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Truth or Consequences: On Being against Theory

Steven J. Mailloux
Loyola Marymount University, steven.mailloux@lmu.edu

Critical Response

IV

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On Being Against Theory

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Before reading "Against Theory" by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn
Michaels, I thought I fully understood Stanley Fish's theory of inter-
pretive communities. Fish's theory seemed a consistent elaboration of
the claim that there are no uninterpreted givens. What we take to be
independent facts are actually constructions of our interpretive assump-
tions and strategies. From this perspective, texts do not determine inter-
pretations; interpretations constitute texts. Furthermore, interpretive
practices are never idiosyncratic; that is, acts of making sense are always
a function of shared beliefs or interpretive conventions. Every individual
interpreter is a member of an interpretive community: "Since the
thoughts an individual can think and the mental operations he can per-
form have their source in some or other interpretive community, he is as
much a product of that community (acting as an extension of it) as the
meanings it enables him to produce."[1] Such a grounding of interpreta-
tion in communities defends this hermeneutic theory against the charge
of relativism, the bugbear of the Anglo-American critical tradition since
the heyday of New Criticism. New Critics claimed to avoid interpretive
relativism by grounding meaning objectively in the autonomous text.
Later, E. D. Hirsch tried to show that New Critical theory and practice
resulted in the very relativism the New Critics abhorred; Hirsch argued
that priority must be given to authorial intention in order to determine
valid or correct interpretations. Fish's theory of interpretive com-
munities holds that interpretation produces both textual meaning and

1. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*
(Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 14.

authorial intention, but he avoids relativism by showing that there are always correct interpretations, determined by communities rather than individuals. Individual interpreters are not free to see or describe any textual meaning they want—the fear of the New Critics—nor is meaning made radically indeterminate—the complaint of Hirsch against the anti-intentionalists. Rather, correct interpretations always exist and can be (are already) determined. It's just that because interpretive communities can change, so too can what counts as a correct interpretation.

So went my understanding of Fish's position before reading "Against Theory." However, I now see that this previous understanding was incomplete. To approach "Against Theory" and eventually reveal *its* incompleteness, we can begin with a literary example of the two hermeneutic accounts that Knapp and Michaels reject on their way to rejecting theory in general.

In George Orwell's *1984* the Party maintains its absolute power over the people of Oceania by completely controlling all individual acts of interpretation. Through material and ideological coercion, the Party imposes its way of making sense on its people and achieves "the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life" which forms the basis of its totalitarian rule.[2] This hermeneutic imperialism guarantees that the people will continue to be "without any impulse to rebel" because they are "without the power of grasping that the world could be other than it is" (p. 173). O'Brien, the spokesman for the Party, points out the philosophical assumption underlying its successful politics of interpretation: "Reality is inside the skull. . . . Nothing exists except through human consciousness" (p. 218). Since the Party controls interpretation, it controls human consciousness and thus manipulates reality itself. One would-be rebel, Winston Smith, tries to resist the Party by attacking its hermeneutics. He champions common sense, autonomous facts, external reality, and the empirical method. Though elsewhere Orwell supports Smith's philosophical stance, in *1984* he allows O'Brien to win the argument (both rhetorically and politically) during the final confrontation between Smith and the Party spokesman.[3] O'Brien argues that "re-

2. George Orwell, *1984* (1949; New York, 1961), p. 173; all further references to this work will be included in the text.

3. See Gerald Graff, "Politics, Language, Deconstruction, Lies, and the Reflexive Fallacy: A Rejoinder to W. J. T. Mitchell," *Salmagundi* 47–48 (Winter-Spring 1980): 88–89.

Steven Mailloux, associate professor of English at the University of Miami, is the author of *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*. He is currently at work on a book on the institutional history of American literary criticism. His previous contribution to *Critical Inquiry*, "Stanley Fish's 'Interpreting the *Variorum*': Advance or Retreat?" appeared in the Autumn 1976 issue.

ality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, . . . only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth *is* truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party" (p. 205). Smith is not able to counter O'Brien's arguments, and ultimately the Party is successful in achieving its goal: "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves" (p. 211). Smith submits by internalizing the Party's world view and adopting its hermeneutic theory.

It is inevitable that Smith must lose, not only because he confronts the overwhelming power of the state but also because he presents such a weak case for his hermeneutic position. As O'Brien points out, Smith holds that "the nature of reality is self-evident" (p. 205). He fails to understand that his commonsense "facts" are as much a product of interpretation as are the Party's; and he clings to a naive realist ontology and a simplistic commonsense epistemology that O'Brien demolishes from his dominant political position, through a more sophisticated her-meneutic argument, a form of idealism he calls "collective solipsism" (p. 219).

Knapp and Michaels would find neither Smith's realism nor O'Brien's idealism to be satisfactory as hermeneutic theories. They write that "a realist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with the objects of interpretation; an idealist thinks that theory allows us to stand outside our beliefs in a neutral encounter with our beliefs themselves" ("Against Theory," p. 739). A realist like Smith is mistaken when he assumes that "the object exists independent of beliefs" and that "knowledge requires that we shed our beliefs in a disinterested quest for the object" (p. 740). An idealist like O'Brien avoids this mistake when he implies that "we can never shed our beliefs," but he commits his own kind of error when he equates knowledge with "recognizing the role beliefs play in *constituting* their objects" (p. 740). This constitutive hermeneutics is a necessary corollary of both O'Brien's collective solipsism and Fish's theory of interpretive communities.[4] In the same way that O'Brien claims that the Party's collective mind creates reality, Fish argues that interpretive communities create what they claim merely to be discovering or describing. Of course, O'Brien and Fish perceive themselves as living within radically different arrangements of hermeneutic power. O'Brien sees himself as the extension of an inter-pretive community (the Party) that completely dominates the world of *1984*. Fish, on the other hand, claims that his world contains many competing communities, each vying for interpretive hegemony for its set of beliefs, values, and ideologies.

4. For discussions of constitutive hermeneutics, see my *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 192–207, and "Learning to Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 12 (Spring 1979): 93–108.

   Despite such differences in their sociological accounts, O'Brien and Fish end up in the same theoretical contradiction. During his debate with Smith, O'Brien's epistemological idealism leads him to imply that a true believer within the Party could somehow get outside the Party's belief system into a neutral space from which to judge the Party's beliefs. Knapp and Michaels argue that Fish makes a similar move when he claims to have a *theory* of interpretation through which he distances himself from his own interpretive assumptions. This theory allows him to argue that previous literary critics' "assumptions were not inferior but merely different" from his own.[5] As Knapp and Michaels point out, Fish is claiming here that "no beliefs are, in the long run, truer than others." But "it is only from the standpoint of a theory about belief which is not itself a belief that this truth can be seen" (p. 741). Since Fish himself admits there is no such standpoint outside belief, he has clearly contradicted himself. Theories like Fish's and O'Brien's which admit the absolute primacy of belief in practice cannot turn around and claim to escape belief in theory.

   Knapp and Michaels ultimately argue that *all* theories cannot avoid similar contradictions or incoherencies whenever theory attempts to prescribe critical practice. They demonstrate how typical theorists base their methodological prescriptions on the prior separation of entities that are in fact logically inseparable (intention and meaning, language and speech acts, knowledge and true belief). Theorists make these false separations so that they can prescribe moving from one entity to the other to arrive at meaning or truth. Thus, if theory is understood as an attempt to describe so that it can have prescriptive consequences, then it is incoherent and should be abandoned. Theory, properly understood, has no consequences.

   Knapp and Michaels' arguments are convincing as far as they go. Their attack on theory *as theory* (i.e., as it conceives itself) certainly showed me a contradiction in Fish's theory that I had previously failed to notice. However, the conclusion that Knapp and Michaels draw from their arguments—that theory is inconsequential and should therefore stop—does not necessarily follow. True, theory does not have consequences in the exact way it claims to have consequences. Nevertheless, theory has results of a very precise kind, as I will now try to show.

   The work of Edward Said demonstrates quite clearly that theory can have disruptive consequences both inside and outside the discipline of literary studies. In *Orientalism* and other writings Said assumes a constitutive hermeneutics as he examines Orientalism as "the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage— and even *produce*—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-

5. Fish, *Is There a Text?*, p. 368.

Enlightenment period."[6] Through Orientalism Europe imposed a self-serving meaning in an apparently disinterested way. In effect, it created an Orient that was ripe for domination. The imperialist West did exactly what the Party in *1984* tries to do: determine reality by controlling interpretation. The Party is simply more self-conscious about its "hermeneutics of power."[7]

Said's project has been to reveal the ideological interests behind the hermeneutic power of Western discourse about the Islamic Orient. But Said further claims that *all* descriptions of the Orient (not just those by European and American Orientalists) are perspectival constructions rather than objective representations:

> I do not mean to suggest that a "real" Islam exists somewhere out there that the media, acting out of base motives, have perverted. Not at all. For Muslims as for non-Muslims, Islam is an objective and also a subjective faith, because people create that fact in their faith, in their societies, histories, and traditions, or, in the case of non-Muslim outsiders, because they must in a sense fix, personify, stamp the identity of that which they feel confronts them collectively or individually. This is to say that the media's Islam, the Western scholar's Islam, the Western reporter's Islam, and the Muslim's Islam are all acts of will and interpretation that take place in history, and can only be dealt with in history as acts of will and interpretation.[8]

Since Said also grounds these acts of hermeneutic will in "communities of interpretation," his theory resembles the epistemological idealism of O'Brien and Fish, who claim that shared beliefs (assumptions, values, ideologies) constitute reality.[9] Though these theories are at times vulnerable to the "beliefless neutrality" objection discussed above, much more often they support assertions like Knapp and Michaels' that there is no "condition of knowledge prior to and independent of belief " (p. 738). If Knapp and Michaels are correct that "no general account of belief [similar to their own] can have practical consequences," then these idealist epistemologies that posit the primacy of belief should also be inconsequential (p. 740). But such accounts can and do have consequences. In the world of *1984,* the theory of collective solipsism provides a philosophical base for totalitarian domination. In the realm of American scholarship and politics, Said's theoretical assumptions guide his practical analyses of Orientalism, and these analyses have had very definite consequences as the debates within the *New Republic,* the *New*

6. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), p. 3; emphasis added.

7. The term is Graff's in "Textual Leftism," *Partisan Review* 49 (1982):566.

8. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York, 1981), p. 41. See also *Orientalism,* pp. 273 and 322.

9. Said, *Covering Islam,* p. 41.

York Review of Books, History and Theory, and other journals testify. Indeed, a recent *Humanities Report* article noted that "the position Said represents [in *Orientalism*] has produced a set of semi-academic study groups and has implications for government and foreign policy."[10]

But how exactly can a hermeneutic theory that, according to Knapp and Michaels, should have no consequences result in these rhetorical and political effects? In Said's case, the reason is that when he reveals Orientalist representations as based on interested belief rather than impersonal truth, objectivists read his demystifying project as (successfully or unsuccessfully) undermining the validity of Orientalist interpretations, and Orientalism's victims read this same project as providing support for the objectivity of their own self-interpretations. These appropriations of Said's discourse can occur because a demonstration that others' asserted truth is actually interested belief always *counts as* a critique of their assertions in the present arena of critical and political discussion. In such an arena, to expose asserted truth as "mere" belief is to have the effect of undermining that truth even though the debunker elsewhere insists that *all* truth is perspectival belief. Even in an essay in which Said foregrounds the perspective from which he makes his analysis (e.g., in "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims"), his discourse still has the rhetorical effect of proof or propaganda (depending on whether the reader is convinced or not by his arguments).[11]

But political consequences are only the most far-reaching results of theory. More limited but just as real are the effects of theoretical prescriptions within the discipline of literary studies. Even if it is granted that all theories are based on logical mistakes (like separating intention and meaning), theories still have consequences for critical practice. All we need do is remember the effects of New Critical proscriptions against the intentional and affective fallacies. The critics persuaded by these theoretical prohibitions avoided extrinsic approaches and directed their analyses to intrinsic elements in the literary text itself—image patterns, symbolic structures, and so forth. More recently, theories of undecidability have changed the interpretive practices of many within the discipline: instead of looking for unities, they look for disunities, contradictions, incoherencies. Theory does change practice.

Here we finally reach the limits of Knapp and Michaels' account of theory. Their description turns out to be as incomplete as my previous understanding of Fish's work was incomplete. Theory does claim to be what Knapp and Michaels define it as, but theory actually *functions* differently. In fact, theory is a kind of practice, a peculiar kind because it claims to escape practice. But the impossibility of achieving this goal does

10. Colin R. MacKinnon, "Talking Back: *Orientalism* and the Orientals," *Humanities Report* 4 (Feb. 1982): 5.

11. See Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 7–58; rev. and rpt. in Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York, 1979), pp. 56–114.

not prevent theory from continuing, nor does it negate the effects it has *as persuasion.* It is telling that Knapp and Michaels do not call for the end of critical practice even though they reject criticism's claim to find meaning objectively in autonomous texts, intentions, or reading experiences. Michaels has pointed out correctly that such practice misconceives its function: the meanings it claims to find are actually determined completely by the beliefs it assumes.[12] Similarly, theory claims to be in a neutral position beyond belief and turns out not to be, yet as theoretical practice it can still affect other practices as persuasion. Theory can simply continue doing what all discursive practices do: attempt to persuade its readers to adopt its point of view, its way of seeing texts and the world. Whether successful persuasion takes place as a result of misunderstanding or not, theory can be consequential as rhetorical inducement and thus will never be abandoned (as Knapp and Michaels no doubt realize).

In their conclusion to "Against Theory," the authors write:

> The theoretical impulse, as we have described it, always involves the attempt to separate things that should not be separated: on the ontological side, meaning from intention, language from speech acts; on the epistemological side, knowledge from true belief. Our point has been that the separated terms are in fact inseparable. It is tempting to end by saying that theory and practice too are inseparable. But this would be a mistake. Not because theory and practice (unlike the other terms) really are separate but because theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice. Meaning is just another name for expressed intention, knowledge just another name for true belief, but theory is not just another name for practice. [Pp. 741–42]

Though they deny it here, Knapp and Michaels do seem to separate theory and practice. They could have said that "theory is just another name for metapractice (practice about practice)." Instead they chose to imply a distinction between two kinds of discourse that are similar in function: theory is an instantiation of practice even as it claims to escape from practice. Why do Knapp and Michaels ignore this? Strangely, this implied separation of theory and practice can be seen as strengthening rather than weakening their argument. Indeed it confirms at least part of it. Like all theoretical discourse, "Against Theory" separates the inseparable—theory from practice—in order to prescribe practice—the abandonment of theory. Of course, whether Knapp and Michaels' theory has consequences depends on whether it persuades readers to take its amusing examples and ingenious arguments seriously. I hope I have done so.

12. See Walter Benn Michaels, "Saving the Text: Reference and Belief," *MLN* 93 (Dec. 1978): 771–93.