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Rhetorical Hermeneutics

Steven Mailloux

The Space Act of 1958 begins, “The Congress hereby declares that it is the policy of the United States that activities in space should be devoted to peaceful purposes for the benefit of all mankind.” In March 1982, a Defense Department official commented on the statute: “We interpret the right to use space for peaceful purposes to include military uses of space to promote peace in the world.”¹ The absurdity of this willful misinterpretation amazed me on first reading, and months later it readily came to mind when I was looking for an effective way to illustrate the politics of interpretation. With just the right touch of moral indignation, I offered my literary criticism class this example of militaristic ideology blatantly misreading an antimilitaristic text.

“But . . . the Defense Department is right!” objected the first student to speak. Somewhat amused, I spent the next ten minutes trying, with decreasing amusement, to show this student that the Reagan administration’s reading was clearly, obviously, painfully wrong. I pointed to the text. I cited the traditional interpretation. I noted the class consensus, which supported me. All to no avail. It was at this point that I felt the “theoretical urge”: the overwhelming desire for a hermeneutic account to which I could appeal to prove my student wrong. What I wanted was a general theory of interpretation that could supply rules outlawing my student’s misreading.

This little hermeneutic fable introduces the three topics of my essay. One topic is the *theoretical moment* that concludes the narrative; another is the simple plot, a brief *rhetorical exchange*; and finally there’s the *institutional*

setting (a university classroom) in which the exchange takes place. These three topics preoccupy the sections that follow. Section 1 analyzes the problems resulting from the theoretical urge, the impasse of contemporary critical theory. Section 2 proposes my solution to this impasse, a solution I call rhetorical hermeneutics, which leads in section 3 to a rhetorical version of institutional history.

1

The theoretical urge is a recurrent phenomenon within the present organization of American literary studies. For within that discipline, the task of explicating individual texts remains the privileged activity; and, historically, this primary task has always brought in its wake a secondary one: critical practice inevitably leads to its self-conscious justification in critical theory. Every time a new challenger to the critical orthodoxy comes along, the discipline's theoretical discourse renews itself in an attempt to provide a rationale for interpretation. In simplified form, the institutional catechism during the last forty years has gone something like this: What is the purpose of literary studies as an institutionalized discipline? To produce knowledge about literature. How can this best be accomplished? By doing explications of texts. What should be the goal of explication? To discover the correct interpretation, *the* meaning of the text.² Once the theoretical dialogue gets this far, the agreement among theorists begins breaking down. How can we guarantee that critics produce correct interpretations? Formalists respond, "By focusing on the text"; intentionalists, "By discovering the author's meaning"; reader-response critics, "By describing the ideal reader's experience"; and so on.

As dissimilar as these theoretical answers appear, they all share a common assumption: validity in interpretation is guaranteed by establishing norms or principles for explicating texts, and such rules are best derived from an account of how interpretation works in general. In other words, most traditional theorists assume that an accurate theoretical description of interpreting will give us binding prescriptions for our critical practice, prescriptions that can assure (or at least encourage) correct readings. The classic statement of this assumption is E. D. Hirsch's in "Objective

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Interpretation”: “When the critic clearly conceives what a correct interpretation is in principle, he possesses a guiding idea against which he can measure his construction. Without such a guiding idea, self-critical or objective interpretation is hardly possible.”³

In this way, contemporary literary theory comes to focus on a question it takes as basic: How does interpretation—the accomplishment of meaning—take place? Two hermeneutic positions have developed in response to this central question: textual realism and readerly idealism. Hermeneutic realism argues that meaning-full texts exist independent of interpretation. From this perspective, meanings are discovered, not created. The facts of the text exist objectively, prior to any hermeneutic work by readers or critics, and therefore correct interpretations are those corresponding to the autonomous facts of the text. Realism often views the interpreter’s mind as passive, simply acted upon by the words on the page. Though the text must be read, in correct interpretation it speaks itself. If the reader needs to do anything, it is only the mechanical activity of combining word meanings into larger thematic units and formal relationships. This is a “build-up” model of interpretation. For hermeneutic realism, texts are the primary source and test of readings; they constrain and ultimately determine interpretations.

In contrast, hermeneutic idealism argues that interpretation always creates the signifying text, that meaning is made, not found. In this view, textual facts are never prior to or independent of the hermeneutic activity of readers and critics. Idealism claims not only that the interpreter’s mind is active but that it is completely dominant over the text. There are no semantic or formal givens; all such textual givens are products of interpretive categories. This is a “build-down” model of interpretation. From this perspective, what counts as a correct reading depends entirely on shared assumptions and strategies, not autonomous texts. In hermeneutic idealism, a text doesn’t constrain its interpretation; rather, communal interpretation creates the text.

As theories of interpretation, textual realism and readerly idealism share a common institutional concern: to establish a foundation for validating knowledge. I call this an *institutional* concern because traditional theorists claim that, without principles of correct interpretation, an institutionalized discipline has no way of grounding its production of new knowledge. Once again Hirsch is the paradigmatic theorist: he claims that, without a proper theory of correct interpretation, we cannot avoid “subjectivism and relativism” and cannot think of “literary study as a corporate enterprise and a progressive discipline.”⁴ It follows from this view that theory serves the corporate enterprise by making explicit the norms and principles of valid readings. Any such theory attempts to derive these norms and principles from its general account of how interpretation works. Whether the account is realist, idealist, or some combination of the two, it must provide an *intersubjective* ground for correct

interpretation, and it is traditionally thought that only by establishing such a ground can the dangers of relativism and subjectivism be avoided.

With such a high value placed on intersubjective foundations for interpreting, it should come as no surprise that the concept of conventions plays an important—even central—role in hermeneutic accounts, whether realist or idealist.⁵ Thus, with some justification, the following discussion takes the conventionalist version of the realist/idealist debate as a synecdoche for all “foundationalist” arguments in recent critical theory.

Theorists of the realist persuasion have long turned to textual conventions to explain literary interpretation. Formalists, intentionalists, structuralists, and even some reader-response critics locate conventions in a text in order to guarantee intersubjective foundations in their hermeneutic accounts. An especially interesting case of realist conventionalism can be found in the work of Monroe Beardsley, who with W. K. Wimsatt codified the prescriptions of New Critical formalism. In essays on the affective and intentional fallacies, Wimsatt and Beardsley proposed an “objective criticism” that would avoid the dangers of “impressionism,” “skepticism,” and “relativism.”⁶ In his *Aesthetics*, Beardsley later developed this formalism into a foundationalist theory, asking, “What are we doing when we interpret literature, and how do we know that we are doing it correctly?” and answering, “There are *principles of explication* for poetry in terms of which disagreements about the correctness of proposed explications can be settled.”⁷ These principles can be summed up in the realist’s slogan “Back to the text.”⁸

Beardsley explains his realist hermeneutics further in *The Possibility of Criticism*, where he argues that the “literary text, in the final analysis, is the determiner of its meaning.”⁹ At this point conventions enter into Beardsley’s account. In his chapter “The Testability of an Interpretation,” he attempts to defend his formalist theory by arguing that “there really is something in the poem that we are trying to dig out, though it is elusive” (*PC*, p. 47). This “something”—the meaning in the text—is the object of interpretation, and Beardsley proposes to define it more rigorously by appropriating the conventionalism of speech-act theory. In another place, Beardsley succinctly describes J. L. Austin’s account of language use: “To know what illocutionary action [requesting, promising, asserting, and so on] was performed is to know what action the production of such a text generated by the appropriate conventions.”¹⁰

Austin’s conventionalism can be pushed in two very different directions: toward readerly idealism, with conventions placed in hearers, or toward textual realism, with conventions posited in texts. Predictably, Beardsley’s adaptation of speech-act theory takes the realist route. Rather than having speakers or hearers “take responsibility” for performing certain illocutionary acts and for committing themselves to certain conventional conditions (for example, in promising, that the speaker can do a certain act in the future), Beardsley prefers to say that literary texts

imitate illocutionary acts and “represent” that certain conditions are in fact the case (*PC*, p. 115 n. 38). This is a shrewd maneuver: instead of readers taking responsibility for conventions of language use, texts represent those conventions; conventions move from outside to inside the text. This realist placement of conventions gives Beardsley just what his formalist theory requires—an autonomous text against which all interpretations can be tested. “I am arguing that there are some features of the poem’s meaning that are antecedent to, and independent of, the entertaining of an interpretive hypothesis; and this makes it possible to check such hypotheses against reality” (*PC*, pp. 57–58). And these semantic features that test interpretations include conventions embedded in the text.

Realist theories like Beardsley’s emphasize that conventions display shared practices for writing literature and that readers and critics must recognize these textual conventions in order to achieve valid interpretations. But such theories inevitably suffer from incomplete coverage and lack of specificity as exhaustive accounts of interpreting. No matter how comprehensive it tries to be, the realist conventionalism of genre critics, formalists, and semioticians remains unsatisfying as a complete description of even a single text’s literary meaning. The common notion of an artwork’s irreducible uniqueness refuses to go away, even when a significant portion of the text’s sense is attributable to an author following, modifying, or rejecting traditional conventions. But perhaps the literary text’s uniqueness is simply an illusion fostered by the humanistic tradition, on the one hand, and supported by the needs of a critical profession, on the other. Even if this were the case and a text’s meaning really could be explained as completely conventional, realist accounts would continue to be embarrassed by their contradictory descriptions of the uninterpreted givens in the text and by their many unconvincing explanations of how such textual givens cause interpretations. Realist conventionalism only restates these essentialist and causal problems: How exactly are conventions manifested in the text? How do such textually embedded conventions determine interpretation? The latter question usually leads realists toward some kind of correspondence model: interpreters recognize conventions in a text because they have literary competence, an internalized set of interpretive conventions.¹¹ Realists who take this route move toward idealist solutions and in so doing also move toward idealist incoherencies.

In contrast to realism, idealist theories emphasize conventions as shared practices for interpreting literature, conventions present in readers and critics, not in texts. Important idealist theories include those of Stanley Fish in “Interpreting the *Variorum*” and Jonathan Culler in *Structuralist Poetics*. Fish argues that communal interpretive strategies are the only constraints on the production of meaning. Texts are products of interpretive communities, which “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading . . . but for writing texts, for constituting their

properties."¹² In *Structuralist Poetics*, Culler more fully elaborates an idealist-oriented account of using conventions in interpretation. Though at times he refers to "potential" properties "latent" in the text itself, he more often emphasizes interpreters' reading conventions, which determine the sense they make of the literary work.¹³ He talks of the poem offering a structure for the reader to fill up, but he stresses the interpretive conventions competent readers use to invent something to fill up that structure. He suggests that it is not the text but the reading conventions that "make possible invention and impose limits on it."¹⁴

While realist accounts posit textual conventions that are recognized by readers, idealist accounts place interpretive conventions in readers who then apply them to create meaningful texts. Idealists fare no better than realists, however, in using conventions to avoid epistemological embarrassment. True, they do avoid the realist problems connected with essentialism and causation by arguing that the content of the text is produced by the interpretive conventions employed and that texts do not cause interpretations at all. But entirely new problems arise out of these supposed solutions. The two most important involve the infinite regress of conventions and the unformalizable nature of context. In a particular case of interpretation, what determines the interpretive conventions to be used? Idealists cannot answer by proposing metaconventions, because this would lead to an infinite regress within their theories: each set of conventions at a lower level requires metaconventions at a higher level to determine the appropriate lower-level conventions. Then these metaconventions themselves need metaconventions, and so on. One way to avoid this pitfall is to argue that context always determines the interpretive conventions to employ. But such a claim only leads to a more difficult question for the idealist: What constrains the use of interpretive conventions in a specific context?

Both Fish and Culler, among others, have recently suggested the impossibility of adequately answering this question. As they fully realize, such a suggestion entails a critique of their past conventionalist accounts of interpretation. I will limit my discussion here to Culler's recent observation that the interpretive conventions on which he focused in *Structuralist Poetics* should be seen as part of a "boundless context."¹⁵ Culler states his new position in this way: "Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless" (*OD*, p. 123). Culler seems to be claiming two rather different things, only the first of which helps explain why the contextual nature of interpretation makes idealist conventionalism inadequate.

Culler first seems to be arguing that any full account of meaning must include a notion of boundless context. By characterizing context as boundless, Culler means that any hermeneutic theory trying to specify a particular context exhaustively is doomed to failure: "Any given context is always open to further description. There is no limit in principle to what might be included in a given context, to what might be shown to

be relevant to the interpretation of a particular speech act" ("CM," p. 24). Every specification is open to questions asking for further specifications.¹⁶ In such an account, conventions are, at best, only first approximations of boundless context. Conventions begin the specification of relevant contextual features, designating the relation of the words, persons, and circumstances required for a speech act to have the specific meaning it has in a given context (compare *OD*, p. 121).

But conventions alone are inadequate as explanatory concepts. *Either* the description of the conventions must reductively and arbitrarily leave out relevant contextual features, *or* the specification of the relevant conventions would have to be so open-ended that conventions would become indistinguishable from context and lose their identity. A hermeneutic theory using conventions in conjunction with other contextual features will fare no better as an exhaustive account of meaning since there is no limit in principle to the features relevant to the interpretation of specific speech acts. Another way of putting this is to say that context is unformalizable. Any account that uses "context" to constrain interpretation thus has only two options: either it must simply name "context," "situation," or "circumstances" as a constraint and not elaborate any further, or it must carry out an infinite listing of all aspects of context and their interrelations, that is, bring everything in.¹⁷ In other words, interpretive theories of context must either never begin the process of specification or never end it.

Culler's first claim about boundless context agrees with what I have been saying so far: boundless context determines meaning, and context is boundless because it is ultimately not formalizable. Unfortunately, Culler confuses things with a second, entirely different argument about meaning and context, in which he asserts the "impossibility of ever saturating or limiting context so as to control or rigorously determine the 'true' meaning" ("CM," p. 28). In this deconstructionist claim, context is boundless not in the first sense—that it is unformalizable—but in a second sense: new contexts can always be imagined for a particular speech act, and thus meaning is in principle radically indeterminate (see *OD*, pp. 124, 128). Culler ends up using context here as an interpretive device for making meaning undecidable rather than as an explanatory concept in accounting for meaning's determinate shape.

Culler's two uses of context are not necessarily irreconcilable; but to make them strictly consistent, he needs to give up his assertion about the absolute indeterminacy of meaning. As it happens, doing this would not be difficult given his initial explanatory use of "context." Indeed, though he claims to be doing otherwise in his deconstructive maneuvers, Culler actually demonstrates not that meaning is always indeterminate but that meaning has one determinate shape in one situation and another in a different situation. Though a speech act's meaning can change from context to context, this meaning is always determinate *within a given*

context. In the cases Culler suggests—situations in which the proposal of an imagined context shows how a meaning could change—one of two things happens: the meaning remains the same because, in the present situation, the proposed context is perceived as imaginary; or the meaning changes because, in the present situation, the proposed context is incorporated into the present circumstances. In this second possibility, meaning changes because the context changes. In neither situation is meaning indeterminate; it is determinate (even if ambiguous) because of the context it is in.¹⁸

But whichever way Culler uses “context”—whether as explanatory concept or interpretive device—he goes far beyond simply showing that “if language always evades its conventions, it also depends on them” (“CM,” p. 29). What he demonstrates instead is something he admits in a footnote: that the distinction between convention and context breaks down (see “CM,” p. 30 n. 12). Indeed, all idealist theories of interpretive conventions tend to self-destruct when they adopt the notion of context to solve their conventionalist problems. Do either realist or idealist uses of conventions, then, provide a full account of literary interpretation? The answer must be no, for both epistemological positions fail to avoid radical embarrassments in their accounts.

Nor do theories combining realism and idealism avoid the hermeneutic problems. Typically, such theories argue that realism and idealism are each only partially right, that neither the text alone nor the reader alone determines meaning, that meaning is contributed by both text and reader. This comfortable compromise is understandably popular in contemporary theory, but it solves none of the realist/idealist problems.¹⁹ What it does do, however, is cagily cover up those problems by continually postponing their discovery. In conventionalist theories, for instance, we noted how some realists move from conventions in a text to conventions matched in a competent critic’s mind. Such theories, by moving toward idealism, avoid the realist problem of explaining textual causation. But when those same theories run up against the idealist problem of determining appropriate interpretive conventions in a given situation, they turn back to the text for a solution. Thus, we end up with a cunningly circular argument: stay a realist until you have problems, then move toward idealism until you get embarrassed, then return to realism, and so forth ad infinitum. No amount of tinkering or conflating can save realist and idealist conventionalism from similar dead ends and vicious circles.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that any other account—objective or subjective, conventionalist or nonconventionalist, or some admixture of these—could provide a general theory of interpretation, something we can call Theory with a capital *T*, something which could solve the hermeneutic problems we have discussed in this section. As Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels have recently shown, Theory is impossible if it is defined as “the attempt to govern interpretations of

particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general.”²⁰ My critique of realist and idealist conventionalism is another version of the attack on Theory so defined. The solution to the realist/idealist debate in hermeneutics is not, then, the proposal of still another Theory. The way to answer the realist/idealist question “Is meaning created by the text or by the reader or by both?” is simply not to ask it, to stop doing Theory.

2

The anti-Theory argument opens up two possibilities: a Theorist can be convinced by the argument and stop doing Theory, or he can remain unpersuaded and continue business as usual. Let’s take up the second and more likely scenario first. If Theory simply continues, what will happen? According to Knapp and Michaels, Theory depends on logical mistakes like Hirsch’s separation of meaning from intention in *Validity in Interpretation*.²¹ Since to see a text as meaningful *is* to posit an author’s intention and vice versa, a Theory built on the separation of meaning and intention includes prescriptions—“Discover meaning by first searching for intention”—that are impossible to follow. Thus, according to Knapp and Michaels, Theory in its general descriptions is illogical and in its specific prescriptions is inconsequential.

But Knapp and Michaels’ thesis needs to be qualified in an important way. Certainly they are right in claiming that Theory cannot have the consequences it wants to have, that it cannot be a general account that guarantees correct interpretations. It can, however, have other kinds of consequences. For example, in advocating a search for the historical author’s meaning, intentionalists promote the critic’s use of history and biography, what formalists call external evidence. Thus, if a critic is convinced by intentionalist Theory, her interpretive method would employ historical and biographical as well as textual facts and thus could establish a meaning for a text that was different from one where extratextual evidence was scrupulously ignored.²²

But such methodological consequences might not be exactly what Knapp and Michaels mean by consequences. Fish has recently made a related argument for Theory’s inconsequentiality, an argument which suggests that my objection is entirely beside Knapp and Michaels’ point:

Interpretation is a function of the way human beings know, of what it is possible and not possible for the mind to do, of epistemology; and epistemology—the conditions of human knowing—is logically independent of any account one might give of it. I could be wrong about the way interpretation works, or I could be right; but the fact of my being either right or wrong would have no bearing whatsoever

on the interpretive act I (or anyone persuaded by me) might perform.²³

In this sense, Fish would argue, accurate or inaccurate Theory has no consequences.

I agree that having a correct or incorrect account of interpretation neither enables nor disables the critic in doing interpretation. She interprets in any case. But having *this* rather than *that* hermeneutic account does affect the *kind* of interpretation done. One account, for example, might restrict the critic to the published text; another might encourage her to examine manuscript material and biographical evidence. Fish, Knapp, and Michaels would not, I suppose, call these effects theoretical because, over and above such methodological prescriptions, the Theorist claims that the correctness of his account determines the effects it has. The anti-Theorists argue that since this Theoretical claim can't be true, the hermeneutic account has no methodological consequences. But delimiting "methodological consequences" in this way is certainly misleading. True, Theories do not have the kind of consequences a Theorist thinks they have in the way he thinks they have them. Still, the *attempt* to do the impossible (to have a correct Theory that guarantees valid interpretations because it is correct) does have consequences for practice that directly follow from the theoretical attempt, consequences such as critics talking about the author's mind or becoming preoccupied with biography.

This, then, is my answer to the first question, "If a Theorist continues doing Theory, what is he doing?" If it persuades other critics, his Theory continues to have consequences, but they are not exactly what he thinks they are. He has not provided an idealist or realist account of interpretation that can be appealed to in order to adjudicate readings. He has, however, affected critical practice by encouraging one type of interpretive method rather than another. But now I turn to the second question, "What will happen to theory if the anti-Theory argument *is* accepted?" Of course, Theory would end, but what can take its place? What happens when the theorist stops searching for that general account that guarantees correct readings? Where does he go once he quits asking realist or idealist questions about interpretation?

One route to follow takes a turn toward rhetoric. I take this path in the rest of my essay, where I propose a *rhetorical hermeneutics*, an anti-Theory theory. Such a hermeneutics does not view shared interpretive strategies as the creative origin of texts (in what George Orwell calls an act of "collective solipsism") but, rather, as historical sets of topics, arguments, tropes, ideologies, and so forth, that determine how texts are established as meaningful through rhetorical exchanges. In this view, communities of interpreters neither discover nor create meaningful texts. Such communities are actually synonymous with the conditions in which acts of persuasion about texts take place. Concepts such as "interpretive

strategies and “argument fields” are, we might say, simply tools for referring to the unformalizable context of interpretive work, work that always involves rhetorical action, attempts to convince others of the truth of explications and explanations.²⁴

A rhetorical hermeneutics must, by necessity, be more therapeutic than constructive.²⁵ To be otherwise, to construct a new account of interpretation in general, would simply reinvolve the same old problems of realism and idealism. Rather than proposing still another interpretive system on all fours with realist and idealist theories, rhetorical hermeneutics tries to cure theoretical discourse of its Theoretical tendencies. It might, then, restate the critique I made in section 1: various hermeneutic accounts make the Theoretical mistake of trying to establish the foundations of meaning outside the setting of rhetorical exchanges. All Theories believe that some pure vantage point can be established beyond and ruling over the messy realm of interpretive practices and persuasive acts. Only in this way, it is thought, can correct interpretation, privileged meaning, be accounted for. Hermeneutic realism, for example, assumes a stability of meaning before any rhetorical acts take place. Meaning is determinate, objective, and eternally fixed because of constraints in the text itself that are independent of historically situated critical debates. In a strangely similar way, hermeneutic idealism also assumes stability of meaning outside situated practices. Meaning is determinate, intersubjective, and temporarily fixed because of constraints provided by the communal conventions in readers’ and critics’ minds. When hermeneutic idealists attempt to describe the system of interpretive conventions that determine meaning, either they describe this system as independent of rhetorical situations or they do not realize that the conventions themselves are the topic of critical debate at specific historical moments. In either case, idealists make a mistake similar to that of realists by presupposing the possibility of meaning outside specific historical contexts of rhetorical practices.

Rhetorical hermeneutics tries to correct this mistake, but simply showing the problems with hermeneutic realism and idealism is not enough. It must also explain why realism and idealism are such attractive theories of interpretation in the first place. We can best do this by redefining realist and idealist claims in terms of a rhetorical hermeneutics. What exactly do these past theories teach us about rhetorical exchanges in interpretation? The realists’ claims about constraints in the text testify to the common assumption in critical debates that interpretive statements are about texts. References to the text are therefore privileged moves in justifying interpretations. The idealists’ claims about the constitutive power of critical presuppositions exemplify the common pluralist belief that if you change the questions being asked about texts, you change the answers you get, and if you can convince someone else to ask *your* questions, you are that much closer to convincing her to accept your interpretation of a specific text. A rhetorical hermeneutics does not reject any of these

assumptions. In fact, it uses their widespread acceptability to explain the rhetorical dynamics of academic interpretation in late twentieth-century America. But to acknowledge the power of these assumptions in rhetorical exchanges today does *not* entail making any claims about whether they are epistemologically true. Such epistemological questions are simply beside the point for a rhetorical hermeneutics. Asking them always leads back to the dead ends of realism and idealism.

Rhetorical hermeneutics, then, gives up the goals of Theory and continues theorizing about interpretation only therapeutically, exposing the problems with foundationalism and explaining the attraction of realist and idealist positions. But a rhetorical hermeneutics has more to do: it should also provide histories of how particular theoretical and critical discourses have evolved. Why? Because acts of persuasion always take place against an ever-changing background of shared and disputed assumptions, questions, assertions, and so forth. Any full rhetorical analysis of interpretation must therefore describe this tradition of discursive practices in which acts of interpretive persuasion are embedded.²⁶ Thus rhetorical hermeneutics leads inevitably to rhetorical histories, and it is to one of these histories I now turn.

3

Recently more and more attention has been paid to the institutional politics of interpretation, and this attention has proven salutary for histories of literary criticism.²⁷ Traditional histories tended to minimize the importance of social, political, and economic factors in the development of American literary study; the focus was almost exclusively on abstract intellectual history. In the introduction to one paradigmatic text, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks claimed to "have written a history of ideas about verbal art and about its elucidation and criticism," stressing "that in a history of this sort the critical *idea* has priority over all other kinds of material."²⁸ Such histories of critical ideas not only downplayed the political and economic context in which those ideas developed; they also ignored the effects of literary study's institutionalization within the American university of the late nineteenth century. In a moment I will try to show how this historical event transformed the critical tradition by adding specific institutional requirements to the more general cultural and political determinations that affected the rhetorical shape of American literary study.

More comprehensive than descriptions of critical ideas is a newer kind of critical history: explanations of literary study in terms of social, political, and economic forces. In *English in America*, for example, Richard Ohmann shows how "industrial society organizes the labor of people who work with their minds"; in *The Critical Twilight*, John Fekete situates

modern critical theory within the American network of social ideologies manipulated by corporate capitalism.²⁹ Such studies take account of literary criticism as part of a discipline which is situated within an institution, the modern university. Indeed, Ohmann, Fekete, and others have done valuable work in revealing the institutional mechanisms that constrain the development of academic literary study. But though these historical analyses do acknowledge the importance of institutional constraints, such determinations are secondary to their primary interest in economic and political formations in society at large. The result is that (at least in Fekete's case) such accounts sometimes overlook or distort the institutional role of literary studies in the development of critical ideology. Whereas Fekete argues that, in the modern critical tradition, "cultural methodology reveals its politics directly,"³⁰ I would say that social and political formations reveal themselves only indirectly, through the mediation of criticism's place within institutions for producing knowledge—universities generally and literature departments specifically. That is, the establishment, maintenance, and development of literary study in universities can only be partially explained through analysis of factors outside these institutions. A more intrainstitutional explanation must also be attempted because, once the institutional space has been established for literary study, the specific interpretive work and rhetorical practices within this space seem only crudely affected by extrainstitutional factors.

Let me use the institutional history of New Critical formalism to illustrate what I mean. Traditional accounts of critical ideas and more recent sociopolitical analyses of criticism give a prominent place to the hegemony of New Criticism in American literary study during the 1940s and 1950s. Traditional histories of criticism usually recount the genealogy of New Critical ideas but fail to explain adequately why those ideas came to dominate literary study. Sociopolitical analyses like those of Ohmann and Fekete have much more explanatory power. For instance, Fekete skillfully shows how Agrarian social ideology, which attacked modern industrial civilization, was easily accommodated to corporate capitalism through the institutionalization of New Criticism within English departments. Fekete's otherwise insightful analysis, however, does not grant the institutional setting of literary study its full share in determining the shape and hegemony of New Criticism. In fact, Fekete distorts the nature of the institutionalized discipline when he suggests that New Criticism filled a vacuum created in the 1930s by the failure of socialist criticism within the discipline.³¹ Actually, there was no vacuum: literary study within the academy was dominated by historical scholarship, which provided the discipline with a professional training program, shared research goals, and interpretive conventions for viewing literature. The rhetorical shape of New Criticism—its theory and practice—was influenced significantly by its institutional attempt to displace this scholarship as the dominant approach to literary texts. To understand exactly what was required of

New Criticism, we need to trace the institutional history of literary study. In what follows I will briefly present a rhetorical version of this history, emphasizing only those forces and events that contribute to an intra-institutional analysis of why New Criticism achieved its persuasive authority in the American study of literature. Such a rhetorical history follows directly from the rhetorical hermeneutics I have proposed because, to understand the discursive practices of interpretive rhetoric, we must also understand their past and present relations to the nondiscursive practices of institutions.

In the 1870s and 1880s the American university expanded its collegiate curriculum to include scientific and humanistic disciplines previously ignored, and it utilized the model of German scientific research for its conception of knowledge production.³² The influence of this scientific ideology can be seen in the particular way literary study was institutionalized. Various critical approaches were available to those in the university who wanted literature to be made part of the curriculum—for example, moral or didactic criticism, impressionism, and liberal social criticism. But the approach that made possible the institutionalization was German philology, the scientific study of modern languages and a linguistic and historical approach to literature.³³ Philology provided the scientific rhetoric needed to justify literary and linguistic study to the rest of the academic community. This scholarship allowed the discipline to take advantage of all the mechanisms for the production and dissemination of knowledge that other institutionalized disciplines were developing. Philological study provided a methodology that could be used for the classroom practices derived from the German scientific model: the seminar, the specialized lecture, and the research paper. It also made use of the agencies that the emphasis on research had created for the diffusion of knowledge: scholarly journals, university presses, and the annual conventions of learned societies.

But philology did not simply plug into an institutional compartment set aside for literary studies; it also effectively designed the interior of that compartment. In the early twentieth century, philology allowed the discipline to develop historical scholarship in all its forms (source and influence studies, examinations of historical backgrounds, and so forth). Indeed, philological research provided much of the agenda for the future of the discipline. The narrower view of philology gave literary study such basic projects as textual editing, variorum commentaries, bibliographical descriptions, and linguistic analyses. The broader view of philology gave historical scholarship its most ambitious rationale: philology as “the cultural history of a nation.”³⁴ As philology modulated into a less linguistically oriented historicism in America, it maintained the ideal of this study of a national spirit. Thus philology did its part for Americanism in the

academy's cultural politics as the United States emerged a world power during the first decades of the century.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, then, philological research and historical scholarship filled the institutional space provided for literary studies. These communal practices shaped and were shaped by the institutional nature of the discipline, and the functions they served became an important part of the institutional demands that the rhetoric of any new approach needed to address. I would now like to outline some of the ways in which New Criticism effectively served and, in turn, revised institutional functions when it came to dominate the discipline by displacing historical scholarship.³⁵

First of all, New Criticism provided an ingenious rhetorical accommodation to scientific ideology. As I've noted, scientific research provided the model of knowledge production through which literary study and several other disciplines were institutionalized. The prestige of science continued to grow within the academy during the early twentieth century, but at the same time some members of the humanistic disciplines grew increasingly discontented with scientific ideology and its positivistic assumptions. In literary study, these two conflicting trends came together in the way the New Critics theorized about literature and criticism in the second quarter of the century. On the one hand, New Critics defended literature against the onslaught of positivist values by claiming that literary discourse presented a kind of knowledge unavailable in scientific discourse. On the other hand, New Criticism itself was promoted as a "scientific" method of getting at this nonscientific, literary knowledge. This strategic manipulation of scientific ideology can be seen in the rhetoric of John Crowe Ransom. In the early 1940s, Ransom distinguished science from poetry, arguing that poetry recovers "the denser and more refractory original world which we know loosely through our perceptions and memories." Poetry treats "an order of existence . . . which cannot be treated in scientific discourse."³⁶ Though he distanced literature from science, Ransom advocated a closer relationship between literary *criticism* and science: "Criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons—which means that its proper seat is in the universities."³⁷ Here Ransom recognized the importance of proposing a "scientific" method of criticism to replace the "scientific" method of philological scholarship dominating the discipline. In this way, New Criticism accommodated itself to the institutionally entrenched model of knowledge production and simultaneously provided a defense of its subject matter as autonomous and uniquely worthy of study. It is beside the point that New Criticism actually laid claim to only a few characteristics of scientific method (technical precision, objectivity, neutrality) or that sciences such as physics were calling these scientific ideas into question. What is important institutionally is that New Criticism rhetorically adapted to the scientific

ideology in such a way that it provided continuity as well as revitalization for the discipline.

This revitalization included a humanistic critique of carefully chosen aspects of scientific ideology. Some New Critics extended a humanistic attack on scientific relativism to the scientism of historical scholarship. In "Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism," Brooks took exception to Frederick Pottle's historical study, *The Idiom of Poetry*, and was particularly upset with the book's historicist premises. Critical evaluation is always relative, Pottle argued, because "poetry always expresses the basis of feeling (or sensibility) of the age in which it was written" and therefore earlier poetry can never be judged by twentieth-century standards. "*The poetry of an age* [in a collective sense] *never goes wrong*."³⁸ Brooks opposed these historicist assumptions with his own formalist claims about poetic structures that are transhistorical: "functional imagery, irony, and complexity of attitude" can be used to evaluate poems in all ages ("CHCR," p. 209). Brooks argued further that a debilitating relativism would certainly result if historical study continued to ignore the universal criteria of formalist evaluation. "I am convinced," he wrote, "that, once we are committed to critical relativism, there can be no stopping short of a *complete* relativism in which critical judgments will disappear altogether" ("CHCR," p. 212). Attributing this growing danger to the fact that "teachers of the Humanities have tended to comply with the [scientific] spirit of the age rather than to resist it," Brooks argued that in literary studies we have tried "to be more objective, more 'scientific'—and in practice we usually content ourselves with relating the work in question to the cultural matrix out of which it came" and thus irresponsibly avoid normative judgments ("CHCR," pp. 213, 198). The New Critical accommodation to scientific ideology, then, simultaneously approved one form of objectivity and criticized another: Ransom advocated a "good" kind of formalist objectivity in interpreting literature, and Brooks condemned a "bad" kind of historicist objectivity in not evaluating it. In this strategic way, New Criticism incorporated into its rhetorical appeal the strengths of both scientific and humanistic programs within the institutionalized discipline.

New Criticism satisfied a second institutional requirement when it became an effective means for increased specialization. The New Critical assumption that literature was an ordered object independent of social and historical context entailed a formalist methodology that could reveal the unified complexity of that literary object. Since literary meaning was also assumed to be independent of authorial intention and reader response, New Critics stressed the details of the text in-and-of-itself. They therefore developed their methodology by focusing on the literary text in a vacuum, or, as they preferred to say, on literature as literature. New Critics thus tried to elaborate a technical criticism that derived its interpretive categories exclusively from literature and not psychology, sociology, or history. This rejection of "extrinsic" approaches conveniently included a rejection of

the historical assumptions of philological scholarship. The rhetoric of this new “intrinsic” criticism served the institutional function of reinforcing the independence of literary study within the academy, an accomplishment that was part of a general institutional tendency in American universities between 1910 and 1960. As Stephen Toulmin points out:

During those years . . . the academic and artistic professions moved into a new phase of specialization. Each “discipline” or “profession” was characterized by, and organized as the custodian of, its own corpus of formal techniques, into which newcomers had to be initiated and accredited, as apprentices. So, there was a general tendency for each of the professions to pull away from its boundaries with others, and to concentrate on its own central, essential concerns.³⁹

In literary study, it was New Criticism that fulfilled this institutional need for increasing differentiation and specialization.

A third function of New Criticism was its usefulness as a means of further professionalization. Since institutional specialization also requires professionalism, the discipline of literary studies also needed an approach that fulfilled what Ohmann calls “the professional mission of developing the central body of knowledge and the professional service performed for clients.”⁴⁰ New Criticism easily satisfied both of these professional requirements. It redefined the nature of the knowledge produced by the discipline, moving it from the historical and linguistic knowledge of philology to formalist knowledge about the literary text in-and-of-itself. It also changed the priority of the discipline’s practices as it moved away from scholarship to criticism, giving ultimate value to explication of individual texts. The formalist assumptions and textual explications presented the discipline with a new pedagogy, one that Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1938) rapidly taught to members of the profession. More slowly, these same New Critical assumptions and practices also displaced philological scholarship as a methodology for training and accrediting the growing number of new recruits to the profession.

The close readings of New Critical formalism represent the fulfillment of the final institutional function I will point out. New Criticism constituted a discursive practice for the discipline, one that could be easily reproduced and disseminated within a growing profession. It gave the members new things to do with old texts, using an interpretive machine that was easy to operate without the traditional and lengthy training of philology. Literary critics exploited this machine to fill the increasing number of monographs and journals the expanding institution demanded.

In the 1940s and 1950s, New Critical formalism showed that it could fulfill all the institutional demands I have outlined. It did this more persuasively than any other available critical approach, even as it simultaneously modified these demands. Again, as with philology, the

dominant critical practice and the institutional space were mutually defining. Today, debates in critical theory take place in terms set by New Critical formalism: Is authorial intention relevant to correct interpretation? Is textual meaning separate from reader response? Is the literary work independent of historical context? But even more important than setting the current agenda for theoretical debate is the hegemonic discourse contributed by New Critical close readings, the detailed explications of individual texts. It is no accident that the most popular forms of post-structuralist criticism are those that most closely resemble the interpretive rhetoric of New Criticism, a rhetoric emphasizing the complexity of the unique literary work. Thus, despite being constantly attacked and supposedly outmoded, formalist rhetoric still remains a dominant presence in literary thought and critical practice within the discipline of American literary studies.⁴¹

By presenting this schematic history, I am not arguing that intra-institutional accounts are the only relevant narratives for understanding the rhetorical evolution of the academic study of literature. In fact, I believe that such histories must be supplemented by more comprehensive analyses relating the institutionalized discipline to the sociopolitical forces originating outside the university. By including this brief history in my presentation, however, I do mean to illustrate how a rhetorical hermeneutics is composed of therapeutic theory *and* rhetorical histories. More exactly, such narratives are not simply added onto theory; rather, rhetorical theory must become rhetorical history. Thus, rhetorical hermeneutics joins other recent attempts to incorporate rhetoric at the level of literary theory and its analysis of critical practice.⁴² Such attempts share a suspicion of Theory and a preoccupation with history, a skepticism toward foundational accounts of interpretation in general, and an attraction to narratives surrounding specific rhetorical acts and their particular political contexts. Such attempts place literary theory and criticism within a cultural conversation, the dramatic, unending conversation of history that is the "primal scene of rhetoric."⁴³ A rhetorical hermeneutics, then, is not so much theory leading to history but theory as history.

1. "National Aeronautics and Space Act of 1958," *United States Statutes at Large* (Washington, D.C., 1959), vol. 72, pt. 1, sec. 102(a), p. 426; Robert Cooper, director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, quoted in Frank Greve, "Pentagon Research Retains Vision of 'Winning' N-war," *Miami Herald*, 27 Mar. 1983, sec. D, p. 4.

2. This answer is only implicit in the most popular forms of American deconstruction—what Richard Rorty calls "weak textualism"—whose practitioners "think that they have now found the true method for analyzing literary works because they have now found the fundamental problematic with which these works deal" (Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*:

Essays, 1972–1980 [Minneapolis, 1982], p. 153; and see Rorty, “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 [Sept. 1984]: 2, 19–20. Cf. J. Hillis Miller, “The readings of deconstructive criticism are not the willful imposition by a subjectivity of theory on the texts but are coerced by the texts themselves” (“Theory and Practice: Response to Vincent Leitch,” *Critical Inquiry* 6 [Summer 1980]: 611).

3. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., “Objective Interpretation” [1960], *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn., 1967), p. 212.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

5. In this essay “conventions” refers to *manifestations of shared practices*. See the discussion in my *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 126–39.

6. Monroe C. Beardsley and W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., “The Affective Fallacy” [1949], in Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1954), p. 21.

7. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, 1958), pp. 403, 49.

8. Beardsley, “Textual Meaning and Authorial Meaning,” *Genre* 1 (July 1968): 181.

9. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit, 1970), p. 37; all further references to this work, abbreviated *PC*, will be included in the text.

10. Beardsley, “Intentions and Interpretations: A Fallacy Revived,” *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. Michael J. Wreen and Donald M. Callen (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), p. 195. The central texts on conventions and speech acts are J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (New York, 1962), and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1969).

11. See, e.g., the comments on “literary competence” in Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, 1981), p. li, and Beardsley, “The Philosophy of Literature,” in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie and R. J. Sclafani (New York, 1977), pp. 329–33.

12. Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*” [1976], *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 171.

13. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), p. 113.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 126. For a more extreme example of idealist conventionalism, see my *Interpretive Conventions*, pp. 192–207.

15. Culler, “Convention and Meaning: Derrida and Austin,” *New Literary History* 13 (Autumn 1981): 30 n. 12; all further references to this work, abbreviated “CM,” will be included in the text. This essay was revised and incorporated into Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982); all further references to this work, abbreviated *OD*, will be included in the text.

16. See Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1967), pp. 24–31, and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence*, rev. ed. (New York, 1979), pp. 256–71.

17. On the first option, see Walter Benn Michaels, “Philosophy in Kinkanja: Eliot's Pragmatism,” *Glyph* 8 (1981): 184–85; on the second, see Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do*, p. 289. For further discussion of context as an explanatory concept, see my “Convention and Context,” *New Literary History* 14 (Winter 1983): 399–407.

18. See Fish, *Is There a Text?*, pp. 277–84, and Fish, “With the Compliments of the Author: Reflections on Austin and Derrida,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 693–721. In this analysis I have followed Dreyfus, Fish, and others in using “context” and “situation” interchangeably. For a suggestive discussion of evaluation related to my analysis of interpretation, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of Value,” *Critical Inquiry* 10 (Sept. 1982): 1–35.

19. See the discussion of Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological theory of reading in my *Interpretive Conventions*, pp. 49–56.

20. Steven Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 723.

21. See Knapp and Michaels, "Against Theory," pp. 724–30. See also, in *Critical Inquiry* 9 (June 1983), Hirsch's rebuttal in his "Against Theory?," pp. 743–47, and Knapp and Michaels' response in their "A Reply to Our Critics," pp. 795–99.

22. For further arguments along these lines, see my "Truth or Consequences: On Being Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 9 (June 1983): 763–66. I should note that Knapp and Michaels come close to addressing my methodological point here when they argue that "nothing in the claim that authorial intention is the necessary object of interpretation tells us anything at all about what should count as evidence for determining the content of any particular intention" ("Reply to Our Critics," p. 796). True enough, for a theory that simply makes claims about the relation of intention and meaning—but what intentionalist theory stops there? For example, assuming that texts with intentions can be corrupted, textual-biographical critics claim that a valid interpretation must reconstruct the author's composing process and thus they are consistent with their theory in advocating the close examination of manuscript stages and biographical evidence in the act of interpretation. Here methodological consequences follow logically from an intentionalist theory. See Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston, Ill., 1984).

23. Fish, "Fear of Fish: A Reply to Walter Davis," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (June 1984): 705.

24. See Fish, *Is There a Text?*, pp. 356–70, and "Fear of Fish," pp. 701–3. Also, cf. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago, 1970), pp. 152–59 and 198–206. On "argument fields" and related concepts, see Charles Arthur Willard, *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* (University, Ala., 1983), esp. pp. 5–11 and 89–91.

25. This distinction is nicely elaborated in Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979), pp. 5–6.

26. Relevant here is the intersection of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics with Chaim Perelman's rhetoric. Cf. Gadamer's analysis of tradition and interpretation throughout his *Truth and Method*, trans. and ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York, 1975), e.g., pp. 250–51, and the analysis of tradition and argumentation in Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, Ind., 1969), e.g., pp. 464–65. See also Fish, "Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony," *Daedalus* 112 (Winter 1983): 175–91, and Adena Rosmarin, "Hermeneutics versus Erotics: Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and Interpretive History," *PMLA* 100 (Jan. 1985): 20–37.

27. Some of the more interesting studies along these lines have been done by the Group for Research on Institutions and Professionalism in literary study (GRIP), sponsored by the Society for Critical Exchange. The work of Michel Foucault stands behind my own and many other recent inquiries into criticism's institutional politics. Foucault's archaeology reveals the "relations between discursive formations and non-discursive domains" such as institutions, while his genealogies trace the history of "the effective formation of discourse" within institutions, "the field of the non-discursive social" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith [New York, 1972], p. 162; "The Order of Discourse," trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young [Boston, 1981], p. 71; and "The Eye of Power," trans. Colin Gordon, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Gordon [New York, 1980], p. 198). More specifically, we might say that an institution "includes both the material forms and mechanisms of production, distribution and consumption and the ideological rules, norms, conventions and practices which condition the reception, comprehension and application of discourse" (Leitch, "Institutional History and Cultural Hermeneutics," *Critical Texts* 2 [July 1984]: 7; Leitch acknowledges his debt to Foucault on p. 10 n. 2). On the relation of rhetorical or discursive practices to a cultural background of nondiscursive

practices, see Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2d ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983).

28. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (New York, 1957), pp. ix, vii–viii.

29. Richard Ohmann, *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession* (New York, 1976), p. 4; and see John Fekete, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (London, 1977). See also Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 1983), pp. 47–53. For related histories of literary studies in other countries, see Brian Doyle, “The Hidden History of English Studies,” in *Re-Reading English*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London, 1982), pp. 17–31, and Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Institution of Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982).

30. Fekete, *Critical Twilight*, p. 49.

31. See Fekete, *Critical Twilight*, p. 49. Fekete does go on to say that “the New Criticism introduced a technicism and an accommodation with science, and it mercilessly attacked and destroyed left-wing aesthetic forms, including the totally reformist forms of historiographic or sociological criticism” (p. 49).

32. For a recent general history, see *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore, 1979).

33. See William Riley Parker, “Where Do English Departments Come From?,” *College English* 28 (Feb. 1967): 339–51; Arthur W. Applebee, *Tradition and Reform in the Teaching of English: A History* (Urbana, Ill., 1974), pp. 25–28; and Phyllis Franklin, “English Studies: The World of Scholarship in 1883,” *PMLA* 99 (May 1984): 356–70.

34. Applebee, *Tradition and Reform*, pp. 25–26.

35. For details of the conflict between criticism and scholarship in American literary study, see Franklin, “English Studies in America: Reflections on the Development of a Discipline,” *American Quarterly* 30 (Spring 1978): 21–38; Grant Webster, *The Republic of Letters: A History of Postwar American Literary Opinion* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 113–16; and William E. Cain, *The Crisis in Criticism: Theory, Literature, and Reform in English Studies* (Baltimore, 1984), pp. 95–101.

36. John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, Conn., 1941), p. 281. In chapter 1 Ransom works out his distinction between science and poetry in a critique of I. A. Richards’ parallel distinction between two uses of language proposed in his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1925).

37. Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *The World’s Body* (New York, 1938), p. 329.

38. Frederick A. Pottle, *The Idiom of Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1941), quoted in Brooks, “Criticism, History, and Critical Relativism,” *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, 1947), p. 207; all further references to Brooks’ work, abbreviated “CHCR,” will be included in the text.

39. Stephen Toulmin, “From Form to Function: Philosophy and History of Science in the 1950s and Now,” *Daedalus* 106 (Summer 1977): 159.

40. Ohmann, *English in America*, pp. 239–40. See Magali Sarfatti Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1977), esp. chaps. 4 and 12, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, “Professional Autonomy and the Social Control of Expertise,” in *The Sociology of the Professions: Lawyers, Doctors, and Others*, ed. Robert Dingwall and Philip Lewis (New York, 1983), pp. 38–58.

41. For useful discussions of this New Critical legacy, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980); Jane P. Tompkins, “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response,” *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, 1980), pp. 201–32; Gerald Graff, “Who Killed Criticism?,” *American Scholar* 49 (Summer 1980): 337–55; Culler, “Beyond Interpretation,” *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), pp. 3–17; Cain, “The Institutionalization of the New Criticism,” *Crisis in Criticism*, pp. 104–21; and Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 140–77.

42. See esp. recent work by Eagleton: *Walter Benjamin; or, Toward a Revolutionary Criticism* (London, 1981), pp. 101–13; “Wittgenstein’s Friends,” *New Left Review* 135 (Sept.–Oct. 1982): 64–90; and *Literary Theory*, pp. 204–14. See also Said, “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 1–26, and Robert Wess, “Notes toward a Marxist Rhetoric,” *Bucknell Review* 28, no. 2 (1983): 126–48.

43. Lentricchia (discussing Kenneth Burke’s fable of history), *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago, 1983), p. 160. For a general discussion of the cultural conversation, see my “Reading *Huckleberry Finn*: The Rhetoric of Performed Ideology,” in *New Essays on Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York, 1985).