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# The History of Theory

Ian Hunter

Do you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind? Why critique, this most ambiguous *pharmakon*, has become such a potent euphoric drug? You are always right! When naïve believers are clinging forcefully to their objects . . . you can turn all of those attachments into so many fetishes and humiliate all the believers by showing that it is nothing but their own projection, that you, yes you alone, can see. But as soon as naïve believers are thus inflated by some belief in their own importance, in their own projective capacity, you strike them by a second uppercut and humiliate them again, this time by showing that, whatever they think, their behavior is entirely determined by the action of powerful causalities coming from objective reality they don't see, but that you, yes you, the never sleeping critic, alone can see. Isn't this fabulous? Isn't it really worth going to graduate school to study critique?

—BRUNO LATOUR, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?"<sup>1</sup>

One of the most striking features of recent discussions of the moment of theory in the humanities is the lack of even proximate agreement about what the object of such theory might be and about the language in which it has been or should be conducted. For Terry Eagleton the object of theory is culture—understood as the dialectical moment in which the making of meaning encounters its own social determination—and its language is a version of Marxian social theory, to which Eagleton has recently added some Aristotelian ballast.<sup>2</sup> For Robert Pippin, though, theory's object is the conditions of knowledge as first posed by Kant and then taken up in other disciplines, while the language of theory is that of post-Kantian critical philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Other commentators take the object of theory to be language or literature or the mode of literary production—an object possibly threatened with displacement by electronically mediated images and digitized communications—and locate theory's language in the discourse of literary criticism, albeit in diverse forms.<sup>4</sup> This diversity could be extended without

This paper was originally written for the History of Theory Seminar, hosted by the Centre for the History of European Discourses at the University of Queensland (2005–6). I would like to thank the seminar participants for their contributions to a shared intellectual agenda, with special appreciation to Peter Cryle, Barry Hindess, Noel King, Amanda McDonald, Jeffrey Minson, David Saunders, and Gary Wickham for their comments on the present paper.

1. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 238–39.

2. See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York, 2003).

3. See Robert Pippin, "Critical Inquiry and Critical Theory: A Short History of Nonbeing," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 424–28.

4. See Elizabeth Abel, "Mania, Depression, and the Future of Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 336–39, and Fredric Jameson, "Symptoms of Theory or Symptoms for Theory?" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 403–8.

much difficulty. Habermas makes discourse or the “ideal speech situation” into the core object of theory, discussing it in a highly elaborated post-Kantian social theory. For Derrida (as we shall see below) what matters is *différance*, understood as the liquefaction of formalized meanings and structures carried out in Derrida’s improvisation on the discourse of transcendental phenomenology.

These differences are real enough to unsettle any calm investigation of the history of theory. They have given rise to an expansive and vehement apologetics in which a whole series of mutually hostile dyads—the formal and the material, the semiotic and the economic, the sociological and the psychoanalytic, the logic of *différance* and the logic of society—do battle for the privilege of foundational status or else seek peace in an endless series of dialectical reconciliations. Historical reflection on the moment of theory is of course possible from within the field of theoretical contest itself, but only, as it turns out, in the form of philosophical history and historical hermeneutics. Eagleton thus historicizes the 1960s “theory boom” in terms of the incorporation of culture itself into the productive processes of late capitalism. This development both gives new importance to cultural theorists, yet also ensures their impotence. That is, a predisposition towards idealism, formalism, and relativism leaves the domain of the material and economic untouched, eventually giving rise to Richard Rorty rather than Vladimir Lenin.<sup>5</sup> This history, however, is a pure projection of Eagleton’s theoretical doctrine—that is, his conception of culture as the intellect’s attempt to think the forces that determine its thinking—and is thus doomed to defend a particular sectarian patch within the field of theoretical contestation.

Rather than pursuing a philosophical history that provides theory with unifying conditions of possibility, we should begin a history of theory by topicalizing the fact of irresolvable conflict between rival accounts of such

5. See Eagleton, *After Theory*, pp. 24–30, 44–49, 95–102.

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conditions. Such conflict is in keeping with the observation that the theory boom began when a certain kind of philosophical interrogation surfaced inside a wide variety of disciplines—linguistics, literary criticism, sociology, political economy, the “psy” disciplines, even jurisprudence—where it assumed the form of an array of associated but rivalrous theoretical vernaculars. This is a pointer to why it is fruitless to begin a history of theory by trying to identify its common object or shared language. Unlike natural scientific theories, the theory that emerged in the humanities and social sciences in the 1960s was not defined by its object because it surfaced in disciplines with quite divergent objects: linguistics and legal studies, literature and anthropology, the study of folktales and the analysis of economic modes of production. Further, the theoretical vernaculars that emerged at this time differed significantly, sometimes in accordance with the university faculties where theorists were employed, but also in accordance with divergent (or only partially overlapping) national intellectual contexts. The Kant that John Rawls used to reconstruct American “rational choice” political science thus differs markedly from the (post-Husserlian) Kant that Jürgen Habermas used to propel his transformation of German metaphysics into a communicational social theory. Similarly, while British and French Marxists both used Louis Althusser to combat their “humanist” predecessors, the Althusserianism that emerged from the attack on British romantic historicism (E. P. Thompson) differed significantly from that which emerged from the attack on French existentialist and Hegelian Marxism. One could make similar remarks about the difference between a literary structuralism dedicated to overthrowing the peculiarly English phenomenon of “Leavisism” and one developing in the context of French phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics.

It is understandable, then, that some commentators should have declared the contents of theory to be so diverse as to make the term unusable. From the standpoint of an empirically oriented intellectual history, however, the fact that this term—together with its cognates *structuralism* and *poststructuralism*—has been used to nominate a series of intellectual developments is itself something to be investigated. The *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*—with its selections from Althusser and Barthes; through Jakobson and Jameson, Kristeva and Lacan; to Saussure and Todorov—may be regarded as weighty proof of the nominalist existence of theory, particularly when taken together with its omnibus countertext, *Theory's Empire*, even if these texts also point to theory's natural home: the American humanities graduate school.<sup>6</sup> If not a single object or a single

6. See *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York, 2001), and *Theory's Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*, ed. Daphne Patai and William H. Corral (New York, 2005).

language, though, then what is it about the manifold forms of theory that has prompted both its exponents and opponents to acquiesce in a single name for them?

In beginning to answer this question, we can suggest that if the various developments referred to in the moment of theory are unified neither by a common object nor by a single theoretical language they can, however, still be viewed as participating in a shared intellectual attitude or deportment, albeit to different degrees. This attitude is skeptical towards empirical experience (in a more or less Kantian way), but also towards a priori formalisms—which it regards as foreclosing a higher level (“transcendental”) experience—and hence cultivates openness to breakthrough phenomena of various kinds. It will be argued that this attitude is characteristic of a particular kind of intellectual persona sustained by a certain inner discipline and that providing an account of this persona and discipline is central to, without being exhaustive of, historical reflection on the moment of theory.<sup>7</sup> Our first encounter with this attitude, and with its prime philosophical discourse, will be paradoxical, however. For it will be an unavoidable (but in the end helpful) confrontation with the doctrine that the history of theory is an impossible undertaking.

#### Is a History of Theory Possible?

In an early essay entitled “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology,” first presented as a lecture in 1959, Jacques Derrida provides an exemplary account of why philosophy and philosophical truth cannot be subject to historical description. In doing so he draws deeply on some of the central thematics of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, offering us a revealing insight into the fundamental role played by this variant of German university metaphysics in the emergence of what would become known as deconstructive philosophy and, more generally, theory.

As part of his argument that, properly understood, there is no clash between the concepts of structure and genesis, Derrida points to a series of harmonized tensions within transcendental phenomenology itself. He does this by opening a bracket in the middle of a sentence, thus:

(it [Husserl’s phenomenology] is a philosophy of essences always considered in their objectivity, their intangibility, their apriority; but, by the same token, it is a philosophy of experience, of becoming, of the temporal flux of what is lived, which is the ultimate reference; it is also a

7. For detailed historical investigations of the cultivation of particular kinds of philosophical personae, see *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, ed. Conal Condren, Stephen Gaukroger, and Ian Hunter (Cambridge, 2006).

philosophy in which the notion of “transcendental experience” designates the very field of reflection, in a project which, in Kant’s eyes for example, would have derived from teratology.)<sup>8</sup>

Not the least interesting aspect of this virtuoso parenthesis is the manner in which it manages to encapsulate the relation between Husserl’s metaphysics and its Kantian predecessor. In Kantian terms Husserl’s notion of “transcendental experience,” or the transcendental phenomenon, would indeed be monstrous. After all, the whole point of Kantian phenomena is that they never reveal the transcendent objects that may underlie them. Such phenomena always appear within the limits of subjective categories of understanding and forms of experience, which may never be broken through since they constitute human (as opposed to divine or angelic) knowledge. In seeking to go beyond Kantian metaphysics, Husserl posits a special kind of experience. This is one in which the object self-manifests, somehow displaying its transcendent conditions of intelligibility immediately, as an experience, hence revealing itself in the formalized “Kantian” field of knowledge as a disturbing foreign body. This breakthrough object—Derrida calls it “noema” rather than noumena—offers the prospect of a fundamental “opening” to being as something “other,” and thus also the prospect of overcoming ossified identity and the chance of “becoming” in the flux of life. Derrida also regards this breakthrough object as the condition of all possible “regions” of meaning and structure (which will emerge to meet it) and as the condition of their undoing (as the result of further anarchic breakthroughs):

This real nonappurtenance to any region at all, even to the archi-region, this *anarchy* of the noema is the root and very possibility of objectivity and of meaning. . . . In any event, the transcendental opening is simultaneously the origin and the undoing, the condition of possibility and a certain impossibility of every structure and of every systematic structuralism. [“GS,” p. 163]

We will return to this characteristically vatic remark below, as it contains important clues to the inseparability of structuralism and poststructuralism. For the moment, though, we are concerned with the consequences of this “transcendental experience” or opening to being for the prospects of a history of theory. The short answer is that it makes the history of theory impossible. In a striking reprise of the history of Christian university metaphysics, Derrida posits the transcendent onto which philosophy opens as the domain of infinite omnitemporal being as truth, in relation to which

8. Jacques Derrida, “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), p. 156; hereafter abbreviated “GS.”

all merely finite, time-bound viewpoints—the domain of history—must remain uncomprehending and subordinate:

This meaning of truth, or of the pretension to truth, is the requirement of an absolute, infinite omni-temporality and universality, without limits of any kind. The Idea of truth, that is the Idea of philosophy or of science, is an infinite Idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense. Every totality, every finite structure is inadequate to it. Now the Idea or the project which animates and unifies every *determined* historical structure, every *Weltanschauung* is finite: on the basis of the structural description of a *vision of the world* one can account for everything except the infinite opening to truth, that is, philosophy. ["GS," p. 160]

Given the usual cares and concerns of temporal life, though, what is it that might motivate someone to take up this remarkable deportment of openness to infinite omnitemporal being? Derrida first answers this question by appealing to the self-enclosed inadequacy of all naturalistic and causalist "genetic" viewpoints: "The transition to the phenomenological attitude is made necessary, thus, by the impotence or philosophical fragility of genetism when the latter, by means of a positivism which does not understand itself, believes itself capable of enclosure by a 'science-of-facts' (*Tatsachenwissenschaft*), whether this be a natural science or science of the mind" ("GS," p. 159). This too is an important pointer—to theory's posture of critique adopted in relation to so-called empiricist and positivist sciences—to which we shall return. For the moment, though, it is enough to observe that this strategy cannot explain why anyone would adopt the "phenomenological attitude" because it assumes that this attitude has already been adopted; that is, it presumes that nonphenomenological sciences are indeed claustral formalisms whose finite views of the world vainly foreclose the "infinite opening to truth."

Derrida's second and more fundamental answer to this question is of much greater interest, however, even if it is unsatisfactory in the end. For here Derrida answers in terms of the special intellectual act—the "transcendental reduction" or *epoché*—that one must perform in order to enter the condition of openness to the infinite and to have the transcendental experience. The transcendental reduction is the inner act of suspending one's commitments to all empirical viewpoints and positivistic formalisms, thereby preparing oneself for the irruptive appearance of the noematic transcendental phenomenon. According to Derrida, however, the question that we are driving towards—the question of the possibility of the transcendental reduction—cannot be answered because it cannot be asked. As the source of all possible structures of meaning and acts of questioning, the

transcendental reduction cannot itself be interrogated for its conditions of possibility:

The question of the possibility of the transcendental reduction cannot expect an answer. It is the question of the possibility of the question, opening itself, the gap on whose basis the *transcendental I*, which Husserl was tempted to call “eternal” . . . is called upon to ask itself about everything, and particularly about the possibility of the unformed and naked factuality of nonmeaning, in the case at hand, for example, of its own death. [“GS,” pp. 167–68]

But this too is an example of someone already committed to a philosophy attempting to motivate its adoption from the inside. The notion that questions ask themselves is an instance of a philosophy attempting to lift itself into existence via its own bootstraps. And in the end it fails to capture the allure and power of the transcendental reduction itself. A different kind of questioning and mode of attention is required to bring this to light. Rather than imagining that questions ask themselves or that positivist sciences declare their own insufficiency, we must shift our attention to the means by which we are induced to enter into a certain kind of questioning and to cultivate a certain inner distrust of available knowledge. This entails asking such questions as, What kind of relation to myself do I establish when I seek to suspend commitment to my existing “natural” knowledges and experiences? What is it about me that is called into question and targeted for transformation as a result of this? What kind of spiritual or intellectual exercise do I perform on myself when undertaking the transcendental reduction? And to what kind of persona do I aspire on the basis of this inner exercise? With such questions, which derive from a certain form of intellectual history, we open a space for the history of theory.<sup>9</sup>

The pertinence of these questions will be clear as soon as we turn to one of Husserl’s characteristic formulations of the *epoché* or transcendental reduction; for what emerges is indeed a highly distinctive kind of spiritual exercise:

9. For the role of such self-questioning in setting the scene for acts of ethical self-problematization and self-transformation, see Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality* (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 25–32. For an account of its role in motivating and shaping the cultivation of a distinctive and prestigious philosophical self or way of life, see Pierre Hadot, *Plotinus, or the Simplicity of Vision*, trans. Michael Chase (Chicago, 1993); Peter Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, Wis., 1992), pp. 118–58; and Hunter, “The Morals of Metaphysics: Kant’s Groundwork as Intellectual *Paideia*,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Summer 2002): 908–29.

We perform the epoché—we who are philosophizing in a new way—as a transformation of the attitude which precedes it not accidentally but essentially, namely, the attitude of natural human existence which, in its total historicity, in life and science, was never before interrupted. . . .

What must be shown in particular and above all is that through the epoché a new way of experiencing, of thinking, of theorizing, is opened to the philosopher; here, situated *above* his own natural being and *above* the natural world, he loses nothing of their being and their objective truths and likewise nothing at all of the spiritual acquisitions of his world-life or those of the whole historical communal life; he simply forbids himself—as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of his direction of interest—to continue the whole natural performance of his world-life; that is, he forbids himself to ask questions which rest upon the ground of the world at hand, questions of being, questions of value, practical questions, questions about being or not-being, about being valuable, being useful, being beautiful, being good, etc. . . . This is not a “view,” an “interpretation” bestowed upon the world. Every view about . . . “the” world has its ground in the pregiven world. It is from this very ground that I have freed myself through the epoché; I stand *above* the world, which has now become for me, in a quite peculiar sense, a *phenomenon*.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Derrida’s insistence that it lies beyond historical conditions of possibility, here we can recognize the transcendental reduction as an instance of an entirely characteristic and eminently historical exercise in philosophical self-questioning and self-transformation.<sup>11</sup> Initiated by an existential act of self-forbidding or abstention from the “world at hand,” the *epoché* is something performed rather than investigated. It is something that individuals do to themselves when, as the result of their induction into a specialized form of self-questioning, they are already convinced of a fundamental ethical shortcoming—their closure within the dead “natural” forms of understanding—which can only be overcome by performing the inner work that will turn them into a certain kind of philosopher or theorist.

In this regard it might look as if Eagleton is better placed to grasp the concrete motivation of the critical attitude than Derrida, for Eagleton ascribes this to history, in fact to the crisis that supposedly occurred when

10. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill., 1970), pp. 151–52.

11. Compare Hadot’s comments on the transcendental reduction as a variation on the long-standing exercise of “return to the self,” in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Chase, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford, 1995), pp. 65–66.

culture was incorporated into late capitalism and lost its autonomy, thereby impelling critical self-consciousness: “It is this critical self-reflection which we know as theory. Theory of this kind comes about when we are forced into a new self-consciousness about what we are doing.”<sup>12</sup> In treating the distrust of empirical knowledges and ordinary experience as something compelled by history, however, Eagleton obscures the contingent character of the requisite acts of self-problematization no less than does Derrida. He turns the program of thought thinking its own conditions into something required of reason by history rather than something required of university students undergoing a certain kind of intellectual formation.

The *epoché* is an act of inner ethical labor or asceticism, oriented to a certain kind of self-transformation. In this regard, from a historical viewpoint, the transcendental reduction is simply one among a series of exercises in philosophical self-culture. Since classical antiquity these have provided intellectuals with the ethical means for such undertakings as controlling anger, conquering the fear of death, restraining the passions, purging the senses, ascending to a vision of God, and so on.<sup>13</sup> The only thing that sets the transcendental reduction and the “phenomenological attitude” apart in this field is the particular means it chooses to lead its inductees across the threshold of self-questioning and self-transformation and the particular intellectual persona that it seeks to cultivate on the basis of this regimen. The apprentice phenomenologist or theorist is thus not someone whose task is to control their anger or restrain their lust—not someone who must monitor and control their relation to sexual partners or political subordinates—but someone who must forbid themselves from continuing what Husserl calls “the whole natural performance of his world-life.” In fact, what is enjoined is an act of inner abstention from a whole array of knowledges and judgments arising from the “factual” sciences and practical morality. The aim is for the individual to suspend ordinary consciousness and to cultivate a specific kind of inner attentiveness—“as a philosopher, in the uniqueness of his direction of interest”—in order to attain what Derrida calls the “virgin glance.” This is a state of presuppositionless heightened anticipation into which the transcendental phenomenon can irrupt, bringing with it a view of the world briefly untouched by the designs of human hands and human consciousness. In other words, in its first iteration the transcendental reduction is a spiritual exercise for a certain kind of university metaphysician rather than, for example, a courtier or a warrior, a monk in the service of Christ or a jurist in the service of a prince.

12. Eagleton, *After Theory*, p. 27.

13. See Ilsetraut Hadot, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung* (Berlin, 1969), and Paul Rabbow, *Seelenführung: Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (Munich, 1954).

This cultivated openness to being can appear as a state of rapt attentiveness to the self-manifestation of things. It is no less present, though, in the posture of intellectual contempt for the sciences of facts that must be placed under abstention if one is to enter into the critical frame of mind. In any case, it seems clear that what is at stake here is not a breakthrough to infinite, omnitemporal, and universal being—nor indeed the manifestation of a crisis in the mode of cultural production—but a highly specific kind of spiritual exercise. This is one that performs the transcendent breakthrough in a kind of inner theater that must be staged by all those undergoing this particular form of philosophical self-cultivation. Above all, we can note the shaping of a certain kind of intellectual persona, characterized by the desire to interrupt ordinary life and knowledge in order to rise above it, to look down on it, to be someone for whom and to whom the world declares itself in all its purity. This persona, who critically subordinates all of the regions of knowledge to the contemplation of a single irruptive source of meaning and structure, may be regarded as an improvisation on the figure of the Christian university metaphysician; for that was always the role of this personage.

Let us assume then, for the sake of the argument at least, that we have opened a space for the history of theory and that we have done so by showing how the philosophical demonstration of the impossibility of such a space may itself be treated as a historical phenomenon. Further, in doing so, we have gone some way to identifying the attitude or deportment that we have suggested is the characteristic feature of the moment of theory. If this moment was characterized by the surfacing of a certain intellectual conduct—minimally, the abstention from empiricist or positivist knowledges through insight into their sleeping structures—then we can suggest that this moment represented the (unexpected and remarkable) dissemination of the spiritual exercises and self-stylization of an updated university metaphysics. It is a central feature of this metaphysics that it constitutes a second-order operation performed on the field of existing knowledges and sciences—not second-order in the sense of metalanguage to object language but in the sense of an act of inner self-problematization and self-transformation performed on sciences that can be constituted as merely factual or “natural” for the purposes of this exercise. This at least provides us with a way into the fields of structuralism and poststructuralism.

### The Structuralist Prelude

Derrida's conception of structuralism in his 1959 lecture—where it refers to formalizations of knowledge that occlude transcendental experience—would not have been understood during the first phase of structuralist

theory in the 1960s, at least not in Anglo-American universities. In fact what would become the intellectual glamour term of the 1960s first emerged from a rather obscure positive science, structural linguistics, or American structuralism as it was sometimes called. Associated with the linguistic fieldwork studies of Leonard Bloomfield (1887–1949), structure in this empirical sense refers to the patterns of co-occurrence or “distribution” of phonological or syntactic items in observed stretches of text or discourse. Zellig Harris’s studies of systematic transformations (in the formation of relative clauses) are structuralist in this sense.<sup>14</sup> But so too is Vladimir Propp’s taxonomy of the recurrent “functions”—characteristic story events—in a corpus of folktales.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the sophistication of its taxonomic notations, and regardless of Bloomfield’s definitive descriptions of several native American languages, this kind of empirical structural linguistics was virtually unknown to the broader humanities academy until it was attacked and (supposedly) superseded by Noam Chomsky during the 1960s. Somewhat confusingly, it was Chomsky’s generative grammar that became widely identified with structuralism and that for a brief but important period—from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s—became a metonym for theory in a new and portentous sense: as an activity that undermined and superseded empirical knowledge by ostensibly revealing its underlying virtual conditions of possibility. Chomsky’s generative structuralism claimed and assumed this status in part because of the kinds of rules that it used. Unlike the notations of Bloomfieldian linguistics, which were understood as a compact means of representing observed distributional patterns, Chomsky employed algebraic devices, interpreted as “generative grammars.” These were regarded as generating formal relations (called “deep structure”) that determined the form in which syntax would be observed (“surface structure”).<sup>16</sup>

It was not, though, the technical specificity of Chomsky’s generative grammar that was responsible for its wide (if short-lived) impact on the humanities academy. Rather, it was the metaphysical and cultural significance that could be claimed for generative grammar that allowed it to briefly incarnate the power of theory in the humanities, even for academics whose training precluded them from understanding the formalism. The key to this power lay in Chomsky’s claim that in generating deep structure his grammar was determining the form in which the subject could know language. This means the subject cannot acquire languages through imitative learn-

14. See Zellig Harris, *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (Chicago, 1951).

15. See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Louis A. Wagner (Austin, Tex., 1968).

16. For examples, see Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague, 1957).

ing, as the grammar will generate sentences never heard before. It also means that linguistics is not a theory of an empirical object, language, but a theory of the intellectual operations in man that allows language to be experienced as a particular kind of object.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of this antibehaviorist and antiempiricist interpretation of the grammar—that is, the treatment of it as underdetermined by empirically observable language—Chomsky proclaimed the grammar to be innate, positing the preexistence of a “Universal Grammar” that determines the form in which a child would select the grammar for a particular empirical language. If we consider the manner in which Chomsky makes this claim, however—“For acquisition of language to be possible at all there must be some sort of initial delimitation of the class of possible systems to which observed samples may conceivably pertain; the organism must, necessarily, be preset to search for and identify certain kinds of structural regularities”<sup>18</sup>—then it is clear that we are dealing with a version of the Kantian transcendental deduction, that is, a style of metaphysical argument in which the supposed indeterminacy of empirical experience is used to motivate the necessary presence of a priori structures in the subject of this experience.<sup>19</sup> The difference in Chomsky’s case is that the transcendental structures are also treated as hard-wired cognitive processes. The language learner in Chomsky’s structuralism thus conforms to Foucault’s account of the figure of Man that emerges in the modern human sciences as a “strange empirico-transcendental doublet, since he is a being such that knowledge will be attained in him of what renders all knowledge possible.”<sup>20</sup>

Just what it was about the 1960s humanities academy that made it so receptive to Chomsky’s antiempiricist construction of theory remains a topic for further intellectual-historical research. There is, though, a clear historical precursor to this event, one that is full of pointers to what it was in Chomsky’s discourse that made it so attractive to humanities academics. In Wilhelmine Germany, Hermann Cohen, a member of the Marburg school of neo-Kantians, published a history of the calculus that would have a cultural impact out of all proportion to its apparently recondite topic.<sup>21</sup>

17. See Chomsky, *Aspects of a Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge Mass., 1965), pp. 24–27.

18. Chomsky, “Formal Properties of Grammars,” in *Handbook of Mathematical Psychology*, ed. R. Duncan Luce, Robert R. Bush, and Eugene Galanter, 3 vols. (New York, 1963–65), 1:330.

19. See Paul Guyer, “Psychology and the Transcendental Deduction,” in *Kant’s Transcendental Deductions: The Three “Critiques” and the “Opus postumum,”* ed. Eckart Förster (Stanford, Calif., 1989), pp. 47–68.

20. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. pub. (New York, 1971), p. 318.

21. See Hermann Cohen, *Das Princip der Infinitesimal-Methode und seine Geschichte: Ein Kapitel zur Grundlegung der Erkenntniskritik* (1883; Berlin, 1984). My discussion of this text is

Cohen treated the relation between the differential operations of the calculus and its determinate outputs—functions and integral numbers—as a model for human knowledge as such. He did so on the presupposition that Kant had correctly formulated the problem of knowledge in terms of the relation between a priori intellectual operations and sensuous intuitions. Like Chomsky's similar treatment of generative grammar, Cohen's metaphysical interpretation of the calculus was not generally understood in its technical details. Yet its cultural message—that all apparently objective things are the products of formal differential relations—was widely absorbed by humanist intellectuals, not least because of the explicatory work undertaken by Cohen's disciple, Ernst Cassirer. According to Cassirer: "The basic idea of Cohen's work can be stated quite briefly: if we want to achieve a true scientific grounding of logic, we should not begin from any sort of completed existence. . . . We should not begin with any sort of objective Being . . . for every "being" is in the first place a product and a result which the operation of thought and its systematic unity has as a presupposition."<sup>22</sup> This means that a mathematical or physical concept "cannot be comprehended, as long as we seek any sort of presentational correlate for it in the given; the meaning only appears when we recognize the concept as the expression of a *pure relation*, upon which rests the unity and continuous connection of the members of a manifold."<sup>23</sup>

This strategy of treating the formal calculus as a general model for the dissolution of substantive objects into formal relations is repeated in Chomsky's discourse. Chomskyan linguistics is thus structuralist or relational, not on account of the nature of language, but on account of the use of generative grammar as a metaphor for an antisubstantialist cultural outlook. This metaphorical strategy allowed the metaphysical import of generative grammar to be carried on in simple teachable doctrines—for example, the doctrine that speech sounds are not so much positive phenomena as they are constituted by purely relational differences within the system of language—which could be learned as cultural truths by students untrained in the

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indebted to Gregory B. Moynahan, "Hermann Cohen's *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode*, Ernst Cassirer, and the Politics of Science in Wilhelmine Germany," *Perspectives on Science* 11, no. 1 (2003): 35–75.

22. Ernst Cassirer, *Der kritische Idealismus und die Philosophie des Gesunden Menschenverstandes* (Gieszen, 1906), p. 32; quoted in Moynahan, "Hermann Cohen's *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode*, Ernst Cassirer, and the Politics of Science in Wilhelmine Germany," p. 42.

23. Cassirer, *Substance and Function*, in "Substance and Function" and "Einstein's Theory of Relativity," trans. William C. Swabey and Marie C. Swabey (1923; New York, 1953), p. 166; quoted in Moynahan, "Hermann Cohen's *Das Prinzip der Infinitesimalmethode*, Ernst Cassirer, and the Politics of Science in Wilhelmine Germany," p. 45.

mathematical formulation of the grammar itself. The immediate impact of these talismanic doctrines—and we should not forget the thrill of cultural aggression and transcendence that accompanied their first hearing—is symptomatic of an audience already predisposed to cultivate the antipositivist metaphysical outlook that would be labelled theory. More work needs to be done, though, to determine whether this was the result of a residual antipositivist metaphysics present in the American humanities academy, reinforced by occasional imports from Germany—for example, the translation of Cassirer's works from the 1940s—and embedded in underlying currents of Judeo-Christian thought and belief.<sup>24</sup>

Due to the technical complexity of generative grammar and the uncompromising formalist scientificity of the MIT research program, in the end it was not Chomskyan linguistics that functioned as the bridgehead through which structuralist theory entered the 1960s Anglo-American humanities academy. Strangely enough, this would take place via a work originally published in 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*. It is symptomatic of the key role played by Saussure's text (and the many digests of it) in the moment of theory that one can say that its central terms are still so widely known in universities that there is little need to rehearse them here. Perhaps it will be enough to say that Saussure became posthumously famous for elaborating an apositive or relational conception of language and signs more generally, a semiotics. According to this conception, whatever is manifest at the level of actual speech (*parole*) is understood to be lacking in positive intelligibility, finding its conditions of possibility at another level altogether, in the purely apositive relations of the language system or code (*langue*), which exists as an atemporal (synchronic) totality.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Saussure's text provided another version of the neo-Kantian treatment of the "language system" as a model for the relational or structural character of human knowledge as such. Given that Saussurean linguistics could never match the technical sophistication of the analyses carried out at MIT during the 1960s and 1970s, it was not greater scientific adequacy that permitted Saussure to eclipse Chomsky in the humanities academy.<sup>26</sup> Rather, it was the easier access that Saussure's nonformal

24. For some pointers in this general direction, see Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America, 1720–2000* (Oxford, 2003), and Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (London, 2001).

25. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, 1966), pp. 120–22.

26. By the same token, it has been persuasively argued that it was not greater scientific accuracy that permitted Chomskyan syntactics to eclipse its greatest technical rival, the Generative Semantics program of James McCawley, George Lakoff, Paul Postal, and John Ross. This occurred because of Chomsky's aggressive capacity for ideological defence and attack and the capacity of the MIT program to function as a center for the reproduction of Chomskyan linguistics through the training of graduate students in an orthodox theory and method. See Geoffrey J. Huck and John

exposition provided to the relational model of language, that is, to the culturally driven metaphysical interpretation of grammar.

No less significant for the Anglo-American reception of Saussure's structuralism, however, was the metaphysical elaboration it had undergone in a series of European academic milieux dominated by transcendental phenomenology. The first and most important of these was its passage through the so-called Prague school structuralism of the 1930s. Prague was the major eastern European hub for Husserl's phenomenology, and Prague school structuralists such as Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský supplied Saussure's somewhat modest text with an explicitly Husserlian elaboration, thereby intensifying its metaphysical articulation in a way that parallels Chomsky's neo-Kantian transformation of empirical structuralism. In a move symptomatic of the transcendental reduction, linguistic structure was thus declared not to be a factual or empirical matter but to be a "phenomenological reality" consisting of virtual relations from which sounds and meanings emerge. According to Mukařovský, "Saussure's discovery of the foundations of the internal structure of the linguistic sign differentiated the sign both from mere acoustic 'things' (such as natural sounds) and from mental processes. . . . Thus attention was directed to the internal organization of the literary work."<sup>27</sup>

With this transition from a neo-Kantian to a Husserlian metaphysical construal of the language metaphor, we are on the cusp of poststructuralism. If, in accordance with the Husserlian interpretation, the relational structure of language turns out to be unanchored either in things or in thought, but instead forms a space in which linguistic objects appear unexpectedly, breaking through their formal-intentional constraints, then we are on the edge of a new metaphysical interpretation of language. This would take the form of a negative theology of the speaking subject, showing not how the relations of language deliver the world to consciousness but how they subvert this logocentric subject. Its rendezvous with the signified detoured through the *différance* of the chain of signifiers, the subject is forced to suspend its habitual meanings and is placed in a condition of pure openness to an unscripted meaning or pleasure, which will count as a higher form of (transcendental) experience. Poststructuralism thus emerged through the Husserlian reinterpretation of the language metaphor, transforming its cultural significance in accordance with the regimen of the transcendental reduction and substituting new cultural contents via the

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A. Goldsmith, *Ideology and Linguistic Theory: Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates* (London, 1995).

27. Jan Mukařovský, *The Word and Verbal Art*, trans. and ed. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (New Haven, Conn., 1977), p. 18.

theme of dissolution of the subject in an epiphanic disclosure of (impossible) meaning. In other words, poststructuralism represents a mutation in the means for cultivating an antipositivist intellectual persona. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Those familiar with the final chapters of Foucault's *The Order of Things* will perhaps detect a certain similarity between the history of theory that we are beginning to outline and the "archaeology of the human sciences" sketched in those chapters. There, Foucault too refuses to treat the linguistic, sociological, and "psy" sciences that would dominate the moment of theory as if they were defined by a common object or unified by a single theory. Rather, he regards them as emerging within a shared epistemic space. This *episteme* is formed by three dimensions or forces: mathematical formalizations and the physical sciences; the empirical sciences of biology, linguistics, and economics; and, crucially, the dimension of (Kantian) transcendental philosophical reflection. Moreover, Foucault treats this philosophical reflection as performing a work of interrogation and transformation of the empirical sciences. This is one that excavates them not for their positive objects but for the structures in Man that both determine his consciousness and yet make him capable of comprehending and thus perhaps outflanking this determination.<sup>28</sup> Something like this account could of course be applied to both Chomsky's neo-Kantian and the Prague school's phenomenological reworking of structural linguistics.

Nonetheless, despite these similarities and despite all that can still be learned from it, Foucault's archaeology of the human sciences cannot provide a framework for a history of theory of the kind envisaged here. It turns out that Foucault's construction of the *episteme* is itself too deeply informed by transcendental phenomenology to treat this metaphysics as an historical phenomenon. This is in part due to the fact that Foucault views the *episteme* as an apositive relational structure inside which cognate arrays of positive sciences emerge. But it is also because he treats the advent of a new *episteme* as resulting from a fundamental rupture in relation to a preceding one, a sudden transformation of the whole structure of knowledge typically brought about by a crisis in knowledge. In this event we can clearly see the ghost of the transcendental reduction and the intellectual crisis it is designed to induce.

It is unhelpful, however, to see the structuralist onset of the moment of theory in this way. The phenomenological reworking of Saussure, for

28. See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, pp. 344–48. Eagleton's conception of culture, as both determined by capitalist production processes and as the means of thinking this determination, can thus be treated as a routine symptomatic expression of this conception of man as the "empirico-transcendental doublet."

example, does not announce the sudden advent of the modern *episteme* of the human sciences; rather it indicates a contested intellectual performance, indicative of the intervention of Husserlian metaphysics with its prestigious persona, taking place (initially at least) in certain central and eastern European universities. Further, the fact that Propp's descriptive morphology of the folktale underwent a phenomenological reworking at the hands of Lévi-Strauss does not mean that such morphologies simply dropped off the planet. Drawing on Milman Parry's earlier studies of Homer, in 1960 Albert Lord could still provide a classic descriptive account of Serbo-Croatian epic songs. Lord treats the narrative patterns of these songs not as a positive relational structures but as positive formulae for oral composition, learned imitatively by highly practiced but illiterate singers.<sup>29</sup> Empirical and descriptive knowledges do not vanish at the touch of phenomenology's epochal wand but continue in academic milieux where the phenomenological attitude is not cultivated and where the persona of the phenomenological theorist may be non grata. Similarly, despite his behaviorist presuppositions and empiricist method, Bloomfield's descriptions of Native American languages remain standards regardless of his supposed supersession by Chomskyan theory.

In short, while Foucault's archaeology provides important pointers for a history of theory—particularly in his account of the emergence of a whole series of critical theories from the post-hoc philosophical reworking of empirical knowledges—this account needs to be rendered in a more positive-historical manner. Drawing on an approach inspired in part by Foucault's own late history of philosophical ascetics, we can learn to treat this reworking as, in the first instance, something that the theorist performs on him- or herself. In theory's problematization of positive knowledges we can learn to see neither the recovery of freshly minted objects from beneath a sleepy positivism nor the interruption of a stale "world-life" by a renovated experience of the world, but something else altogether. We can learn to identify an act of self-problematization initiating a particular kind of spiritual exercise. This is one from which the theorist will emerge in the form of a persona who can look down on the positive knowledges as vestiges of a lower kind of self. Understanding the history of theory means understanding the circumstances in which this act and exercise could be recovered from the history of university metaphysics, disseminated in new pedagogical forms, and put to work in and around a whole array of empirical disciplines.

### Organizing the Event

It should already be clear that the structuralist phase of the moment of theory was ghosted by its poststructuralist partner from the beginning and

29. See Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

that the latter does not really supersede the former. Even in 1959, before many in the humanities academy had heard of structuralism and while many of the leading theorists were still children, Derrida could say: "Moreover, it is always something like an *opening* which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed" ("GS," p. 160). The reason for this is that transcendental phenomenology and its central instrument, the transcendental reduction, treat formalized structures as that which must be suspended or abstained from if consciousness is to transcend its "natural" forms and open itself to the irruptive presence of the transcendental phenomenon. The surfacing of poststructuralism in the late 1960s was thus not an historical event driven by the discovery of epistemic weaknesses in structuralism. To the extent that it proclaimed structuralism's closure to "transcendental experience," it was an event wholly internal to the phenomenological regimen, where it signifies the intellectual performance of putting formalized knowledges under suspension in order to prepare the theorist for the irruption of something entirely other. What was at stake was a cultural-political battle in the humanities academy in which the short-lived resurgence of neo-Kantian structuralism would be overcome by its neo-Husserlian rival.

Rather than attempting to catalogue the explosion of theoretical gestures resulting from this development, I will simply identify and illustrate two key intellectual figures present in all of them: first, the figure of thought (and ascesis) in which the formalist calm is shattered by an irruptive event; and, second, the conception of history itself as hermeneutic revelation involving the sudden eclipse of structures of thought under the impact of a novel phenomenon. With regard to the first of these, the generic form assumed is that of the appearance of an unscripted event, captured in the dyad theory and event. According to this figure, the irruptive event actually emerges from the heart of the formalization itself, at the very point where this eludes everyday consciousness and opens itself to something unthought or not yet thought. Derrida provides us with the pattern whose recondite character has proved no obstacle to its exoteric dissemination:

In effect the irruption of the *logos*, the accession to human consciousness of the idea of an infinite task of reason, does not occur only through a series of revolutions which at the same time would be self-conversions, seeming to tear open a previous finitude in order to lay bare the power of a hidden infinity and to give voice to the *dynamis* of a silence. These ruptures, which at the same time are unveilings (and also coverings up, for the origin dissimulates itself immediately beneath the new domain of uncovered or produced objectivity) *are always already*

*indicated*, Husserl recognises, “in confusion and in the dark,” that is, not only in the most elementary forms of life and human history, but closer and closer in animality and nature in general. [“GS,” p. 165]

We can find a more recent formulation in this comment from Alain Badiou:

But from the point of view of singular truth we have an access from the event itself and not from preconstituted knowledge. It’s very important. The truth is not a question of knowledge; it is the *defection* of knowledge. This is the reason why the people who defend knowledge are against events: the subject which is constituted within a truth, in a way, has no need of knowledge. Such a subject *is* a transformation of knowledge, a complete transformation of knowledge.<sup>30</sup>

If we were to regard this kind of formulation as a set of veiled instructions for a certain work of the self on the self, then it would say something like the following: Treat the structures of knowledge and everyday morality you have at your disposal not only as congealed forms covering an anarchic infinite domain of being but also as themselves containing this being, in the form of an unthought irruption, to which you must attune yourself in order to be properly open to the infinite.

This set of instructions can be and indeed has been put to work in a great variety of ways in several adjacent disciplines or disciplines rendered adjacent by the phenomenological regimen—literary theory, hermeneutics, social theory, psychoanalysis—often with rich effects and powerful affects. Derrida himself, for example, could reappropriate a semiotics already transformed by phenomenology in order to make signs or writing function as that which suspended ordinary meaning and subjectivity. In an essay that played an important role in disseminating theory to the American humanities academy—it was first presented as a lecture at a celebrated Johns Hopkins colloquium in 1966—he could thus declare that the system of signs delays the appearance of meaning through an infinite “play of signification,” suspending the “transcendental signified” and closing the history of metaphysics by expelling “being as presence.”<sup>31</sup> A few years later, Roland Barthes could provide the following improvisation, which varies the theme by metaphorically identifying the disruptive character of writing with its material or bodily character: “Writing is the destruction of every voice, of

30. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London, 2003), p. 179.

31. See Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, pp. 278–93.

every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.<sup>32</sup> Julia Kristeva makes use of Lacanian psychoanalysis—a Freudianism transformed by phenomenology—to push the corporeal metaphors of writing even further. Kristeva channels a psychoanalytic conception of bodily drives into the linguistic domain via her conception of the semiotic. This is understood as a presignificatory dimension of language in which the drives are discharged through such things as rhythm and tone, standing thus in opposition to the dimension she calls the “symbolic,” the domain of meaning supported by syntax.<sup>33</sup>

In all of these versions, the Husserlian thematics of identity—the “natural” identity perpetuated through the occlusion of infinite being (the other) and the epiphanic identity briefly attained through its irruption—is never far away. In Kristeva’s poetics this identity drama is played out on the threshold between her semiotic and symbolic domains. Here it is given shape by Lacan’s conception of identity formation as an introjection of the image of the being I must become for meaning to be possible—the mirror phase—which is nonetheless perpetually under threat from the delirium of the corporeal semiotic. This corporealization of the transcendental event was of course only a metaphorical improvisation on the basic theme. Given its Husserlian genesis, the phenomenological attitude could always return in its abstract philosophical form, as in Badiou’s earlier-cited comment that “truth is not a question of knowledge; it is the *defection* of knowledge.”

If the history of theory we have been sketching is tenable, however, then there will be no semiotic in the intended Kristevan sense. More generally, there will be no corporeal or material level of signification or writing in a relation of perpetual subversion to meaning, the transcendental signified, or the metaphysics of presence. That is because Kristeva’s semiotic and its analogues are not a universal feature of language—something whose existence could be demonstrated to any kind of person—but something brought into existence through the cultivation of a specialized virtuoso persona. Kristeva’s semiotic is what appears when the spiritual exercise of the transcendental *epoché* is deployed in the register of literary hermeneutics. It is what becomes available for contemplation when a properly initiated reader forbids themselves the natural meaning of the text and their natural world-life, thereby taking up an inner department of pure openness to the world—here the delirious epiphany of the drives in language.

32. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image-Music-Text*, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (New York, 1977), p. 142.

33. See, in particular, Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York, 1984).

This delirium is of course perfectly contained within the exercise of the hermeneutic *epoché* itself, where it functions as a kind of honor badge of transcendental openness, the mark of a prestigious persona that Kristeva herself occupies. None of this detracts from the allure and force of the readings performed by Barthes and Kristeva, which are indeed remarkable performances by virtuosi of the critical persona. It does, however, restrict them to a particular historical and institutional milieu, leaving them not as breakthroughs to a universal truth about language and being but as instances of a particularly intense hermeneutics of the self—one that envisages such breakthroughs as the telos of a particular exercise in self-cultivation—sitting alongside a plurality of other such exercises.

### Metaphysical History

The second figure of thought fuelling the explosion of theory is a conception of history itself as a metaphysical hermeneutics tracking the breakthroughs of being into time. European university metaphysics can be characterized as an academic discipline (or culture) whose thematics concern the relation between an infinite, atemporal, self-active, world-creating intellect and a finite, “duplex” (intellectual-corporeal) worldly being. Since the seventeenth century one of this discipline’s central tasks has been to forestall the autonomy of positive knowledges by tethering them to philosophical reflection on this relation of finite to infinite being.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the philosophical history that would eventually accompany the moment of theory took shape as a metaphysical hermeneutics. The path-breaking instance of this metaphysical hermeneutics of history is to be found in Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*. Here Kant reworked the terms of his own metaphysics of morals by transposing the relation between noumenal moral being and man’s finite sensuous nature into a temporal register. He treated this relation as one in which history would take place as the progressive refinement of man’s sensuous nature, more or less in accordance with a Protestant account of the descramentalization and dehistoricization of religion.<sup>35</sup> This would eventually lead to the

34. For useful overviews, see Bogumil Jasinowski, “Leibniz und der Übergang der mittelalterlichen in die moderne Philosophie,” *Studia Leibnitiana*, no. 4 (1972): 251–63; Charles H. Lohr, “Metaphysics,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 537–638; and esp. Walter Sparr, *Wiederkehr der Metaphysik: Die ontologische Frage in der lutherischen Theologie des frühen siebzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1976) and “Die Schulphilosophie in den lutherischen Territorien,” in *Das heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation, Nord- und Ostmitteleuropa*, vol. 4, pt. 1 of *Die Philosophie des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts*, ed. Helmut Holzhey and Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Basel, 2001), pp. 475–97.

35. See Hunter, “Kant’s *Religion* and Prussian Religious Policy,” *Modern Intellectual History* 2 (Apr. 2005): 1–27.

appearance of beings capable of governing themselves through pure reason in the temporal sphere: the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>36</sup> Kant's strongly eschatological historicized metaphysics represented a self-conscious rejection of the antimetaphysical political historiography associated with civil philosophy, and it would have important ripple effects, not only in Hegel's metaphysical historicism but also in Husserl's.<sup>37</sup>

In Husserl's version of metaphysical history it is not religion that acts as proxy for humanity's self-development but philosophy itself. Further, the principle of infinite omnitemporal being has been relocated. It has been transposed from the register of the divine intellect to that of the world, now understood as a self-acting, self-manifesting source of all meanings and things (the *Lebenswelt*). Man, however, remains stationed where university metaphysics has always placed him, enclosed in a finitude that compels him to seek openness to the infinite. In projecting this metaphysics into the temporal register, Husserl develops a philosophical history with a highly distinctive pattern. This is one characterized by a lapsarian formalistic occlusion of lifeworld intuitions and thus by an orientation to a future in which a metaphysics capable of breaking through the dead formalist carapaces will again (briefly) make contact with transcendental experience and the living world.

Ironically, one of the first victims of this updated metaphysical hermeneutics of history was Kant himself, whom Husserl could now portray as the architect of a philosophical formalism incapable of making contact with the transcendental phenomenon.<sup>38</sup> In fact this anachronistic view of Kant—which of course presumes the truth of Husserl's own adaptation of university metaphysics—was crucial for the elaboration of the philosophical history that would accompany the moment of theory. It permitted a whole variety of disciplines to be treated as Kantian transcendental formalisms, that is, as sciences whose formalization of intuition represented the occlusion of an anarchic living world, but that thereby promised the opening of this closure through the future irruption of the transcendental phenomenon.

36. See Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 39–216, esp. 89–97, 122–25, 146–53.

37. For more on this parting of the ways, see Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, 2001). For illuminating comments on the difference between philosophical approaches to political thought and a history whose object is the development of secular civil government, see J. G. A. Pocock, "Quentin Skinner: The History of Politics and the Politics of History," *Common Knowledge* 10 (Fall 2004): 532–50.

38. See Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, pp. 103–21.

The manner in which this updated metaphysics of history fed into the moment of theory can be briefly illustrated. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was undoubtedly the most influential historiographic adaptation of the Husserlian figura, pulling the history and philosophy of science into the orbit of phenomenological theory.<sup>39</sup> In a typical *succès de scandale*, Kuhn argued that "normal science" was characterized not by its openness to experience but by its closure. Not only what is sayable in a science but also what is see-able is determined by the internal relations between a set of interlocking axioms, theorems, and observations that Kuhn called the paradigm. This set of relations thus functions as a Kantian transcendental formalism, but one that is seen from a Husserlian viewpoint. According to Kuhn, the paradigm undergoes radical transformation not as the result of new empirical discoveries but through a process in which anomalies start to cluster around the perimeter of the paradigm itself, eventually rupturing it and instigating a new paradigm. The epistemic rhythm of Kuhn's history of science thus follows the stages of the transcendental reduction: the suspension of formal structures ("normal science"), followed by the fleeting appearance of the ruptural phenomenon, and then the synthesis of a new formal structure.

Althusser's improvisation on this figure of thought was designed to draw Marxist social theory into the space of the phenomenological regimen. Althusser called his version of claustral transcendental formalism the problematic. By stressing the relational and internal character of the objects of a problematic, Althusser was able to formulate a characteristic phenomenological problem: Given that Marx could not discover a new object for political economy through empirical historical investigation—as all objects are internal to their own problematics—how then could he transform classical economics?<sup>40</sup> With this question Althusser proclaimed that he was reading Marx philosophically. In fact his object was not political economy but Marx's great opus *Capital* itself. In a work entitled *Reading Capital*, Althusser thus treats *Capital* as marking the moment in which the discipline of political economy underwent a radical transformation through the irruption of an unscripted event of knowledge:

To see this invisible, to see these "oversights," to identify the lacunae in the fullness of this discourse, the blanks in the crowded text, we need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an *informed gaze*, a new gaze, itself produced by a reflection on the "change

39. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).

40. See Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1970), pp. 13–22.

of terrain” on the exercise of vision, in which Marx pictures the transformation of the problematic. Here I take this transformation for a fact, without any claim to analyse the mechanism that unleashed it and completed it.<sup>41</sup>

In this way, Althusser was able to remove Marx from the history of economic thought and incorporate him within a Husserlian metaphysical history. For Althusser, Marx’s *Capital* marks one of the periodic moments in which a problematic mutates as a result of the rupturing of its formalization of an empirical domain. In short, rather than offering an account of economy and society, Althusser reworks the text of *Capital* in accordance with the requirements of metaphysical history and the transcendental *epoché*.

Finally, our earlier comments on Foucault’s concept of the *episteme* can also be brought forward into this context. Not just the *episteme* of *The Order of Things* but also the concepts of discourse and the historical a priori in Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* are deeply informed by a phenomenological metaphysics of history.<sup>42</sup> It is true that the materials that Foucault includes within his organizing structures have much greater variety and historical density than Kuhn’s or Althusser’s; Foucault’s archaeology of clinical medicine, for example, includes physiological theories, hospital buildings, diagnostic routines, governmental health programs, and more—which is why we can continue to learn from his works. Yet this variety is finally harnessed to phenomenological figures. Foucault is thus not content to treat the relations among these elements as empirically contingent matters of historical fact. Instead, he converts them into formal “rules” by using the Kantian transcendental deduction: What group of discursive relations is *necessary* for a particular object to appear? He thereby treats them as relational conditions for a particular kind of consciousness or gaze.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as already noted in the case of the *episteme*, there is a strong tendency to treat these structures as self-enclosed epochal orders, transforming their historical existence into a transcendental necessity and necessitating their sudden rupture and “discontinuist” transformation.<sup>44</sup>

41. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

42. For an account of the continuing presence of transcendental philosophy in Foucault’s historical descriptions, see Béatrice Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford, Calif., 2002). Like Foucault’s, Han’s account is not strictly historical, seeking instead a reconciliation of the transcendental and the historical left unfinished by Foucault.

43. See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London, 1972), pp. 46–49, 53–55, 126–31.

44. See David Hyder, “Foucault, Cavaillès, and Husserl on the Historical Epistemology of the Sciences,” *Perspectives on Science* 11 (Spring 2003): 107–29.

The presence of this philosophical thematic, however, turns out to be incompatible with the tasks of historical description that Foucault sets himself. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault argues that the modern *episteme*—the three-dimensional space of the human sciences mentioned above—was preceded by two others. These were the Renaissance *episteme* of similitudes and signatures—the mental landscape of hermetic, neo-Platonic natural philosophy and natural magic—and the classical eighteenth-century *episteme*, characterized by taxonomic versions of biology, linguistics, and economics. There now seems little reason to accept, however, either that such epochal epistemological structures existed or that they can be usefully posited as analytical tools. If we consider early modern hermeticism and neo-Platonic natural philosophy, for example, then recent work suggests that, far from constituting a general *episteme* for an intellectual epoch, this kind of philosophy had a rather restricted dissemination.<sup>45</sup> Its religious heterodoxy—in particular its treatment of the world as a domain of hidden correspondences accessible only to those initiated in the esoteric arts—placed it outside the religiously orthodox academic mainstream. The fate of Giordano Bruno is exemplary. The neo-Platonic decipherment of the world's enigmatic signatures and hidden correspondences that Foucault identifies with the Renaissance *episteme* was thus typically found only in certain minor princely courts, happy to shelter a degree of religious heterodoxy.<sup>46</sup> It thus remained far removed from the major universities of northern Italy, Germany, and western Europe, where Aristotelian science and orthodox metaphysical theology provided the dominant philosophical discourse until the middle of the seventeenth century.

This reminder of the crucial role played by religion and the church in the restricted dissemination of Renaissance neo-Platonism is a pointer to the distance between the *episteme* (and its analogues) and the empirical history of philosophy. When sciences and philosophies encounter limits and restrictions, these typically arise not from the apositive relations of their formalizations but from the concrete obstacles and rivalries they meet in contested cultural and institutional spaces. The maintenance of Aristotelian science and Thomist metaphysics in Catholic universities during the sev-

45. Renaissance neo-Platonism is helpfully situated amongst its rivals in Stephen Menn, "The Intellectual Setting," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 33–86.

46. For more on this, see Bruce T. Moran, *The Alchemical World of the German Court: Occult Philosophy in the Circle of Moritz of Hessen (1572–1632)* (Stuttgart, 1991); Howard Hotson, *Johann Heinrich Alsted, 1588–1638: Between Renaissance, Reformation, and Universal Reform* (Oxford, 2000) and *Paradise Postponed: Johann Heinrich Alsted and the Birth of Calvinist Millenarianism* (Dordrecht, 2000); and, for a general overview, *Das heilige Römische Reich deutscher Nation, Nord- und Ostmitteleuropa*, pp. 3–123.

enteenth century, for example, was not the inertial result of an apositive paradigm, problematic, or *episteme*. Rather, it represented the concrete success of the Jesuit order in militantly excluding Galilean-Newtonian natural philosophy and Hobbesian natural law from the curriculum of Catholic *Schulphilosophie*.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, a key condition of the eclipse of Aristotelian science and Thomist metaphysics in Protestant territories was the religiously and politically driven construction of antimetaphysical “eclectic” intellectual cultures, sympathetic to both the new physics and the new secularist politics.<sup>48</sup> This opening of the universities occurred not in the form of the sudden ruptural appearance of the transcendental phenomenon but as the result of protracted hand-to-hand intellectual battles, whose outcomes were never certain.

### Transposing the Disciplines

I have already indicated that one of the important insights contained in Foucault’s version of the history of theory is his argument that the human sciences emerged not from a single theoretical discovery but as a series of philosophical reworkings of empirical disciplines. Our argument, though, is that this reworking took place not through the virtual relations of the *episteme* but as a series of concrete intellectual struggles. These were struggles in which academics imbued with phenomenological thematics and occupying (to varying degrees) the prestigious persona of the theorist sought to reconstitute a whole variety of disciplines. They did so by treating them as claustral domains, incapable of comprehending their own emergence through exclusion of the other, and hence as ripe for transformation by those capable of abstaining from the taken-for-granted and preparing themselves to receive the ruptural event in all its purity.

Not only was the degree to which this took place entirely contingent—depending on the role played by local “theory-import” cultures and the resistance of existing academic disciplinary cultures—but the form in which it took place depended on the character of the discipline being targeted for transformation. The manner in which the moment of theory takes place in literary studies thus differs significantly from parallel events in sociology or political science; and the latter differ again from the developments that

47. See Paul-Richard Blum, “Der Standardkurs der katholischen *Schulphilosophie* im siebzehnten Jahrhundert,” in *Aristotelismus und Renaissance: In memoriam Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. Eckhard Kessler, Lohr, and Sparr (Wiesbaden, 1988), pp. 127–48 and *Philosophenphilosophie und Schulphilosophie: Typen des Philosophierens in der Neuzeit* (Stuttgart, 1998).

48. See Horst Dreitzel, “Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der ‘Eklektischen Philosophie,’” *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 18, no. 3 (1991): 281–343 and “The Reception of Hobbes in the Political Philosophy of the Early German Enlightenment,” *History of European Ideas* 29, no. 3 (2003): 255–89; and Ulrich Johannes Schneider, “Eclecticism Rediscovered,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 1 (1998): 173–82.

would occur in the reworking of jurisprudence, in those universities where theory would announce its presence under the banner of critical legal studies.<sup>49</sup> In some cases—for example, the borrowing of Austinian speech-act theory by the Cambridge school historians—phenomenological themes seem to have played little or no role, which means that here the moment of theory will not fit the dominant model discussed in this paper.<sup>50</sup> But these are matters best left to particular investigations. For the moment, as a way of illustrating some paths of investigation, I will restrict my comments to two disciplinary domains—literary studies and social theory—and even here my comments will be partial and selective.

### Literary Theory

When, in the 1970s, literary theory opened its campaign for control of Anglo-American English departments—for example, in works by Jonathan Culler, Eagleton, and Jameson—it did so through a particular delegitimation and reconstruction of the existing discipline, in this case various versions of the so-called New Criticism.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on themes taken from Saussure and Derrida, Barthes and Althusser, these writers declared the New Criticism to be a closed discourse, an empiricism incapable of understanding its own constitution as knowledge, and an ideology that naturalized meaning through the interpellation of occlusive bourgeois subjectivities and narratives. In short, they engaged in the first part of the transcendental reduction: the abstention from and problematization of knowledges declared to occlude their own emergence from the apositive relations of language or the mode of production, the play of the signifier or the delirium of semiosis. In doing so, these writers laid claim to the prestigious persona of the theorist, forbidding themselves the natural pleasures of bourgeois realist narrative and character and gesturing towards transcendental openness to various kinds of hidden, ruptural, or transgressive meaning.

The fact that the New Criticism was none of the things it was said to be should not surprise us at this stage. After all, the point of this kind of problematization is not to conduct a detached investigation into the relevant discipline. Rather, it is to perform the theorist's exemplary abstention from the discipline as a natural knowledge; it is to existentially

49. For a discussion of this last development, see David Saunders, *Anti-Lawyers: Religion and the Critics of Law and State* (London, 1997).

50. For more, see Pocock, "Quentin Skinner."

51. See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975); Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978); and Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 1971).

transform the theorist's relation to the discipline as a form of intellectual conduct and to put a different kind of discipline or inner conduct in its place. If we do look at the New Criticism with a degree of indifference then what we find is neither a claustrophobic formalism repressing the delirium of signification nor an ideological interpellation of a static identity, but something else altogether. In fact we find a particular version of the hermeneutics of the self, carried out using a specially selected literary corpus and transmitted in the highly wrought milieu of the literary seminar of conscience.<sup>52</sup>

An important source of this version of the hermeneutics of the self was the nineteenth-century culture of Protestant reading groups. Here, the point of performing a reading is to display to oneself and other members of the group how an imbalance in one's own "sensibility" always compromises access to the true meaning of the text—typically present as a kind of ineffable concreteness.<sup>53</sup> In England this literary asceticism was transmitted from Protestant Sunday schools into an emerging state school system during the nineteenth century, progressively marginalizing the older linguistic and rhetorical training of the grammar schools.<sup>54</sup> By the 1930s it could ensure not only the existence of writers like D. H. Lawrence and critics like F. R. Leavis but also the form in which seminars were conducted and readings took place in many English departments. Leavis's once-famous exegetical routine—in which the interrogative statement, This is so isn't it? is to be met with the answer, Yes, but . . . —is thus not a means of closing off identity by naturalizing meaning.<sup>55</sup> Rather, it is a means of organizing an always-incomplete work of literary self-scrutiny and self-cultivation. In this setting interpretive statements operate as acts of self-exposure to a seminar or teacher in whom the true meaning resides but will never be declared, thereby producing the scarifying close reading. This description of the New Criticism is not of course intended as a defense. The literary seminar of conscience was indeed a very closed affair, not through its occlusion of immanently transgressive meaning, however, but simply through its routine pedagogical operation, as a sectarian milieu for the cultivation of an exemplary literary sensibility.

We should not allow ourselves, though, to be too disturbed by the fact that literary theory was able to eviscerate New Criticism without offering a

52. See Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21 (May 1993): 198–227.

53. See Hunter, "Literary Theory in Civil Life," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95 (Fall 1996): 1099–134.

54. See Hunter, *Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education* (Basingstoke, England, 1988).

55. See F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an "English School"* (London, 1943).

true account of it. In the domain we are concerned with, the success of disciplines is rarely the result of their truth, while their failure often has little to do with their falsity. In fact, we have already suggested as much with regards to the combination of Aristotelian science and Thomist metaphysics in seventeenth-century Germany, whose success in Jesuit universities was unrelated to its truth and whose failure in Protestant ones was ensured independently of its falsity. The manner in which literary theory was able to eclipse the New Criticism should thus be described independently of either discipline's truth or falsity—and certainly not in terms of the irruption of a new paradigm or problematic. Rather, we need an institutionally oriented investigation of the historical circumstances in which one kind of pedagogically entrenched hermeneutics of the self was targeted for problematization and transformation by another. This is not of course the place for such an investigation, but we can make two comments as pointers to it.

In the first place, it will be worth investigating whether or not the moment of literary theory represents a return of university metaphysics to a domain from whence it had been excluded by earlier religious and political developments. In the case of England and, to a lesser degree, America, too, the settlement of the religious civil wars of the seventeenth century had witnessed the marginalization of university metaphysics—as a discipline whose doctrinalization of the divine mysteries had turned them into instruments of heretification and persecution—and the emergence of a variety of self-consciously antimetaphysical knowledges and cultures.<sup>56</sup> Among them was the pietistic Protestant seminar of conscience, in which doctrinal metaphysical explications of the apophatic mysteries were proscribed as symptomatic of intellectual hubris and lack of grace—a situation still vividly present in the radically antitheoretical stance of the Leavis seminar.<sup>57</sup>

How then should we look at the way in which this intellectual milieu was placed into question by the literary-theoretical campaigns of the 1970s? To answer this question our prime focus would be on the fact that literary theory was reactivating the central theme of phenomenological metaphysics, namely, the relation between a domain of infinite and uncontainable meanings and the being whose finitude both occludes this domain yet, in doing so, promises the possibility of openness to it. At the

56. For overviews, see Dreitzel, “Zur Entwicklung und Eigenart der ‘Eklektischen Philosophie’”; T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2000); and Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments*, pp. 63–92.

57. The ground rules for the Protestant seminar of conscience, initially elaborated in the context of antisacerdotal pietistic Bible study, are provided in Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia desideria*, trans. T. G. Tappert (1675; Philadelphia, 1964).

same time, literary theory was elaborating this relation in its own theoretical vernacular. Here, rather than consciousness, it was language and literature that occupied center stage, and the drama of the transcendental reduction was played out in terms of the eclipsing of the author by the transcendental anonymity of the codes, the irruption of a corporeal semiotic into an occlusive symbolic, the dissolving of the signified into the infinite play of signification, and much more in this vein. At the very least, there is enough here to suggest that we could begin investigating the moment of literary theory in terms of the historical circumstances that permitted a metaphysical hermeneutics—long cultivated in the universities of eastern and central Europe—to penetrate the academic culture of England and America, where its bridgehead was provided by university literature departments.

Second, this element of real novelty at the level of spiritual exercises should not prevent us from investigating the possibility of a deep continuity at the level of pedagogical milieu. After all, is it not clear enough that the New Criticism and the literary theory that displaced it both have an intensely ascetic-pedagogical dimension? In the New Criticism this takes the form of a routinely ruthless exposure of literary seminarians to the inner chagrin of an impossibly concrete meaning. In literary theory it takes place as the more self-conscious asceticism of the transcendental *epoché*, which requires a fundamental act of self-forbidding as the condition of obtaining the fleeting state of transcendental openness. More importantly, if, as we have suggested, the objects of literary theory are no more universally available than those of the New Criticism, then is it not likely that the former will have to avail itself of the same mechanism as the latter—the discipline of the seminar of conscience overseen by an exemplary persona—to bring these objects into quasi-public visibility?

Consider, for example, the once-notorious case in which Stanley Fish presented his seminar with a supposed seventeenth-century devotional poem—in fact an arbitrary list of words formatted as such a poem—in order to demonstrate the “production” of poetic meanings grounded ultimately in the “authority of interpretive communities.”<sup>58</sup> Fish’s discussion erases the fact that nothing would have led his students to produce such interpretations of this list other than that they were elicited by their teacher as part of an ethically compulsive and institutionally compulsory task of behavior. Further, nothing validates them as poetic interpretations other than Fish’s declaration that they are such. For what is Fish’s experiment

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

other than a mini-dramatization of the literary transcendental *epoché* itself? What we see in Fish's seminar is a little theater in which the anarchy of unstructured meanings will be briefly presented in order to show how the closure of meaning occurs through the imposed authority of a community of interpreters.

By treating authority as a transcendental necessity required to close the arbitrariness of meaning, Fish obscures the existence of an entirely historical and contingent authority—his own as the exemplary master of the seminar of conscience—which is exercised to ensure that students will regard meaning as arbitrary. Presiding over this updated hermeneutic seminar, Fish requires his students to abstain from the “natural” assumption that texts exist and have meanings, thereby enforcing a literary simulacrum of the transcendental reduction. The fact that this regimen forms a central part of their training as apprentice theorists provides a context for Latour's comment that “entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on.”<sup>59</sup> We can suggest, then, that if literary theory and deconstructive philosophy walked into the American academy through the doors of the literature department, it was the pedagogical relations maintained there that gave it the ethical force to do so.

### Social Theory

In discussing our second instance of the phenomenological transposition of the disciplines—Habermas's social theory—we shall also seek to clarify a kind of political demeanor characteristic of the moment of theory. There will be some, particularly those committed to Franco-American deconstruction, who will regard Habermas as an implausible or peripheral participant in the theoretical moment, owing to his briefly notorious attack on deconstructive and poststructuralist theory.<sup>60</sup> Seen historically, however, Habermas's social theory is a central and influential example of the phenomenological reworking of a disciplinary field, in this case sociology.

Despite Habermas's once-vaunted (now airbrushed) credentials as a Marxist, Husserlian phenomenology was always the driving philosophy informing his social theory. This can be seen not just in the crucial use he makes of Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt* but, just as importantly, in

59. Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” p. 227.

60. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1987).

his constitutive use of Husserl's philosophical history or metaphysical hermeneutics, which Habermas derived from the first generation of the Frankfurt school theorists.<sup>61</sup> Habermas's philosophical history is thus one that treats history as a series of attempts to take hold of the contents of traditional metaphysics—the notion of an infinite, transcendent mind spontaneously intelligizing all possible meanings—and to detranscendentalize it, thereby making reason available in the register of politics and society.<sup>62</sup> According to Habermas, Kant made an important contribution to this process through his transposition of the divine mind into the categories of human subjectivity. Yet, as in Husserl's account, Kant himself remains trapped within a philosophy of consciousness, owing to his failure to penetrate its nonsubjective conditions. Through his concept of the lifeworld—as a domain of pretheoretical everyday intuitions—Husserl provides crucial insight into these conditions, even if the great phenomenologist himself finally fails to break with the category of consciousness. It is thus left to the Frankfurt school and to Habermas himself to complete the detranscendentalization of metaphysics through his concept of discourse, understood as the social communication of meanings in a suitably idealized speech situation.

What commentators have yet to make sufficiently clear is the degree to which Habermas's social theory—particularly in his magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative Action*—takes place as a metaphysical hermeneutics of history. By treating society as something that evolves in tandem with its theorization, Habermas can present his theory of social communication in the form of a chain of hermeneutic commentaries on the great sociologists—Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, the Frankfurt school writers—and some kindred philosophers of language—Peirce, Dewey, and Austin in particular.<sup>63</sup> As in the Kantian prototype, this hermeneutic chain is envisaged as a progressive refinement of man's intellectual and social relations leading to the realization of a buried capacity for rational self-determination, although in Habermas this takes a Husserlian detranscendentalized direction towards discursive relations in the lifeworld. In keeping with the Husserlian model, each stage in the process takes place in the form of a brief but fundamental breakthrough to lifeworld intuitions—Marx's grasp of the importance of productive relations, Durkheim's conception of society as the social form of religious and philosophical categories, Weber's understanding of the

61. See in particular the exemplary version of this metaphysical history in Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York, 1974).

62. For a dedicated statement of this thematic, see Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, trans. William Mark Hohengarten (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

63. See Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, 1981).

rationalization of society—that is then occluded through the elaboration of formal theorizations themselves complicit with society as system.<sup>64</sup> Once again the regimen of the transcendental *epoché* plays the organizing role here, as nothing proves the problematic character of the great sociological theories other than Habermas's decision to problematize them, as repeated breakthroughs to and formalizations of the domain of lifeworld intuitions. Moreover, the eschatological dimension of historical metaphysics is again clearly visible, as the possibility of final breakthrough to this domain provides the hermeneutic chain with its *telos*, even if the revelatory moment will now take place not in the form of a delirious literary epiphany but in the more sober setting of the ideal speech situation.

The (Left-rationalist) political theory that Habermas extrapolates from his social theory is also strongly marked by the phenomenological regimen and its metaphysics of history. The central term of Habermas's politics, *juridification*, is deployed in accordance with the now-familiar ambivalence associated with the formalization of the lifeworld.<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, Habermas characterizes the juridification of social relations associated with Hobbesian political jurisprudence—which reorganized property relations and provided the constitutional basis for absolute sovereignty over the old society of estates—as indicative of a nullification of the existing lifeworld that would give rise to self-enclosed bureaucratic systems. This repressive occlusion of lifeworld intuitions and freedoms is specifically ascribed to the formal-positive character of law, which allows government to be justified in purely procedural, nonmoral terms. On the other hand, because it is capable of defending citizens' rights and setting constitutional limits to sovereignty and because it remains in touch with normative, consensus-forming discussion contexts of the lifeworld—here the public sphere—the law remains a possible channel for the resurgence of the lifeworld into the system. Habermas thus understands discursive democracy as the space in which the unscripted intuitions and norms of the lifeworld, purged of their irrational nationalist energies via the consensus-forming ideal speech situation, will break through the juridified structures of the state, recasting them in accordance with the principles of true justice.<sup>66</sup>

Given the preceding discussion—in which we have shown several times

64. See Habermas, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, vol. 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. McCarthy (Boston, 1987).

65. For this discussion, see in particular *ibid.*, pp. 358–73, and more generally Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

66. For a convenient short statement, see Habermas, "The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship," trans. Ciaran Cronin, *Public Culture* 10, no. 2 (1998): 397–416.

that this way of characterizing and problematizing historical structures owes almost nothing to historical investigation and almost everything to the transcendental reduction—perhaps we can be forgiven for dealing with Habermas's account of juridification summarily. It would be redundant to observe that none of the many works of empirical history dedicated to early modern Germany has uncovered any evidence for the existence of the lifeworld, as this is a device of philosophical-ascetic self-transformation, not a category of historical description. It does need to be said, though, that these works also do not support the existence of a fundamental moment of juridification as understood by Habermas.

If we look at the remarkable essays of Martin Heckel—the foremost historian of German *Staatsrecht* (public law, political jurisprudence) and *Staatskirchenrecht* (political and constitutional church law)—then a quite different picture of juridification emerges.<sup>67</sup> Here, the term *juridification* refers not to the metaphysical-historical moment of occlusion of the lifeworld and its future restoration but to something else altogether. It refers in fact to a particular historical process whereby, in order to end religious civil war and establish legal parity between the two great confessional blocs, the institutions of imperial public law gradually displaced theology in adjudicating disputes and establishing the terms of coexistence for conflicting religions.<sup>68</sup> This process may well have helped transform the terrain of politics, lending support to a Hobbesian conception of sovereignty in which the autonomizing of politics is matched by the restriction of its scope to the end of social peace. This transformation took place, however, not as an occlusion of lifeworld norms and intuitions by the formal-positive character of law but as a result of the protracted establishment of a new norm for politics: the maintenance of a territorial state's external security and internal social peace. Far from being an obstacle to this new norm of religious neutrality, the formality and positivity of law helped make it possible by excluding recourse to transcendent religious norms in legislative contexts, but doing so in a manner that offered protection to those who pursued these norms in extrapolitical settings.<sup>69</sup> This is the history of juridification that Habermas's metaphysics of history turns its back on. It does so by arguing for the political reinstatement of transcendent norms, this time in the form of the supposedly detranscendentalized metaphysics of discursive democracy.

67. Heckel's essays and treatises have now been collected in Martin Heckel, *Gesammelte Schriften: Staat, Kirche, Rechte, Geschichte*, ed. Klaus Schlaich, 5 vols. (Tübingen, 1989–97).

68. See Heckel, "Religionsbann und landesherrliches Kirchenregiment," in *Die lutherische Konfessionalisierung in Deutschland*, ed. Hans-Christoph Rublack (Gütersloh, Germany, 1992), pp. 130–62 and "Die religionsrechtliche Parität," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:227–323.

69. See Heckel, "Zur Entwicklung des deutschen Staatskirchenrechts von der Reformation bis zur Schwelle der Weimarer Verfassung," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:366–401.

### Concluding Remarks

Needless to say, the preceding discussion neither exhausts the topic of the history of theory nor pretends to be the last word. In fact it is intended only to open a space in which this topic can be taken up and to provide some rough outlines of how it might be filled. To open this space, however, it was necessary to turn aside Derrida's argument that philosophy could not be subject to historical description. We had to treat the central tenet of this argument—philosophy's claim to open man's empirical finitude to the irruptive infinity of being—as itself a symptom of a particular historical phenomenon: a philosophical ascesis associated with the cultivation of a particular intellectual persona. In the wake of this historicization, other proxy concepts for the transcendental phenomenon—the *différance* of writing, the infinite play of signification, the corporeal delirium of the semiotic, the self-writing of the codes—lose their universality and their aura in becoming instruments and objects for a particular work of the self on the self.

We have indicated that the manner and degree to which this philosophical ascesis goes to work on the field of empirical disciplines—transforming them into structures of transcendental possibility, problematizing their claustral character in relation to being, promising to cultivate a new kind of openness—is itself a matter for historical investigation. Given the variety of disciplinary and indeed national contexts in which this transposition of the disciplines has taken place, the sketches provided above should be treated as indicative and provisional, pointers to a space of investigation in which quite different and unexpected instances might appear. Nonetheless, for such investigations to take place it will be necessary to discard the phenomenologically inspired concepts of the “paradigm” and the problematic, and even Foucault's more historically sensitive concepts of the *episteme*, discourse, and the historical a priori. The manner in which philosophy reworked the empirical disciplines was a matter not of virtual relations within apositive systems but of concrete intellectual combat associated with the return of a certain kind of metaphysics to the Anglo-American academy.