Change

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In more than a few reviews of *Is There A Text In This Class?* I have been taken to task for not providing an adequate account of change; and in some cases it was said that the fact of change was one that the notion of interpretive communities could not account for at all. This objection takes different forms, according to the political disposition of the critic; from the right comes the complaint that an interpretive community, unconstrained by any responsibility to a determine text, can simply declare a change without consulting anything but its own desires; this is the burden of an essay by Walter Davis, forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry* and entitled *The Fisher King or Will Zu Macht Im Baltimore*. From the left comes the complaint that an interpretive community, enclosed in the armor of its own totalizing assumptions, is impervious to change and acts only to perpetuate itself and its interests; in this view, represented for example by Catherine Gallagher, the business of an interpretive community and of the theory that privileges it, "is the legitimization of the *status quo*." The two accusations, different as they are, articulate a fear that is based on the same assumption, the assumption that an interpretive community is monolithic and is therefore a new kind of object in relation to which the problem of interpretation is not resolved but merely reinscribed. It is that assumption, I think, which must be challenged, but before challenging it I would first like to look more closely at the process by which change has come to be seen as a problem, as something to be accounted for rather than as a simple and obvious fact of life.

The first thing to note is that under an older (and by no means entirely discredited) epistemology – which we may for convenience label essentialist or foundationalist – change is not a problem at all. It is not a problem because it follows naturally from a certain picture of the scene of interpretation. In that picture, the landscape is dominated by two discrete and independent entitites: the world of objects, in all of its details, and the observing or knowing self, who is furnished at once with the ability to

perceive and with some vocabulary or methodology by means of which what is perceived is given a discursive form. In literary terms, this means a text, a reader and a system of description that reflects a fully articulated universe, complete with genres, periods, styles, a canon, major and minor authors, questions, answers, projects, desiderata, unthinkable thoughts, etc. The goal of criticism under this picture is to give an accurate account of the text, and changes either mark progress toward that goal or (as it is determined later and by hindsight) a retrograde movement in the opposite direction. Progress is made when the machinery of description is refined, when its definitions, categories, levels, etc., have been brought into a closer correspondence with the facts of the text; progress is impeded when that machinery is informed by the bias of an individual observer or a partisan group. The check against interpretive bias is the text, which is at once the object to be described and the judge of which of its descriptions is the more accurate. Change, then, is the function of the text's operation as a regulating and adjudicative principle, and in the best scenario, when the text has fully completed its judicial work, the correct description will have been achieved and change will have ceased.

The comfortable outlines of this picture are blurred however when one substitutes for this foundationalist epistemology an epistemology in which the object to be described cannot be sharply distinguished from the descriptive vocabulary that seems appropriate to it. This is the consequence of a number of arguments that have been made in the last twenty years with increasing success. One could cite Kuhn's contention in *The Structure of Scienctific Revolutions* that since "a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself" (113) and all descriptive languages are paradigm specific, our inquiries always "presuppose a world already perceptually and conceptually divided in a certain way," and we are never in the position of being able to compare that way with a world apprehended independently of any paradigm whatsovever. Or we could refer to Nelson Goodman's assertion (in *Ways of Worldmaking*) that if "I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference, but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames," there is nothing you can say, because our universe consists of "ways of describing . . . rather than of a world of worlds" (2-3). Or we could listen to Richard Rorty as he declares with characteristic brusqueness (in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*) that "there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language," no way "of breaking out of language to compare

it with something else" (xix). Or we could even attend to Stanley Fish when he argues (in *Is There A Text in This Class*? and elsewhere) that we cannot check our interpretive accounts against the facts of the text, because it is only within our accounts – that is within an already assumed set of stipulative definitions, and evidentiary criteria – that the text and its facts, or, rather, a text and its facts, emerge and become available for inspection. Of course there are only representative formulations and there are distinctions to be made between them, but I think it is fair to say that one consequence of following their general line is to make a problem out of change; for it is no longer possible to see change as occurring when the world or a piece of the world forces us to revise or correct our descriptions of it; since descriptions of the world are all we have, changes can only be understood as in description, and we are left with the task of explaining not only how they come about, but why they should ever come about in the first place.

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

One begins to see that there are now not one, but several problems of change: First, there is the problem of *what* changes if the world and its objects are not independent of the characterizations we make of them;

and then there is the problem of how change can be principled, if nothing constrains the community except its own assumptions and procedures; and this leads directly to the problem or puzzle of individual change: how can someone whose perceptions and judgments are delimited by the norms, criteria, and definitions of an interpretive community take note of anything that would lead him to revise those norms, criteria, and definitions? How can a mind that cannot see anything outside its horizon change? There would seem to be only two answers to these questions: either the mind is able to take into account something that is not already presupposed by its assumptions which would mean that the determinations of an interpretive community are corrigible by something independent of it; or the mind remains confined within the circle of community assumptions, and we must reach the counterintuitive conclusion that no one ever changes his mind.

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

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

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

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

field or in an entirely different discipline; and suppose further that it occurred to you suddenly that what you were reading had a direct bearing on your own work and even indicated to you the necessity of revising your understanding of what was involved in that work. This is an experience that most of us will have had, and on its face it would seem to be quite different from the experience of the student in my seminar; for rather than the interaction of two agents or elements in the same framework or community, it would seem that in this imagined situation, someone operating from within a framework or a community had been moved by something outside that framework or community to change.

But in fact that something would not have been noticed at all (at least not in this way) if there had not been already in place the assumption of a general relationship between the two supposedly discrete disciplines. That is, in order for a formulation from economics or mathematics or anthropology to be seen as related to a problem or project in literary studies, literary studies would themselves have to be understood by practitioners in such a way that the arguments and conclusions of economics or mathematics or anthropology could be seen as at least potentially relevant. If, on the other hand, one's sense of the literary were exclusive – if one held to some version of the doctrine of literary autonomy so influential in our century – those same arguments and conclusions, however interesting they might be for any number of reasons, would not be interesting for any literary reason, and therefore would not be perceived as suggesting or demanding a reconsideration of one's literary views. (This does not mean of course that an exclusionary definition of the literary is itself invulnerable to challenge; only that as long as the challenge had not been made – and it too would have to be made in terms that were already recognized as legitimate by the community – the force of the definition will be to render some information irrelevant.) To put the matter in what only seems to be a paradox, in order for something outside of a community to be noticed as a possible stimulus to change, it must already be inside in the sense that at the moment it is noticed it will be noticed as an instance of a connection already implicit in the community's understanding of itself as a mode of inquiry responsible to the facts and theorems of some, but not all, other modes of inquiry.

Consider, as a concrete and historical example, the case of linguistics. The period 1957-1970 witnessed a remarkable growth in the amount of literary work informed by linguistic principles and models. That was also,

not coincidentally, the period of the "Chomskian revolution" and one might think that the conceptual power of Chomsky's formulations, so much the center of discussion in the academy and elsewhere, is sufficient to explain the phenomenon; like so many other intellectuals, literary students simply felt compelled to reconsider their methods and assumptions in the light of something so perspicuously and undeniably far reaching. In fact, however, that is not what happened at all. Only a small percentage of those working in literary studies were markedly affected by Transformational Grammar which came and went without changing at all the way most literary business was done. (This is not to say of course that changes were not being brought about in some other way). Those who did, in fact, alter their ways of reading and writing did so because they were already committed to a view of criticism in which the close study of linguistic facts was central and obligatory; that is, they were in agreement with Harold Whitehall's declaration that "no criticism can go beyond its linguistics" and therefore when linguistics underwent a profound and apparently authoritative change, they were obliged, by the principles they already held, to change too. Those whose principles and commitments were different, those for whom stylistics, Chomskian or any other, was an interesting but fringe activity, could feel free to continue on as before.

The example underscores two points that I have made before: first, that change occurs, not in response to a phenomenon previously unencountered, but when something is from the very first seen as related to an already articulated concern; and second, that an interpretive community is not necessarily monolithic, but can resemble, in Kuhn's words, "a rather ramshackle structure with little coherence among its various parts" (49). This does not mean that there is nothing basic to the sense of the enterprise, only that at levels other than the basic the enterprise can tolerate a diversity of principled practices which can then display different rates and patterns of change. In this context it is instructive to compare the impact of linguistics with the impact of deconstruction, at least in the aspect it has for those who fear it: while linguistics stylistics says to other more traditional modes of criticism, the unity and coherence of the literary text are not where you have assumed them to be but are here, deconstruction seems to reject unity and coherence as values and to call into question the very existence of the text and the literary as simple categories. Consequently it is perceived both by its adherents and opponents as portending changes so fundamental that no one working in literary studies can properly ignore

it; what is at stake seems to be at stake for everyone.

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

But how can that come about? Why should it come about? Why should someone be convinced that the researches of formal linguistics were unrelated to his work or ever change his mind, especially when conditions in the institution were such that he could do what he had always done without penalty? The answer returns us to the way in which an interpretive community is at once homogeneous with respect to some general sense of purpose and purview, and heterogeneous with respect to the variety of practices it can accommodate. Any one of those practices exists in some relationship of assumed justification to that general sense; both those who practice stylistics and those who don't believe that they are engaged in the business of determining meaning and value, and if one wants to persuade the other to his point of view, he will do so by invoking the goal they both

acknowledge and arguing that it cannot be reached except by the route he follows. The stylistician will question the possibility of even talking about meaning in the absence of a fully articulated semantics; the non-stylistician might reply that semantics is merely a formalization of what the sensitive and intelligent critic intuits. Each will have recourse to examples that would seem to challenge the other's assumptions, and so it would go. There is no guarantee of course that the effort at persuasion will be successful, but if it should be, one partly will have changed his understanding of what is internal to his discipline, and that change will have come about by mechanisms that are themselves internal.

There are then at least two ways of explaining change without having recourse to a model in which independent data compel a community to revise its assumptions: (1) change of one kind occurs when already-in-place principles of relevance and noticeability cause an interpretive attention to be paid to something new, which is not really new at all since it is immediately seen as an instance or modification of a relationship internal to the community. And (2) change of another, and in some sense deeper, kind occurs when the principles of relevance and noticeability are themselves altered by confronting those who hold them with principles of a greater generality and arguing that a commitment to those principles requires that more be taken into account than had hitherto been assumed.

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

study or in an informal colloquium on the model of Socratres, and who therefore might welcome the withering away of a structure and a bureaucracy that served only to overwhelm and subvert the true values of the literary experience. In principle, then, the impact on literary studies of a political revolution would be no different than the impact of a revolution in liguistic theory; both would vary with the extent to which the profession or part of the profession did or did not consider the phenomenon as, at some level, a literary one. (Of course, given the general structure of literary studies – the absence of a strong sense of internal continuity – political events are more likely to provoke a change in assumptions than they are, for example, in the world of science, where the researchers have a large stake in believing that they set and solve problems only in response to the demands of nature. Exactly the opposite would be true of the law where the practitioners think of themselves as directly responding to social and political crises.)

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

Weider's example is a community of ex-convicts who live in a half-way house but continue to abide by the convict code. The heart of that code, the task it once directs and commands, is the obligation to show loyalty to the residents by displaying resistance to the staff. As an instance of the code at work Weider recalls an occasion when a resident, upon expressing interest in the formation of a house baseball team, was asked by the director

to organize one himself. He replied, "You know I can't organize a baseball team" and was immediately understood by both the director and the sociologist to have said, "You know that the code forbids me to participate in your program in that way, and you know that I'm not going to violate the code. So why ask me?" (161).

The exchange is illuminating and to my point because the question of organizing a baseball team had not arisen before. This shows that the code is not a list of specific maxims – a closed set of rules that can serve as a self-executing decision procedure – but is rather a general project whose implementation involves the continual discovery of its own content, a discovery that is at the same time the accomplishment of its own alteration. As soon as the resident says what he says and is understood as Weider and the director understand him, two things have happened: (1) the scope of the code has been extended to render intelligible an occurrence it couldn't have predicted (2) the code, which is inseparable from the practices it enables (it cannot be reduced to a formal rule) has been augmented or modified and has therefore changed. The code, in short, has done its work of elaborating the setting, and at the same time it has elaborated itself. The code, then, is not a set of explicit directions or a prescriptive description; rather, as Weider points out, it is "part of life in the halfway house, and it [is] a part that [is] itself included within the scope of things over which it [has] jurisdiction. (152). "In this sense," he concludes, it is more appropriate to think of the code as a continuous, ongoing process, rather than as a set of stable elements of culture which endure through time." In other words, and in terms that are crucial to my own argument, even though it is fully articulated and underwritten by a full fledged philosophy of life complete with an ontology and an epistemology, the code is not monolithic and self-confirming; it is an entirely flexible instrument for organizing contingent experience in a way that does not preclude but renders inevitable its own modification.

It may seem that this flexibility goes only in one direction, the direction of annexation and imperialism. The example suggests that the code as an interpretive strategy operates in the manner of an amoeba, simply surrounding and ingesting anything that comes its unstoppable way. This however is not the case, as we may see by imagining an alternate ending to the story Weider tells. Suppose the director of the half-way house, rather than accepting the resident's response – "You know I can't organize a baseball team." – had chosen to dispute it. What might he have said? Well,

he might have argued that organizing a baseball team was an activity entirely independent of the staff and would have the effect of helping the residents; or he might have pointed out that the suggestion didn't come from him, but from the resident, and that he was simply refusing to do something which could then be done by someone else as a form of resistance. It is true of course that whatever then happened would still be happening under the aegis of the code (were it otherwise the category of the absolute outside would have been revived), but the code will have shown itself to be not a single simple organism, but a set of interlocking assumptions one of which can always be brought into play as a check against the others and all of which are answerable to the complex social situation that is at once the code's mooring and its accomplishment. Admittedly, the circumstances of this example are special, but the analysis can easily be extended to situations that are not special at all. How often have we seen a presidential spokesman, or an attorney or a journalist respond to a question by saying I can't answer because it is a matter of national security or because the case is still under litigation or because it is priviliged information. These are all instances of what Weider calls "telling the code" as a means of organizing and controlling experience, but they are all equally open to a challenge that proceeds from the very same concerns that are being invoked. (It is always possible to question the definitition of priviliged information or to dispute the scope of national security or to counter-invoke the public's right to know.)

The argument has now come full circle and has taken a somewhat curious turn. Where originally the problem seemed to be the interpretive communities were monolithic and therefore impervious to change, I may have now succeeded in making them so flexible and dynamic that change becomes their essence. Rather than the question "how, given the nature of interpretive communities, can anything be the occasion of change," we are now confronted with the question, "how given the nature of interpretive communities, can anything *not* be the occasion of change?" It might seem that our entire inquiry has collapsed because it has found randomness, but in fact, it has only found history. That is, rather than a theory of change that would chart a predictive and necessary relationship between change and a particular set of stimuli, we have a way of thinking about change as something that does or does not occur in particular institutional situations where this or that set of in-place-concerns can lead to the noticing and taking into account of an open ended, although not infinite, range of

phenomena. In general anything can cause change, although in particular circumstances change will be brought about by the relevancies which those circumstances render recognizable. As Hubert Dreyfus says of human behavior as a whole, change is always orderly, but never rule-governed. It cannot be formalized, but neither is it mysterious. One can at least attempt to understand it case by case, that is, by the patient historical reconstruction of its conditions, but one cannot understand it in a way that would make possible anything like a general account.

What this means, among other things, is that it is impossible to identify in advance something that is inherently or by nature an agent of change, and this brings us to a topic that had surfaced fleetingly some pages ago, the relationship between change and theory. For both proponents and detractors of theory that relationship is usually assumed to be close. When Jonathan Culler declares in *On Deconstruction* that theoretical inquiry leads to "changes in assumptions, institutions, and practice" (154), he articulates an article of faith held by theorists and anti-theorists alike. Thus the first respondent to a recent survey in *New Literary History* declares that "Literary theory should contribute to the changing of social and professional institutions,' (XIV, 1983, No. 2; 411), while another asserts in a similar vein that "A basic function of literary theory consists in opening up new realms of investigation," and a third regards literary theory as, at least potentially, a "well-defined practice, of social critique and social redirection" (434). These large claims are not disputed but are made the basis of fear by those who see in theory the spectre of frivolous and value-subverting change and hope, as one respondent put it, that when the rage for theory abates, "the study of literature can continue its uninterrupted course without having suffered any permanent damage" (437).

Both sides agree that theory is something special, something that stands apart from the field of practice which is either reformed by theory or misled by its beguiling ways. But to conceive of theory in this way is once again to revive the picture in which a community is provoked to revise its assumptions by an independent agency. On the analysis offered here, however, the agent of change must already be a component in the field it alters, and so it is with theory. No theory can compel a change that has not in some sense already occurred, although it may seem both those who promote it and those who resist it that what has been proposed is entirely new. Not long ago an old friend rushed up to me brandishing a copy of *PMLA* and crying "look at what you and your kind have done." The object of his

ire was a reading of a novel to which he had devoted much of his career; and yet he complained, this essay, published in the profession's leading journal, spoke to no concerns he could recognize and was written in a style he found impenetrable. This sad state of affairs, he was convinced, was directly attributable to the appearance on the scene of deconstruction. But in fact, deconstruction is no more or less than a particularly arresting formulatin of principles and procedures that have been constitutive of literary and other studies for some time. Indeed, deconstruction would have been literally unthinkable were it not already an article of faith that literary texts are characterized by a plurality of meanings and were it not already the established methodology of literary studies to produce for a supposedly "great text" as many meanings as possible. Of course, deconstruction takes the additional step of attributing these meanings not to the text as a special kind of object, but to interpretation as a force unconstrained by independent and determinate facts, but this step too can be seen to follow from the growing influence in this century of hermenutical thought with its emphasis on contexts, cultural matrices, and gestalts. It goes without saying that I vastly oversimplify what in the full telling would be an immensely complex story, but even if that story were told, its point, I think, would turn out to be the same: rather than something new which in its newness gives rise to revolutionary practices, deconstruction is a programmatic and tendentious focusing of ways of thinking and working that have already come to be regarded as commonplace and orthodox. That is why, when deconstructionist doctrine began to be promulgated one of the first things people did was to exclaim that so and so – usually Kenneth Burke – was a deconstructionist before there was a name for it; or that they themselves, in the manner of Moliere's gentleman, had been speaking deconstruction all their lives.

What is true of deconstruction is true of any theory, so called. It is an articulation of a shift that has in large part already occurred; it announces a rationale for practices already in force; it provides banner under which those who are already doing what it names can march; and it provides a visible target for those who have long thought that things are going from bad to worse. In a sense, then, a theory does cause change since it will give rise to controversy, and lead to the calling of symposia, and the founding of journals, and the funding of chairs, but these are the consequences of any practice that can be identified and imitated; and they are not consequences that can be described as revolutionary or groundbreaking. In other

words theory does not cause change on the level claimed by those who either see it as the means of salvation or fear it as the subverter of values. It does not even cause critical self-consciousness or make one aware of one's assumptions; first, because self-consciousness is a necessary condition of any activity even if one can not produce its informing principles on demand; and second, because if one were to produce those principles – that is, make one's assumptions explicit – that activity would itself occur within assumptions of which one was not and could not be aware. All of which is to say that theory's project – the attempt to get above practice and lay bare the grounds of its possibility – is an impossible one (this some of you will recognize as the argument of the Knapp-Michaels essay *Against Theory*). Theory is a form of practice, as rooted in particular historical and cultural conditions as any other, and as in the case of any other, the extent to which its introduction will or will not give rise to changes, small and large, cannot be determined in advance.

This returns us to the question with which we began: what is the relationship between the theory of interpretive communities and change? In fact, it is three questions. First one might ask, does an interpretive community encourage or license change by relieving its members of any responsibility to the world or to the text, or does it inhibit change by refusing to take into account anything that is contrary to its assumptions and interests? The bulk of this essay has been concerned to demonstrate that this question, in either its left or right versions, is misconceived: since an interpretive community is an engine of change, there is no status quo to protect, for its operations are inseparable from the transformation of both its assumptions and interests; and since the change that is inevitable is also orderly – constrained by evidentiary procedures and tacit understandings that at once enable change and are changed by what they enable – license and willful irresponsibility are never possibilities. A second question looks very much like the first, but is slightly different, for it is concerned not with the work interpretive communities do, but with the work done by the fact that the term "interpretive community" is available to practitioners as a mode of self-description. Does this fact give comfort to those who want to turn everything upside down, or is it ammunition for those who want everything to go on as before? The answer is the same. The desire of neither party is authorized by the notion of interpretive communities which says to the left "anything you can do I can do better" and to the right, "the more things stay the same, the more they change." There is, however,

a third question. What is likely to be the effects of the intervention in the field of the theory of interpretive communities? Which of the parties now contending for control of the profession's machinery will turn the theory to most advantage? That question has an answer, although the answer I must now give is, "I don't know." The reason it has an answer is that it is an empirical question, directed not at the political implications built into the theory (there are none), but at the political consequences of having the theory as a resource. It is undoubtedly the case that the practice, of professing interpreive communities will, like any other practice, participate in the ongoing modification of the enterprise, but the shape and the extent of that participation is not predictable because the relationship between the emergence of a theory and change is not theoretical.

Two more questions, and we will be done, at least for today. First, what has all of this to do with writing the history of modern criticism? The answer returns us to the distinction made earlier between a foundationalist or essentialist epistemology and an epistemology in which the objects of critical attention only emerge and become available for description within the definitions and categories of understanding that are constituitive of the critical community itself. In the context of the first epistemology one can distinguish three activities, the writing of literature, the writing of accounts of literature, and the writing of the history of the accounts of literature, each of which bears a different relationship to change. While literature changes in the sense of evolving into new forms and hybrids, the work of literature, once produced, remains the same; accounts of literature continually change as the mechanism of description is refined; and those changes are the subject of the history of the accounts of literature. In the context of a conventionalist epistemology, however, change occurs at all levels and in ways that are interdependent. Since the shape of a work or a period or a canon only emerges within the definitions and categories in force in the critical community, any change in that community's practice means changes in the very objects of the community's attention; and by the same reasoning, any change in the writing of the history will at once reflect and contribute to changes in that practice, since the history is itself a practice within the field whose story it tells. In short, to write the history of criticism is not simply to record changes, but to produce them, and to produce them even to the extent of altering the phenomena to which both the history and the criticism are supposedly responsible.

I hasten to add that this analysis brings with it no methodological

consequences. Those who write histories of literature or of criticism will still write them with the conviction that their descriptions are definitive and their evaluations just; and they will do so whether or not they make the currently obligatory disclaimer (in fact a claim) about being aware of the status of their own discourse. Of course the kind of history that gets written may now change, at least if it is written by those who have learned the lesson Derrida and others have been teaching. For some time now, I have been preparing a history of the criticism of *Paradise Lost*, books XI and XII, from 1942 to the present in an attempt to answer the question, how is it that in 1942 C. S. Lewis was able to dismiss books XI and XII as an "untransmuted lump of futurity," whereas by 1982 those same books (apparently no longer the same) had come to be regarded as the poem's very center? What is different about this history is that it is not presented as a record of discrete insights, each of which is more or less adequate to the facts of an abiding text, but as a linked and dynamic sequence in which what one takes to be the text's facts, and therefore the text itself, is continually changing. What is not different about this history is the commitment of the author to its facts, a commitment that will survive, even when, as so often happens in the course of a scholarly project, his sense of what those facts are has been changed.

This brings me to the second question, change in relation to what? This question faces in two directions. First of all, the very notion of change would seem to require a continuity or stability against which it can be measured. In Robert Nisbet's words, "Only when the succession of differences in time may be seen to relate to some object, entity, or being the identity of which persists through all the successive differences, can change be said to have occurred" (*Social Change*, p. 1). But in the picture that I have been drawing objects have a relational rather than a substantial identity; rather than standing in relief against an indifferent background, they are a function of that background, of the system of differences in the context of which entities, or in Saussure's phrase, positive terms, can be said to exist. Any shift in the system, in the categories of understanding that inform perception, will bring with it new entities of which it would be inappropriate to say that they are changed instances of a persisting identity. The problem, to put it simply, is that unless something stays the same, the concept of change loses its bite, and it might be better to drop it altogether in favor of the language of simple succession, of one thing after another.

Such a solution, however, would be unnecessarily severe, and insofar as it were urged a say of being more faithful to "what really happens," it would reintroduce the category of uninterpreted or community-independent experience. That is, it is a mistake to think of change or its absence as an emprical fact, and therefore to think of the question "has it or has it not occurred" as preliminary to any attempt to account for it within the perspective of some institution or descriptive system. Rather, it is only from within the perspective of some institution or descriptive system that change is or is not a feature. Change, in short, is an interpretive fact, and the shape it has or does not have will be a function of the way in which an enterprise conceives of itself, of the story it at once tells about itself and lives out in the actions of its members. Is there change in the law? It depends on whether a lawyer or a judge thinks of himself as applying fixed and stable principles to changing social conditions or as responding to changing social conditions by formulating new principles or, even, as applying fixed and stable principles to social conditions that esentially remain the same. In general, the law has a stake in the first and third versions of its enterprise and tends to resist the doctrine of legal realism by invoking the elaborate machinery of precedent, a machinery that claims to bring the present in line with an ordered and settled past. The scientific community has an even greater stake in its own continuity, and one suspects that, despite the wide circulation of Kuhn's arguments, most scientists continue to think of themselves as constrained in their labors by an unchanging nature and continue to believe that what changes are the descriptions of herself that nature either confirms or rejects. The assumption of continuity is also necessary to anyone who would write the history of philosophy from the beginnings to the present, an exercise which, as Rorty has recently reminded us, depends on "the idea that philsophy is the name of a natural kind, . . . of a discipline which in all ages and places, has managed to dig down to the same deep fundamental questions" (21). The very project of such a history involves a commitment to the durability of these questions to which a succession of philosophers have given answers of varying adequacy. In literary history and the history of criticism the position occupied by the great philosophical questions is often occupied by the genres assumed to be major and by the approaches assumed to be basic; changes are explained as variations on a few persisting forms and the story then told is a cyclical rather than a progressive one. Of course, that is not the only story being currently told; for those who write under the influence of the new his-

toriography as represented in the work of Foucault and others, the persistence of genres, either in literature or criticism, is a fiction, and the truth is that even when the vocabulary of an enterprise remains stable its terms refer to radically different principles. In the resulting narrative, change is at once inevitable and somewhat mysterious, since the assumptions impelling this kind of history forbid the discovery of a pattern too regular or too rational.

In all of these cases, and in any others that can be imagined, a theory of change is inscribed in the self description that at once directs and renders intelligible the characteristic labors of workers in the community. The question of change is therefore one that cannot be posed independently of some such self-description which gives a shape to the very facts and events to which the question is put. What must be resisted (although it seems as natural as breathing) is the temptation to ask another question – "but what really happened?" or "what after all the interpretive descriptions have been set aside, can one say about change on a miminal phenomenal level?" The answer is "nothing," since change only exists on the level of cultural percepions and practices; which does not mean, as I have already said, that the concept should be abandoned in the illusion that one had thereby escaped interpretive complicity, but that when we use it – to say things like "I've changed my mind" or "there's been a change in foreign policy" or "Milton decisively changes the possibilities available to epic poets" – the word has force in relation to a stability or identity that is itself a function of some interpretive perspective to which the community is committed. In short, relative to assumptions and definitions firmly in place, (and some always are) the word "change" is not only perfectly serviceable; it is necessary and correct.

But once again, change in relation to what? or, what's the point? That is, for many people, an intellectual enterprise – be it literary criticism, or philosophy, or science – is legitimized finally by its goal, and it is in relation to some goal that changes must be justified. Otherwise, it is often said, change would be "mere" change or meaningless change or change for change's sake. The idea is that change is intolerable unless it is perceived as progress and that the sense of progress must be underwritten by a belief in the achievability of some desired end. Now one can understand this in two ways. In the first and stronger way the word "end" is taken to refer to that time when a particular activity will cease, because, for example, all of the world's goods will have been equitably distributed or all of the world's

texts correctly described. But while this may be a desire periodically voiced, it does not correspond, I think, to anything that a practitioner in the field really wants. Is it really the case that we do what we do so that there will come a day when we are not called upon any longer to do it? Should such a day ever seem to be approaching, in literary studies or any other, I venture to predict that there will suddenly be the discovery that the problem was more complicated than we had assumed, the discovery that the last word has not yet been explicated.

There is, however, another way to take the word "end," so that it refers not to an ultimate state of rest or closure but to a time when things will be better, where "better" is understood in relation to the perceived deficiencies of our present circumstances. This is Kuhn's understanding when he suggests that we think of progress not as teleplogical, but as "evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time" (17), and it is, I would contend the understanding under which we all labor even when we speak as if the end we have in mind were transcendental. In short, there is no need to envision a point or a goal outside of practice because practice is at every moment organized in relation to goals already known, although it should now go without saying that the accomplishment of those goals will be inseparable from the emergence of others and therefore inseparable from the call for more practice. Perhaps the most persistent charge against the notion of interpretive communities is that it seems to make disciplinary and professional activity its own end; but since that end itself is continually changing, the charge can be cheerfully embraced because it says only that the members of a community will always believe in the ends for which they work, and that therefore their work will never be ended even though it will be ceaselessly transformed.