

The World,
the Text,
and the Critic

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Traveling Theory

LIKE people and schools of criticism, ideas and theories travel—from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas, and whether it takes the form of acknowledged or unconscious influence, creative borrowing, or wholesale appropriation, the movement of ideas and theories from one place to another is both a fact of life and a usefully enabling condition of intellectual activity. Having said that, however, one should go on to specify the kinds of movement that are possible, in order to ask whether by virtue of having moved from one place and time to another an idea or a theory gains or loses in strength, and whether a theory in one historical period and national culture becomes altogether different for another period or situation. There are particularly interesting cases of ideas and theories that move from one culture to another, as when so-called Eastern ideas about transcendence were imported into Europe during the early nineteenth century, or when certain European ideas about society were translated into traditional Eastern societies during the later nineteenth century. Such movement into a new environment is never unimpeded. It necessarily involves processes of representation and institutionalization different from those at the point of origin. This complicates any account of the transplantation, transference, circulation, and commerce of theories and ideas.

There is, however, a discernible and recurrent pattern to the movement itself, three or four stages common to the way any theory or idea travels.

First, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of ini-

tial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance transversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions—call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances—which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place.

It is obvious that any satisfactorily full account of these stages would be an enormous task. But though I have neither the intention nor the capacity to undertake it, it seemed worthwhile to describe the problem in a sketchy and general way so that I might at length and in detail address a particularly topical, highly limited aspect of it. Of course the discrepancy between the general problem and any particular analysis is itself deserving of comment. To prefer a local, detailed analysis of how one theory travels from one situation to another is also to betray some fundamental uncertainty about specifying or delimiting the field to which any one theory or idea might belong. Notice, for example, that when professional students of literature now use words like “theory” and “criticism” it is not assumed that they must or should confine their interests to literary theory or literary criticism. The distinction between one discipline and another has been blurred precisely because fields like literature and literary study are no longer considered to be as all-encompassing or as synoptic as, until recently, they once were. Although some polemical scholars of literature can still, nonetheless, attack others for not being literary enough, or for not understanding (as who should not?) that literature, unlike other forms of writing, is essentially mimetic, essentially moral, and essentially humanistic, the resultant controversies are themselves evidence of the fact that no consensus exists on how the outer limits of the word “literature” or the word “criticism” are to be determined. Several decades ago, literary history and systematic theory, of the kind pioneered by Northrop Frye, promised an orderly, inhabitable, and hospitable structure in which, for instance, it might be demonstrated that the mythos of summer could be transformed definably into the mythos of autumn. “The primal human act in Frye’s system,” writes Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism*, quoting Frye’s *The Educated Imagination*, “and a model for all

human acts, is an 'informative,' creative act which transforms a world that is merely objective, set over against us, in which we 'feel lonely and frightened and unwanted' into a home."¹ But most literary scholars find themselves now, once again, out in the cold. Similarly, the history of ideas and comparative literature, two disciplines closely associated with the study of literature and literary criticism, do not routinely authorize in their practitioners quite the same Goethean sense of a concert of all literatures and ideas.

In all these instances the specific situation or locality of a particular intellectual task seems uneasily distant from, and only rhetorically assisted by, the legendary wholeness, coherence, and integrity of the general field to which one professionally belongs. There seem to be too many interruptions, too many distractions, too many irregularities interfering with the homogeneous space supposedly holding scholars together. The division of intellectual labor, which has meant increasing specialization, further erodes any direct apprehension one might have of a whole field of literature and literary study; conversely, the invasion of literary discourse by the *outré* jargons of semiotics, post-structuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis has distended the literary critical universe almost beyond recognition. In short, there seems nothing inherently literary about the study of what have traditionally been considered literary texts, no literariness that might prevent a contemporary literary critic from having recourse to psychoanalysis, sociology, or linguistics. Convention, historical custom, and appeals to the protocols of humanism and traditional scholarship are of course regularly introduced as evidence of the field's enduring integrity, but more and more these seem to be rhetorical strategies in a debate about what literature and literary criticism ought to be rather than convincing definitions of what in fact they are.

Geoffrey Hartman has nicely dramatized the predicament by analyzing the tensions and vacillations governing contemporary critical activity. Today's criticism, he says, is radically revisionist. "Freed from a neoclassical decorum that, over the space of three centuries, created an enlightened but also over-accommodated prose," criticism is undergoing what he calls "an *extraordinary language* movement."² At times this language movement is so eccentric as to approach, even challenge, literature itself; at others it obsesses the critics who are borne along its currents toward the ideal of a completely "pure" language. At still others, the critic discovers that "writing is a labyrinth, a topological puzzle and textual crossword; the reader, for his part,

must lose himself for a while in a hermeneutic 'infiniteizing' that makes all rules of closure appear arbitrary."³ Whether these alternatives for critical discourse are called terrorist or "a new type of sublimity or an emerging transcendentalism,"⁴ there remains the need for the humanist critic both to define more clearly "the special province of the humanities" and to materialize (rather than spiritualize) the culture in which we live.⁵ Nevertheless, Hartman concludes, we are in transition, which is perhaps another way of saying (as he does in his title *Criticism in the Wilderness*) that criticism today is alone, at loose ends, unlucky, pathetic, and playful because its realm defies closure and certainty.

Hartman's exuberance—for his attitude is at bottom exuberant—ought to be qualified by Richard Ohmann's devastating observation in *English in America* that English departments represent "a moderately successful effort by professors to obtain some benefits of capitalism while avoiding its risks and, yet, a reluctance to acknowledge any link between how we do our work and the way the larger society is run."⁶ This is not to say that literary academics present a united ideological front, even though Ohmann is right *grosso modo*. The divisions within cannot be reduced simply to a conflict between old and new critics or to a monolithically dominant antimimetic ideology, as Gerald Graff very misleadingly argues. Consider that, if we restrict the number of debated issues to four, many of those in the vanguard on one issue are very conservative on another:

(1) Criticism as scholarship, humanism, a "servant" to the text, mimetic in its bias, versus criticism as revisionism and as itself a form of literature.

(2) The role of critic as teacher and good reader: safeguarding the canon versus subverting it or creating a new one. Most Yale critics are revisionist with respect to (1), conservative with respect to (2).

(3) Criticism as detached from the political/social world versus criticism as a form of philosophical metaphysics, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or any of these, versus criticism as actually having to do with such "contaminated" fields of history, the media, and economic systems. Here the distributional spread is much wider than in (1) or (2).

(4) Criticism as a criticism of language (language as negative theology, as private dogma, as ahistorical metaphysics) versus criticism as an analysis of the language of institutions versus criticism as a study of relationships between language and nonlinguistic things.

In the absence of an enclosing domain called literature, with clear

outer boundaries, there is no longer an authorized or official position for the literary critic. But neither is there some new sovereign method, some new critical technology compelling allegiance and intellectual loyalty. Instead there is a babel of arguments for the limitlessness of all interpretation; of ideologies that proclaim the eternal yet determinate value of literature or "the humanities"; for all systems that in asserting their capacity to perform essentially self-confirming tasks allow for no counterfactual evidence. You can call such a situation pluralistic if you like or, if you have a taste for the melodramatic, you can call it desperate. For my part, I prefer to see it as an opportunity for remaining skeptical and critical, succumbing neither to dogmatism nor to sulky gloom.

Hence the specific problem of what happens to a theory when it moves from one place to another proposes itself as an interesting topic of investigation. For if fields like literature or the history of ideas have no intrinsically enclosing limits, and if, conversely, no one methodology is impossible upon what is an essentially heterogeneous and open area of activity—the writing and interpretation of texts—it is wise to raise the questions of theory and of criticism in ways suitable to the situation in which we find ourselves. At the outset, this means an historical approach. Assume therefore that, as a result of specific historical circumstances, a theory or idea pertaining to those circumstances arises. What happens to it when, in different circumstances and for new reasons, it is used again and, in still more different circumstances, again? What can this tell us about theory itself—its limits, its possibilities, its inherent problems—and what can it suggest to us about the relationship between theory and criticism, on the one hand, and society and culture on the other? The pertinence of these questions will be apparent at a time when theoretical activity seems both intense and eclectic, when the relationship between social reality and a dominant yet hermetic critical discourse seems hard to determine, and when, for all of these reasons and some of the ones I have just referred to, it is futile to prescribe theoretical programs for contemporary criticism.

Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) is justly famous for its analysis of the phenomenon of reification, a universal fate afflicting all aspects of life in an era dominated by commodity fetishism. Since, as Lukacs argues, capitalism is the most articulated and quantitatively detailed of all economic systems, what it imposes upon human life and labor under its rule has the consequence of radically transforming everything human, flowing, processual, organic, and

connected into disconnected and "alienated" objects, items, lifeless atoms. In such a situation, then, time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable "things" (the reified, mechanically objectified "performance" of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space. In this environment where time is transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space, an environment at once the cause and effect of the scientifically and mechanically fragmented and specialized production of the object of labour, the subjects of labour must likewise be rationally fragmented. On the one hand, the objectification of their labor-power into something opposed to their total personality (a process already accomplished with the sale of that labor-power as a commodity) is now made into the permanent ineluctable reality of their daily life. Here, too, the personality can do no more than look on helplessly while its own existence is reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system. On the other hand, the mechanical disintegration of the process of production into its components also destroys those bonds that had bound individuals to a community in the days when production was still "organic." In this respect, too, mechanization makes of them isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly and organically; it becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them.⁷ If this picture of the public world is bleak, it is matched by Lukacs' description of what happens to intellect, "the subject" as he calls it. After an astonishingly brilliant account of the antinomies of classical philosophy from Descartes to Kant to Fichte, Hegel, and Marx, in which he shows the increasing retreat of the subject into passive, privatized contemplation, gradually more and more divorced from the overwhelmingly fragmented realities of modern industrial life, Lukacs then depicts modern bourgeois thought as being at an impasse, transfixed and paralyzed into terminal passivity. The science that it produces is based on mere fact gathering; the rational forms of understanding therefore cannot cope with the irrationality of physical *données*, and when efforts are made to compel "the facts" to submit to "system," their fragmentation and endlessly atomized *thereness* either destroy the system or turn the mind into a passive register of discrete objects.

There is, however, one form of experience that concretely represents the essence of reification as well as its limitation: crisis. If capitalism is the embodiment in economic terms of reification, then

everything, including human beings, ought to be quantified and given a market value. This of course is what Lukacs means when he speaks of articulation under capitalism, which he sometimes characterizes as if it were a gigantic itemized list. In principle nothing—no object, person, place, or time—is left out, since everything can be calculated. But there are moments when “the qualitative existence of the ‘things’ that lead their lives beyond the purview of economics as misunderstood and neglected things-in-themselves, as use-values [Lukacs here refers to such “irrational” things as sentiment, passion, chance] suddenly becomes the decisive factor (suddenly, that is, for reified, rational thought). Or rather: these ‘laws’ fail to function and the reified mind is unable to perceive a pattern in this ‘chaos.’”⁸ At such a moment, then, mind or “subject” has its one opportunity to escape reification: by thinking through what it is that causes reality to appear to be only a collection of objects and economic *données*. And the very act of looking for process behind what appears to be eternally given and objectified, makes it possible for the mind to know itself as subject and not as a lifeless object, then to go beyond empirical reality into a putative realm of possibility. When instead of inexplicable shortage of bread you can imagine the human work and, subsequently, the human beings who produced the bread but are no longer doing so because there is a bakers’ strike, you are well on your way to knowing that crisis is comprehensible because process is comprehensible; and if process is comprehensible, so too is some sense of the social whole created by human labor. Crisis, in short, is converted into criticism of the status quo: the bakers are on strike for a reason, the crisis can be explained, the system does not work infallibly, the subject has just demonstrated its victory over ossified objective forms.

Lukacs puts all of this in terms of the subject-object relationship, and proper justice to his argument requires that it be followed to the point where he shows that reconciliation between subject and object will be possible. Yet even he admits that such an eventuality is very far into the future. Nevertheless, he is certain that no such future is attainable without the transformation of passive, contemplative consciousness into active, critical consciousness. In positing a world of human agency outside the reach of reification, the critical consciousness (the consciousness that is given rise to by crisis) becomes genuinely aware of its power “unceasingly to overthrow the objective forms that shape the life of man.”⁹ Consciousness goes beyond empirical givens and comprehends, without actually experiencing, history, totality, and society as a whole—precisely those unities that

reification had both concealed and denied. At bottom, class consciousness is thought thinking its way through fragmentation to unity; it is also thought aware of its own subjectivity as something active, energetic, and, in a profound sense, poetic. (Here we should note that several years before *History and Class Consciousness* Lukacs had argued that only in the realm of the aesthetic could the limitations of pure theory and of pure ethics be overcome; by the former he meant a scientific theory whose very objectivity symbolized its own reification, its thralldom to objects, by the latter a Kantian subjectivity out of touch with everything except its own selfhood. Only the Aesthetic rendered the meaning of experience as lived experience—*der Sinn des Erlebnisses*—in an autonomous form: subject and object are thereby made one.¹⁰)

Now because it rises above objects, consciousness enters a realm of potentiality, that is, of theoretical possibility. The special urgency of Lukacs’ account of this is that he is describing something rather far from a mere escape into fantasy. Consciousness attaining self-consciousness is no Emma Bovary pretending to be a lady in Yonville. The direct pressures of capitalist quantification, that relentless cataloguing of everything on earth, continue to be felt, according to Lukacs; the only thing that changes is that the mind recognizes a class of beings like itself who have the power to think generally, to take in facts but to organize them in groups, to recognize processes and tendencies where reification only allows evidence of lifeless atoms. Class consciousness therefore begins in critical consciousness. Classes are not real the way trees and houses are real; they are imputable by consciousness, using its powers to posit ideal types in which with other beings it finds itself. Classes are the result of an insurrectionary act by which consciousness refuses to be confined to the world of objects, which is where it had been confined in the capitalist scheme of things.

Consciousness has moved from the world of objects into the world of theory. Although Lukacs describes it as only a young German philosopher could describe it—in language bristling with more metaphysics and abstractions than even I have been using—we must not forget that he is performing an act of political insurgency. To attain to theory is to threaten reification, as well as the entire bourgeois system on which reification depends, with destruction. But, he assures his readers, this destruction “is no single unrepeatable tearing of the veil that masks the process [of reification] but the unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement.”¹¹ Theory, in fine, is won as the result of a process that begins when consciousness first ex-

periences its own terrible ossification in the general reification of all things under capitalism; then when consciousness generalizes (or classes) itself as something opposed to other objects, and feels itself as a contradiction to (or crisis within) objectification, there emerges a consciousness of change in the status quo; finally, moving toward freedom and fulfillment, consciousness looks ahead to complete self-realization, which is of course the revolutionary process stretching forward in time, perceivable now only as theory or projection.

This is very heady stuff indeed. I have summarized it in order to set down some small indication of how powerfully responsive Lukacs' ideas about theory were to the political order he described with such formidable gravity and dread. Theory for him was what consciousness produced, not as an avoidance of reality but as a revolutionary will completely committed to worldliness and change. According to Lukacs, the proletariat's consciousness represented the theoretical antithesis to capitalism; as Merleau-Ponty and others have said, Lukacs' proletariat can by no means be identified with a ragged collection of grimy-faced Hungarian laborers. The proletariat was his figure for consciousness defying reification, mind asserting its powers over mere matter, consciousness claiming its theoretical right to posit a better world outside the world of simple objects. And since class consciousness derives from workers working and being aware of themselves that way, theory must never lose touch with its origins in politics, society, and economics.

This, then, is Lukacs describing his ideas about theory—and of course his theory of sociohistorical change—in the early twenties. Consider now Lukacs' disciple and student, Lucien Goldmann, whose *Le Dieu caché* (1955) was one of the first and certainly among the most impressive attempts to put Lukacs' theories to practical scholarly use. In Goldmann's study of Pascal and Racine, class consciousness has been changed to "vision du monde," something that is not an immediate, but a collective consciousness expressed in the work of certain highly gifted writers.¹² But this is not all. Goldmann says that these writers derive their world vision from determinate political and economic circumstances common to members of their group; yet the world vision itself is premised not so much on empirical detail as on a human faith that a reality exists "which goes beyond them as individuals and finds its expression in their work."¹³ Writing as a politically committed scholar (and not like Lukacs as a directly involved militant), Goldmann then argues that because Pascal and Racine were privileged writers, their work can be constituted into a

significant whole by a process of dialectical theorizing, in which part is related to assumed whole, assumed whole verified empirically by empirical evidence. Thus individual texts are seen to express a world vision; second, the world vision constitutes the whole intellectual and social life of the group (the Port-Royal Jansenists); third, the thoughts and feelings of the group are an expression of their economic and social life.¹⁴ In all this—and Goldmann argues with exemplary brilliance and subtlety—the theoretical enterprise, an interpretive circle, is a demonstration of coherence: between part and whole, between world vision and texts in their smallest detail, between a determinate social reality and the writings of particularly gifted members of a group. In other words, theory is the researcher's domain, the place in which disparate, apparently disconnected things are brought together in perfect correspondence: economics, political process, the individual writer, a series of texts.

Goldmann's indebtedness to Lukacs is clear, although it has not been noted that what in Lukacs is an ironic discrepancy between theoretical consciousness and reified reality is transformed and localized by Goldmann into a tragic correspondence between world vision and the unfortunate class situation of the *noblesse de robe* in late seventeenth-century France. Whereas Lukacs' class consciousness defies, indeed is an insurgent against, the capitalist order, Goldmann's tragic vision is perfectly, absolutely expressed by the works of Pascal and Racine. True, the tragic vision is not directly expressed by those writers, and true also that it requires an extraordinarily complex dialectical style of research for the modern researcher to draw forth the correspondence between world vision and empirical detail; the fact nevertheless is that Goldmann's adaptation of Lukacs removes from theory its insurrectionary role. The sheer existence of class, or theoretical, consciousness for Lukacs is enough to suggest to him the projected overthrow of objective forms. For Goldmann an awareness of class or group consciousness is first of all a scholarly imperative, and then—in the works of highly privileged writers—the expression of a tragically limited social situation. Lukacs' *zugerechnetes Bewusstsein* (imputed consciousness) is an unverifiable, yet absolutely prior theoretical necessity if one is to effect a change in social reality; in Goldmann's version of it, admittedly limited to an acutely circumscribed situation, theory and consciousness are expressed in the Pascalian wager upon an unseen and silent god, the *deus absconditus*; they are also expressed for Goldmann the scientific researcher, as he calls himself, in the theoretical correspondence between text and political

reality. Or to put the matter in another way, for Lukacs theory originates as a kind of irreducible dissonance between mind and object, whereas for Goldmann theory is the homological relationship that can be seen to exist between individual part and coherent whole.

The difference between the two versions of Lukacs' theory of theory is evident enough: Lukacs writes as a participant in a struggle (the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919), Goldmann as an expatriate historian at the Sorbonne. From one point of view we can say that Goldmann's adaptation of Lukacs degrades theory, lowers it in importance, domesticates it somewhat to the exigencies of a doctoral dissertation in Paris. I do not think, however, that degradation here has a moral implication, but rather (as one of its secondary meanings suggests) that degradation conveys the lowering of color, the greater degree of distance, the loss of immediate force that occurs when Goldmann's notions of consciousness and theory are compared with the meaning and role intended by Lukacs for theory. Nor do I want to suggest that there is something inherently wrong about Goldmann's conversion of insurrectionary, radically adversarial consciousness into an accommodating consciousness of correspondence and homology. It is just that the situation has changed sufficiently for the degradation to have occurred, although there is no doubt that Goldmann's reading of Lukacs mutes the latter's almost apocalyptic version of consciousness.

We have become so accustomed to hearing that all borrowings, readings, and interpretations are misreadings and misinterpretations that we are likely to consider the Lukacs-Goldmann episode as just another bit of evidence that everyone, even Marxists, misreads and misinterprets. I find such a conclusion completely unsatisfying. It implies, first of all, that the only possible alternative to slavish copying is creative misreading and that no intermediate possibility exists. Second, when it is elevated to a general principle, the idea that all reading is misreading is fundamentally an abrogation of the critic's responsibility. It is never enough for a critic taking the idea of criticism seriously simply to say that interpretation is misinterpretation or that borrowings inevitably involve misreadings. Quite the contrary: it seems to me perfectly possible to judge misreadings (as they occur) as part of a historical transfer of ideas and theories from one setting to another. Lukacs wrote *for* as well as *in* a situation that produced ideas about consciousness and theory that are very different from the ideas produced by Goldmann in his situation. To call Goldmann's work a misreading of Lukacs', and then to go on immediately

to relate that misreading to a general theory of interpretation as misinterpretation, is to pay no critical attention to history and to situation, both of which play an important determining role in changing Lukacs' ideas into Goldmann's. The Hungary of 1919 and post-World War II Paris are two quite different environments. To the degree that Lukacs and Goldmann are read carefully, then to that precise degree we can understand the critical change—in time and in place—that occurs between one writer and another, both of whom depend on theory to accomplish a particular job of intellectual work. I see no need here to resort to the theory of limitless intertextuality as an Archimedean point outside the two situations. The particular voyage from Hungary to Paris, with all that entails, seems compelling enough, adequate enough for critical scrutiny, unless we want to give up critical consciousness for critical hermeticism.

In measuring Lukacs and Goldmann against each other, then, we are also recognizing the extent to which theory is a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part. Thus what is insurrectionary consciousness in one instance becomes tragic vision in another, for reasons that are elucidated when the situations in Budapest and Paris are seriously compared. I do not wish to suggest that Budapest and Paris determined the kinds of theories produced by Lukacs and Goldmann. I do mean that "Budapest" and "Paris" are irreducibly first conditions, and they provide limits and apply pressures to which each writer, given his own gifts, predilections, and interests, responds.

Let us now take Lukacs, or rather Lukacs as used by Goldmann, a step further: the use made of Goldmann by Raymond Williams. Brought up in the tradition of Cambridge English studies, trained in the techniques of Leavis and Richards, Williams was formed as a literary scholar who had no use whatever for theory. He speaks rather poignantly of how intellectuals educated as he was could use "a separate and self-defining language" that made a fetish of minute, concrete particulars; this meant that the intellectuals could approach power but speak antiseptically only of microcosm, profess not to understand reification, and to speak instead of the objective correlative, not to know mediation although they knew catharsis.¹⁵ Williams tells us that Goldmann came to Cambridge in 1970 and gave two lectures there. This visit, according to Williams in the moving commemorative essay he wrote about Goldmann after his death, was a major event. It introduced Cambridge to theory, Williams claims, understood and employed as it had been by thinkers trained in the major

Continental tradition. Goldmann induced in Williams an appreciation of Lukacs' contribution to our understanding of how, in an era of "the dominance of economic activity over all other forms of human activity," reification was both a false objectivity so far as knowledge was concerned and a deformation thoroughly penetrating life and consciousness more than any other form. Williams continues:

The idea of totality was then a critical weapon against this precise deformation; indeed, against capitalism itself. And yet this was not idealism—an assertion of the primacy of other values. On the contrary, just as the deformation could be understood, at its roots, only by historical analysis of a particular kind of economy, so the attempt to overcome and surpass it lay not in isolated witness or in separated activity but in practical work to find, assert and to establish more human social ends in more human and political and economic means.¹⁶

Once again Lukacs' thought—in this instance the avowedly revolutionary idea of totality—has been tamed somewhat. Without wishing in any way to belittle the importance of what Lukacs' ideas (via Goldmann) did for the moribund state of English studies in late twentieth-century Cambridge, I think it needs to be said that those ideas were originally formulated in order to do more than shake up a few professors of literature. This is an obvious, not to say easy, point. What is more interesting, however, is that because Cambridge is not revolutionary Budapest, because Williams is not the militant Lukacs, because Williams is a reflective critic—this is crucial—rather than a committed revolutionary, he can see the limits of a theory that begins as a liberating idea but can become a trap of its own.

At the most practical level it was easy for me to agree [with Lukacs' theory of totality as a response to reification]. But then the whole point of thinking in terms of a totality is the realization that we are part of it; that our own consciousness, our work, our methods, are then critically at stake. And in the particular field of literary analysis there was this obvious difficulty: that most of the work we had to look at was the product of just this work of reified consciousness, so that *what looked like the methodological breakthrough might become, quite quickly, the methodological trap*. I cannot yet say this finally about Lukacs, since I still don't have access to all his work; but in some of it, at least, *the major insights of History and Class-Consciousness*, which he has now partly disavowed, *do not get translated into critical practice* [Williams refers here to Lukacs' later, much cruder

work on European realism] and certain cruder operations—essentially still those of base and superstructure—keep reappearing. *I still read Goldmann collaboratively and critically asking the same question*, for I am sure the practice of totality is still for any of us, at any time, profoundly and even obviously difficult.¹⁷

This is an admirable passage. Even though Williams says nothing about the lamentable repetitiveness of Goldmann's later work, it is important that as a critic who has learned from someone else's theory he should be able to see the theory's limitations, especially the fact that a breakthrough can become a trap, if it is used uncritically, repetitively, limitlessly. What he means, I think, is that once an idea gains currency because it is clearly effective and powerful, there is every likelihood that during its peregrinations it will be reduced, codified, and institutionalized. Lukacs' remarkably complex exposition of the phenomenon of reification indeed did turn into a simple reflection theory; to a degree of course, and Williams is too decently elegaic to say it about a recently dead old friend, it did become this sort of idea in Goldmann's hands. Homology is, after all, a refined version of the old Second International base-and-superstructure model.

Beyond the specific reminder of what could happen to a vanguard theory, Williams' ruminations enable us to make another observation about theory as it develops out of a situation, begins to be used, travels, and gains wide acceptance. For if reification-and-totality (to turn Lukacs' theory now into a shorthand phrase for easy reference) can become a reductionist implement, there is no reason why it could not become too inclusive, too ceaselessly active and expanding a habit of mind. That is, if a theory can move down, so to speak, become a dogmatic reduction of its original version, it can also move up into a sort of bad infinity, which—in the case of reification-and-totality—is the direction intended by Lukacs himself. To speak of the unceasing overthrow of objective forms, and to speak as he does in the essay on class consciousness, of how the logical end of overcoming reification is the self-annihilation of the revolutionary class itself, means that Lukacs had pushed his theory farther forward and upward, unacceptably (in my opinion). The contradiction inherent in this theory—and perhaps in most theories that develop as responses to the need for movement and change—is that it risks becoming a theoretical overstatement, a theoretical parody of the situation it was formulated originally to remedy or overcome. To prescribe "an *unbroken* alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement" toward to-

tality as a theoretical remedy for reification is in a sense to substitute one unchanging formula for another. To say of theory and theoretical consciousness, as Lukacs does, that they intervene in reification and introduce process is not carefully enough to calculate, and allow for, the details and the resistances offered by an intransigent, reified reality to theoretical consciousness. For all the brilliance of his account of reification, for all the care he takes with it, Lukacs is unable to see how even under capitalism reification itself cannot be totally dominant—unless, of course, he is prepared to allow something that theoretical totality (his insurrectional instrument for overcoming reification) says is impossible, namely, that totality in the form of totally dominant reification is theoretically possible under capitalism. For if reification is totally dominant, how then can Lukacs explain his own work as an alternative form of thought under the sway of reification?

Perhaps all this is too fussy and hermetic. Nevertheless, it seems to me that however far away in time and place Williams may be from the fiery rebelliousness of the early Lukacs, there is an extraordinary virtue to the distance, even the coldness of his critical reflections on Lukacs and Goldmann, to both of whom he is otherwise so intellectually cordial. He takes from both men a sophisticated theoretical awareness of the issues involved in connecting literature to society, as he puts it in his best single theoretical essay, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory." The terminology provided by Marxist aesthetic theory for mapping the peculiarly uneven and complicated field lying between base and superstructure is generally inadequate, and then Williams goes on to do work that embodies *his* critical version of the original theory. He puts this version very well, I think, in *Politics and Letters*: "however dominant a social system may be, the very meaning of its domination involves a limitation or selection of the activities it covers, so that by definition it cannot exhaust all social experience, which therefore always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project."¹⁸ *The Country and the City* records both the limits and the reactive alternatives to dominance, as in the case of John Clare, whose work "marks the end of pastoral poetry [as a systematic convention for describing the English countryside] in the very shock of its collision with actual country experience." Clare's very existence as a poet was threatened by the removal of an acceptable social order from the customary landscape idealized by Jonson and Thomson; hence Clare's

turning—as an alternative not yet fully realized and not yet completely subdued by the inhuman relationships that obtained under the system of market exploitation—to "the green language of the new Nature," that is, the Nature to be celebrated in a new way by the great Romantics.¹⁹

There is no minimizing the fact that Williams is an important critic because of his gifts and his insights. But I am convinced it would be wrong to underestimate the role in his mature writings played by what I have been alluding to as borrowed, or traveling, theory. For borrow we certainly must if we are to elude the constraints of our immediate intellectual environment. Theory we certainly need, for all sorts of reasons that would be too tedious to rehearse here. What we also need over and above theory, however, is the critical recognition that there is no theory capable of covering, closing off, predicting all the situations in which it might be useful. This is another way of saying, as Williams does, that no social or intellectual system can be so dominant as to be unlimited in its strength. Williams therefore has the critical recognition, and uses it consciously to qualify, shape, and refine his borrowings from Lukacs and Goldmann, although we should hasten to add that it does not make him infallible or any less liable to exaggeration and error for having it. But unless theory is unanswerable, either through its successes or its failures, to the essential untidiness, the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations (and this applies equally to theory that derives from somewhere else or theory that is "original"), then theory becomes an ideological trap. It transfixes both its users and what it is used on. Criticism would no longer be possible.

Theory, in short, can never be complete, just as one's interest in everyday life is never exhausted by simulacra, models, or theoretical abstracts of it. Of course one derives pleasure from actually making evidence fit or work in a theoretical scheme, and of course it is ridiculously foolish to argue that "the facts" or "the great texts" do not require any theoretical framework or methodology to be appreciated or read properly. No reading is neutral or innocent, and by the same token every text and every reader is to some extent the product of a theoretical standpoint, however implicit or unconscious such a standpoint may be. I am arguing, however, that we distinguish theory from critical consciousness by saying that the latter is a sort of spatial sense, a sort of measuring faculty for locating or situating theory, and this means that theory has to be grasped in the place and the time out of which it emerges as a part of that time, working in and for it, re-

sponding to it; then, consequently, that first place can be measured against subsequent places where the theory turns up for use. The critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported. And, above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict. Indeed I would go as far as saying that it is the critic's job to provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory.

Much of this is illustrated if we compare Lukacs and Williams on the one hand with Goldmann on the other. I have already said that Williams is conscious of what he calls a methodological trap. Lukacs, for his part, shows in his career as a theorist (if not in the fully fledged theory itself) a profound awareness of the necessity to move from hermetic aestheticism (*Die Seele und die Formen, Die Theorie des Romans*) toward the actual world of power and institutions. By contrast, Goldmann is enmeshed in the homological finality that his writing, brilliantly and persuasively in the case of *Le Dieu caché*, demonstrates. Theoretical closure, like social convention or cultural dogma, is anathema to critical consciousness, which loses its profession when it loses its active sense of an open world in which its faculties must be exercised. One of the best lessons of that is to be found in Lentricchia's powerful *After the New Criticism*, a wholly persuasive account of what he calls "the currently paralyzed debates" of contemporary literary theory.²⁰ In instance after instance he demonstrates the impoverishment and rarefaction that overtake any theory relatively untested by and unexposed to the complex enfolding of the social world, which is never a merely complaisant context to be used for the enactment of theoretical situations. (As an antidote to the bareness afflicting the American situation, there is in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* an extremely useful account of three "semantic horizons" to be figured in dialectically by the interpreter as parts of the decoding process, which he also calls "the cultural mode of production."²¹)

Yet we must be aware that the social reality I have been alluding to is no less susceptible to theoretical overtotalization, even when, as I shall be showing in the case of Foucault, extremely powerful histori-

cal scholarship moves itself out from the archive toward the world of power and institutions, toward precisely those resistances to theory ignored and elided by most formalistic theory—deconstruction, semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Althusserian Marxism attacked by E. P. Thompson.²² Foucault's work is most challenging because he is rightly considered to be an exemplary opponent of ahistorical, asocial formalism. But he too, I believe, falls victim to the systematic degradation of theory in ways that his newest disciples consider to be evidence that he has not succumbed to hermeticism.

Foucault is a paradox. His career presents his contemporary audience with an extraordinarily compelling trajectory whose culmination, most recently, has been the announcement made by him, and on his behalf by his disciples, that his real theme is the relationship between knowledge and power. Thanks to the brilliance of his theoretical and practical performances, *pouvoir* and *savoir* have provided his readers (it would be churlish not to mention myself; but see also Jacques Donzelot's *La Police des familles*) with a conceptual apparatus for the analysis of instrumental discourses that stands in stark contrast to the fairly arid metaphysics produced habitually by the students of his major philosophical competitors. Yet Foucault's earliest work was in many ways remarkably unconscious of its own theoretical force. Reread *Histoire de la folie* after *Surveiller et punir* and you will be struck with how uncannily prescient the early work is of the later; and yet you will also be struck that even when Foucault deals with *renfermement* (confinement), his obsessive theme, in discussing asylums and hospitals, power is never referred to explicitly. Neither for that matter is *volonté*, will. *Les Mots et les choses* might be excused for the same neglect of power, on the grounds that the subject of Foucault's inquiry was intellectual, not institutional history. In *The Archeology of Knowledge* there are intimations here and there that Foucault is beginning to approach power through a number of abstractions, surrogates for it: thus he refers to such things as acceptability, accumulation, preservation, and formation that are ascribed to the making and the functioning of statements, discourses, and archives; yet he does so without spending any time on what might be the common source of their strength within institutions or fields of knowledge or society itself.

Foucault's theory of power—to which I shall restrict myself here—derives from his attempt to analyze working systems of confinement from the inside, systems whose functioning depends equally on the continuity of institutions as on the proliferation of justifying

technical ideologies for the institutions. These ideologies are his discourses and disciplines. In his concrete presentation of local situations in which such power and such knowledge are deployed, Foucault has no peer, and what he has done is remarkably interesting by any standard. As he says in *Surveiller et punir*, for power to work it must be able to manage, control, and even create detail: the more detail, the more real power, management breeding manageable units, which in turn breed a more detailed, a more finely controlling knowledge. Prisons, he says in that memorable passage, are factories for producing delinquency, and delinquency is the raw material for disciplinary discourses.

With descriptions and particularized observations of this sort I have no trouble. It is when Foucault's own language becomes general (when he moves his analyses of power from the detail to society as a whole) that the methodological breakthrough becomes the theoretical trap. Interestingly, this is slightly more evident when Foucault's theory is transported from France and planted in the work of his overseas disciples. Recently, for example, he has been celebrated by Ian Hacking as a kind of hard-headed alternative to the too backward and forward-looking "Romantic" Marxists (which Marxists? all Marxists?), and as a ruthlessly anarchistic opponent of Noam Chomsky, who is described inappropriately as "a marvelously sane liberal reformer."²³ Other writers, who quite rightly see Foucault's discussions of power as a refreshing window opened on to the real world of politics and society, uncritically misread his pronouncements as the latest thing about social reality.²⁴ There is no doubt that Foucault's work is indeed an important alternative to the ahistorical formalism with which he has been conducting an implicit debate, and there is great merit to his view that as a specialized intellectual (as opposed to a universal intellectual)²⁵ he and others like him can wage small-scale guerrilla warfare against some repressive institutions, and against "silence" and "secrecy."

But all that is quite another thing from accepting Foucault's view in *History of Sexuality* that "power is everywhere" along with all that such a vastly simplified view entails.²⁶ For one, as I have said, Foucault's eagerness not to fall into Marxist economism causes him to obliterate the role of classes, the role of economics, the role of insurgency and rebellion in the societies he discusses. Let us suppose that prisons, schools, armies, and factories were, as he says, disciplinary factories in nineteenth-century France (since he talks almost exclusively about France), and that panoptic rule dominated them all.

What resistances were there to the disciplinary order and why, as Nicos Poulantzas has so trenchantly argued in *State, Power, Socialism*, does Foucault never discuss the resistances that always end up dominated by the system he describes? The facts are more complicated of course, as any good historian of the rise of the modern state can demonstrate. Moreover, Poulantzas continues, even if we accept the view that power is essentially rational, that it is not held by anyone but is strategic, dispositional, effective, that, as *Discipline and Punish* claims, it invests all areas of society, is it correct to conclude, as Foucault does, that power is exhausted in its use?²⁷ Is it not simply wrong, Poulantzas asks, to say that power is not *based* anywhere and that struggles and exploitation—both terms left out of Foucault's analyses—do not occur?²⁸ The problem is that Foucault's use of the term *pouvoir* moves around too much, swallowing up every obstacle in its path (resistances to it, the class and economic bases that refresh and fuel it, the reserves it builds up), obliterating change and mystifying its microphysical sovereignty.²⁹ A symptom of how overblown Foucault's conception of power can become when it travels too far is Hacking's statement that "nobody knows this knowledge; no one yields this power." Surely this is going to extremes in order to prove that Foucault is not a simple-minded follower of Marx.

In fact, Foucault's theory of power is a Spinozist conception, which has captivated not only Foucault himself but many of his readers who wish to go beyond Left optimism and Right pessimism so as to justify political quietism with sophisticated intellectualism, at the same time wishing to appear realistic, in touch with the world of power and reality, as well as historical and antiformalistic in their bias. The trouble is that Foucault's theory has drawn a circle around itself, constituting a unique territory in which Foucault has imprisoned himself and others with him. It is certainly wrong to say, with Hacking, that hope, optimism, and pessimism are shown by Foucault to be mere satellites of the idea of a transcendental, enduring subject, since empirically we experience and act according to those things daily without reference to any such irrelevant "subject." There is after all a sensible difference between Hope and hope, just as there is between the Logos and words: we must not let Foucault get away with confusing them with each other, nor with letting us forget that history does not get made without work, intention, resistance, effort, or conflict, and that none of these things is silently absorbable into micronetworks of power.

There is a more important criticism to be made of Foucault's the-

ory of power, and it has been made most tellingly by Chomsky. Unfortunately most of Foucault's new readers in the United States seem not to know of the exchange that took place between them several years ago on Dutch television³⁰, nor of Chomsky's succinct critique of Foucault contained in *Language and Responsibility*. Both men agreed on the necessity of opposing repression, a position Foucault has since found it more difficult to take unequivocally. Yet for Chomsky the sociopolitical battle had to be waged with two tasks in mind: one, "to imagine a future society that conforms to the exigencies of human nature as best we understand them; the other to analyze the nature of power and oppression in our present societies."³¹ Foucault assented to the second without in any way accepting the first. According to him, any future societies that we might imagine now "are only the inventions of our civilization and result from our class system." Not only would imagining a future society ruled according to justice be limited by false consciousness, it would also be too utopian to project for anyone like Foucault who believes that "the idea of justice in itself is an idea which in effect has been invented and put to work in different societies as an instrument of a certain political and economic power or as a weapon against that power."³² This is a perfect instance of Foucault's unwillingness to take seriously his own ideas about resistances to power. If power oppresses and controls and manipulates, then everything that resists it is not morally equal to power, is not neutrally and simply a weapon against that power. Resistance cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it, except in some metaphysical, ultimately trivial sense. Even if the distinction is hard to draw, there is a distinction to be made—as, for example, Chomsky does when he says that he would give his support to an oppressed proletariat if as a class it made justice the goal of its struggle.

The disturbing circularity of Foucault's theory of power is a form of theoretical overttotalization superficially more difficult to resist because, unlike many others, it is formulated, reformulated, and borrowed for use in what seem to be historically documented situations. But note that Foucault's history is ultimately textual, or rather textualized; its mode is one for which Borges would have an affinity. Gramsci, on the other hand, would find it uncongenial. He would certainly appreciate the fineness of Foucault's archeologies, but would find it odd that they make not even a nominal allowance for emergent movements, and none for revolutions, counterhegemony, or historical blocks. In human history there is always something beyond

the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible, limits power in Foucault's sense, and hobbles the theory of that power. One could not imagine Foucault undertaking a sustained analysis of powerfully contested political issues, nor, like Chomsky himself and writers like John Berger, would Foucault commit himself to descriptions of power and oppression with some intention of alleviating human suffering, pain, or betrayed hope.

It may seem an abrupt conclusion to reach, but the kinds of theory I have been discussing can quite easily become cultural dogma. Appropriated to schools or institutions, they quickly acquire the status of authority within the cultural group, guild, or affiliative family. Though of course they are to be distinguished from grosser forms of cultural dogma like racism and nationalism, they are insidious in that their original provenance—their history of adversarial, oppositional derivation—dulls the critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively, responsive to history. Left to its own specialists and acolytes, so to speak, theory tends to have walls erected around itself, but this does not mean that critics should either ignore theory or look despairingly around for newer varieties. To measure the distance between theory then and now, there and here, to record the encounter of theory with resistances to it, to move skeptically in the broader political world where such things as the humanities or the great classics ought to be seen as small provinces of the human venture, to map the territory covered by all the techniques of dissemination, communication, and interpretation, to preserve some modest (perhaps shrinking) belief in noncoercive human community: if these are not imperatives, they do at least seem to be attractive alternatives. And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?