The Dangerous Irrelevance of Recent Theory

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IN HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN’S “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” two con artists swindle the emperor and his court into believing in the existence of magical clothes that will reveal the incompetence or the stupidity of anyone unable to appreciate their invisible workmanship. The two charlatans rely on the vanity and the insecurity of their audience, none of whom wishes to be revealed as unSophisticated or incompetent. In the story, the deceit is revealed only when a small child points out that the emperor is, in fact, not wearing any clothes, but even after the ordinary people shout their agreement with the child, the emperor and his entourage continue on, more determined than ever to maintain the fraud in which they are participating.

Like the Emperor who wears no clothes, recent criticism struts proudly in the vanguard of its own parade of obsequious followers, none of them daring enough to admit that they cannot actually see the fine work that the theorists claim to have woven. In the case of poststructuralism, much originality was claimed for a methodology that, as John Ellis pointed out years ago, was merely a trite reworking of a system of thought that had been more clearly and forcefully set forth in the Enlightenment itself. “The method of doubt” pioneered by Descartes and Pascal, as Bronowski and Mazlish point out in The Western Intellectual Tradition (1960), “came to be used [in the eighteenth century] by the great antireligious French skeptics as a matter of course,” and “the method of doubt has really been one of the fundamental methods of French thinking ever since.” The fundamental element linking poststructuralism, New Historicism, and cultural studies has been an insistence on moral skepticism, a nonjudgmental and relativistic conception of ethics intended to undermine traditional Western values. The extreme opacity of a Lacan or a Derrida attempted not only to mask the utter triteness of their line of thinking but, by making doubt fashionable, to insinuate a pervasive cultural cynicism.

The fact that modern theory is trite does not mean that it is harmless. Any message, no matter how ridiculous, gains credence if it is repeated often enough, and the message of recent theory is moral detachment and cultural defeatism. Having deconstructed the authority of the text, making the text “the last thing studied,” as one influential critic had it, theorists posed more and more arcane approaches, and one of the effects of this

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mystification has been to trivialize literary studies. It is not surprising that the number and quality of students who wish to study literature has been declining for decades: What is the point of a program of university studies that proposes to teach that everything means nothing and that nothing can come of nothing? What this course of studies intends is to engage students as foot soldiers in a self-destructive war against the very civilization that makes their privileged lives possible, for in the academic climate that now exists, students are taught to despise Western cultural identity. Only the more foolish and weak-minded of students would engage in such a course of studies: it is not surprising that most find it implausible and sinister at the same time, and wisely turn away.

More worrying is the contempt with which activist professors have tossed aside respect for academic freedom and open-minded inquiry as academic discourse in the humanities and social sciences has been twisted into blatant political rhetoric. The assumption behind this distortion in academic research is the cynical assurance that no definite truth actually exists. If a position is supported by a majority, or by those with the greatest influence or the loudest voices, it is "true." As in the Cultural Revolution in China, if a million ignorant young people decide to burn a book while only a few scholars are brave enough to try to save it, then the book will be burned. In China, millions of precious books and rare art works were destroyed, and a generation of learning was ruined. Clearly, something similar has transpired in American universities. For a cynical majority, there is no objective basis for truth; there is only the coarse conviction that the strident and the superficial should prevail over the studious.

It is not merely or primarily deconstruction that has been engaged in this assault on traditional academic values: what followed deconstruction, while less exasperatingly, to be sure, was more pointed in its methods and more assured of its ideological correctness. Like those who had preceded them, New Historicists rejected the idea that any one perspective can be privileged: they assailed the so-called view from nowhere, the idea that authority can be ascribed to any one critical or historical perspective, but while deconstruction seemed always to admit the possibility of its own frivolous irrelevance, New Historicism sought to extend radical skepticism to the experiential world.

In the development of recent theory, several figures have played a crucial role: Bakhtin, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, among others. One should also note the early influence of Roland Barthes, whose criticism helped to alter the conception of time relationships toward a syntactic model and to shift the relationship of author and reader toward what was touted as a more democratic association. Yet while Barthes had the good sense to admit that his influential conception of "the death of the author" was merely the extravagant jeu d'esprit of a playful interpreter, the great majority of his ponderous imitators, particularly in America, did not. They took up the death of the author and drove it, and literature along with it, into the ground.

There is something profoundly regrettable about the work of Barthes and his contemporaries in the vanguard of poststructuralism, as lives of great potential were frittered away in alienated "play" while Western civilization, lacking the careful stewardship of its intellectuals, drifted toward confusion and self-contempt. Barthes's passivity allowed this decline to occur, but Barthes was essentially a trimmer, aloof and uncommitted in the face of the great evils of his time, acquiescent but impassive in the midst of a mounting cultural crisis. Those who followed were not so equivocal: they
enlisted as active combatants in the war on Western civilization. Their attitudes shifted from Gallic insouciance to puritanical fanaticism on the side of alienation and self-contempt. Their purpose has hardened into a single goal: to destroy Western civilization and replace it with a bloody apocalypse of total anarchy.

As criticism passed from the terrain of deconstruction to that of New Historicism, one of the linking figures between these movements was Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory has emerged as an important influence not only on late poststructuralism but also on New Historicism as well. As he analyzed the complex social origins of language, Bakhtin extended the idea of heteroglossia to literature and other forms of culture. The novel form itself was understood as a historical development associated with the flowering of heteroglossia; it was the best example of a new form of art shaped by the forces of carnivalization. In opposition to the centralization implicit in more official, prestige forms of culture, the novel was open to the influence of a broad range of popular, folk, and working-class discourses. According to this theory, the novel was the product of polysemy, the dialogic play of uninhibited and uncensored expression.

Michel Foucault’s conception of writing as existing contingently within the “complex field of discourse” also contributed to New Historicism, which sought from the beginning to assert that earlier historical readings had largely overlooked the contingent and interdependent nature of human experience. Like the earlier poststructural critics who refused to endorse any single approach but who worked from a conflict of theories or other forms of contingency, New Historicism asserted the infinite complexity of the relationship of literature to its material and social context. In this way, New Historicism replayed the essential retreat from judgment of poststructuralism: from this perspective, any final theory would obviously be rejected and any assertion of moral discrimination was excluded, an exclusion that was in and of itself an indication of a sweeping bias against traditional conceptions of order and belief.

At the very beginning, it was assumed that no “single history” can occupy the mind at any point in time—ostensibly an unremarkable assertion of open-mindedness but, in fact, an astounding claim, and one that obviates the possibility of meaningful historical study. History was by its very nature now taken to be so complex and shifting in its relationships and meanings that no reader could aspire to attain a comprehensive or lasting understanding of any aspect of it, and so all possible conclusions were tentative and subject to corrosive interrogation. In this respect, New Historicism was replaying a familiar shell game: given the fact that the relationship of literature to its context is infinitely complex and infinitely contingent, no firm assertion of truth can be made, but by the same token, no assertion can ever really be challenged. The anarchic implications of this position are frightening.

The altered relationship of the New Historicists to the earlier deconstructive theories was suggested in Jerome McGann’s influential article, “The Text, the Form, and the Problem of Historical Method” (from his book The Beauty of Inflections, 1985). In particular, McGann’s critique addressed Paul de Man’s abstraction of the material basis of literary production and reception. According to McGann, de Man’s praxis “purified” the linguistic, historical, sociological, and other disciplinary approaches to a linguistically based theory that McGann unmasked as totalizing and implicitly authoritarian. As McGann saw it, deconstruction was characterized by qualities of skepticism and retreat that found their
origin in a “late-capitalist” culture. The important point for McGann, as for Stephen Greenblatt, Marilyn Butler, David Simpson, and other New Historicists, is the dialectical and highly contingent nature of the critical language with which we address any text and consider the text’s relationship to its cultural environment. As McGann pointed out, all works of art exist in a “double relationship” to history: a relationship that involves the way in which the text was originally produced and read and the relationship to the present and to the way in which the text is read quite differently today. Unfortunately, what McGann failed to acknowledge is the fact that New Historicism points to the same authoritarian potentiality as deconstruction. In their different ways, both deconstruction and New Historicism abdicate the true role of criticism, and the consequence of their refusal to assert cultural governance is the inevitability that an authoritarian conception will one day supply the lack.

New Historicism extended the method of indeterminacy to a broader field of study, essentially that of literature and history. The next step was to extend the theory to everything. Given the fact that cultural studies sets no limits on what may be studied and, at least theoretically, sets no limits on its methodology, the question is: How, within the parameters of this so-called discipline, does this approach contribute to one’s education? If one’s study involves little more than a form of blogging in which one chats about anything in any manner without making an effort to work within a particular discipline and without striving to study an enriching subject, will not one gradually sink to a lower and lower intellectual level? Civilization has always required discipline and discrimination, but the very idea of any sort of discrimination or discipline is odious to those who promote cultural studies. Civilization is precisely what they are most set against. In their naïve way, what they are seeking is a world of justice and total equality, but the effect of their misguided theory is a world in which everyone will be reduced equally to ignorance. Cultural studies is not in any real sense a discipline at all: it is, as Edmund Burke wrote of the theorists of his own day, “nothing but carte blanche—upon which [one] may scribble whatever he pleases.”

Recent theory has, nonetheless, evolved a number of interpretative strategies calculated to discourage open discussion. One of the revealing characteristics of both deconstruction and New Historicism, and of the plethora of culturally-based theories that have succeeded New Historicism, is a tendency to focus on minutiae at the expense of larger conceptions of meaning—and thus to stifle actual distinctions of any real significance. In Barthes’s focus on linguistic or imagistic fragments, in Paul de Man’s or Hayden White’s insistent campaign to evacuate the literary work of meaning, in Stephen Greenblatt’s dissection of the relation of discrete elements of Shakespearean text to historical curiosities, the task of arriving at an interpretation that offers the reader a new depth of understanding of the work as a whole is largely lost, and intentionally so. It is difficult to challenge an interpretation that offers no general reading of the work, and within our disputatious era, in which graduate students are trained like trial lawyers to go after the assets of any critical approach that dares to posit a meaningful interpretation, there is safety in irrelevance. There seem to be an endless number of critical variants on the theme of silence, each professing greater detachment and passivity: the silence of indeterminacy, the silence of historical relativism, the silence of multiculturalism, the silence of moral perspectivism, and so on. What none of these non-approaches can accomplish is to make known the active good that is the subject
of all true art: the “presence” that lies at the heart of literary art and at the heart of existence itself.

Because of the inherent emptiness of their philosophical origins, none of the poststructuralist or historicist approaches can accomplish what every competent critic from Ben Jonson to Cleanth Brooks assumed to be his essential function: to offer a sensible reading of a significant work of literature. In what they tell us, or refuse to tell us, about literary works of unique importance to our civilization, contemporary theories reveal just how bereft of purpose they are. The negativity and incoherence of the post-1960s approaches can be seen clearly, for example, if one examines what this body of criticism has made of America’s greatest work of fiction, *Moby Dick* (1851). Here is a novel that should excite the imagination of all readers, for it is a work that makes possible profound philosophical and cultural understandings of our national identity and our cultural tradition. At the very heart of that identity and tradition is the conviction that America is a nation dedicated to an overriding moral purpose, and, despite its intricate layers of irony and humor, *Moby Dick* is a work of moral simplicity and discrimination unified by a single great theme: the miraculous goodness of life and the consequent responsibility of men to care for it. Unfortunately, modern theorists have found ways to trivialize even this great novel.

From the perspective of Bakhtin, for example, Melville’s great work would seem to be the occasion for consideration of almost infinite complexity rather than simplicity, a novel of intricate and self-canceling cultural practices rather than the representation of the inherent conflicts and marvelous worth of a particular civilization. From the perspective of Bakhtin, the entire arena of Melville’s usages of the languages with which primitivism was represented at the time of his writing must be considered *before* the extrapolation of any general significance is attempted. These linguistic effects would include the official missionary society and evangelical languages referenced throughout Melville’s satirical chapters on Stubbs’s sermon or the wry explanation of Captain Peleg’s and Sister Charity’s Quakerism; the romantic discourse of the “noble savage,” adopted at times by Melville’s indulgent narrator, Ishmael, and inscribed in Ishmael’s idealization of Queequeg; the discourses—not restricted to verbal, but also gestural, material, and structural—of the savages themselves in relationship to Western society as represented by the whaling industry, military exploits, and missionary societies; Melville’s discussions of artistic representation, reception, literary tradition, and formal qualities of art; and numerous other languages and discourses that are to be found within the novel.

Adopting elements of Bakhtin’s approach, New Historicism might well focus on the relationship and context of our own reading in relation to those of Melville’s contemporaries. For example, Chapter 13, “Wheelbarrow,” might appear to our reading sensibilities as an irresistible allegory of cultural and linguistic contingency. Even the naming of the chapter, “Wheelbarrow” and not “The Wheelbarrow,” initiates this undermining of linguistic authority. As theorists, we would understand that our reading is embedded in a social and historical culture out of which Melville’s telling of Queequeg’s carrying the wheelbarrow is interpreted as a decentering subversion of cultural authority. Our reading foregrounds fictional and linguistic acts as we inscribe our reading practice within Melville’s novel and as simultaneously Melville inscribes his language on our reading. From the theorist’s point of view, one axis of the story might be the hegemon’s comeuppance as Queequeg
reverse the cultural insecurity that he has been made to feel. With its humorous
turns of phrase and fantastic place names (for instance, “Kokovoko” for “a certain
grand merchant ship”), Melville’s text inscribes its own carnivalized tradition of
tall tale, popular culture, and folk tradition through which the ignorant outsider is seen to triumph over the more urbanc and empowered adversary. This sort of cultural turn is so familiar that we may have difficulty actually locating itwithin Melville’s text, but from the perspective of the New Historicism this difficulty itself enriches our reading by suggesting the contingency, and the insufficiency, of our own view.

Our theoretically informed reading is necessarily anthropological, foregrounding the opposition of non-Western and Western cultures that are brought together in the course of whaling, but whaling also finds its analogue in hunting, a universal fact of frontier life, and Melville’s whale hunt is tied to a literature of the early Republic that in the shifting cultural landscape of the past two hundred years has migrated from the identification of the frontier with American identity itself to the conviction of its irrelevance (with its reputed demise in the 1890s) to a new, inverted relevance in which the frontier is now pervasively interrogated as the default setting for a grand scheme of cowboy diplomacy on the part of American imperialism targeting colonized peoples at home and abroad: so much so that, as a genre, the Western can only be revived by subjecting it to the sneering devaluation implicit in a film about cowboys uncertain of their sexual orientation. Now, with the unlimited privacy that its open range affords, the American West is the stage for sexual dithering rather than the locus of moral clarity and action.

Along with the considerable baggage of frontier studies, the theorist brings to the reading of Melville’s novel the anagnorisis of “the savage in the civilized” with its insistence on the endless culpability of Western civilization in relation to all other cultures. In our reading of the rendering of whale into oil, we interpellate more recent forms of human and animal expropriation, cultural practices with which we are all too familiar that it is no longer necessary to discriminate the circumstances or causes of past acts of violence but merely to cite them, along with all practices that might be interpreted as metaphorical renderings of life to thing, to trigger a reflexive disgust. Melville’s humorous taunting of his carnivorous contemporaries must now be read differently, and with less humor, so that when Melville writes that “the first man that ever murdered an ox was regarded as a murderer” and raises the question, “who is not a cannibal?” we so readily concur as not even to reflect on the dubious logic underlying his question. And yet from the Victorian perspective, this passage may have seemed innocuous enough: none of us are really cannibals, and one can enjoy Melville’s jibe without seriously questioning the virtue of one’s own gastronomic practices or the general validity of one’s own civilization.

Our twenty-first-century reading, however, is something else (literally), for here, a self-lacerating doubt has altogether displaced the genteel idealism within which Melville’s reservations might seem purposeful. Nothing can be less purposeful than the proposition that all human beings are blind cannibals, murderers, and degenerates and, thus, that the impulse toward betterment and virtue of any sort is sheer hypocrisy. And yet this is the proposition that we have too readily accepted, since for the theorist Melville’s insight states the obvious: we are all cannibals in some sense—cannibals and Christians, as Mailer would have it—and we are utterly convinced of our own responsibility for all the world’s
woes. Ours is no longer the playful wit of a Victorian-era author secure enough in his culture to raise doubts but the solemn recitation of the unchallengeable fact of our civilization’s absolute corruption.

As the dedicated theorist probes further, he finds that Melville’s novel is implicated in a vast web of intertextuality that lends further weight to the work’s assumed condemnation of the West. Any educated literary treatment of cannibals would reference Michel de Montaigne’s essay, which reflects Montaigne’s own reading of New World texts. For Melville, immersed in Shakespeare’s works at the time of composing *Moby Dick*, cannibalism would of course bring into play *The Tempest*, itself a reading of both Montaigne’s essay and of his sources. Such texts as the record of the Donner expedition, a doomed party of settlers caught in the Sierras and reduced to cannibalism, were part of recent national memory as reported in newspaper accounts and reiterated in memoirs, journals, and biographies of the survivors, those rehabilitated cannibals who in some cases went on to become prominent citizens of what would become America’s most populous state. This simultaneity of all texts, normally functioning on behalf of an infinite deferral of meaning, can nonetheless be deployed to make a point, though one of questionable worth. It is like the argument from mass appeal, aided by a slight elision of logic: everyone seems to be talking of cannibals, so cannibals we must be.

From the Bakhtinian perspective, the chapter intriguingly titled “Whales Variousl Represented” retraces the whale’s image in an unrestricted carnival of levels of representation. From scrimshander to door knockers, from church weathercocks to starry heavens, the interplay of language, apparently related to Melville’s own long exile from Christendom, conflates savage with civilized at the expense of the latter’s pretensions. The process is, once again, the familiar shell game of modern theory with its conclusion that, amid the infinite database of culture, nothing can be asserted and nothing can be understood. With Ishmael’s assertion, “I myself am a savage,” we imagine that we have entered squarely into the anthropological sensibility that is the well-known underpinning of our own nonjudgmental and relativist culture. As Melville appears to favor the so-called primitive art of the Hawaiian savage or the Iroquois Indian over that of Western civilization—with the verbal complexity of the Latin lexicon or the intricate drawings of Albert Dürer—we nod in automatic agreement. Ishmael appeals to our own unchallengeable modernity as he inventories the parallels between savage and sailor avocations and the identical practices of carved portraiture. As he compares Homer’s Shield of Achilles with this so-called primitive art, we accept that our own wise suspicion of the classics has been antedated in the voice of this clever precursor.

Then there is the white whale itself. Whales as researched by Ishmael and as encountered by him directly must be interpreted as a further extension of the novel’s languages of primitivism, while Melville’s representation of the environmental life of the sea involves us in a reflexive reading of ourselves as readers within the conflicting languages appropriate to the natural environment. Again, the list of these languages is long, for they comprise Ishmael’s errors of classification meant partially to subvert the “truth” of scientific language with which nature is said to be known, along with Ahab’s, indeed, the entire crew’s, speculation concerning the mental life of nature and specifically of the degree of malevolence of the whale. Again, heteroglossia discloses the infinitely complex and ultimately incoherent nature of existence. The rapid transformation in the dis-
courses with which readers have absorbed scientific knowledge since 1851 makes it inevitable that we should read differently from Melville in his “Cetology” and other parodic sections. His definition of the whale as “a spouting fish with a horizontal tail” is, of course, a dig at the scientific discourse of classification, and it follows immediately, just as the cultural theorist would wish it, that all human knowledge “supposed to be complete, must for that very reason...be faulty.”

From the New Historist’s perspective, we identify the broad humor of Ishmael’s labored classification of whale as fish, and perhaps we even come to appreciate the fact that such misprision now seems less funny to readers whose stock of common knowledge is now heavily influenced by visual signals rather than verbal categories. By focusing on the complex relationship of contemporary and present-day interpretations of Melville’s parody, including Melville’s notation that Ishmael’s scientific qualifications include merely a single term as a country schoolteacher, the inclusion of Ishmael’s footnotes which parody the format of scientific publication, or the sections on phrenology in Chapter 80 (“The Nut”) that expose a naïve pseudo-science to our scientifically informed reading, we can believe that we are producing a new interpretation of the novel.

With its outlandish mix of phrenology, Emersonian uplift, and Swedenborgian mysticism, Chapter 80 is filled with hazards of interpretation, but its greatest hazard is its tendency to draw us into a consideration of arcane textuality that ultimately has as much significance as the typical internet chat room. The chapter’s complex intertextuality interjects sailor lore such as the identification of the whale’s brain with its sperm magazine, while much of the chapter involves a lampoon of nineteenth-century interests in mysticism. Melville’s parody is wicked, though, oddly enough, our present reading may have recovered some of the mystical and inspirational language which Melville himself satirized, so that we are in one sense able to read the final sentence without irony (Melville’s irony being that the noble false front of the whale is thirty square meters of sheer fat). One part of our “improvement” is likely our self-assurance in the truth of our own greater scientific knowledge: namely, our assurance that ten square inches of brain matter is perfectly suited to the whale’s biological and environmental needs.

Likewise, our conception of Ahab’s relationship to the crew of the Pequod, that vessel named for an extinct tribe (not only foreshadowing the ship’s destruction, but suggesting its present repression under Ahab and all repression of native by European cultures), assumes a repression of heteroglossia in the context of the natural vitality of the socially and racially mixed crew, the collection of Anglo-Saxon officers, a savage class of Negro, Indian, and Polynesian harpooners, and the working-class crew of roughs (plus the unclassifiable Ishmael himself). From this interpretive perspective, the role of Starbuck involves a mediation of discourse: he is the first mate, midway between the captain and crew, loyal to Ahab but always alert to the grumbling and dissenting of repressed heteroglossia as well as to his own discourses of domesticity (his Mary and child at home), his professional as opposed to Ahab’s obsessive code of whaling, his commonsense urging of survival and comfort—a language that Melville inscribes at the beginning of the novel with the homely comforts of the Spouter Inn and the Try Pots—and the pragmatic discourse with which, despite his artistic and philosophical remoteness, Melville, it would seem, is sympathetic. The affectionate representation of this pragmatic view, with whaling as in one sense the most demo-
ocratic paradigm in existence, connects Melville with the Young America movement, especially through his connection with publisher and friend Evert Duyckinck, and with the special historical consciousness of a democratic, expansionist mid-nineteenth-century America.

To reconstruct Melville’s languages as outlined above would involve an immense labor: indeed, it would be an impossible task of historical scholarship to understand fully Melville’s textual readings of fiction, essay, popular history, journals, diaries, letters, as well as the contemporary culture of politics, literature, business, and daily life, all of which he hints at in the extracts, allusions, and asides of *Moby Dick*. A still more complete (and completely impossible) reading would not rest with reconstituting Melville’s text but would bring our own text into dialogue with it, for we are always interpolated into Melville’s novel, creating our reading of it just as Melville and his contemporaries offered a contingent, historically relative reading of the novel that Melville-as-author wrote. Awareness of our different languages might involve, for example, the transformation of labor and of the conditions of work in our time or the representation of the “body” of labor, of the primitive, of the female, or, in the imaging of the harried whale, of nature itself. Melville would seem to connect the conditions of work with the certainty of destruction and with the larger conditions of labor in a society not far removed from the frontier, and the details of whaling in *Moby Dick* seem inevitably to connect the text with aggression in all its metaphorical implications.

If Melville’s language includes rich metaphors of physical hardship and survival, our reading, we confidently assume, affords a richer text grounded in a liberal culture of conciliation and healing. One might bring into relationship, for example, our specialized languages of psychology through which, we may believe, we are likely to read Ahab in more “productive” ways than late-Victorian interpreters who often seemed to admire the conquest of nature. Our own contingent reading involves us in an interpretation of Ahab’s madness more than of his majesty. Consider a 58-year-old legless captain, whose single night of cohabitation with a twenty-year-old bride has produced a male child, as if by immaculate conception.

At this point in our reading, however, a crucial inconsistency emerges. Following the dictates of heteroglossia, we have asserted that a practically infinite number of discourse relationships, all presumably of equal significance, can be discovered in a text as multivalent and polysemic as the one now before our eyes, and, indeed, our critical praxis has uncovered evidence of this level of complexity almost to the point of exhaustion and, in doing so, it has made credible the assertion that an almost infinite variety of relationships may exist. Yet at the same time, contemporary theory, whether it be deconstruction, or New Historicism, or cultural studies, seems always to light on a few particulars within the body of this infinite complexity. No critical appraisal, after all, would be capable of considering all of the elements of heteroglossia in equal detail or in any detail at all: inevitably, unless the criticism is to remain a pointless accretion of detail, a condition with which de Man or White seemed perfectly at ease, some elements will receive greater stress, and this even more so in the space remaining after a large number of elements has been introduced for review.

Following the exhaustive parade of heterogeneous details with which so much of modern criticism is preoccupied, it is simply not feasible to explicate more than a few salient elements. As a result, it turns out that such criticism,
while purporting to be multivalent and impartial, is actually narrow and thesis-driven. At the same time that the infinite complexity of heteroglossia is deployed to undermine the authority of tradition, the modern critic authorizes certain selected ideological precepts of his own. The “overdetermination” of traditional readings, focused on such trivial matters as the spiritual condition of Western civilization, has been superseded by a modish new practice with its own agenda of overdetermination, this one differing from the first in that it is governed by the polemics of narrow interest groups rather than by the long-standing faith of a consensus of believers. Universal matters of ethics and faith have been shunted aside, along with such mundane matters as the consideration of the basis of practical reasoning and the legitimate self-interest of society as a whole.

The supreme representative of this rhetoric of self-interest is, of course, Michel Foucault, although the list of activist theorists who believe that literature is merely a weapon for partisan struggle is long. Aside from Bakhtin and Greenblatt, whom we have already considered, one would have to include Gilles Deleuze, Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Barbara Smith, and Jane Tompkins. For all of these critics, as for Foucault, culture is merely a sideshow to the “real” political, economic, physical existence of human beings. Far from being a normative condition of human culture, however, and even further from being an advance in terms of self-awareness, the desperate condition in which this theory has landed us must be understood as an extreme aberration. The moment of cultural doubt in which we now live, with its ever-present willingness to look for conspiracies and corruptions in the heart of those traditions and authorities that once provided a noble governance to life, represents a sickening moment of cultural retreat.

The brave new world that we have entered with the arrival of poststructuralist theory, and that continues with the influence of historicist and cultural approaches, resembles a new dark ages rather than a renaissance. In the world of endless indeterminacy, moral confusion, and spiritual nihilism that it tenders, the cultural theory of our times is a recipe for extinction like that served up by the Reverend Jones to his followers in British Guiana. Years from now, it will be recognized for what it is, but it is our misfortune to find ourselves in a time of confusion in which even the most outlandish philosophical assertions are accepted without demur. Years from now, we will recognize that theory, the unchallengeable emperor of literary studies, really has not been wearing any clothes, but for the time being there are few who are childlike enough to see the truth for what it is and brave enough to speak out. For now, we are condemned to watch the carnival of fools, one theoretical fashion vying with the other for its place in the embarrassing parade.