

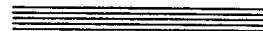
Post-Contemporary Interventions

Series Editors: Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson

Doing What Comes Naturally

Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies

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they are grave ones: "Viewing adjudication as interpretation helps to stop the slide toward nihilism. It makes law possible."⁴⁵ But if the slide toward nihilism is not a realizable danger, the urging of nihilist views cannot accelerate it, and, conversely, the refutation of nihilist views cannot retard it. From either direction, the account one has of adjudication is logically independent of one's ability to engage in it. Your account may be nihilist or (as it is for Fiss) objectivist or (as it is for me) conventionalist, and when all is said and done, adjudication is still either possible or it is not. The empirical evidence is very strong that it is; and it has been my argument that its possibility is a consequence of being situated in a field of practice, of having passed through a professional initiation or course of training and become what the sociologists term a "competent member." Owen Fiss has undergone that training, but I have not; and, therefore, even though I believe that his account of adjudication is wrong and mine is right, anyone who is entering the legal process would be well-advised to consult Fiss rather than Fish.

7. Change

The notion of "interpretive communities" was originally introduced as an answer to a question that had long seemed crucial to literary studies. What is the source of interpretive authority: the text or the reader? Those who answered "the text" were embarrassed by the fact of disagreement. Why, if the text contains its own meaning and constrains its own interpretation, do so many interpreters disagree about that meaning? Those who answered "the reader" were embarrassed by the fact of agreement. Why, if meaning is created by the individual reader from the perspective of his own experience and interpretive desires, is there so much that interpreters agree about? What was required was an explanation that could account for both agreement and disagreement, and that explanation was found in the idea of an interpretive community, not so much a group of individuals who shared a point of view, but a point of view or way of organizing experience that shared individuals in the sense that its assumed distinctions, categories of understanding, and stipulations of relevance and irrelevance were the content of the consciousness of community members who were therefore no longer individuals, but, insofar as they were embedded in the community's enterprise, community property. It followed that such community-constituted interpreters would, in their turn, constitute, more or less in agreement, the same text, although the sameness would not be attributable to the self-identity of the text, but to the communal nature of the interpretive act. Of course, if the same act were performed by members of another community—of some rival school of criticism informed by wholly different assumptions—the resulting text would be different, and there would be disagreement; not, however, a disagreement that could be settled by the text because what would be in dispute would be the interpretive "angle" from which the text was to be seen,

and in being seen, made. In this new vision both texts and readers lose the independence that would be necessary for either of them to claim the honor of being the source of interpretive authority; both are absorbed by the interpretive community which, because it is responsible for all acts interpreters can possibly perform, is finally responsible for the texts those performances bring into the world.

In the years since *Is There a Text in This Class?* was published, this argument has been variously criticized, and one criticism frequently heard is that the privileging of the interpretive community leaves us without an adequate account of change. This objection takes different forms, according to the political disposition of the critic; from the right comes the complaint that an interpretive community, unconstrained by any responsibility to a determinate text, can simply declare a change without consulting anything but its own desires; this is the burden of an essay by Walter Davis entitled "The Fisher King: *Wille zur Macht* in Baltimore."¹ From the left comes the complaint that an interpretive community, enclosed in the armor of its own totalizing assumptions, is impervious to change and acts only to perpetuate itself and its interests; in this view the business of an interpretive community and of the theory that privileges it is the legitimization of the status quo. The two accusations, different as they are, articulate a fear that is based on the same assumption, the assumption that an interpretive community is monolithic and is therefore a new kind of object in relation to which the problem of interpretation is not resolved but merely reinscribed. It is that assumption, I think, that must be challenged, but before challenging it I would first like to look more closely at the process by which change has come to be seen as a problem, as something to be accounted for rather than as a simple and obvious fact of life.

The first thing to note is that under an older (and by no means entirely discredited) epistemology—which we may for convenience label essentialist or foundationalist—change is not a problem at all because it follows naturally from a certain picture of the scene of interpretation. In that picture the landscape is dominated by two discrete and independent entities—the world of objects, in all of its details, and the perceiving self—and mediating between them is some vocabulary or methodology by means of which what is perceived is given a discursive form. In literary terms this means a text, a reader, and a system of description that reflects a fully articulated universe, complete with genres, periods, styles, a canon, major and minor authors, questions,

answers, projects, desiderata, unthinkable thoughts, etc. The goal of criticism under this picture is to give an accurate account of the text, and changes either mark progress toward that goal or (as it is determined later and by hindsight) a retrograde movement in the opposite direction. Progress is made when the machinery of description is refined, when its definitions, categories, levels, etc., have been brought into a closer correspondence with the facts of the text; progress is impeded when that machinery is informed by the bias of an individual observer or a partisan group. The check against interpretive bias is the text, which is therefore at once the object to be described and the judge of which of its descriptions is the more accurate. Change, then, is a function of a text's operation as a regulating and adjudicative principle, and in the best scenario, when the text has fully completed its judicial work, the correct description will have been achieved and change will have ceased.

The comfortable outlines of this picture are blurred, however, when one substitutes for this foundationalist epistemology an epistemology in which the object to be described cannot be sharply distinguished from the descriptive vocabulary that seems appropriate to it. This is the consequence of a number of arguments that have been made in the last twenty years with increasing success. One could cite Kuhn's contention in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*² that since "a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself" and all descriptive languages are paradigm-specific, our inquiries always "presuppose a world already perceptually and conceptually divided in a certain way," and we are never in the position of being able to compare that way with a world apprehended independently of any paradigm whatsoever. Or one could refer to Nelson Goodman's assertion in *Ways of Worldmaking*³ that if "I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference, but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames," there is nothing you can say, because our universe consists of "ways of describing . . . rather than of a world of worlds." Or one could listen to Richard Rorty as he declares with characteristic brusqueness in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*⁴ that "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language," no way "of breaking out of language to compare it with something else." Or we could even attend to Stanley Fish when he argues in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and elsewhere⁵ that we cannot check our interpretive accounts against the facts of the text

because it is only within our accounts—that is, within an already assumed set of stipulative definitions and evidentiary criteria—that the text and its facts, or, rather, a text and its facts, emerge and become available for inspection. These are only representative formulations, and there are distinctions to be made between them, but I think it is fair to say that one consequence of following their general line is to make a problem out of change; for it is no longer possible to see change as occurring when the world or a piece of the world forces us to revise or correct our description of it; since descriptions of the world are all we have, changes can only be understood as change in description, and we are left with the task of explaining not only how they come about, but why they should ever come about in the first place.

Nor is that the worst of it. Not only is there insufficient distance in this newer model between the community and the object of its attention; there is also insufficient distance between the community and its methods. The traditional understanding of change assumes and requires not only the independence of entities from our representations of them, but the independence of our representations from the criteria by which they are judged; but if those criteria, those measures of adequacy and accuracy, are no less community- or paradigm-specific than the facts they are intended to measure, confirmation or validation would seem to be at once assured and empty. And since the procedures of validation, the description to be validated, and the object in relation to which validity is to be assessed are homologous, the analyst who uses the perspective of any one to get a purchase on the others is apparently engaged in a circular and futile exercise. Indeed, the very notion of the analyst as a discrete agent is called into question when he is seen not as an independent consciousness capable of turning a disinterested eye on the alternatives that vie for his attention, but as an already embedded practitioner whose standards of judgment, canons of evidence, or normative measures are extensions of the community or communities of which he is a member.

One begins to see that there are now not one, but several, problems of change. First, there is the problem of *what* changes if the world and its objects are not independent of the characterizations we make of them; then there is the problem of how change can be principled if nothing constrains the community except its own assumptions and procedures, and this leads directly to the puzzle of individual change: how can someone whose perceptions and judgments are delimited by

the norms, criteria, and definitions of an interpretive community take note of anything that would lead him to revise those norms, criteria, and definitions? How can a mind that cannot see anything beyond its horizon change? It would seem that it must be the case either that: (1) the mind is, in fact, able to take into account something not already presupposed by its assumptions, or that (2) the mind remains forever confined within the circle of community assumptions. The first alternative has the disadvantage of enfeebling (and indeed emptying) the notion of an interpretive community, which loses its claim to authority if the shape of its own activity is constrained by independent facts. The second alternative has the disadvantage of forcing us to the (counterintuitive) conclusion that no one has ever changed his mind.

There is a way, I think, to escape these alternatives, and I will approach it by recalling an occasion on which just these questions were put, and put by someone whose behavior was at that very moment providing an answer. The questioner was a student in a graduate seminar in literary theory who acknowledged that in the course of the semester he had been persuaded to the conventionalist views I have been describing. What bothered him was the very fact that he had been persuaded, for, given those same views, he didn't see how his mind could have been changed. He had, after all, been a member of an interpretive community, and indeed of a *literary* interpretive community, when he entered my class. How is it that he was able to move out of that community and into another? A part of the explanation emerged when I asked him what would have happened if a student in one of his own classes—he was then teaching an introductory literature course in the same department—had challenged him with arguments like those I had been making. He responded by saying that in all likelihood he would have moved to disarm the student's objections either by invoking a distinction she had failed to take into account or by demonstrating that properly understood his own position already included hers or by some other strategy that had the effect of protecting and recuperating the assumptions underlying the routines and procedures of the class. What he would not have been inclined to do (although, as we shall see, there are conditions under which his inclinations would have been different) was consider his student's remarks as the occasion for a thoroughgoing rethinking of everything he believed about literature, the status of the text, the sources of interpretive authority, or the origins of genres. That, however, is exactly what he had done as a student in

Capitalism:
Get there
first.

my course, and the reason, or at least one reason, for his having done so was that among his beliefs was the belief that challenges from some directions should be taken more seriously than challenges from others. I am not suggesting that the mere fact of my position as instructor was sufficient to make my assertions the stimulus to change; it is easy to imagine an instructor who did not command respect because he had not thought through the implications of his argument or, from the other side, a student whose performance had been so impressive that an instructor would feel obliged to come to terms with anything she said. But in any of these circumstances it would still be the case that change, in the form of the reconsideration of received opinion, would be prompted by a suggestion that came from a source assumed in advance to be, if not authoritative, at least weighty.

One could say, then, that in the course of the semester my student was induced by one belief—a belief in the likely authority of some members of the community relative to others—to change another belief, or in this case a set of beliefs, about the nature and shape of interpretation. Putting it this way allows us to see that beliefs are not all held at the same level or operative at the same time. Beliefs, if I may use a metaphor, are nested, and on occasion they may affect and even alter one another and so alter the entire system or network they comprise. Even though the mind is informed by assumptions that limit what it can even notice, among those is the assumption that one's assumptions are subject to challenge and possible revision under certain circumstances and according to certain procedures when they are set in motion by certain persons. What this means is that the mind is not a static structure, but an assemblage of related beliefs any one of which can exert pressure on any other in a motion that can lead to a self-transformation. In short, and this is a formulation to which I shall return, rather than being an object of which one might ask, "how does it change," the mind (and, by extension, the community) is an engine of change, an ongoing project whose operations are at once constrained and the means by which those same constraints can be altered.

Those operations are not limited to the formal institutional setting of the present example. Change does not require confrontation in a highly defined and hierarchical situation like the classroom. It can occur when no one else is present, in the privacy of one's room. Suppose, for example, that you were reading something that was, as far as you were consciously aware, unrelated to your professional views and

concerns, an essay in another field or in an entirely different discipline or in no "discipline" whatsoever; and suppose further that it occurred to you suddenly that what you were reading had a direct bearing on your own work and even indicated to you the necessity of revising your understanding of what was involved in that work. This is an experience that most of us will have had, and on its face it would seem to be quite different from the experience of the student in my seminar; for rather than the interaction of two agents or elements in the same framework or community, it would seem that in this imagined situation someone operating from within a framework or a community had been moved to change by something wholly outside that framework or community.

But, in fact, that something would not have been noticed at all (at least not in this way) if there had not been already in place, as a part of the community's conception of itself, the assumption of a relationship between it and some neighboring body of knowledge. That is, in order for a formulation from economics or mathematics or anthropology to be seen as related to a problem or project in literary studies, literary studies would themselves have to be understood in such a way that the arguments and conclusions of economics or mathematics or anthropology were already seen by practitioners as at least potentially relevant. To put the matter in what only seems to be a paradox, when a community is provoked to change by something outside it, that something will already have been inside, in the sense that the angle of its notice—the angle from which it is related to the community's project even before it is seen—will determine its shape, not *after* it has been perceived, but *as* it is perceived. And all of this will follow from the community's understanding of itself as a mode of inquiry responsible to the facts and theorems of some, but not all, other modes of inquiry.

Consider, as a concrete and historical example, the case of linguistics. The period 1957–70 witnessed a remarkable growth in the amount of literary work informed by linguistic principles and models. That was also, not coincidentally, the period of the "Chomskian revolution" and one might think that the conceptual power of Chomsky's formulations, so much the center of discussion in the academy and elsewhere, is sufficient to explain the phenomenon; like so many other intellectuals, literary students simply felt compelled to reconsider their methods and assumptions in the light of something so perspicuously and undeniably far-reaching. In fact, however, that is not what happened at all. Only a small percentage of those working in literary studies was markedly

affected by transformational grammar, which came and went without changing at all the way most literary business was done. (This is not to say, of course, that changes were not being brought about in some other way.) Those who did alter their ways of reading and writing did so because they were already committed to a view of criticism in which the close study of linguistic facts was central and obligatory; that is, they were in agreement with Harold Whitehall's declaration in 1951 that "no criticism can go beyond its linguistics,"⁸ and therefore when linguistics underwent a profound and apparently authoritative change, they were obliged, by the principles they already held, to change too. Those whose principles and commitments were different, those for whom stylistics, Chomskian or any other, was an interesting but fringe activity, could feel free to continue on as before.

The example illustrates how misleading it is to think of change as the process by which something from the outside penetrates and alters the inside of a community or of a consciousness informed by community assumptions. It is misleading because it assumes that the distinction between outside and inside is empirical and absolute, whereas in fact it is an interpretive distinction between realms that are interdependent rather than discrete. For those who already think of themselves as stylisticians, Chomsky is inside even before he appears on the scene; for those who practiced literary history or some "soft" version of New Criticism, he was outside and has remained so. This does not mean that he was *absolutely* outside, but that he was outside in relation to a set of assumptions concerning what is and is not a piece of literary information. In other words, his status as something or someone outside is conferred by the very community from which he is supposedly distinct; he is an *interpreted* outside, and forms along with other items and persons a general background of irrelevance that defines and is defined by the sense of relevance that informs the community, telling it what it must pay attention to and what it can afford to ignore. When that sense of relevance changes—when the community is persuaded (by arguments that rely on assumptions not at the moment being challenged) that its project requires the taking into account of what had hitherto been considered beside the point or essential only to someone else's point—the boundaries of outside/inside will have been redrawn, and redrawn *from the inside*.

But how can that come about? Why should it come about? Why should someone be convinced that the researches of formal linguistics

were unrelated to his work ever change his mind, especially when conditions in the institution were such that he could do what he had always done without penalty? The answer lies in the nature of an interpretive community which is at once homogeneous with respect to some general sense of purpose and purview, and heterogeneous with respect to the variety of practices it can accommodate. Any one of those practices exists in some relationship of assumed justification to that general sense; both those who do and those who don't practice stylistics believe that they are engaged in the business of determining the meaning and value of literary texts, and if one wants to persuade the other to his point of view, he will do so by invoking the goal they both acknowledge and arguing that it cannot be reached except by the route he follows. The stylistician will question the possibility of even talking about meaning in the absence of a fully articulated semantics; the nonstylistician will reply that semantics is merely a formalization of what the sensitive and intelligent critic intuitively feels. Each will have recourse to examples that would seem to challenge the other's assumptions, and so it would go until one persuaded the other. Of course, persuasion is not inevitable, but should it occur in either direction, one party will have changed his understanding of what is internal to his discipline, and that change will have come about by mechanisms that are themselves internal.

One could object that this explanation of change is still too narrowly institutional and says nothing, for example, about the changes that can follow upon some momentous political event, a war, a shift in federal policy, an economic crisis, etc. Surely events like these would be external to the literary community or to any other community narrowly conceived, and yet the members of that community would certainly be impelled by them to reconsider and revise their ways of doing business. Well, yes and no. It depends on the extent to which the members of the community see the event in question as one that has a direct bearing on their conception of what they do; and that will depend on whether or not their conception of what they do, their sense of the enterprise, is bound up in an essential way with political issues. Some of us changed our teaching methods and our research priorities markedly during the Vietnam War; others of us went on as before as if nothing were happening. Even the drying up of funds or the elimination from the university of literature departments might be received with equanimity by someone who believed (or thought he believed) that literary

studies were best conducted in the privacy of one's study or in an informal colloquium on the model of Socrates, and who therefore might welcome the withering away of a structure and a bureaucracy that served only to overwhelm and subvert the true values of the literary experience. In principle, then, the impact on literary studies of a political revolution would be no different from the impact of a revolution in linguistic theory; both would vary with the extent to which the profession or part of the profession did or did not consider the phenomenon as, at some level, a literary one.

I am now in a position to return to what may have earlier seemed an enigmatic assertion: that an interpretive community, rather than being an object of which one might ask "how does it change?" is an engine of change. It is an engine of change because its assumptions are not a mechanism for shutting out the world but for organizing it, for seeing phenomena as already related to the interests and goals that make the community what it is. The community, in other words, is always engaged in doing work, the work of transforming the landscape into material for its own project; but that project is then itself transformed by the very work it does. The stylistician who reaches out to absorb Chomsky into the structure of his own concerns is at once extending those concerns and altering them in as much as they will wear a different aspect once Chomsky has been assimilated. In the words of the sociologist D. L. Weider, the enterprise, as a moving project or bundle of interests, is both "self and setting elaborative."

Weider's example is a community of ex-convicts who live in a halfway house but continue to abide by the convict code. The heart of that code, the task it at once directs and commands, is the obligation to show loyalty to the residents by displaying resistance to the staff. As an instance of the code at work Weider recalls an occasion when a resident, upon expressing interest in the formation of a house baseball team, was asked by the director to organize one himself. He replied, "You know I can't organize a baseball team" and was immediately understood by both the director and the sociologist to have said, "You know that the code forbids me to participate in your program that way, and you know that I'm not going to violate the code. So why ask me?"

The exchange is illuminating and to my point because the question of organizing a baseball team had not arisen before. This shows that the code is not a list of specific maxims—a closed set of rules that

can serve as a self-executing decision procedure—but is rather a general project whose implementation involves the continual discovery of its own content, a discovery that is at the same time the accomplishment of its own alteration. As soon as the resident says what he says and is understood as Weider and the director understand him, two things have happened: (1) the scope of the code has been extended to render intelligible an occurrence it could not have predicted; (2) the code, which is inseparable from the practices it enables (it cannot be reduced to a formal rule), has been augmented or modified and has therefore changed. The code, in short, has done its work of elaborating the setting, and at the same time it has elaborated itself. The code, then, is not a set of explicit directions or a prescriptive description; rather, as Weider points out, it is "part of life in the halfway house, and it [is] a part that [is] itself included within the scope of things over which it [has] jurisdiction." "In this sense," he concludes, "it is more appropriate to think of the code as a continuous, ongoing process, rather than as a set of stable elements of culture which endure through time."⁸ In other words, and in terms that are crucial to my own argument, even though it is fully articulated and underwritten by a full-fledged philosophy of life complete with an ontology and an epistemology, the code is not monolithic and self-confirming; it is an entirely flexible instrument for organizing contingent experience in a way that does not preclude but renders inevitable its own modification.

It may seem, however, that this flexibility goes only in one direction, the direction of annexation and imperialism. The example suggests that the code as an interpretive strategy operates in the manner of an amoeba, simply surrounding and ingesting anything that comes its unstoppable way. This, however, is not the case, as we may see by imagining an alternate ending to the story Weider tells. Suppose the director of the halfway house, rather than accepting the resident's response—"You know I can't organize a baseball team"—had chosen to dispute it. What might he have said? Well, he might have argued that organizing a baseball team was an activity entirely independent of the staff and would have the effect of helping the residents; or he might have pointed out that the suggestion to organize a baseball team didn't come from him, but from a resident, and that he was simply refusing to do something which could then be done by someone else as a form of resistance. It is true that whatever then happened would still be happening under the aegis of the code (were it otherwise, the

category of the absolute outside would have been revived), but the code will have shown itself to be not a single simple organism, but a set of interlocking assumptions one of which can always be brought into play as a check against the others and all of which are answerable to the complex social situation that is at once the code's mooring and its accomplishment. Admittedly, the circumstances of this example are special, but the analysis can easily be extended to situations that are not special at all. How often have we seen a presidential spokesman, or an attorney, or a journalist respond to a question by saying I can't answer that because it is a matter of national security or because the case is still under litigation or because it is privileged information? These are all instances of what Weider calls "telling the code" as a means of organizing and controlling experience, but they are all equally open to a challenge that proceeds from the very same concerns that are being invoked. (It is always possible to question the definition of privileged information or to dispute the scope of national security or to counter-invoke the public's right to know.)

The argument has now come full circle and taken a curious turn. I began, you will recall, by pointing out that change is not a problem if one posits independent agents who can check their accounts and descriptions against an equally independent reality; for then change is easily explained as a function of the constraints placed by reality on our interpretations of it. But the neatness of this picture is sacrificed if one conceives of persons not as free agents, but as extensions of interpretive communities, communities whose warranting assumptions delimit what can be seen and therefore what can be described; for then the describing agent, the object of description, and the descriptive vocabulary are all transformations of one another and there would not seem to be enough room between them to make change a possibility. In the preceding pages this impasse has been negotiated by a demonstration that neither interpretive communities nor the minds of community members are stable and fixed, but are, rather, moving projects—engines of change—whose work is at the same time assimilative and self-transforming. The conclusion, therefore, is that change is not a problem; and, indeed, to the extent that there is a problem, it would seem to be one of explaining how anything ever remains the same; or, even more precisely, how, given the vision of a system and of agents continually "on the move," can one even say that a change has occurred since the very notion of change requires, as Robert Nisbet has pointed out, "some object entity

or being the identity of which persists through all the successive differences"?

The answer to this question is that not everything changes at once. Interpretive communities are no more than sets of institutional practices; and while those practices are continually being transformed by the very work that they do, the transformed practice identifies itself and tells its story in relation to general purposes and goals that have survived and form the basis of a continuity. So that, for example, insofar as there has been for some time a practice of literary description, and insofar as there is something called *Paradise Lost* that has for some time been considered an object of that practice, it makes perfect and legitimate sense to regard the successive descriptions of *Paradise Lost* as a description of a persisting identity. Of course, it is an identity as conceived within a continuity of practice; but the alternative would be to reserve the idea of identity and the notion of change for an object that appeared to us under no practice whatsoever, an alternative that is as unimaginable as it is nonsensical. The fact that the objects we have are all objects that appear to us in the context of some practice, of work done by some interpretive community, doesn't mean that they are not objects or that we don't have them or that they exert no pressure on us. All it means is that they are interpreted objects and that since interpretations can change, the perceived shape of objects can change too.

But how does that change occur? That, after all, is the question we set out to answer, but with every turn of the argument an answer seems further away, especially if we expect it to take the form of something like a *theory* of change, complete with criteria and a predictive formula. It becomes increasingly obvious that there could be no such theory and that change is something that does or does not occur in particular institutional situations where this or that set of already-in-place concerns can (but not *must*) lead to the noticing and taking into account of an open-ended, although not infinite, range of phenomena. The answer to the question "what can cause change?" is "anything," although in a specific situation "anything" will be qualified by the structure of relevancy the situation displays: everything cannot be noticed at every moment, although what can be noticed can change (that word again) at every moment. It would seem that if change can be understood at all, it is only in the context of a historical reconstruction of its empirical conditions and not in the context of any (impossible) general account.

It follows, then, that there is nothing that is inherently—by right of its nature—an agent of change, although that is exactly the claim that has been routinely made for the operation of theory, and especially for that form of theory that supposedly enables us to distance ourselves from our practices. When Jonathan Culler declares in *On Deconstruction* that theoretical inquiry leads to “changes in assumptions, institutions, and practice,” he articulates an article of faith held by theorists and antitheorists alike.¹⁰ Thus the first respondent to a recent survey in *New Literary History* declares that “literary theory should contribute to the changing of social and professional institutions,” while another asserts in a similar vein that “a basic function of literary theory consists in opening up new realms of investigation,” and a third regards literary theory as, at least potentially, a “well-defined practice, of social critique and social redirection.” These large claims are not disputed but are made the basis of a fear by those who see in theory the specter of frivolous and value-subverting change and hope, as one respondent put it, that when the rage for theory abates, “the study of literature can continue its uninterrupted course without having suffered any permanent damage.”¹¹

Both parties to the debate about theory agree that theory is something special, something that stands apart from the field of practice which is either reformed by theory or misled by its beguiling ways. But the granting to theory of such power is just one more version of the picture in which a community is provoked to revise its assumptions by an independent agency. On the analysis offered here, however, the agent of change must already be a component in the field it alters, and so it is with theory. No theory can compel a change that has not in some sense already occurred, although it may seem to both those who promote it and those who resist it that what has been proposed is entirely new. Not long ago an old friend rushed up to me brandishing a copy of *PMLA* and crying, “look at what you and your kind have done.” The object of his ire was a reading of a novel to which he had devoted much of his career, yet he complained that this essay, published in the profession’s leading journal, spoke to no concerns he could recognize and was written in a style he found impenetrable. This sad state of affairs, he was convinced, was directly attributable to the appearance on the scene of deconstruction. But in fact deconstruction is no more or less than a particularly arresting formulation of principles and procedures that have been constitutive of literary and other studies for some time.

Indeed, deconstruction would have been literally unthinkable were it not already an article of faith that literary texts are characterized by a plurality of meanings and were it not already the established methodology of literary studies to produce for a supposedly “great text” as many meanings as possible. Deconstruction takes the additional step of attributing these meanings not to the text as a special kind of object, but to signification as a force untethered to any grounding origin, but this step too can be seen to follow from the growing influence in this century of hermeneutical thought with its emphasis on contexts, cultural matrices, and *gestalts*. It goes without saying that I vastly oversimplify what in the full telling would be an immensely complex story, but even if that story were told, its point, I think, would turn out to be the same: rather than something new which in its newness gives rise to revolutionary practices, deconstruction is a programmatic and tententious focusing of ways of thinking and working that have already come to be regarded as commonplace and orthodox. That is why, when deconstructionist doctrine began to be promulgated, one of the first things people did was to exclaim that so and so—usually Kenneth Burke—was a deconstructionist before there was a name for it, or that they themselves had been speaking deconstruction all their lives.

What is true of deconstruction is true of any theory, so-called. A theoretical pronouncement is always an articulation of a shift that has in large part already occurred; it announces a rationale for practices already in force; it provides a banner under which those who are already doing what it names can march; it provides a visible target for those who have long thought that things are going from bad to worse. In a sense, then, a theory does cause change since it will give rise to controversy and lead to the calling of symposia, and the founding of journals, and the funding of chairs, but these are the consequences of any practice that can be identified and imitated: they are not consequences that can be described as revolutionary or groundbreaking. Theory does not cause change on the level claimed by those who either see it as the means of salvation or fear it as the subverter of values. It does not even cause critical self-consciousness or make one aware of one’s assumptions (these are the usual claims); first, because self-consciousness is a necessary condition of any activity even if one cannot produce its informing principles on demand; and second, because if one were to produce those principles—that is, make one’s assumptions explicit—that activity would itself occur within assumptions of which one was

not and could not be aware. All of which is to say that theory's project—the attempt to get above practice and lay bare the grounds of its possibility—is an impossible one. Theory is a form of practice, as rooted in particular historical and cultural conditions as any other, and, as in the case of any other, the extent to which its introduction will or will not give rise to changes, small and large, cannot be determined in advance.

This returns me to the question with which I began: what is the relationship between the theory of interpretive communities and change? In fact, it is three questions. First, one might ask, does an interpretive community encourage or license change by relieving its members of any responsibility to the world or to the text, or does it inhibit change by refusing to take into account anything that is contrary to its assumptions and interests? The bulk of this essay has been concerned with demonstrating that this question, in either its left or right versions, is misconceived: since an interpretive community is an engine of change, there is no status quo to protect, for its operations are inseparable from the transformation of both its assumptions and interests; and since the change that is inevitable is also orderly—constrained by evidentiary procedures and tacit understandings that at once enable change and are changed by what they enable—license and willful irresponsibility are never possibilities. A second question looks very much like the first, but is slightly different, for it is concerned not with the work interpretive communities do, but with the work done by the fact that the term "interpretive community" is available to practitioners as a mode of self-description. Does this fact give comfort to those who want to turn everything upside down, or is it ammunition for those who want everything to go on as before? The answer is the same. The desire of neither party is authorized by the notion of interpretive communities, which says to the left "anything you can do I can do better," and to the right "the more things stay the same, the more they change." There is, however, a third question. What is likely to be the effect of the intervention in the field of the theory of interpretive communities? Which of the parties now contending for control of the literary profession's machinery will turn the theory to most advantage? That question has an answer, although the answer I must now give is, "I don't know." The reason it has an answer is that it is an empirical question, directed not at the political implications built into the theory (there are none), but at the political consequences of having the theory as a resource. It is

undoubtedly the case that the practice of professing interpretive communities will, like any other practice, participate in the ongoing modification of the enterprise, but the shape and the extent of that participation are not predictable because the relationship between the emergence of a theory and change is not theoretical.

I do not mean to say that in time the nature and extent of the changes brought about by the notion of interpretive communities will be obvious; for in so saying I would be making the *fact* of change into something that was or could be self-evident. But no fact is self-evident, and therefore it is a mistake to think of change or its absence as being verifiable by a simple (unmediated) act of empirical observation; rather it is only within the perspective of some interpretive descriptive system that change is or is not a feature. That is to say, the fact of change, like any other fact, is irremediably interpretive; its specification cannot be made independently of the way a community conceives of itself, of the story it tells about itself and lives out in the actions of its members. The enterprise of the law, for example, is by definition committed to the ahistoricity of its basic principles, and workers in the field have a stake in seeing the history of their own efforts as the application of those principles to circumstances that are only *apparently* new (i.e., changed). That is why a judge will do almost anything to avoid overturning a precedent, and why even those who hold to the doctrine of legal realism—the doctrine that the law is whatever the courts happen on that day to say it is—are uncomfortable with that doctrine and wish that they held to something else. In short, the very point of the legal enterprise requires that its practitioners see continuity where others, with less of a stake in the enterprise, might feel free to see change. The scientific community has an even greater stake in its own continuity, and I suspect that, despite the wide circulation of Kuhn's arguments, most scientists continue to think of themselves as constrained in their labors by an unchanging nature and continue to believe that what changes are the descriptions of herself that nature either confirms or rejects. (Indeed, were these not their beliefs, they would cease to be scientists.) The assumption of continuity is also necessary to anyone who would write the history of philosophy from its beginning to the present, an exercise which, as Richard Rorty has recently observed, depends on "the idea that philosophy is the name . . . of a discipline which in all ages and places, has managed to dig down to the same deep fundamental questions."¹² If someone with that idea sets out to write the history of

philosophy, he will already have ruled out the possibility that what he will be writing is a history of changes. In literary history and the history of criticism the position occupied by the great philosophical questions is often occupied by the genres assumed to be major and by the approaches assumed to be basic; changes are explained (or explained away) as variations on a few persisting forms, and the story then told is a cyclical rather than a progressive one. But that is not the only story being currently told: for those who write under the influence of the new historiography as represented in the work of Foucault and others, the persistence of genres, either in literature or criticism, is a fiction, and the truth is that even when the vocabulary of an enterprise remains stable, its terms refer to radically different activities informed and enabled by radically different principles. In the resulting narrative, which assumes and produces *discontinuities*, change is at once inevitable and somewhat mysterious, since the assumptions impelling this kind of history forbid the discovery of a pattern too regular or too rational.

In all of these cases, and in any others that can be imagined, a theory of change is inscribed in the self-description that at once directs and renders intelligible the characteristic labors of workers in the community. The question of change is therefore one that cannot be posed independently of some such self-description which gives a shape to the very facts and events to which the question is put. Does this mean, then, that we can never say "what really happened" because we can only say what happened under some description or account? Not at all. Every description and account—including the descriptions and accounts that make up this paper—is an attempt to say what really happened. If the claim to be saying that is contested (as it often is), it will not be contested by some view of the event independent of description but by a competing description, and the competition will be adjudicated with reference to the norms, standards, and procedures understood by the community to be appropriate to the determination of empirical fact. The problem arises only when one thinks that by "what really happened" is meant "what really happened after all the competing descriptions have been discounted or set aside?" But it's hard even to give *that* question a sense, since the fact of what happened, like any other fact, can only be said to exist relative to some characterization or description. To ask "what really happened independently of any account or description whatsoever" is to ask for a description that is not a description; it is what no one could ever tell you, not because it remains

hidden as the real truth behind all the partial ones, but because there is nothing to tell. What one does tell and tells continually is what really happened in the only sense that makes sense: one tells what happened as it seems manifest within some set of interpretive assumptions concerning what events are alike, what is necessary to establish their shape, what is evidence for their having occurred. It is in that sense and within assumptions of that kind that I have been speaking to you here, telling you, by way of examples, what really happened when this or that state of affairs underwent a change.

This brings me to a final question. Change in relation to what? Or, what's the point? That is, for many people, an intellectual enterprise—be it literary criticism or philosophy or science—is legitimized finally by its goal, and it is in relation to some goal that changes must be justified. Otherwise, it is often said, change would be "mere" change or meaningless change or change for change's sake. The idea is that change is intolerable unless it is perceived as progress and that the sense of progress must be underwritten by a belief in the achievability of some desired end. One can understand this in two ways. In the first and stronger way the word "end" is taken to refer to that time when a particular activity will cease, because, for example, all of the world's goods will have been equitably distributed or all of the world's texts correctly described. But while this may be a desire periodically voiced, it does not correspond, I think, to anything that a practitioner in the field really wants. Is it really the case that we do what we do so that there will come a day when we are not called upon any longer to do it? Should such a day ever seem to be approaching, in literary studies or any other, I venture to predict that there will suddenly be the discovery that the problem was more complicated than we had assumed, the discovery that the last word has not yet been explicated.

There is, however, another way to take the word "end" so that it refers not to an ultimate state of rest or closure but to a time when things will be better—"better" understood in relation to the perceived deficiencies of our present circumstances. This is Kuhn's understanding when he suggests that we think of progress not as teleological, but as "evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time."¹⁸ And it is, I would contend, the understanding under which we all labor even when we speak as if the end we have in mind were transcendental. In short, there is no need to envision a point or a goal outside of practice because practice is at every moment organized in

relation to goals already known, although it should now go without saying that the accomplishment of those goals will be inseparable from the emergence of others and therefore inseparable from the call for more practice. Perhaps the most persistent charge against the notion of interpretive communities is that it seems to make disciplinary and professional activity its own end. But since that end itself is continually changing, the charge can be cheerfully embraced because it says only that the members of a community will always believe in the ends for which they work, and that therefore their work will never be ended even though it will be ceaselessly transformed.

Professionalism

