

Critical Inquiry and the Ideology of Pluralism

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There are no definite positions to be taken in chemistry or philology, and if there are any to be taken in criticism, criticism is not a field of genuine learning.

This remark from Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* has a rather poignant ring in the 1980s. It calls up a time, the 1950s, when criticism, along with the other social sciences, seemed ready to emancipate itself from ideology, ready to establish itself as an autonomous discipline free from contamination by "extrinsic" approaches, ready to abandon questions of value and taste in favor of a neutral, systematic, scientific methodology.

It doesn't take a particularly acute sense of history to observe that things have not turned out the way Frye expected. Criticism has not disentangled itself from other disciplines such as history, philosophy, and psychology to discover its own unique axioms and postulates; it has turned instead toward increasing interdisciplinary entanglement. Criticism has not freed itself from ideology; it has made ideology one of its central subjects. And it has certainly not liberated itself from "positions"; for better or worse, much of our recent critical energy has been occupied with polemics and statements of position.

These developments do not, of course, prove that Frye was wrong

A version of the following remarks was first prepared for a conference on "The Institutions of Criticism" held at McGill University in May 1981. Since statements of position are increasingly in demand in recent criticism, it seemed appropriate to say something about ours.

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about what criticism *should* become, only that he was a rather poor predictor of what it *would* become in the twenty-five years after *Anatomy of Criticism*. Indeed, one could argue that Frye was a very good prophet (as distinct from a predictor) on the grounds that criticism has failed to become a genuine science precisely because it has fallen back into ideology and position mongering in the last quarter-century. There doesn't seem to be any way of settling this argument, however, either by appeals to history or to theoretical principles. I propose instead in the following pages to reflect on a particular case history which is part of the development Frye failed to predict but which has discernible roots in the values he espoused. This case history is none other than that of *Critical Inquiry*, a journal which was founded with the professed purpose of encouraging "reasoned inquiry into significant creations of the human spirit," a rational, progressive humanism rather like Frye's, and yet which has found itself the scene of the major ideological disputes in the criticism of the '70s and '80s, and which has actually begun to sponsor an ideologically conscious criticism with special issues on feminism, politics and interpretation, and the formation of artistic canons. Our reasoned inquiries have taken us a considerable distance from Frye's dismissal of these matters as "ideological perorations" which have no place in a rational criticism.

Before we turn to the particular case of *Critical Inquiry*, however, it may be useful to reflect briefly on the species of which it is a member. It seems clear that we live in an age not just of criticism but of institutions of criticism. These institutions range from the foundations and universities which provide a material basis for critical activity, to those immaterial institutions we call "schools of thought," to the hybrid institutions which structure research and the exchange of information. One thinks here specifically of professional conferences, disciplinary associations, and, finally, of critical journals, the places where the intellectual and material institutions of criticism come together in the products we call critical texts. The more one reflects on the notion of "institutions of criticism," the more difficult it becomes to think of any kind of critical activity that is autonomous and independent of institutional involvement. And yet the idea that criticism has, or should aspire to, this sort of autonomy is a persistent illusion that has prevented criticism from taking a clear look at itself.

A rather striking emblem of this illusion of autonomy presented itself on the program of a recent conference on—what else?—"The Institutions of Criticism." The program showed a young tree—tied to a supporting post, and the moral of this emblem was clear: the tree stood for the "living work" of criticism, while the pole stood for institutions such as schools, libraries, foundations, and publishers which support the growth of criticism. The further implication was that criticism, like the

young tree, is capable of outgrowing its institutional props, which are there only temporarily until criticism can stand on its own.

I'd like to suggest that a more accurate emblem of the relation of criticism to institutions would show the tree merging into the supporting post, becoming indistinguishable from it—or, conversely, the post itself taking root and sprouting branches like those mossy pilings that line the canals in Constable's pictures of the Stour Valley. And the moral of this emblem would be what I take to be the fact of the matter: that there is no such thing as criticism apart from institutions. To see ourselves clearly we must not pretend that we are like some young tree which needs temporary support from institutions until we can stand free and independent. The question is not whether criticism will be involved in institutions but rather what kind of institutions we will devise to structure our activities and whether criticism is capable of turning its gaze upon its own institutional base.

If the goal of critical autonomy has been an illusion, however, it has been a noble one. It has usually been associated with the exemplary figure of the critic as public spokesman, as intellectual commentator on the full range of civilized life—the critic in the tradition of Arnold, Eliot, Trilling, Sontag, or Barthes. These figures present to those of us who labor on the academic assembly lines of institutionalized criticism a constant reproach to our professional insularity, our marginal position in coteries linked by technical jargon and narrow historical or theoretical questions. They strike us as inimitable, as institutions unto themselves, and so we content ourselves with envy or emulation: we dismiss their work as excessively popular and general, lacking rigor, empirical or theoretical, or we join up as imitators and workers in the institutions of criticism that grow up around their writings. In either case, we tend not to notice that the great free spirits of criticism are as deeply involved in institutions as any of us; it's just that they are attached to different ones than we are, ones which have a wider impact on our culture than our tiny associations of professional interest. If there is any hope of moderating the marginality of criticism, of bringing it closer to the goal not of autonomy but of cultural centrality, it must begin, I would suggest, with institutional self-examination and systematic disillusionment, a turning of criticism's analytic and interpretive attention to its own social, political, and economic basis. If we can understand where we fit in the structure of institutional organs that are the living body of criticism, we may be in a position to tend to the health of that body, to insure circulation and cooperation throughout all its parts, and to cure the feverish internal warfare which threatens to tear it apart.

The warfare I'm referring to is, of course, familiar to everyone who reads or writes criticism, but its real issues are far from clear. Sometimes it looks like a battle between criticism and old-fashioned scholarship,

between theory and history, or between formal textual analysis and the study of historical contexts. Sometimes it presents itself more particularly as a struggle between Europe and the Anglo-American tradition, specifically between criticism based in dialectical thought and that based in empiricism, positivism, and historicism. All too often it degenerates into a rhetorical battle between young and old, ancients and moderns, devils and angels, the avant-garde and the rear guard. Sometimes it even manifests itself as a clash (usually one-sided) between a would-be public critic like Gore Vidal and the entire body of academic criticism, which is dismissed for its failure to be interesting to a mass audience, a ploy which draws its strength from the incurable anti-intellectualism of the intellectual community. This modern battle of books has been going on long enough now to become something of an institution itself: the positions have been established, the troops are dug into the trenches, and negotiations have dwindled to the occasional shouting of accusations across no-man's-land. "Nihilism, decadence, solipsism, irrationality" is shouted by one camp; "Reactionary, fascist, authoritarianism" is the reply from the other. In this sort of atmosphere, the attempt to locate the position of *Critical Inquiry* among contemporary institutions of criticism is about as attractive as an invitation to walk blindfolded through a minefield. Since, however, any bloodletting will not only be metaphoric but even potentially medicinal, the risk seems worth taking.

What is, then, the position of *Critical Inquiry* among contemporary institutions of criticism? If this question is regarded as one about ideology, that is, about the implicit structure of political values and class interests that lie beneath a history of practices, then the editor of a critical journal may not be in the best position to say what the ideology of his own enterprise is. He may, in fact, be in the worst possible position, since he will tend to cover up the true ideology of his practices with self-serving proclamations of impartiality and editorial idealism and will avoid taking the rather jaundiced perspective which is needed to unveil an ideology. If ideology is, as some writers have suggested, the political equivalent of the unconscious, then a journal editor is in the position of a censor whose mission is precisely the repression of unacceptable truths about his own work. The following remarks, then, may be regarded as a combination of free association and confession, with the listeners invited to regard themselves as sympathetic analysts helping the speaker to reconstruct the political unconscious of *Critical Inquiry*.

The ideology usually associated with *Critical Inquiry* is that of "pluralism," a term which has had a rather mixed press in recent years. The problem with avowing an ideology of pluralism in a time that seems to demand alignment, commitment, and polemical certitude is that it looks like a false or evasive neutrality. Pluralism is often regarded at best as an aimless eclecticism and at worst as a disguised form of repressive tolerance which pretends to listen to many points of view while actually

suppressing or watering down their content. There seems to be some sort of fundamental contradiction involved in even bringing terms like "ideology" and "pluralism" together, for pluralism is so often regarded as a sort of nonposition, beyond ideology, a stance which is regarded as smug self-deception by the ideologue and as a commitment to free inquiry and intellectual liberation by the pluralist. The notion of an "ideology of pluralism" seems self-contradictory, for the ideologue must deny the possibility of pure pluralism, and the pluralist must affirm the possibility of transcending ideology. The chances of communication, much less reconciliation or identification of these two positions, would seem rather small. And yet this small chance of mediation between alien or conflicting positions has been precisely the opportunity and goal of *Critical Inquiry*.

One of the simplest ways of identifying our position among contemporary critical journals is to compare our role with journals like *New Literary History* or *Glyph*. Both these journals have dedicated themselves to the task of importing European critical traditions—semiotics, structuralism, deconstruction, and so on—into the Anglo-American critical scene. *Critical Inquiry*'s function has been, at least in part, to stage encounters of these ideas with the native tradition, to bring European and Anglo-American criticism into debate and dialogue. It must be confessed, however, that this was not the conscious intention which informed the founding of *Critical Inquiry*. The original idea was to have a journal friendly to the Chicago School of criticism, one which would foster neo-Aristotelian methods in a time (the early '70s) that seemed dominated by semiotics, structuralism, and deconstruction. This goal was abandoned even before the first issue appeared under pressure from the critical community itself: there were simply too many other interesting things coming in for *Critical Inquiry* to immure itself in the gray walls of Chicago's critical tradition. The policy for acceptance of manuscripts rapidly shifted from "essays that are correct, or well reasoned, or which contain important discoveries" to "essays that are interesting" or, even more significant, to "essays that the editors would like to argue with." This last criterion has, I think, now established itself as a fundamental principle of *Critical Inquiry*'s editorial policy, and I would like, therefore, to reflect a little more extensively on how that policy has manifested itself in practice.

The criterion of "arguability" has tended to steer *Critical Inquiry* away from the kind of pluralism which defines itself as neutral, tolerant eclecticism toward a position which I would call "dialectical pluralism." This sort of pluralism is not content with mere diversity but insists on pushing divergent theories and practices toward confrontation and dialogue. Its aim is not the mere preservation or proliferation of variety but the weeding out of error, the elimination of trivial or marginal contentions, and the clarification of fundamental and irreducible dif-

ferences. The goal of dialectical pluralism is not liberal toleration of opposing views from a neutral ground but transformation, conversion, or, at least, the kind of communication which clarifies exactly what is at stake in any critical conflict. A good dramatization of *Critical Inquiry's* editorial ideal would be the dialogue of the devil and angel in Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, an exchange in which each contestant enters into and criticizes the metaphysics of his contrary and which ends happily with the angel transformed into a devil.

This goal, as far as I know, has never been reached in any actual exchange in the pages of *Critical Inquiry*. At least I can't recall that any of our authors (aside perhaps from Stanley Fish) has emerged from a dispute admitting that it has fundamentally changed his or her views. But we can, I think, point to some more modest accomplishments, the staging of critical exchanges which have reflected and clarified the major controversies of criticism in the last ten years. One thinks first, I suppose, of the debates between J. Hillis Miller, M. H. Abrams, and Wayne Booth on the subject of interpretive determinacy; of the clashes between neopositivist, Popperian criticism and "affectivist" methods in the encounters of Ralph Rader, Stanley Fish, and John Reichert; of Fredric Jameson and Kenneth Burke on the issue of criticism as ideological interpretation; of Heinz Kohut and Erich Heller on the validity of psychoanalytic criticism; of Max Black, Nelson Goodman, Donald Davidson, and W. V. Quine on the nature of metaphor.

Or one may think of less fiery and disputatious encounters: of Frank Kermode and Joseph Frank puzzling out their long-standing conflict over the notion of spatial form in literature; of E. H. Gombrich and Quentin Bell pondering the issue of canons and values in the visual arts; of Annette Kolodny and William Morgan in a friendly hagggle over the role of men in the emerging institution of feminist criticism; or of Joseph Kerman and Leonard Meyer chastising the entire discipline of music history and theory for its sterile formalism and antiquarianism.

Before I get carried away with editorial enthusiasm and start reciting to you *Critical Inquiry's* entire contents of the last seven years, let me stop to make a couple of observations about the list of authors and subjects I have just mentioned. The first thing you might notice is that you recognize the names of a great many of our authors, a fact which suggests that *Critical Inquiry* has a rather elitist editorial policy, that it works, to put it frankly, on a star system. The second thing that may strike you is that these stars do not come from just the literary part of the firmament but comprise a sampling of leading figures in philosophy, psychology, music, and art history. If I had gone on with the recital you would have heard the names of historians, lawyers, novelists, film critics, poets, theologians, anthropologists, composers, painters, photographers, and so on. How do these facts fit with our policy of dialectical pluralism, and what ideology do they imply?

The connection between pluralism and an interdisciplinary format seems self-evident, but the ideological implications of interdisciplinary study are perhaps a little less clear. A self-congratulatory view of this sort of work generally regards it in a revolutionary, iconoclastic light, as a disruptive and liberating force which breaks down the walls between entrenched, stodgy institutions of pedantry. A more jaundiced and critical view, however, cannot fail to notice that interdisciplinary study has become a sort of institution in itself, enjoying conspicuous support from foundations and emerging as a kind of survival strategy for scholars in traditional disciplines (classics, foreign languages and literatures) whose institutional support in the academy is diminishing. *Critical Inquiry's* editorial stance toward the emerging institution of interdisciplinary study is, therefore, somewhat ambivalent.

We feel that a distinction should be made between "programmatically" interdisciplinary study, which sees the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries as a desirable goal in itself, and the sort of work which crosses boundaries in response to the imperatives of particular historical or theoretical problems. Gombrich is perhaps the exemplar of what we find most attractive in so-called interdisciplinary studies. Gombrich did not stray into the fields of psychology, linguistics, information theory, and philosophy of science because of any desire to dissolve the boundaries between these disciplines and his own work in the history of art. He made these forays because the problem of pictorial illusion required them. It should be noted, then, that the interdisciplinary component of *Critical Inquiry's* pluralism is relatively conservative. We publish a journal that combines music, art history, philosophy, and literary criticism not because we want to abolish the institutional boundaries between these disciplines but because we feel that the best work within the established disciplines will inevitably be of interest to specialists in other fields and that it will often strain against the boundaries of what is normally regarded as proper to a discipline. Our goal is to overcome the insularity of specialization, not to devalue the rather intense and particular knowledge that it can provide.

It will probably be evident that our particular kind of interdisciplinary format tends to foster the sort of star system I mentioned. The scholars whose work in any given special field is likely to interest those in other specialties will generally be leaders in their field, those whose work sets a standard or which exemplifies the most comprehensive and advanced thinking. That said, a couple of qualifications should be noted: the first is that we reject as many manuscripts from these stars as we accept; the second is that we are engaged in a continual search for the work of relatively unknown, younger scholars whose writing may be of general interest to the intellectual community. These qualifications, finally, should be accompanied by a confession: because we regard their work as barometric, we sometimes print essays by famous writers which

do not come up to our normal standards. One of our goals is to give our readers a sense of what recognized writers are up to at the present time, even when we do not think that they are up to much good. We want to give a reading of what's going on in some quarters. Surely this is an elitist policy, but it is not our only policy or even a major aspect of what we do. We are happiest when we discover someone doing good work of general interest, someone we had not known about before. In search of that kind of happiness we read our mail very carefully. Every submission is read by at least one editor, often by more than one. Every article is discussed in one way or another at editorial meetings.

What I've said so far about *Critical Inquiry* as an interdisciplinary institution has been mainly descriptive of our practice, but I'm not sure that it has really laid bare the ideological agenda of that practice. Are we just mouthing a kind of intellectual *Gemütlichkeit* in looking for a common ground for the various special interests of criticism? Of course we hope we are not. Our aim is to revitalize the existing institutions of criticism by a kind of intellectual cross-pollination, to encourage the development of new institutions which answer collective needs and interests of the intellectual community. We hope to assist in the development of a more coherent and wholistic sense of the history of the arts in the context of cultural and social history and to link the development of the arts more firmly to the communities of thought and interest which sustain them. Most fundamentally, I suppose, we hope to make it clear that criticism matters—that it makes a difference to someone else besides professional academic critics.

This emphasis on widening the cultural ambitions of criticism has several consequences. One of the most important is our emphasis on readability, the practice of what is, relative to most professional criticism, plain, standard English prose. We are of course sensitive to the complex relation between linguistic and conceptual innovation, and we try to recognize cases when jargon is indispensable, difficulty unavoidable. We recognize the force of Jameson's argument that "clarity and simplicity" can "serve an ideological purpose" of their own, a kind of short-circuiting of thought which resists the difficult, the alien, in favor of the ready-made and facile. In practice, however, it must be said that excessive clarity and facility have not been our problems, but obfuscation and mystification sometimes have. We encourage our authors, therefore, to employ the plainest style they can muster, to paraphrase jargon where necessary, to eliminate it where possible. We recognize that deconstructive or dialectical thinking has a claim to a kind of rigor which may feel stifled in the straitjacket of plain English prose, but we also feel that the choice for these authors is not a simple one of stylistic freedom versus confinement. The freedom to say things just the way you like may amount in practice to the confinement of one's thought to a tiny coterie of like-minded readers. If one wishes to claim the attention of a larger

audience, however, and to make good the claim that one's critical position matters to that audience, then one must ponder very carefully the question of rhetoric.

I've suggested that *Critical Inquiry's* institutional purpose is to enlarge the audience for criticism by seeking a common ground of arguable issues, interdisciplinary concerns, and accessible language, but somehow this still does not strike me as an adequate account of our ideological position. We need to ask what purposes are served by enlarging this audience, aside from increasing the number of *Critical Inquiry's* subscribers. To answer this question we must look more closely at the historic shift in the nature of criticism which has occurred in the last generation, a shift which in a sense has brought new institutions like *Critical Inquiry* into existence.

Let me just suggest—with the understanding that this is only a sketchy account—that there are two main factors behind the emergence of a journal like *Critical Inquiry*. One is the perfecting of formalist criticism of the arts, the increasing refinement and subtlety of textual analysis; the other is the widely felt failure of purpose in the aftermath of the political experience of the '60s in both America and Europe. Since then there has been a widespread feeling that we need to get "beyond formalism" in some fundamental way, and one of the strategies for doing this has been simply to carry formalism beyond the old textual boundaries, to construct a pan-textualism which reads the entire fabric of nature and culture as a network of signs. This strategy has often been accompanied by a rhetoric of liberation and revolution, presenting itself as a mode of transgression, scandal, and radical innovation, while appropriating to itself the universality of scope claimed by traditional positivist, empiricist, and historicist modes of explanation.

I'm not terribly concerned with the question of whether this hermeneutic revolution of pan-textualism is really a radical break or merely formalism writ large. What does seem evident is that, sociologically speaking, it occupies the same institutional position that New Criticism and formalism did; that is, it constitutes itself as an intellectual vanguard whose ideas are first rejected and then absorbed by the established institutions of criticism. No one feels very happy with the results: the old men complain about corruption of standards and loss of rigor; the young men and women complain that their ideas have been co-opted and stripped of their critical content. The same old texts are read with just one more ironic turn of the hermeneutic circle, and the vanguard remains in a position of marginality.

It is my view, my hope at any rate, that *Critical Inquiry* is an institution dedicated to breaking out of this circle. If we have a hidden agenda, it is to bring the hermeneutic revolution, the golden era of innovation in technical, analytic, and formalist criticism, into a living relationship with the traditional function of criticism as a kind of public conscience, an

ethical and political commentary on the full range of civilized life. This sort of relationship can never be built out of the simple polarization of criticism into vanguard and old guard which passes for “political consciousness” in so many of our current polemics. We need a sense of history, especially of our own critical history, which will get beyond the notion that we have somehow “gotten beyond” all previous paradigms. The treatment of previous criticism as a history of error which is always about to be set right in the present moment of critical breakthrough is, I would suggest, the chief error which stands in the way of our grasping our own institutional history. The ritual assertion that certain “naive” positions—positivism, empiricism, and mimetic theories of art are the first that come to mind—have been irrevocably discredited by our recent breakthroughs strikes me as an ahistorical bit of naiveté which invariably depends on a reductive view of the supposedly discredited positions.

The resistance to reductive views of rival positions, the treatment of history as something that admits of multiple, even contrary, interpretations, the ability to listen, as Barbara Johnson has put it, “with both ears”—this has been *Critical Inquiry*’s goal, a position which I’ve described as “dialectical pluralism.” I hope it is clear, however, that *Critical Inquiry* has not seen the position as one of transcendent neutrality, beyond ideology. Everything in our practices indicates that we have tended to side with the ancients, affirming the values of historical research, the importance of rational argument and use of evidence, the need for clear, eloquent English prose. But I hope it’s also clear that we have treated this position not as a bastion to be defended against the assaults of nihilism but as an outpost for negotiation and intelligence. For us, there is no paradox in affirming the values of reason and humanism and at the same time admitting that deconstruction is one of the most interesting and important critical movements of the ’70s, one that requires understanding, not polemical dismissal. There is no contradiction in remembering the lessons of our fathers, the New Critics, while trying to learn new lessons from their daughters, the emerging feminist movement in criticism; there is no inconsistency in resisting the labels of the ideologue, while affirming an ideology of pluralism.

Our goal has been and continues to be a new synthesis of professional and public criticism firmly rooted in Anglo-American culture and leavened by a sensitivity to the best in European and non-Western modes of thought. If there has been a hermeneutic moment in the understanding of this goal, perhaps it came when the first editors of *Critical Inquiry* looked at the slogan printed on the masthead of the first volume and decided to eliminate it from future issues: it called *Critical Inquiry* “a voice for reasoned inquiry into significant creations of the human spirit.” “Too pompous,” said Sheldon Sacks. “And besides,” said Wayne Booth, “if we manage to live up to that slogan, people will know it by the things we print, not by anything we say.” It is my hope that we are living up to that slogan, but “under erasure,” as it were.