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OBJECTIVITY IS NOT NEUTRALITY:
RHETORIC VS. PRACTICE IN PETER NOVICK'S
THAT NOBLE DREAM

THOMAS L. HASKELL

In general, I believe that skepticism is revealing and not refutable, but that it does not vitiate the pursuit of objectivity. It is worth trying to bring one's beliefs, one's actions, and one's values more under the influence of an impersonal standpoint even without the assurance that this could not be revealed from a still more external standpoint as an illusion. In any case, we seem to have no choice but to make the attempt. . . .

Objectivity and skepticism are closely related: both develop from the idea that there is a real world in which we are contained, and that appearances result from our interactions with the rest of it. We cannot accept these appearances uncritically, but must try to understand what our own constitution contributes to them. To do this we try to develop an idea of the world that includes an explanation of why it initially appears to us as it does. But this idea, since it is we who develop it, is likewise the product of interaction between us and the world, though the interaction is more complicated and more self-conscious than the original one. If the initial appearances cannot be relied upon because they depend on our constitution in ways that we do not fully understand, this more complex data should be open to the same doubts. . . . However often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens, something in us will determine the resulting picture, and this will give grounds for doubt that we are getting any closer to reality.

The idea of objectivity thus seems to undermine itself. . . .

I want both to defend the possibility of objective ascent [that is, of developing an impersonal standpoint, the "view from nowhere," a view of the world in which the self is not at the center but is included as merely one among many objects] and to understand its limits. We should keep in mind how incredible it is that such a thing is possible at all. We are encouraged these days to think of ourselves as contingent organisms arbitrarily thrown up by evolution. There is no reason in advance to expect a finite creature like that to be able to do more than accumulate information at the perceptual and conceptual level it occupies by nature. But apparently that is not how things are. Not only can we form the pure idea of a world which contains us and of which our impressions are a part, but we can give this idea a content which takes us very far from our original impressions. . . .

The search for objective knowledge, because of its commitment to a realistic picture, is inescapably subject to skepticism and cannot refute it but must proceed under its shadow. Skepticism, in turn, is a problem only because of the realist claims of objectivity.

Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 7, 67-71.

When it comes to debates over objectivity and relativism, appearances can be deceiving, not just in the world the debaters strive to comprehend, but also in

the relation between a debater's position and the rhetoric he or she employs to defend it. For example, as I sift through my reactions to Peter Novick's important and provocative book, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, Eng., and New York, 1988)*, I find it necessary to distinguish the moderate position he actually seems to occupy on the objectivity question from the rather more radical rhetorical posture he adopts in defense of that position. All things considered—that is, taking into account not only what he says about the ideal of objectivity *per se*, but also what he does as a practicing historian, writing about historians' quarrels over that ideal—I conclude that he and I occupy pretty much the same, moderate, position. We admire the same sorts of historical judgments and feel about the same degree of confidence in the end product of the historian's labors. We agree that representing the past is a far more problematical enterprise than most historians realize, and that there are more ways to represent it than the guild currently acknowledges. Certainly I do not believe any more than he does that facts speak for themselves, that political neutrality is a virtue in itself, that scholarship is a wall-building exercise in which each scholar contributes his brick to a steadily accumulating edifice of unchallengeable knowledge, or that the best history is that which provokes no controversy. Nor am I any more sanguine than he about the likelihood that disagreements over historical interpretation will one day fade away in some grand convergence.

Yet I regard objectivity, properly understood, as a worthy goal for historians. Novick, on the contrary, says the ideal is "essentially confused" (6) and the text he has written—which, ironically, passes all my tests for objectivity with flying colors—is in the main designed to persuade readers that the ideal of objectivity is all washed up. We seem not to differ greatly in what we admire and wish to defend in terms of historical practice, but our rhetorical postures vis-à-vis the ideal of objectivity are decidedly at odds.

That two people sharing the same position should say different things about it need not be surprising. One obvious reason is the difficulty of forecasting audience response. We all occasionally polemicize on behalf of our own version of the good, the true, and the beautiful, and the posture we assume in public is shaped by our estimate of where our audience already stands on these issues and which way it needs to be moved in order to strengthen the position we admire. Two authors may say very different, even opposite, things in defense of the same position, simply because they have different estimates of where their audience currently stands, or what its members need to hear in order to be moved in the desired direction. For the same reason a single person may, without any inconsistency, adopt different rhetorical postures on different occasions. If, for example, a proponent of the welfare state were to deliver exactly the same speech to the National Association of Manufacturers and the Young Socialist League, we would not applaud the speaker's consistency, but lament the insensitivity of

* I am indebted to Peter Novick for several very open and informative letters sent in response to my initial reactions to his book. Subsequent page references to the book appear in parentheses.

the performance, the failure to anticipate objections coming from different directions. Estimating the composition and likely reaction of the audience for a book is notoriously difficult, so it is easy to see how Novick and I might share much the same position on substantive issues, and yet adopt opposing postures and appear for all the world as if we were completely at loggerheads.

Two further reasons help explain why I want to endorse much of Novick's analysis of objectivity even as I draw what may seem opposite conclusions from it. The first is a matter of strategy. He and I agree that objectivity was the charter under which professional history was inaugurated, in his words, "the rock on which the venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d'être*" (1). We also agree that the ideal is currently viewed with considerable skepticism, especially by scholars impressed by recent developments in literary criticism; that historians eager to counter that skepticism have sometimes done so naively and ineffectively; and that although attacks in the past have come and gone cyclically, the overall trend has been one of declension. The ideal of objectivity just does not grip us as powerfully as it did the founding generation of the 1880s. Given this state of affairs, Novick's advice to the profession evidently is to cut loose from the ideal, declaring it obsolete—even while silently perpetuating many of the practices associated with it. In contrast, my inclination is to protect those practices by continuing to honor the ideal, meanwhile ridding it of unwanted connotations. Fatefully dissimilar though the two strategies may be, they do not aim at very different outcomes in terms of historical practice.

That difference of strategy immediately points to crucial differences in the way Novick and I use the term "objectivity." My impression, unlike Novick's, is that among the influential members of the historical profession the term objectivity has long since lost whatever connection it may once have had with passionlessness, indifference, and neutrality. Eugene Genovese, a much-honored member of the profession and a self-proclaimed Marxist whom no one will think dispassionate or politically neutral, passes my test of objectivity with plenty of room to spare, just as Novick himself does.¹ In my view, what sophisticated historians mean by the term today has precious little to do with neutrality, but a great deal to do with a cultural orientation in which neutrality, disinterestedness, and like qualities did indeed figure prominently in the nineteenth century: that complex of values and practices which Nietzsche contemptuously called "asceticism."² If objectivity could be reduced simply to neutrality, I would not bother to defend it; but insofar as it is the expression in intellectual affairs of the ascetic dimension

1. Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese do not hesitate, for example, to speak of "Braudel's great and anti-Marxist work"—and then follow through on what might otherwise be an empty gesture with a close and critical analysis of that work. I look forward to the day when spokespersons for other movements can treat their opponents with similar detachment. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital: Slavery and Bourgeois Property in the Rise and Expansion of Capitalism* (New York, 1983), 188.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, transl. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1969). See especially the third essay of *The Genealogy of Morals*, titled "What is the Meaning of Ascetic Ideals?"

of life, it deserves a defense, for asceticism is not only “common to all culture,” it is “the ‘cultural’ element in culture. . . . Where there is culture there is asceticism.”³

I regard Nietzsche’s attack on asceticism as a cultural calamity, all the more regrettable because of his high seriousness and the brilliance of the assault. Had he directed his wrath merely against Victorian passionlessness there would be no room for complaint, but his ridicule of ascetic values and practices became reckless and indiscriminate, reaching far beyond the foibles of a generation to renunciation itself. Morality is what suffers most from the devaluation of ascetic practices, but such practices are also indispensable to the pursuit of truth. The very possibility of historical scholarship as an enterprise distinct from propaganda requires of its practitioners that vital minimum of ascetic self-discipline that enables a person to do such things as abandon wishful thinking, assimilate bad news, discard pleasing interpretations that cannot pass elementary tests of evidence and logic, and, most important of all, suspend or bracket one’s own perceptions long enough to enter sympathetically into the alien and possibly repugnant perspectives of rival thinkers. All of these mental acts — especially coming to grips with a rival’s perspective — require *detachment*, an undeniably ascetic capacity to achieve some distance from one’s own spontaneous perceptions and convictions, to imagine how the world appears in another’s eyes, to experimentally adopt perspectives that do not come naturally — in the last analysis, to develop, as Thomas Nagel would say, a view of the world in which one’s own self stands not at the center, but appears merely as one object among many.⁴ To be dissatisfied with the view of the world as it initially appears to us, and to struggle to formulate a superior, more inclusive, less self-centered alternative, is to strive for detachment and aim at objectivity. And to turn thus against one’s most natural self — to engage in “this uncanny, dreadfully joyous labor of a soul voluntarily at odds with itself” — is to commit that very sin against the will to power that Nietzsche so irresponsibly condemned.⁵

Detachment does not promise access to any transcendental realm and always remains, as Nagel says, “under the shadow” of skepticism.⁶ Although it is an ideal and holds out a standard higher than any of us routinely achieve, acceptable performance under its regulative influence does not require superhuman effort. It is that frail and limited but perfectly real power which, for example, permits conscientious scholars to referee one another’s work fairly, to acknowledge merit even in the writings of one’s critics, and successfully to “bend over backwards” when grading students so as not to penalize those holding antagonistic political convictions. We try to exercise this capacity every day; sometimes we succeed, sometimes we fail, and we assign praise and blame to ourselves and others accordingly. It is of course true that we sometimes delude ourselves, developing

3. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago and London, 1987), xi-xii.

4. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York, 1986), 4–6, 68.

5. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 87.

6. Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 71.

a pseudo-objective standpoint that functions mainly to obscure choice, shifting responsibility for what we want to do to a seemingly impersonal state of affairs. But to shrug off the capacity for detachment as entirely illusory – to claim that since none of the standpoints the self is capable of imagining are *really* that of “the other,” but are self-produced (as is certainly the case), and to argue that all viewpoints therefore are *indistinguishably* contaminated by selfishness or group interest or the omnipresent Nietzschean will – is to turn a blind eye to distinctions that all of us routinely make and confidently act upon, and thereby to blur all that distinguishes villainy from decency, veracity from mendacity, in everyday affairs. Not to mince words, it is to defame the species. Fairness and honesty are qualities we can rightfully demand of human beings, and those qualities require a very substantial measure of self-overcoming – more than could exist if Nietzsche’s hyperbolic and indiscriminate war on asceticism were permitted to triumph. Objectivity is not something entirely distinct from detachment, fairness, and honesty, but the product of extending and elaborating these priceless and fundamentally ascetic virtues.⁷

If I am correct in thinking that these virtues of self-overcoming already rank high in historians’ practice, that should suffice to show that my strategy of keeping alive the term “objectivity” while ridding it of unwanted connotations is not a matter of appropriating a traditional name as a dignified cover for new practices.

7. Although in other respects people attracted to “postmodernism” are often especially eager to give the subjective element its due, they tend not to take seriously detachment, self-restraint, self-denial, or any of the other subjective experiences of *self versus self* upon which asceticism builds. No wonder: postmodernism typically presupposes a self too vaporous to resist anything, least of all its own all-consuming desires. From the postmodernist standpoint, the self is not a discrete agent which merely takes *cognizance* of circumstances, and selects a course of action *in light* of them; instead its “situatedness” is so thoroughgoing that, like the electrified gas inside a neon tube, it can only conform to the shape of its circumstantial container and respond on cue as enviroing forces surge irresistibly through it. Thus Stanley Fish, in a candid, if characteristically reckless, essay titled “Critical Self-Consciousness, or Can We Know What We’re Doing?” derides the idea that there is any emancipatory potential in striving to become more self-aware: “To be in a situation (as one always is),” says Fish, “is already to be equipped with an awareness of possible goals, obstacles, dangers, rewards, alternatives, etc., and nothing is or could be aided [sic] by something called ‘self-consciousness.’” Consciousness is exhaustively determined by situation: the first lesson of antifoundationalism, Fish says, is precisely that “being situated means that one cannot achieve a distance on one’s beliefs.” His root assumption is straightforwardly fatalistic: our subjective experience of freedom to choose between options is simply an illusion. “Freedom, in whatever shape it appears, is another name for constraint.” *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C., and London, 1989), 466, 467, 459. It is ironic that although Fish has little use for the idea of objectivity and Nagel defends it, Fish’s error, as seen from Nagel’s standpoint, is precisely that Fish is trying too hard to “be objective.” Fish, that is, gives no credence at all to the “internal” (subjective) view, according to which our own power to bring one event rather than another into existence seems quite indisputable, and instead he tries once and for all to substitute for that view the “external” (objective) one, according to which the real causes of our acts may well lie outside our deceptively vivid experience of conscious choice. Nagel, in contrast, accords to some subjective experience a status no less real than that derived from the “view from nowhere.” In his words, “. . . the seductive appeal of objective reality depends on a mistake. It is not the given. Reality is not just objective reality. Sometimes, in the philosophy of mind but also elsewhere, the truth is not to be found by travelling as far away from one’s personal perspective as possible.” Nagel, *View from Nowhere*, 27. See also 114–115.

The tendency of past generations to associate objectivity with “selflessness,” and to think of truth-seeking as a matter of emptying oneself of passion and preconception, so as to become a perfectly passive and receptive mirror of external reality, has, for good reason, become notorious.⁸ But in valuing (as even Nietzsche did, in his calmer moments) the elementary capacity for self-overcoming, we need not aspire to the unrealistic and undesirable extreme of extinguishing the self or denying that its situation in time and space limits the perspectives available to it.⁹ Likewise, in making detachment a vital criterion of objective thinking, we need not make the still greater error of confusing objectivity with neutrality.

I see nothing to admire in neutrality. My conception of objectivity (which I believe is widely, if tacitly, shared by historians today) is compatible with strong political commitment. It pays no premium for standing in the middle of the road and it recognizes that scholars are as passionate and as likely to be driven by interest as those they write about. It does not value even detachment as an end in itself, but only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for the achievement of higher levels of understanding—higher not in the sense of ascending to a more spiritual plane, where the concerns of the soul displace those of the body, as an earlier generation might have understood it, but higher in Nagel’s sense of being more complete, more cognizant of that most powerful of all the world’s illusory appearances, which is that the world centers on me (or those with whom I choose to identify) and that what matters to me (or us) is paramount.

Detachment functions in this manner not by draining us of passion, but by helping to channel our intellectual passions in such a way as to insure collision with rival perspectives. In that collision, if anywhere, our thinking transcends both the idiosyncratic and the conventional. Detachment both socializes and deparochializes the work of intellect; it is the quality that fits an individual to participate fruitfully in what is essentially a communal enterprise. Objectivity is so much a product of social arrangements that individuals and particular opinions scarcely deserve to be called objective, yet the social arrangements that foster objectivity have no basis for existence apart from individual striving for detachment. Only insofar as the members of the community are disposed to set aside the perspective that comes most spontaneously to them, and strive to see things in a detached light, is there any likelihood that they will engage with one another mentally and provoke one another through mutual criticism to the most complete, least idiosyncratic, view that humans are capable of. When the ascetic effort

8. Throughout this essay I have, for purposes of argument, accepted the conventional wisdom that our Victorian forebears really expected through self-annihilation to be transported into the realm of truth. In fact, my guess is that a more sensitive contextual reading would show that they were less naive than we like to think. The important book that has come to epitomize conventional wisdom on this point is Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979).

9. For Nietzsche’s sincere admiration for the human capacity for promise keeping and other basic renunciatory traits, see the second essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, especially 57–60 and 84–85. Walter A. Kaufmann’s *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 3rd edition (Princeton, 1968) develops the theme of self-overcoming at length.

at detachment fails, as it often does, we “talk past one another,” producing nothing but discordant soliloquies, each fancying itself the voice of reason. The kind of thinking I would call objective leads only a fugitive existence outside of communities that enjoy a high degree of independence from the state and other external powers, and which are dedicated internally not only to detachment, but also to intense mutual criticism and to the protection of dissenting positions against the perpetual threat of majority tyranny.

Some hypothetical examples may clarify what I mean by objective thinking and show how remote it is from neutrality. Consider an extreme case: the person who, although capable of detachment, suspends his or her own perceptions of the world not in the expectation of gaining a broader perspective, but only in order to learn how opponents think so as to demolish their arguments more effectively—who is, in short, a polemicist, deeply and fixedly committed as a lifelong project to a particular political or cultural or moral program. Anyone choosing such a life obviously risks being thought boorish or provincial, but insofar as such a person successfully enters into the thinking of his or her rivals and produces arguments potentially compelling not only to those who already share the same views, but to outsiders as well, I see no reason to withhold the laurel of objectivity.¹⁰ There is nothing objective about hurling imprecations at apostates or catechizing the faithful, but as long as the polemicist truly engages the thinking of the enemy he or she is being as objective as anyone. In contrast, the person too enamored of his or her own interpretation of things seriously and sympathetically to entertain alternatives, even for the sake of learning how best to defeat them, fails my test of objectivity, no matter how serene and even tempered.

The most common failure of objectivity is preaching to the converted, proceeding in a manner that complacently presupposes the pieties of one’s own coterie and makes no effort to appreciate or appeal to the perspectives of outsiders. In contrast, the most commonly observed fulfillment of the ideal of objectivity in the historical profession is simply the *powerful argument*—the text that reveals by its every twist and turn its respectful appreciation of the alternatives it rejects. Such a text attains power precisely because its author has managed to suspend momentarily his or her own perceptions so as to anticipate and take account of objections and alternative constructions—not those of some straw man, but those that truly issue from the rival’s position, understood as sensitively and stated as eloquently as the rival him- or herself could desire. Nothing is rhetorically more powerful than this, and nothing, not even capitulation to the rival, could acknowledge any more vividly the force and respectability of the rival’s perspective. To mount a telling attack on a position, one must first inhabit it. Those

10. I find it difficult to imagine that a person so narrowly committed would, as a matter of fact, succeed in entering sympathetically into the thought of another, even for polemical purposes, but the assertion still holds—if he or she *did* succeed, there would be no other reason to deny the objectivity of the performance.

so habituated to their customary intellectual abode that they cannot even explore others can never be persuasive to anyone but fellow habitués.

That is why powerful arguments are often more faithful to the complexity and fragility of historical interpretation — more faithful even to the irreducible plurality of human perspectives, when that is, in fact, the case — than texts that abjure position-taking altogether and ostentatiously wallow in displays of “reflexivity” and “undecidability.” The powerful argument is the highest fruit of the kind of thinking I would call objective, and in it neutrality plays no part. Authentic objectivity has simply nothing to do with the television newscaster’s mechanical gesture of allocating the same number of seconds to both sides of a question, or editorially splitting the difference between them, irrespective of their perceived merits.

This conception of the ideal of objectivity, stripped as it is of any association with neutrality and offering no metaphysical guarantees of truth, is not terribly different from that “future ‘objectivity’” that even Nietzsche grudgingly acknowledged in the midst of his slashing attack on asceticism. He spoke without malice of an objectivity “understood not as ‘contemplation without interest’ (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability *to control* one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.”¹¹ Even in one of his fits of hyperbole, as Nietzsche gathered up the last hope of objective knowledge and threw it out the window along with the bathwater of a literal-minded notion of disinterestedness, he let slip a crucial concession. This often-quoted passage proclaims the impossibility of disinterestedness so stridently that it is easy to ignore the second half of the lead sentence and the important qualification that Nietzsche there inserted against the grain of his own thought:

There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”; and the *more* affects we are allowed to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing be. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing we were capable of this — what would that mean but to *castrate* the intellect?¹²

The baby that needs rescuing here is the thought that some conceptions are more “complete” than others and that by doing what we can to multiply the perspectives brought to bear on a problem, we can achieve higher levels of completeness. Once it is acknowledged that conceptions differ in this way, it is but a small additional step to say that the more complete a conception is, the greater its claim upon us — opening the possibility that we are sometimes *obliged* to give up incomplete conceptions for more complete ones. The ideal of objectivity requires no more of a foothold than this.

The possibility of distinguishing baby from bathwater is lost the moment we con-

11. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 119.

12. *Idem*.

fuse objectivity with neutrality. And my most serious reservation about Novick's uncommonly intelligent and wide-ranging history of the objectivity question — the most complete history of the American historical profession ever written for any purpose — is that he virtually equates objectivity with neutrality. Subtle and perceptive though his analysis is, much of his text reads like an exposé. His aim is to show, often through passages selected from personal correspondence, that in spite of all their high-minded public rhetoric about the importance of “being objective,” historians have bristled with likes and dislikes and have often conceived of their work as a means of striking a blow for what they liked, be it reunification of North and South in the founding generation, or racial integration in a later one.¹³ All this is presented to the reader in a tone of bemused shock and wide-eyed dismay, as if by discovering connections between their scholarship and their likes and dislikes we were catching the mighty with their pants down. That tone is justifiable in a few sad and striking cases in which prominent historians' dislikes turn out to have been ethnic and ugly. But on the whole, who will be either surprised or disappointed to discover that historians who praised objectivity and thought of themselves as objective had strong preferences about mobilization for World War I, isolationism, responsibility for the cold war, Vietnam, racial segregation and the like, and wrote books and articles meant in part to advance their side of these major public debates? These commitments betray a lack of objectivity only if we define objectivity as neutrality, and to do that would be to trivialize both the ideal and those who have striven to realize it.

Novick generally construes active political commitment by historians who subscribe to the ideal of objectivity as evidence either of personal insincerity or, more often, the incoherence and emptiness of the ideal. I wonder. Perhaps Novick has defined objectivity too narrowly. Perhaps historians who advocated objectivity and worried, say, about the relativism of Charles Beard and Carl Becker meant neither to claim neutrality for themselves nor to impose it on others. Perhaps instead, by defending what they called “objectivity,” they meant, as I do, to sustain that minimal respect for self-overcoming, for detachment, honesty, and fairness, that makes intellectual community possible. Perhaps they were not naive to sense in snappy slogans like “everyman his own historian” not only the

13. Novick is quite insistent about the virtual identity of objectivity and neutrality. Thus when one of the profession's founders, Hermann Eduard von Holst, the prominent German historian who established the department at the University of Chicago, tried to disentangle the idea of objectivity from that of neutrality, Novick complains of the “elusiveness” and “ambiguity” of his language: “Von Holst, with no apparent sense of inconsistency, could profess ‘the objectivity of the historian,’ of the ‘cool, unbiased student’ aiming at the ‘stern historical truth,’ and yet praise Woodrow Wilson for being ‘no votary of that exaggerated, nay, impossible *objektivität*, which virtually amounts to a denial of his right to hold any political or moral opinion as to the events and men he is treating of. But he has no thesis to prove. With unimpeachable honesty and undeviating singleness of purpose he strives — as Ranke puts it — “simply to say how it was”.’ The elusiveness and ambiguity in von Holst's usage was characteristic” (25–26). Von Holst's statement is no model of clarity about the relationship between objectivity and neutrality, but it does make it clear that even among the founding generation, the necessity of distinguishing between the two was recognized, and that is a fact Novick never comes to terms with.

useful corrective to scientism that Novick appropriately sees there, but also the harbinger of a remissive cultural movement corrosive of all constraints upon the will, a movement which over the course of the twentieth century has in fact succeeded in putting on the defensive the very idea of obligation, whether moral (“You ethically *ought* to do x”) or epistemological (“You rationally/logically *ought* to believe y”).¹⁴ The upshot, as a new century looms, is that many wonder if “ought” statements capture anything important about human beings and the world they live in, or are merely grandiose masks for preferences that are ultimately personal and self-serving (“I *want* you to do x or believe y”).¹⁵ Some will see in this cultural shift a welcome retreat of authoritarianism, others a tragic breakdown of authority. Those who lament it as a breakdown will by no means be found only on the political right, for insofar as the left trades on ideas of moral obligation (for example, to the poor, to minorities), or distinguishes between policies that are well or ill-suited to the “realities” of our situation, it too has a vested interest in objectivity. Without entering into the debate here, we can simply observe that the stakes in this cultural contest are extremely high, and while the possibility of objective knowledge is a central point at issue, neutrality is not.

Yet in Novick’s definition of objectivity, neutrality looms very large indeed. In two key definitional paragraphs near the beginning of his text, Novick spells out in abbreviated form the principal tenets of the ideal of objectivity to which he believes historians have subscribed with little change for the past hundred

14. For three quite different, though related, accounts of the movement I have in mind, each assigning it different causes and chronologies, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, 1984); Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* [with a new preface] (Chicago, 1987); and T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York, 1981).

15. A culture that acknowledges no significant difference between “You *ought* to do/believe x” and “I *want* you to do/believe x”—the former an invocation of objective obligation, the latter a report of merely subjective desires—is, I believe, in serious trouble. But there is, in my view, no help to be had outside the sphere of history and convention. After three centuries of inquiry into the basis of moral judgment it appears that no ultimate, metaphysical foundations are to be found—in nature, divine will, or anywhere else. Admitting that moral judgment cannot be based on timeless absolutes, universally applicable and utterly independent of human consciousness and practice, does not mean, however, that we must set morality adrift and leave it at the mercy of whimsy and fashion. Thomas Kuhn has shown how authoritative science remains even when we admit the social, conventional quality of scientific understanding and give up the claim that scientists aim at correspondence with eternal verities: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1970). Similarly, the most sophisticated proponents of moral realism today do not try to rally faith in supposedly self-evident absolutes or claim that moral rules are independent of cultural conditioning; they admit the historicity and even the conventionality of our ethical thinking and seek to reestablish grounds for obligation on that more modest base. Moral realists have been fighting an uphill battle in philosophical circles for a long time, but variations on that position are defended today by some very able voices: see, in addition to MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986), 163–207; the essays by Simon Blackburn and John McDowell in *Morality and Objectivity: A Tribute to J. L. Mackie*, ed. Ted Honderich (Boston, 1985); and Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (New York, 1984). I have discussed these issues at greater length in “The Curious Persistence of Rights Talk in the ‘Age of Interpretation,’” *Journal of American History* 74 (1987), 984–1012, and “Convention and Hegemonic Interest in the Debate over Antislavery: A Reply to Davis and Ashworth,” *American Historical Review* 92 (1987), 829–878.

years.¹⁶ I place the second of the two sequential paragraphs first because it strains hardest to identify objectivity with neutrality.

The objective historian's role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of an advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian's conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressures or political influence, and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias—not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties: the historian's primary allegiance is to "the objective historical truth," and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal. (2)

Although there is much in this sketch that strikes me as accurate, on the whole I find it impossible to reconcile with my impression that most historians, certainly the abler and more influential ones, recognize full well that fine history can be and routinely is written by politically committed scholars. Most historians just do not assign to "neutrality" and "disinterestedness" the inflated value that Novick suggests. Most, I think, would be aghast at the thought that historians must "purge themselves of external loyalties" in order to do their job well. Seeing an analogy between the role of the judge and that of the historian does not imply any overestimation of the value of neutrality: judges, like historians, are expected to be open to rational persuasion, not to be indifferent about the great issues of their day or—bizarre thought—to abstain from judgment. What we demand of them is self-control, not self-immolation. Bias and conflict of interest do indeed arouse our suspicion, not only of judges and historians, but of whomever we depend upon to be fair. The demand is for detachment and fairness, not disengagement from life. Most historians would indeed say that the historian's primary commitment is to the truth, and that when truth and "the cause," however defined, come into conflict, the truth must prevail. But to say that is not to prohibit political advocacy; it is only to set intellectually responsible limits to it—limits without which advocates would discredit not only scholarship but their own cause. Who will trust a scholar-advocate who claims the privilege of lying or obscuring the truth for good causes?

By the same token, Novick is no doubt right that historians see a world of difference between politically committed scholarship, which I think they accept, and propaganda dressed up as history, which they certainly do not, and should

16. Of the two paragraphs he says: "Although radically compressed, this is, I think, a fair summary of the original and continuing objectivist creed—an ideal to be pursued by individuals, policed by the community." He concedes that over the past century the concept has been modified—objectivists are less confident that they can purge themselves of values and preconceptions; more likely to ground objectivity in social mechanisms, as opposed to individual qualities; more tolerant of hypotheses; more willing to think of truth-seeking as a matter of "tacking" toward reality, or proceeding dialectically, as opposed to brick-making and wall-building. "But," he concludes, "despite these recent modifications, older usages remain powerful, and perhaps even dominant" (2).

not, accept. Historians do indeed become wary, but not necessarily dismissive, when scholarship is performed as a means to exogenous, “utilitarian” ends; they do regard scholarship as a collaborative effort, requiring a great deal of mutual trust, and most no doubt regard a degree of insulation from external influence as indispensable. (The latter point seems impossible to doubt as I write these lines in the summer of 1989, just as the Chinese government rewrites the history of the Tiananmen Square killings and as intellectuals in the USSR and Central Europe put their lives on the line by publicly challenging state sponsored orthodoxies in historical interpretation.) None of these beliefs require historians to “purge themselves of external loyalties,” or to be “neutral,” or to be “disinterested” in any extravagant sense. What is required is at most a modicum of ascetic detachment.

Does Novick think that even this modicum is too much to ask? It is not easy to tell, either from his two definitional paragraphs or from the 600-plus pages that follow, how much of the ideal of objectivity he actually means to reject. Consider both the passage quoted above and the more general of his two definitional paragraphs (which in his text appears first):

The principal elements of the idea [of objectivity] are well known and can be briefly recapitulated. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found,” not “made.” Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging. (1-2)

Since Novick is evidently out to show that the ideal of objectivity is “essentially confused,” one might think that he is prepared to abandon each of the “elements” of the ideal he lists in these two paragraphs. But considering the text in its entirety, and, again, taking into account both his statements about objectivity *per se* and his practices as the author of this particular historical narrative about historian’s debates, I conclude that his rejection of the ideal is far from total.

Let us examine the elements he lists. What precisely it would mean for an historian or anyone else to doubt the “reality of the past” is not obvious, but surely anyone whose doubt was more than a rhetorical gambit would think twice before writing a 600-page book about it. “Correspondence” as a metaphor for the hoped-for relation between thought and reality has notoriously fallen on hard times, and mention of dualisms such as “knower and known,” “fact and value,” “history and fiction,” will call up important debates familiar to the readers of this journal. Without slighting in the least either Novick’s performance as an historian, or the significance of those debates, I find it difficult to see—apart, perhaps, from a certain heightened self-consciousness and epistemological anxiety that have no evident consequence—how the debates influence the performance. The fault is not Novick’s. Knowing that correspondence is an inadequate meta-

phor, how are historians to conduct themselves differently? Novick gives no answer, either explicitly or implicitly, and was probably wise not to try. As for the ostensible benefits of recognizing the kinship of history and fiction, Novick seems at best half-persuaded. His treatment of Hayden White, the scholar most closely identified with those benefits, is respectful (he calls him our “philosopher of freedom” and laments his scapegoating by objectivists looking for an embodiment of “nihilistic relativism” [599]), but decidedly guarded: White’s “trivializing of questions of evidence was in the service . . . above all [of] his existentialist quasi obsession with the historian’s liberty of choice,” says Novick, and it requires only a “moderately careless reading,” he continues, to conclude that White’s relativism is that of the proverbial freshman, “for whom any view was as good as any other” (601). These are not the attitudes one expects of a radical on the objectivity question.

“Fact” is another word that has fallen on hard times. Just as there are many historians out there who need to be reminded that, for all their differences, the writing of history and the writing of fiction are kindred activities, so there are also historians who still need to learn that facts only take shape under the aegis of paradigms, presuppositions, theories, and the like. There are even historians who might benefit from writing on the blackboard twenty times, “facts are just low-level interpretative entities unlikely for the moment to be contested.” That said, it must also be observed that one of the virtues of Novick’s book is that it is jam-packed with such low-level entities, and I should be very surprised if he really thought that the value of his higher level interpretations was independent of their ability “to account for” the lower ones. I would be still more surprised if he retained in his book any higher level interpretations that he really thought were flatly “contradicted” by the lower ones. He is much too good an historian for that. As for Novick’s questions about the oneness of truth and the origin of the patterns historians “find” in history, his subsequent discussions make perfectly clear his sensible refusal to grasp either horn of such either-or dilemmas. He appears in practice to believe, as I do, that some truth claims are irreducibly perspectival, while others lend themselves to rational resolution. His practice seems compatible with my view (not at all unusual among historians) that historical patterns are “found,” but not without a process of imaginative construction that goes far enough beyond the intrinsic properties of the raw materials employed that one can speak of their being “made”—though certainly not out of whole cloth. Once again, sweeping though Novick’s abandonment of objectivity sometimes sounds, in practice he is usually what I would call a sensible moderate.

Although the most conspicuous struggle underway in this text is between the author’s practice and his rhetorical posture, the rhetorical posture itself is also conflicted. Novick claims, interestingly, that he is more concerned to report the debate over objectivity than to take a position: “What I can’t do,” he says, “is hope to satisfy those who exigently demand to know if I am ‘for’ or ‘against’ objectivity.” Having said this, he then proceeds in the next two paragraphs to speak of the ideal and the distinctions it gives rise to as “confused,” “dubious,”

“naive,” “unreal,” “empty,” and “incoherent” (6). Summing up this uniformly critical commentary, he says “Another way of describing my stance is to say that, in general and on the whole, I have been persuaded by the arguments of the critics of the concept; unimpressed by the arguments of its defenders” (6). Clear though his rejection of objectivity seems at this point, he reasserts two paragraphs later his role as nonjudgmental reporter: “Above all, the reason why I cannot take a position for or against objectivity is my historicism, which here means simply that my way of thinking about anything in the past is primarily shaped by my understanding of its role within a particular historical context, and in the stream of history” (7).

Novick’s characterization of his own views seems most promising to me when he likens objectivity to a myth which, while resisting classification as either “true” or “false,” indubitably sustains valued practices and thus comes to possess many of the qualities of tenacity and inescapability that we associate with truth. In the same view he likens objectivity to the inalienable and self-evident rights of the Declaration of Independence: hopelessly ambiguous, philosophically indefensible, even “nonsense,” perhaps, but, in Novick’s word, “*salutary nonsense*” (7), in view of the form of life they have fostered.¹⁷ On balance, however, Novick is not content to regard the ideal of objectivity as salutary: “it promotes an unreal and misleading invidious distinction between, on the one hand, historical accounts ‘distorted’ by ideological assumptions and purposes; on the other, history free of these taints” (6). Nor does the idea of myth provide much shelter, for in Novick’s eyes the valued practices sustained by the myth of objectivity are strictly those of historians striving to professionalize their discipline, enhance their dignity, and maximize their incomes. He would evidently give little credence to my own view, which is that although the ideal of objectivity has been most fully and formally developed by scholars and serves importantly to legitimize their work, it was not invested by them and in fact pervades the world of everyday affairs. As I see it, the ideal is tacitly invoked (sometimes as a test, sometimes in a gesture of blind faith) every time anyone opens a letter, picks up a newspaper, walks into a courtroom, or decides which of two squabbling children to believe. All of us, professional or not, invoke the ideal every time we choose between two conflicting interpretations with confidence that they are not simply different, but that one is *superior* to the other, superior as a representation of the way things are. No wonder Novick is less concerned than I about the fate of the ideal: for him the consequences of abandoning it are confined to the academic professions while for me the cultural ramifications are incalculably wide.

Although I disagree with many of Novick’s judgments, I have high confidence in his objectivity as an historian. He sees little connection between the scholar’s

17. Italics in original. Novick also likens objectivity to the Christian myth of the redemptive death of Christ and the Marxist myth of the emancipatory potential of the proletariat. In a footnote, apologizing for his use of the neologisms “objectivism” and “objectivist,” he observes that “it would be very difficult to write several hundred pages on the belief in the divinity of Christ, and on believers, without ‘Christianity’ and ‘Christians’” (3 fn).

ideal and the homely virtues of fairness, honesty, and detachment, and therefore assumes a posture *vis-à-vis* objectivity that seems to give those virtues short shrift. In practice, however, he takes them very seriously. It would be tedious to recite many examples, but even his introductory comments about the near-fatal inadequacy of the ideal of objectivity are interspersed with declarations of respect for the homelier virtues that constitute the very taproots of that ideal as I would define it. Thus, having declared himself persuaded by the critics of objectivity, he expresses the hope, in the very next sentence, that he has succeeded in setting forth “fairly” (12) both sides of the argument. I wonder how he could explain the high value we place on fairness — or even explain what fairness means in this context — without resorting eventually to the language of objectivity. Similarly, in defense of his self-conscious tendency to give rather more explanatory weight to extra-rational factors than most historians do, Novick hastens to assure the reader that he has done his best “to extend such treatment evenhandedly: as much to the thought of those with whom I am in sympathy as to those whose views I dislike” (15). Again the practice he promises is not something other than objectivity, but a facet of it. He even aspires to detachment. Noting that most historians write about their profession “the way Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writes about the Kennedys,” he fears that “what I think of as my attempt at detachment may be read as hostility” (13). In the narrative account that follows, he seems to me generally to live up to the promise of these declarations. If we could be sure that abandoning the ideal of objectivity meant that all the professions’ members would continue (or begin) to go about their work as scrupulously as Novick, we could rest easy. But we cannot.

If there is any aspect of the objectivity question about which Novick and I are truly opposed, substantively as well as rhetorically, it is the degree of solicitude the profession owes to scholars whose zeal for advocacy carries them close to, or over, the border between politically committed scholarship and propaganda. Novick is more tolerant of border violations than I am, more reluctant, in fact, to believe that any border can be defined that is not itself an artifact of political perspective. His sensitivity on this issue may well reflect painful personal experiences. He describes himself in the book as a member in the mid-1950s of the “‘Schachtmanite’ Young Socialist League” (419). More important, he also describes himself as a mentor and good friend of David Abraham, a young Marxist scholar teaching at Princeton whose dissertation on the role of big business in the rise of Hitler became a cause célèbre in the mid-1980s when it was attacked by Professors Henry Turner of Yale and Gerald Feldman of Berkeley. Turner and Feldman did not merely criticize Abraham’s arguments, but alleged “outright invention” of “nonexistent archival documents” (614). They also took the unusual steps of contacting departments where Abraham was under consideration for employment and supporting an effort to get the University of Chicago to rescind Abraham’s Ph.D. (617). Abraham replied to his critics, publicly apologizing for some errors that he called “inexcusable” (616), but denying any inventions. Some historians found his reply persuasive; some did not. The pivotal issues,

on which the leading lights of the profession publicly split and about which I, to my embarrassment, remain undecided, are whether all of Abraham's errors could have been excusably accidental (the result, as he put it, of "hasty and niggardly note taking" [616]) and whether the "facts" that have been contested play a vital or a peripheral role in supporting the conceptual structure of the book (612–621).

Novick construes the outcome — Abraham's departure from the profession and enrollment in law school — as "a striking demonstration of the continued power of the empiricist-objectivist alliance" (621). Traumatic as the incident obviously was for him and for the profession (not to mention the immediate protagonists), Novick does not pretend that Abraham was laid low by the ideal of objectivity pure and simple. Abraham was, of course, accused of far more than a lack of objectivity or neutrality. Novick characterizes the standpoint of his critics not only as "neo-objectivist," but as "hyperobjectivist" and "hyperempiricist." Novick's account of the episode is impassioned. I would not expect it to please Abraham's critics and I concede that their displeasure may be justifiable. But even if it is, I would contend that Novick's account is manifestly the work of someone who prizes detachment and makes a serious effort to bracket his own perspective long enough to enter sympathetically into the thinking of others, even under trying circumstances. Indeed, although Novick chalks up the case as another black mark for objectivism, his principal complaint about Abraham's critics is that, in their zeal for their own, non-Marxist perspective they exaggerated the importance of details and failed to grapple with the conceptual heart of Abraham's position, thereby themselves violating accepted standards of scholarly conduct. Without trying to pass judgment on the merits of the accusation, we can note that the standard he tacitly invokes — an obligation to enter sympathetically into rival perspectives — is that of objectivity, much as I have defined it.

Novick's silent loyalty to the practices I would identify with objectivity is also evident in the accounts he gives of other rancorous episodes in the recent history of the profession. In fact, a surprisingly pained, elegiac tone creeps into his last four chapters, in which he traces what he regards as the virtual demise of the ideal of objectivity in our own time. Chapter and section titles tell the story: "Objectivity in crisis," "The collapse of comity," "Every group its own historian," "The center does not hold," and finally, "There was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his eyes." These titles are hard to reconcile with the tone of the first twelve chapters, which display little sympathy for the ideal of objectivity or those who rallied to it.

In the chapter titled "Every group its own historian," Novick recounts the rise of black history and women's history since the 1960s. Among the people attracted to these highly politicized fields were many for whom academic employment and scholarly performance were means to what they perceived as political ends, and who, far from seeing any danger in the subordination of scholarship to politics, sometimes looked with considerable disdain on their more conventional colleagues who had no more elevated mission in life than to teach and write well — goals easy to dismiss as "privatistic" or "careerist." Moreover, the internal wars over

doctrine that were waged within activist circles during these years often stirred up intensely particularist currents and explicit repudiations of the universalistic values that had eased the none-too-smooth assimilation into the profession of Jews and left-leaning dissenters during earlier decades, and which continued to underwrite arguments for academic freedom and toleration of dissent during the McCarthy era. By the late 1960s there were in activist circles many who, in the arena of national politics, were not willing to settle for reforms aiming at race- and gender-blind treatment. For similar reasons, many also were not willing to think of themselves merely as historians who happened to be black and/or female. The demand for objectivity, whether defined my way or Novick's, was from these particularistic standpoints often construed as one more link in a chain of oppression.¹⁸

Novick is more patient with these assaults on universalistic values than I am, but, if I understand him correctly, he does not finally accept the key contention: that each gender and ethnic group has its own truths, inaccessible to outsiders. He tells harrowing stories about black history, some of which I confess I never heard before, in spite of following some parts of the field quite closely. He mentions, for example, that black militants told Kenneth Stampp that he had no right, as a white man, to write *The Peculiar Institution*. In a tone of stern disapproval Novick reports that at meetings of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, Herbert Gutman, an ex-Communist party member whose "left" credentials could hardly have been in dispute, was shouted down, as were other white historians. One of those shouted down was Robert Starobin, whose support of black liberation had extended even to the Black Panthers. Devastated by that experience and no doubt much else, Starobin committed suicide the following year (475–476).

Novick also traces the less dramatic but equally sad intellectual sequence that begins with Stanley Elkins's 1959 book likening the psychological impact of slavery to the trauma of incarceration in Nazi concentration camps. In 1965 came the ill-fated Moynihan Report, which, drawing on Elkins and other scholars, many of them black, argued that government policy ought to focus on the breakdown of the black family. Amid simplistic cries of "racism" and "don't blame the victim," what amounts to a political taboo was erected against the "damage thesis" and a whole generation of historical work, capped by Herbert Gutman's 1974 book on *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, set out to show that blacks had managed to create a rich and resilient family-oriented culture even in the grip of slavery. "At its extreme," Novick observes, "work in this vein suggested Teflon slaves, all but immune to the system which oppressed them" (487). In the 1980s, as the NAACP (which had chastised Moynihan severely for his emphasis on family breakdown) reversed its ground and placed the "precipitous slide of the black

18. Novick closes the chapter with an interesting discussion of the rise during the 1970s of so-called "Public History," many of whose practitioners work not in universities, but for government agencies and private firms. In spite of dramatic differences, these practitioners often share with those of black history and women's history a suspicion of traditional universalistic values (510–521).

family” at the top of its agenda, and as black sociologists took the lead in re-opening questions about the black family – questions highly reminiscent of those raised by W. E. B. DuBois as far back as 1908 – a generation of historians was caught flat-footed. The sequence does not reflect well on the independent-mindedness of historians, let alone their objectivity. Novick admits to the “troubling thought . . . that insofar as the new black historiography of the seventies had discernible social impact, it was to divert attention from the urgent needs of the constituency which those who produced it were dedicated to serving” (485, 489). He stops just short of the conclusion that seems inescapable to me: when scholar-advocates put advocacy first, exempting “their” group, however defined, from detached, critical examination, they deprive that group and the larger society of the one authentic contribution scholars can make in public affairs.¹⁹

Although the field of women’s history experience! nothing as traumatic as the events in black history, there, too, what Novick calls an “assertive particularism” holds sway and there, too, the social dynamics of a “more militant than thou” attitude has created a professional subculture in which detachment, far from being encouraged, is likely to be construed as a betrayal of the cause (470). Much of Novick’s discussion of women’s history revolves around the 1986 case of the *Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Sears, Roebuck and Company*, in which Barnard College historian Rosalind Rosenberg was accused by her professional colleagues of precisely that – “betrayal” – when she testified as an expert witness for Sears. The subsequent campaign of intimidation mounted against her calls to mind C. Vann Woodward’s warning that political orthodoxies of the left can have the same “chilling effect” on scholarship as those of the right: in the 1960s and 1970s, Woodward observed, just as in the McCarthy period, “there is no reckoning the number of books not written, research not done, and the standards, values, and ideals besmirched or trashed.”²⁰

The Sears case reveals with exceptional clarity the difference between politically committed scholarship and advocacy that is intellectually indefensible. In my opinion – anything but neutral, since I am the joint author of an essay defending Rosenberg against her assailants and drawing out the distressing implications of the episode for academic freedom – the EEOC’s case against Sears was so deeply flawed that once historians were called into the courtroom, their testimony, if faithful to the complexity of the problems at issue, could hardly help but favor Sears.²¹ The pivotal issue was whether the undenied predominance

19. For a powerful reaffirmation of universalistic values and a painstaking demolition of arguments for routinely treating racial identity as a positive criterion of merit, see Randall L. Kennedy, “Racial Critiques of Legal Academia,” *Harvard Law Review* 102 (1989), 1745–1819. Kennedy is especially insightful about the dynamics of blame and guilt that often shape the interactions of black and white scholars, and has very telling things to say about the long-term dangers those dynamics pose for the black community.

20. C. Vann Woodward, “The Siege,” *New York Review of Books* 33 (Sept. 25, 1986), 10.

21. Thomas L. Haskell and Sanford Levinson, “Academic Freedom and Expert Witnessing: Historians and the Sears Case,” *Texas Law Review* 66 [special issue on Academic Freedom] (1988), 1629–1659; Alice Kessler-Harris, “Academic Freedom and Expert Witnessing: A Reply to Haskell and Levinson,” *ibid.* 67 (1988), 429–440; Thomas L. Haskell and Sanford Levinson, “On Academic Freedom and Hypothetical Pools: A Reply to Kessler-Harris,” *ibid.* 67 (1989), 1591–1604.

of males in Sears' higher-paying commission sales positions was evidence of a systematic pattern and practice of discrimination against women, or was compatible with gender-blind hiring practices and attributable to the greater interest of men in a type of sales job long associated with career commitment and the aggressive hard-sell. For reasons that have never been adequately explained, the EEOC chose to rely almost entirely on the high-tech statistical "proof" of Sears' guilt and did not present in court either victims or witnesses of the alleged offense. The task of the EEOC statisticians was to estimate the number of women who would have been hired by a truly gender-blind recruitment policy. In the absence of complainants or even of known applicants for the jobs in question, the statisticians had to base their esoteric calculations on some very bold hypothetical assumptions, one of them being that in choosing between commission and non-commission sales jobs the interests and preferences of women are identical to those of men. On that unlikely assumption (possibly built into the EEOC's argument inadvertently by statisticians, without the knowledge of the agency's lawyers) the statisticians calculated that Sears should have given four out of every ten jobs to women. The firm had in fact given women *three* out of ten. Sears defended itself by calling Rosenberg and many other witnesses to testify that the interests and job related experience that men and women bring to the workplace are not identical—seemingly a truism, but one sharp enough to puncture the Achilles heel that the EEOC's litigators had fashioned for themselves.

Novick's account of the case (written entirely independently of the one I helped write) is undeniably thin on the legal setting and it underestimates the role played by statistics, but we concur entirely on one vital point: the historian called by the EEOC to rebut Rosenberg, Alice Kessler-Harris of Hofstra University, found her dual roles as scholar and as political activist in dire conflict. Her published work provided so much support for Sears' argument that one wonders what induced her to appear as a witness for the EEOC. Rosenberg, testifying for Sears, had quoted extensively from Kessler-Harris's book, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-earning Women in the United States*, to show not only that women's job interests were distinguishable from men's, but, in Novick's words, that "women's own attitudes were an important factor limiting their full and equal participation in the work force" (504).

Until quite recently, she had said in her book, "the ideology of the home still successfully contained most women's aspirations." Elsewhere Kessler-Harris had expressed the view that women "harbor values, attitudes, and behavior patterns potentially subversive to capitalism," an assertion that Rosenberg, in surrebuttal, found "at odds with her testimony . . . that women are as likely as men to want Sears' most highly competitive jobs, those in commission sales" (504).

Embarrassed at having her own work used against her, Kessler-Harris tried to talk around the narrowly posed question, and to advance broader arguments, but the format defeated her. She found herself offering testimony in which as she later acknowledged, "subtlety and nuance were omitted . . . complexity and exceptions vanished from sight." It was, in fact, a bit worse than that. The rules of the game were such that Rosenberg had only been required to show that women's values and attitudes played some role in their choice of jobs; Kessler-Harris was required to assert that they played no role. In an impossible

situation Kessler-Harris advanced impossible arguments. “Where opportunity has existed,” she told the court, “women have never [sic] failed to take the jobs offered. . . . Failure to find women in so-called non-traditional jobs can thus only [sic] be interpreted as a consequence of employer’s unexamined attitudes or preferences, which phenomenon is the essence of discrimination.” (504)²²

Novick quite properly brushes aside Kessler-Harris’s claims that she was misquoted and that the court misconstrued the legal significance of her work, and leaves practically no doubt about the intellectual superiority of Rosenberg’s testimony.²³ Rosenberg’s central claims, that women cannot simply be assumed to want exactly the same jobs as men, and therefore that “disparities in the sexual composition of an employer’s workforce, as well as disparities of pay between men and women in many circumstances, are *consistent with* an absence of discrimination on the part of the employer,” are virtually impossible to contest.²⁴ Sears needed little more than truisms from its historical witness because of the extraordinary vulnerability of the EEOC’s statistical argument and because the agency, as plaintiff in the case, bore the burden of proof. In contrast, Kessler-Harris’s central contention (quoted above by Novick) — that gender-typing in the workplace has nothing to do with the preferences of employees and is attributable entirely to employer discrimination — is patently implausible.

But the two historians’ testimony was seldom judged on intellectual merit. Within the professional subculture of women’s history, in widely-circulated letters, public meetings, and nationally-published magazine interviews, Rosenberg was subjected to scathing verbal abuse, much of which Novick duly reports. In print she was accused of “class bias” and her decision to testify was labelled “immoral,” “stupid,” “unethical,” and “unscholarly.” Although she is a feminist who differs with other feminists mainly over the advisability of blanket denials of gender difference, she was said to have “betrayed” feminism by collaborating in “an attack on working women and sexual equality.” At an annual convention of the American Historical Association, two organizations of women’s historians jointly

22. The “sic” notations appear in his text. Judging from the terms Novick uses to describe the argumentative constraints that tripped up Kessler-Harris — an “impossible situation,” a matter of “format,” “the rules of the game,” a “narrowly posed question” — he erroneously supposes that some arcane legal technicality limited her freedom of expression. On the contrary, these constraints stemmed directly from one of the law’s most elemental safeguards: that defendants are innocent until proven culpable. The EEOC, as plaintiff, had the burden of showing not only that employer discrimination was one possible explanation for the different hiring rates of men and women (which no one doubted and Kessler-Harris’s testimony abundantly documented), but that it was a better explanation than that advanced by the defendant. Both the original judge and the appeals court decided in favor of Sears.

23. He leaves no doubt at all if one disregards his passing suggestion, relegated to a footnote, that Kessler-Harris’s criterion of causation was “exactly” that which the philosopher R. G. Collingwood expounded: the cause of an event is whatever factor we can “do something about” (506 fn.). The suggestion oversimplifies Collingwood’s point, which was already notoriously oversimple: see H. L. A. Hart and A. M. Honoré, *Causation and the Law* (London, 1959), 31–34. If this were the sole criterion of causal attribution, it would make no sense to treat earthquakes, lightning, and floods as causes of anything; many agonizing moral questions would evaporate; and many of the law’s complex rules of criminal and civil liability would become unintelligible.

24. Rosenberg, quoted in Haskell and Levinson, “Academic Freedom and Expert Witnessing: Historians and the Sears Case,” 1653, emphasis added.

adopted a resolution declaring that “as feminist scholars we have a responsibility not to allow our scholarship to be used against the interests of women struggling for equity in our society.” The resolution was widely understood as a condemnation of Rosenberg’s interpretation of “the interests of women,” and a suggestion that by espousing that interpretation in a court of law, she had compromised her status as a “responsible” feminist scholar. In what I regard as the nadir of the whole affair, the feminist journal *Signs* published an “Archive” ostensibly documenting historians’ involvement in the case, that omitted – and thus effectively consigned to silence – one of the three documents the historians prepared for the trial. The document omitted was Rosenberg’s devastating response to Kessler-Harris’s testimony, in which she displayed many contradictions between Kessler-Harris’s published views and what she had said in court – contradictions often as transparent as the ones Novick mentions in the passage quoted above.²⁵

Novick describes the attack on Rosenberg but expresses no clear disapproval of it, and although he is eager for us to understand how little deceived he was by Kessler-Harris’s testimony (for her, he observes, Sears was “guilty until proven innocent, inherently complicit in the discrimination endemic to the capitalist system”), he is not critical of her effort, under oath, to persuade the judge that that testimony represented the collective judgment of the profession (506). His attitude, if I understand him correctly, is that Kessler-Harris, as a politically committed feminist scholar, was entitled to walk into court and describe the world from whatever perspective the movement required and say about the history of gender typing whatever feminists currently found it convenient to believe. Conventional scholarly standards, not to mention objectivity, detachment, or even simple candor, weigh very little for Novick, it appears, against the claims of a good cause.²⁶ Reverting, oddly enough, to the starchy neutrality of the television news commentator, Novick wraps up his account of the case by coolly splitting the difference between the two historians: “Neither of the two opposing expert witnesses was ‘disinterested.’ Neither had taken a ‘tell the truth though the heavens fall’ posture. Both decided to testify based on their respective evaluations of the political consequences of the verdict . . . [and] a priori beliefs about Sears’ guilt or innocence which in neither instance seemed very well grounded” (506).

Unsubstantiated though they are, let us assume, just for the sake of argument, that Novick is right on each of these three points: both witnesses were at the outset equally “interested,” their decisions to testify were equally “a priori,” and they were equally oriented to “political consequences.” These stipulations boil down to the assertion that Rosenberg was no more *neutral* and Kessler-Harris.

That banal observation evidently suffices to persuade Novick that there are no general grounds upon which scholars can evaluate the two historians’ testimony, but only political grounds: feminists will appropriately find Kessler-Harris’s tes-

25. *Ibid.*, 1630–1632, 1635–1636.

26. “When committed scholars enter the legal arena, they uphold the highest academic standards when the circumstances allow; when circumstances don’t, they fudge” (507).

timony true, the rest of the world will not, and never the twain shall meet.²⁷ Although he has already acknowledged immense differences of intellectual merit and elementary plausibility between the two historians' statements, those differences now fade out of sight, all matters of degree become incalculable, and the only thing that finally counts is that neither witness attained a "God's eye view" — neither was neutral. Since neither witness's statement was immaculately conceived, Novick concludes that one is intrinsically as good as the other, leaving political affiliation as the only basis for preference. Notice that Novick throws in the towel and treats intellect as an abject slave of political alignment, not because he has any difficulty distinguishing which historian's testimony was more intellectually compelling, but simply because he hesitates, even in the affairs of scholars, to assign intellectual criteria priority over political considerations. The possibility that intellect might give direction to political commitments — that a movement with an ill-conceived agenda might revise it beneficially out of a concern for intellectual respectability — is left with no purchase.

Novick's relativistic rhetoric is usually counterbalanced by *de facto* moderation on the objectivity question, but here the rhetoric carries the day. His aim, I assume, in treating political commitments with kid gloves, is commendable: it is to make the academic world safe for politically committed scholarship. We must remind ourselves that on his assumptions that task appears to require root and branch reforms, because he is convinced that the central ethical tradition of the scholarly world calls for neutrality, and neutrality, of course, would outlaw commitment. He actually says at one point that historians today face "a choice between either relaxing traditional objectivist criteria or reading important constituencies [that is, black and feminist historians] out of the discipline" (596). If the question were whether to purge the profession of activists, I would of course side with Novick, for in spite of the lapses he describes, important work is being done in both fields and activists have undeniably widened the scope and variety of the profession's interests in valuable ways. But the idea that political activists might be read out of the profession is laughable: several recent presidents of the Organization of American Historians would have to be placed high on the list of deportees.²⁸ On the contrary, as I have said, it appears to me that there is widespread recognition within the profession that political commitment need not de-

27. Speaking of the conflicting pressures of feminism and scholarship in the Sears case, he says, "Of all the illusions in which we seek refuge, none is more pathetic than that which holds out the prospect of satisfactorily resolving irreconcilable claims" (510). But he does not tell us what he finds unsatisfactory about Rosenberg's resolution of those supposedly "irreconcilable" claims. Her choice was not whether to be a feminist or a scholar, but whether, as both a feminist and a scholar, to bow to the momentum of the movement, or to blow the whistle on an ill-conceived feminist project. The fact that her blowing of the whistle incurred the wrath of other movement members does not testify to the irreconcilability of scholarship and political commitment, but only to the tension between them and the need for courage.

28. For a breathless announcement that, instead of being read out of the profession, what leftist historians presently face is the responsibility of running it (now that demoralized liberals have unaccountably let control of it slip out of their own hands), see Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959–1980," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989), 399–434.

tract from the writing of history — not even from its objectivity — as long as honesty, detachment, and intelligence are also at work.

Perhaps overreacting to the traumas of the Abraham incident, Novick closes his discussion of the Sears case by speaking sketchily of “dual citizenship,” a doctrine that would evidently elevate the claims of political loyalty to co-equal status with the traditional intellectual imperatives of the scholarly community (510). Dual citizenship would mean, if I understand his rather cryptic reference to it correctly, that sometimes we would understand ourselves to be acting in our capacity as scholars, sometimes as political partisans; the laws of neither domain would be allowed to overrule those of the other; or, at any rate, no one would ever be under any very weighty obligation to adhere to scholarly standards if doing so encroached on political loyalties. Whether Novick is really prepared to go this far I am not sure, but it is certainly too far. Although he questions the ethic of objectivity precisely because of the intellectual hubris he thinks it breeds, and although he appears at heart to be a skeptic, a person who believes little and doubts much, in the end Novick allows his solicitude for advocacy to subvert his skepticism: he hands to any scholar who can claim membership in a political movement a blank check, a license to believe whatever the movement requires and to assert it with all the authority of scholarship. Instead of trimming pretentious claims to certainty, he inadvertently multiplies them. As so often happens, the relativist ends up by championing self-indulgence, for if moral and epistemological obligations are nothing more than ghostly superstitions, then mistakes and unethical choices (departures from obligation) become phantasmagorical as well, and we can literally do no wrong. All the while, of course, the relativist claims that “anything goes” is *not* the intended message, and the claim is sincere in the sense that most of us cannot avoid construing the world in terms of right and wrong, no matter what our formal views on objectivity and relativism. But the status of these intuitive judgments is what is at stake, and here obligation is the keystone: if in principle no opinions and courses of action can be obligatory or “right,” then none can be “wrong,” and everything is permitted, notwithstanding the annoying static of intuition. Saying that there is such a thing as obligation does not, of course, commit us to a metaphysical account of foundations, or to the idea that any particular bundle of claims and practices adequately defines truth or morality.

Within the scholarly community, the characterological values that we associate with the intellectual vocation — respect for logical coherence, fidelity to evidence, detachment, candor, honesty, and the like — must not only compete on equal terms with other values, they must prevail. When the members of the scholarly community become unwilling to put intellectual values ahead of political ones, they erase the only possible boundary between politically committed scholarship and propaganda and thereby rob the community of its principal justification for existence. John Q. Public would be sensible and well within his rights to terminate his support for the university and the academic disciplines it houses if the scholarly world were nothing more than its most cynical and shallow members now say it is: an ancient, tumble-down fortification, constructed by other generations

for purposes no longer intelligible, valued today only for the territory it controls and devoid of any character other than the political coloration supplied by whichever band of ideological warriors happens by hook or crook to occupy its battlements at the moment. The university, in my view, does control valuable territory and it is an arena of conflict. But the contest is vitally constrained by the ascetic values we associate with objectivity, and those constraints, in turn, give the institution an identity radically distinct from, and far more durable than, any of the various partisan bands that struggle for influence under its auspices. There is nothing in the nature of things that guarantees the perpetuation of this unique and priceless institution. It lives only insofar as we choose to live by the values that sustain it.

My concern about Novick's near equation of objectivity with neutrality, and his willingness sometimes to subordinate intellectual priorities to political ones, may create the wrong impression. So let me say as plainly as I can that this is no run-of-the-mill piece of work. The range of Novick's research is staggering, and the story he tells is gracefully constructed and wittily presented. *That Noble Dream* is an exceptionally important book. I do not know of any other work by an historian that, if read by everyone in the profession, could do more to raise the general intellectual level of the guild. Even where the lessons it teaches are, in my view, wrong, its power of provocation is immense and all to the good. Epistemological issues about which historians have long remained oblivious, even as debate has raged like brushfire through adjacent disciplines, are here shown succinctly and cogently to be relevant to every historian's daily practices. Novick's next-to-last chapter, fifty pages long, could serve as a fine crash course in contemporary, intellectual debate and should be read by every graduate student in history, regardless of field. But like all texts, even the best, this one is open to many interpretations, not all of them intended by its author, and some of the interpretations it licenses are, I think, potentially hazardous to the health of the profession. Two dangers—throwing off the reins of objectivity just because no one is neutral, and endorsing political commitment uncritically, without erecting any fences against propaganda—have been sufficiently attended to. It remains to show that there is something to regret about the apocalyptic tenor of Novick's rhetorical posture, even though he usually, if unaccountably, couples that posture with admirably moderate practices.

The academic air is thick nowadays with sensational pronouncements about the failures of reason. Given Novick's silent loyalty, in practice, to the ascetic values that I associate with objectivity, I do not think that he can be counted among those who imagine that we stand at the threshold of a new epoch of endless interpretative play, in which words like reason, logic, rationality, truth, and evidence can be merrily and painlessly dispensed with. The tone of his concluding chapters is more suggestive of the breaking of the seventh seal than the dawning of a brave new world, and like all authentic skeptics his skepticism extends at least intermittently to the claims of skepticism itself. He understands that relativism predicts its own relativity; he knows that if one supposes historicism to be "right," one

must suppose it to be so only during a passing phase of history—observations which have, of course, never been enough to silence doubt about reason.

Tempered though his skepticism is, he does believe that the ideal of objectivity, the “founding myth” of the profession, is more or less defunct, presumably leaving the practice of historical representation foundationless, adrift in the cosmos. Toward the end of the book, in a discussion that slides back and forth between talk of cognitive crisis and concrete institutional conundrums such as the growth of specialization, decay of the academic job market in the 1970s, the exponential growth of the literature each of us tries to stay abreast of, and the inherently dispersive character of a discipline that, unlike English and Philosophy, lacks even the possibility of defining a single canon familiar to all practitioners, Novick repeatedly suggests that history is today so fragmented—politically, institutionally, and intellectually—that it “no longer constitute[s] a coherent discipline” (577, also 592). He even concludes that a sense of “dismay,” “disarray,” and “discouragement” is more prevalent among historians than among the members of any other discipline (578) (hardly likely in view of the state of numb exhaustion that prevails in the literary disciplines after a decade of theory wars that make historians’ quarrels seem like family reunions).²⁹ Whether he intends it or not, all this gloom and doom might well lead the reader to conclude that writing a history of anything—even a history of historian’s quarrels about objectivity—is a preposterous undertaking that only a fool would attempt. As if to encourage that reading, Novick closes the book with a rather portentous passage from Sartre: “In the domain of expression . . . success is necessarily failure. . . . It is impossible to succeed, since at the outset you set yourself the goal of failure (to capture movement in immobile objects, for instance). . . . So there it is. You never quite grasp what you set out to achieve. And then suddenly it’s a statue or a book. The opposite of what you wanted” (629).

Coming from an author who is (at least in practice) as securely wedded to conventional modes of representation as Novick, this display of epistemological angst is harmless enough. It is, however, strongly reminiscent of the distinctively “postmodern” syndrome a literary critic had in mind when he observed that many scholars influenced by Deconstructionist doctrines seem to feel that they “live upon inevitable but somehow invigorating failure.”³⁰ This characteristically postmodern authorial stance in which the author cheerfully acknowledges that what he or she is saying is unsubstantiable or worse, and then goes on to assert it exactly as if it were “true”—always ready, if challenged, to fall back on the initial disclaimer—has the undeniable advantage of allowing an author to indulge in quite ordinary forms of communication and common sense, while preserving

29. For a sample of the conflict in literary circles, see Frederick Crews, “The Parting of the Twins,” *New York Review of Books* 36 (July 20, 1989), 39–44, and subsequent letters to the editor, *ibid.* (September 28, 1989), or any issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry*.

30. Denis Donoghue, “The Strange Case of Paul de Man,” *New York Review of Books* 36 (June 29, 1989), 37.

a reputation for sophistication and undeceivability.³¹ The benefits are obvious at a time when strife over epistemological questions is so intense that only the debater with no recognizable position is unassailable. In an age of guerrilla scholarship, the thing to do is stay always on the offense and unburden oneself of any convictions, lest they require a defense. The ancient military advice of Sun Tzu applies: "Subtle and insubstantial, the expert [warrior] leaves no trace; divinely mysterious, he is inaudible. Thus he is master of his enemy's fate."³²

The most striking example of what might be called "the undeceivability ploy," and one that by its very extremity sheds light on the much more modest gap between Novick's rhetoric and his practice, comes straight from the author of *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-François Lyotard himself. In his latest book, Lyotard fondly recalls an old friend, Pierre Souyri, a comrade in arms with whom he served for many years on the barricades of the Parisian left. Together they helped publish radical Marxist organs with titles such as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Pouvoir Ouvrier*. What is immediately noteworthy about this reminiscence, or "memorial," as Lyotard calls it, is not so much its deceased subject as the display of epistemological anxiety and contrition with which it begins. The author's first words announce the unworthiness of his efforts. "The only testimony worthy of the author of *Révolution et Contre-révolution en Chine*," worries Lyotard, "is the one I cannot give him: it would be to write the history, in Marxist terms, of the radical Marxist current to which he belonged." But this is impossible, says Lyotard, for "I am not a historian."³³

Lyotard hesitates to take up the historian's pen not because he feels untrained or insufficiently talented. Nor is it simply that, having lost faith in Marxism, he fears that even his best efforts to represent his friend's life will embody terms and assumptions that Souyri himself, whose own devotion to the cause never faltered, would find unacceptable. Rather, Lyotard explains, what makes it impossible for him to write the history his friend deserves is that he lacks faith of another sort, shared by Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike: faith in the reality of the past and the possibility of representing that reality in words:

Obviously, I lack the expertise, the knowledge, the fine tuning of the mind to the methodology; but above all I lack a certain way of interrogating and situating what is spoken of in relation to what one is saying. To be brief, let us call this the postulate of realism. That which the historian recounts and explains had [sic] to be real; otherwise what he is doing is not history. As in legal rhetoric, everything is organized in order to explore the clues, produce proofs, and induce the belief that the object, the event, or the man

31. "I, too, aspire to see clearly, like a rifleman, with one eye shut; I, too, aspire to think without assent. This is the ultimate violence to which the modern intellectual is committed. Since things have become as they are, I, too, share the modern desire not to be deceived. . . . This is the unreligion of the age, and its master science. . . . The systematic hunting down of all settled convictions represents the anti-cultural predicate upon which the modern personality is being reorganized." Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 13.

32. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, transl. and intro. by Samuel B. Griffith, foreword by B. H. Liddell Hart (London, 1971), 96-97.

33. Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* [The Welleck Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine] (New York, 1988), 45-46.

now absent were indeed there just as they are being depicted. The opposing party against whom the historian argues with all his force is not easy to beat; it is the forgetting which is the death of death itself.

He cannot subscribe to such hubris and naiveté:

However, I cannot manage to make this pious activity my own, to share the historian's confidence in its ends, to believe in the fidelity or the plausibility of that which is, in any case, only a representation. I cannot manage to forget that it is I, the historian, who makes my man speak, and speak to men he did not know and to whom he would not necessarily have chosen to speak.³⁴

Once an author has carried skepticism to this extreme, one might expect him or her simply to fall silent: better to say nothing than to soil one's hands in the shabby illusions of historical representation. Or alternatively one might expect these words to introduce an experimental form of communication, a text designed to overcome the conventional limits of representation, or at least to acknowledge those limits with greater candor and precision. But none of these expectations is borne out.

Having warned his readers of the inescapable futility of all efforts to represent the past "as it was," Lyotard then embarks upon the very course he has just declared to be impossibly naive. Having shown that the historian's pious, death-defying claim to know "how things really were" does not deceive him in the least, Lyotard proceeds to tell us . . . well, how it really was with his friend Souyri. In spite of himself, Lyotard commits an historical representation. He makes Souyri speak. And, by all appearances, he puts his representational pants on pretty much the same way the rest of us do. He informs us that he sent his friend a letter announcing his resignation from the *Pouvoir Ouvrier* group in 1966. Souyri answered him in October. "He affirmed that our divergences dated from long before . . . he considered it pointless to try to resolve them." "He attributed to me the project of. . . . He added. . . . He knew himself to be bound to Marxist thought. . . . He prepared himself. . . . We saw each other again. . . . I felt myself scorned . . . He knew that I felt this. . . . He liked to provoke his interlocutor. . . . [He was] a sensitive and absent-minded man in daily life."³⁵ And so on. The representation is unexceptionable. It is successful enough as representations go — we feel that we have learned something of Souyri and of the relation between the two men — but there is nothing to distinguish it from the representations each of us hear, read, and produce dozens of times every day, not just in writing history but in the conduct of the most mundane affairs of life. Nor, in spite of all the cautions Lyotard has urged upon us, do we know any better how to assess the trustworthiness of this portrait of Souyri than we would if its author had simply set it forth as a "true account."

Does Lyotard believe in the "postulate of realism"? Certainly not, if we judge from what he says on the subject. But if we take into account what he does as

34. *Ibid.*, 46.

35. *Ibid.*, 47–48, 51.

well as what he says, he seems in the end, in practice, unable to escape it. Notwithstanding all his skeptical rhetoric, in telling us about his deceased friend he acts as if the past is real, as if some representations of it are preferable to others, and as if the criteria of preference are far from idiosyncratic. We are reminded of Thomas Nagel's suggestion, which stands at the head of this essay, that objectivity and skepticism are not opposites but complementary ideas, and that every effort to get beyond appearances postulates the real. The gap between Lyotard's hyper-skeptical rhetorical posture and run-of-the-mill realist practice is immense and evidently unbridgeable. What is to be gained from it? Nothing that I can see except a reputation for undeceivability and possibly (as Denis Donoghue said of Deconstruction) a "Pyrrhic victory of angst over bourgeois liberalism."³⁶

What, then, are we to think when able people like Novick tell us that the effort to represent the past, and "get it right," is bound to fail – and then do a rather good job of getting it right? The obvious answer is to do as they do, and not as they say. But in closing allow me to suggest, in the compact form of a parable, the outlines, at least, of a more expansive answer. It is as if we are lost in the French countryside, trying to find our way to Paris with maps that do not agree. We happen upon a native philosopher, Jean, whom we ask for help in deciding which map to believe. He examines the maps and frowns, saying "None of these documents will do. They give only a two-dimensional representation of a path that is at least three dimensional, even disregarding what Einstein says . . . no, they won't do at all. These are mere pieces of paper, and they fail utterly to convey any sensation of movement, of passage from one town to another, of what the scenery along the route looks like, the feel of the road, the aromas, the sounds of the birds as you pass by! And look at this! Why, these pieces of paper rely on mere round black dots to represent whole cities of people: families, complex

36. Donoghue, "The Strange Case of Paul de Man," 37. Is it wrong of me to expect an author's rhetoric about "theoretical" matters to have a bearing on his or her practice? Stanley Fish would say it is. Fish (a Milton scholar who is no doubt conversant with the rhetorical strategies employed by Puritan divines to ward off the seemingly fatalistic implications of predestination) has repeatedly argued that theory neither has nor needs to have any consequences for everyday practice. For Fish the inconsequentiality of antifoundationalist theory (the "truth" of which he does not doubt) is a corollary of the self's radical situatedness and its consequent inability to achieve detachment. His often repeated thesis is that "being situated not only means that one cannot achieve a distance on one's beliefs, but that one's beliefs do not relax their hold because one 'knows' that they are local and not universal. This in turn means that even someone . . . who is firmly convinced of the circumstantiality of his convictions will nevertheless experience those convictions as universally, not locally, true. It is therefore not surprising but inevitable that at the end of every argument, even of an argument that says there can be no end, the universalist perspective will reemerge as strongly as ever." There is an important kernel of truth in what Fish says, yet we are left wondering why, if antifoundationalism is without practical consequences, anyone finds it illuminating, or worth arguing about. One also wonders if it is wise to engage in conversations with people who feel entitled, for all practical purposes, to regard their own beliefs as universally valid, while regarding everyone else's as unfounded and parochial. Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham and London, 1989), 467. For parallel Puritan arguments, see Perry Miller's classic essay, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York, 1956), 48–98.

souls, individuals full of life and variety and mystery, all absurdly compressed into a dot!” Stretching himself to his full height, Jean, exasperated, hands the maps back to us, and asks, incredulously, “How can anyone ever have thought that anything so sublime as getting to Paris could be represented by a few marks on a sheet of paper?”

Confronted with such radically misplaced expectations, there is nothing to do but walk on in hopes of finding a more discriminating philosopher. What Jean wants, maps cannot supply.³⁷ But we want to go to Paris, we know perfectly well that maps can help us get there, and we also know that some maps are better suited to the purpose than others. (Why that should be so is the really interesting question, though it seems not to arouse much curiosity nowadays in Paris.) Take with a grain of salt Novick’s distress over the supposedly insuperable difficulties of map-making; be glad that, in spite of them, he has helped us find our way into this past so effectively.

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37. As John Dunn put it in a context that is similar, though not identical, “maps are maps, not regrettably ineffectual surrogates for physical environments.” John Dunn, *Political Obligation in Its Historical Context: Essays in Political Theory* (Cambridge, Eng., 1980), 14.