we know, *some* theorists are wise and worth reading, ergo theory is *permissible*.

S: Fair enough. But consider this servicable characterization of theory as a whole, courtesy of Valentine Cunningham:

Theorists have indeed managed to pull off what is, by any standards, an astounding coup, or trick; have managed to wedge together a great many various subjects, concerns, directions, impulses, persuasions and activities that are going on in and around literature, and squeeze them all under the one large sheltering canopy of 'Theory'. They have managed to compel so many divergent wings of what they call Theory under the one roof, persuaded so many sectional variants of interpretative work to sink their possible differences around a common conference table, in the one seminar with the sign Theory on its door. So while setting their faces, usually, against Grand Narratives and Keys to All Mythologies, as delusive and imperialist, and all that, Theorists have managed to erect that Grandest Narrative of all – Theory – the greatest intellectual colonizer of all time. How this wheeze was pulled off, how you can have the political and the personal subjects of literature – representations of selfhood and class and genre and race: the outside-concerns, the outward look of writing, the descriptive and documentary, the reformist intentions and the ideological instrumentality of writing – envisioned and envisionable as absolutely part and parcel of the often quite opposite and contradictory functions of writing – the merely formal, or the technically linguistic, or (as often) a deeply inward, world-denying, aporetic writing activity – rather defies ordinary

logic. Foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, shall we say roughly the Marxist reading on the one hand, and the deconstructionist on the other, make awkward bed-partners, you might think. But Theory deftly marries them off, or at least has them more or less cheerfully all registered as guests in the same hotel room.⁵²

It would never occur to me to doubt that there are *individual* theorists worth reading for their insights. Many are quite brilliant. But the successes of *individuals* do not constitute any basis for *general* defense. Putting the point, once again, hydrodynamically: if someone constructs something *solid* – a theory or an argument, say – this is no justification for a large body of *liquid*: theory. Putting the point grammatically, ‘theory’ is not just ‘ofless’ but standardly lacks an article, any ‘a’ or ‘the’. It is a *mass* noun, as one might cry out, ‘theory, theory everywhere, but not a thought to think.’ A *general* defense of theory must rebut this lament by *justifying* the existence of the *liquid*. The hypothetical prospect of bobbing or fishing for stray good thoughts or arguments is consolation but no defense. As Cunningham says, theory defies ordinary logic by being *essentially* a matter of putting things together in characteristically incoherent ways. Pragmatic eclecticism is the rule: a bit of this, a bit of that, impressionistically mixed and matched – all systems but no systematicity. It seems, then, there should be some reason why this defiance of logic *tends* to be good rather than bad.

P: I suppose the response will be that you are biased in favor of intellectual *solids* over *liquids*. Theorists will say your reluctance to admit the collective validity of their fluid efforts goes to show that you have a rigid, unduly narrow conception of what constitutes rigor in philosophy.

S: Yes, I have failed to compass theory’s authentic, expressive originality – its performative *invention* and *energy*. I ought to burst these hoops of logical steel constricting my poor, crabbed soul because, as Friedrich Schlegel remarks: “It is equally deadly to the spirit to have a system and not to have one. One must resolve to combine the two.”⁵³ If I may rub a spot of Schegelian boldness onto myself, this maxim is surely as suitable a motto for theory *in general* as any. It declares forthrightly that a strangely systematic sort of incoherence is necessary for the sake of *spirit*. All my rudely mechanical objections have, of course, completely missed this admirably Romantic point all day long. On the other hand, it seems fair to note that falling back on Schlegel merely pushes back the problem. To *resolve* to do something that sounds at least mildly impossible is not to *succeed*, let alone on a regular academic basis. And one would also like a good seat from which to view the god emerging from the machine. I do admit that anyone who has the least terpsichorean knack for dancing over abysses should be encouraged to do so. But one must distinguish these sorts of cases from ordinary trippings over one’s logical feet – stupid mistakes, as they are called. Why should it be that theory tends to be contradictory in a *good* way, rather than a *bad* way? Putting the point historically, theory is a cultural child of the 1960’s. This fact is as obvious and undeniable as it is resistant to precise statement. I will attempt none, nor do I hint at any problem with the decade in question. I merely note that the reason theory can retain its self-identity without self-consistency is

that it is, loosely, culturally coherent. Theory is a gradually evolving cultural *sensibility*, plus a will to express and enforce that sensibility – tremendously, energetically – in a semi-poetic idiom largely taken over and adapted from the edifice of traditional philosophy. As such, theory is apparently unsuited to be a tool of inquiry, much less of critical inquiry. Theory is a mode of self-expression, a suburb of the city of the language of *poetry*, in Hazlitt's sense:

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty: it takes from one thing to add to another: it accumulates circumstances together to give the greatest possible effect to a favourite object. The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty: it judges of things, not according to their immediate impression on the mind, but according to their relations to one another. The one is a monopolizing faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of present excitement by inequality and disproportion; the other is a distributive faculty, which seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion. The one is an aristocratical, the other a republican faculty. The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is every thing by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents a dazzling appearance. It shews its head turreted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and bloodstained. Before it "it carries noise, and behind it tears."⁵⁴

Theorists know what they *think*, and what they *want*. The practice known as 'theory' consists of ongoing attempts to craft linguistic vehicles impressive and expressive enough to be worthy of these more or less fixed thoughts, attitudes and desires.

P: At the start of our discussion you were more clearly sympathetic to the aristocracy.

S: But I love metaphysical poetry. In pointing out that one can hardly use a megaphone as a microscope, I hope I do not seem to be expressing hatred of megaphones. To put it yet another way, perhaps I can mediate my inner class conflict by means of a third term, 'intellectual conscience', which I crib from *The Gay Science*:

I keep having the same experience and keep resisting it every time. I do not want to believe it although it is palpable: *the great majority of people lacks an intellectual conscience*. . . Everybody looks at you with strange eyes and goes right on handling his scales . . . Nobody even blushes when you intimate that their weights are underweight; nor do people feel outraged; they merely laugh at your doubts. I mean: *the great majority of people* does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most

certain reasons: pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterwards.⁵⁵

A case can be made that a serviceable definition of 'theory' – the sort Eagleton introduces, whose good spirit he still defends - might be 'applied lack of intellectual conscience, in a Nietzschean sense.' This is how Jonathan Culler defines it, for example.

P: Really?

S: Only *in effect*. The book is *Literary Theory, a Very Short Introduction*. Culler begins by noting the oddity of theory's 'oflessness'. 'Theory' isn't *scientific*. What is it? He raises, only to drop, the possibility that it should be defined as some or other set of propositions; better to call it a sort of *activity*. He acknowledges that *resistance* to theory has nothing to do with resistance to "systematic reflection on the nature of literature or debate about the distinctive qualities of literary language, for example."⁵⁶ Yet he apparently does regard blanket resistance to theory as inherently intellectually illegitimate. Ultimately, Culler defines 'theory' in terms of *function*: "Works regarded as theory *have effects* beyond their original field."⁵⁷ More specifically:

If theory is defined by its practical effects, as what changes people's views, makes them think differently about their objects of study and their activities in studying them, what sort of effects are these? The *main effect* of theory is to dispute 'common sense': common sense views about meaning, writing, literature, experience.

Culler composes a bulleted list: "the conception that the meaning of an utterance or text is what the speaker 'had in mind'; or the idea that writing is an expression whose truth lies elsewhere, in an experience or a state of affairs which it expresses; or the notion that reality is what is 'present' at a given moment." He rounds it all off with a slight waffle: "Theory is often a pugnacious critique of common sense notions, and further, an attempt to show that what we take for granted as 'common sense' is in fact a historical construction, a particular theory that has come to seem so natural to us that we don't even see it as a theory."⁵⁸

P: According to Culler, to 'do theory' is to find some way of arriving at a *pre-specified* set of anti-common sense conclusions, on pain of not doing 'theory' at all? He is so sure what these conclusions will be that he actually draws up a list? Here is a paradox! The point of theory is to *change* peoples' minds. But theory cannot change the minds of theorists if *both* theory and theorists unshakably *assume* the *same* things in advance: namely, common sense is mistaken. It seems that on Culler's account theorists themselves can have mostly no real use for the 'main effect' of theory.

S: This does leave the coherent possibility that theory is no mirror of self-examination, as some say, but primarily a rod of stern correction to be used by the 'better people' against – those who are not the 'better people', to use Eagleton's exquisitely delicate expression.

P: Culler does say 'often' – 'theory *often* critiques common sense'. What if he concedes 'theory' may sometimes be wrong, common sense sometimes right?

S: At points Culler does hint that the conclusions of theory are unpredictable, which would seem to imply something of the sort. The trouble with this agnosticism is that it is inconsistent with the conjunction of two premises he accepts: first, theory is *necessary*, hence resistance illegitimate; second, theory is *defined* by its effects, i.e. its *conclusions*, which are denials of common sense. If we turn around and say theory is *not* defined by its effects, it would seem there is no such thing as theory. Derrida says so, but I have my doubts as to its total non-existence.

P: Assuming there is such a thing as theory, is Culler's definition of 'theory' correct? Surely theorists are, to some degree, committed to *methods*. Something counts as 'theory' if it has the right methodological character. Do practicing theorists instead regard theory simply as whatever gets them where they want to go?

S: Here is a passage from the introduction to a popular anthology, *Cultural Studies*. "It is problematic for cultural studies simply to adopt, uncritically, any of the formalized disciplinary practices of the academy, for those practices, as much as the distinctions they inscribe, carry with them a heritage of disciplinary investments and exclusions and a history of social effects that cultural studies would often be inclined to repudiate." Ergo, "no methodology can be privileged or even temporarily employed with total security and confidence, yet none can be eliminated out of hand. Textual analysis, semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, interviews, phonemic analysis, psychoanalysis, rhizomatics, content analysis, survey research – all can provide important insights and knowledge."⁵⁹ I think it fair to say the editors might have saved a bit of breath by announcing: we do theory.

P: Surely the editors would claim that, by placing themselves under the constant, keen and watchful gaze of so many and varied guardians, they ensure their own critical good conduct.

S: As if there were no difference between a royal bodyguard and an abject prisoner led along in chains! The editors make it clear that when they say they do not want to accept anything 'uncritically', what this means is that they do not admit conclusions they would be 'inclined to repudiate'. This is the *point* of denying privilege and tenure to any *one* theoretical point of view. If one wishes a thing done, doves of desire flutter off in clouds, returning with happy news. The least velleity summons a theoretical servant with willing hands. If any of these betray impertinent reluctance, others take their places. When all is said and done, the only thing lacking in all this *pandaimonium* of theoretical servantry is a single *daimonical* voice with the privilege of whispering, 'no' – a voice that cannot be ignored. This may seem a small loss in exchange for such opulence and ease; but I feel the loss. Which more or less brings me round to my answer to your question. Do I 'resist theory'? Everyone has blind spots, even ideologies, though

it is a nice question what it can *mean* to say so. I quite see what J. S. Mill is getting at when he writes that, “whoever despises theory, let him give himself what airs of wisdom he may, is self-convicted as a quack.”⁶⁰ But Mill did not mean ‘theory’ in anything like the sense that Culler defines. What, then, is to be *done*? Is the answer to *assume* theorists are right to *stipulate* conclusions in advance? Shall I believe whatever others are ‘inclined’ to have me believe? As William Blake remarks: “a fool’s balance is no criterion because, though it goes down on the heaviest side, we ought to look what he puts into it.”⁶¹ I freely grant the imperative of self-knowledge, but when I think about trading in old, unfamiliar ideologies for the sorts of things I have *seen* pressed between covers of theory books, I am put in mind of a salutary lesson in critical methodology related by no less an authority than that amateur-for-the-ages, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch. Once upon a time, there was “a Persian monarch who, having to adjudicate upon two poems, caused the one to be read to him, and at once, without ado, awarded the prize to the other.”⁶² The end. Think about this tale. Do you think the king *may* have acted justly?

P: The moral of the story is a bit *complacent*.

S: Ah, fair enough! As Nabokov wisely declares, reasoning one’s way out of reading is bad practice. But I did not mean it that way. I had another remark by Quiller-Couch in mind all the while. “The reader will perhaps excuse certain small vivacities, sallies that meet fools with their folly, masking the main attack. That, he will see, is serious enough; and others will carry it on, though my effort come to naught.”⁶³ Of course I do not deny that Quiller-Couch has his Victorian faults. As Nietzsche remarks, “at times one remains faithful to a cause only because its opponents do not cease to be insipid.”⁶⁴

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¹⁶ *Literary Theory*, p. 173.

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