

I take as my text—since I am one of those critics who can speculate only via a text—the five propositions that collectively suggest that critical inquiry, the practice, not the journal, is both retrenching and expanding, assuming a depressive and euphoric stance toward the place of the humanities in a posthuman age. Five potential futures, but only two positions: a defense of familiar humanistic ground against the pressures of technology and corporatization and an embrace of the human sciences reconstituted through, and on equal footing with, their more confident scientific others. Can these stances be theorized together rather than apart?

The sequence of propositions traces a course from retrenchment to expansion, an implicit narrative of progress, but I will proceed in the opposite direction to propose an alternative set of relations. For it seems, to start with proposition four, indisputably the case that “the rapid transformations in contemporary media . . . are producing new horizons for theoretical investigations in politics, science, the arts, and religion that go well beyond the resources of structuralism, poststructuralism, and the ‘theory revolution’ of the late twentieth century.” The question is not whether these broader prospects are achievable or desirable, however distant their horizons and nascent their terms, but whether they necessarily render previous projects and practices obsolete, whether they exact a developmental narrative, or whether there are grounds, beyond a weak pluralism, for accommodating the humanities and posthumanities in a relation that unsettles the terms of each.

The most obvious vectors across this turf are interdisciplinary: programs and special journal issues in media studies, science/technology and literature, and globalization and the humanities, designed to build new discursive communities. If their goal is to resist as well as to theorize the spread of global systems of technology and capital, they would need to reflect on the ways that the arts and sciences can be deployed in the interests of the local as well as of the global. Similarly, they would need to reconsider the diminished status of foreign language and area study programs to insure a voice for the local in the discourse of the global without succumbing to the “timidity, back-filling, and (at best) empirical accumulation” outlined by the first proposal.

An easier and more pervasive instance of the local that is also a conduit of the social is the resurgence in recent years of the autobiographical critical voice that talks back to the abstract voice of theory. It is a return, as various critics have noted both positively and negatively, to storytelling as a means of building the public sphere, of finding common ground through the narrative particular. The first-person genre has opened the discussion to a range of critical voices that were tongue-tied by the language of theory, an expansion that in turn has multiplied the entry points for readers. These narrative circuits may reinforce the intimate nature of the critical public sphere, but they do not constitute, as the second proposition contends, a retreat from “social-political engagements” (which are not infrequently their topic) to an introverted and individualizing “therapeutic turn,” especially if critical interest in Lacan is deemed their “major theoretical symptom.”

For if Lacan is either symptom or agent of a theoretical turn, it is far from the “care of the self” imagined by this proposition because the French return to Freud explodes any ready notion of self-care. It also removes the props for identity politics. Poststructural psychoanalysis has been the key provocation of a turn to the identity-destabilizing work of the unconscious that, along with an unlikely ally in historicism, has galvanized the transition from transparent to unstable, internally divided, and overdetermined identity categories. The shift from women’s studies to gender studies charts this passage vividly. The tense debates of the 1980s and 1990s between feminism and poststructuralism have without much fanfare yielded to a tacit consensus

that, rather than invalidating politically engaged analysis, psychologically and historically mobile conceptualizations of gender make intellectual and political alliances possible across previously hostile discursive terrains. As self-difference opens the door to other differences, theorizations that emanate from one racial or sexual or class turf are more likely to provoke new questions than old accusations from competing grounds. We are just at the beginning of a generative process that encompasses not only the particularization that results from historical refinement and nuancing but also the elaboration of revisionary narratives: what happens (as Darieck Scott has asked) when the dark plantation son retells the story of the primal horde, or when the racial shadow falls across the mirror stage, or the queer encounters and reforms the melancholic. Fracturing the subject has also poked holes in the walls that have divided psychoanalysis and history, launching a potentially interminable analysis.

This expansive vision does not entail the fantasy that we can abandon the language of gender or race. These (and other) identity categories must still be marshalled not only politically in an era that is likely to witness the dismantling of affirmative action and *Roe v. Wade* but also intellectually in a climate that has claimed postmodern license to level distinctions for sometimes dubious gain. To take one salient recent example: Michael Cunningham's siphoning off of Virginia Woolf's cultural capital. Woolf's death in the opening scene is the enabling condition of *The Hours*—the foregrounding of her suicide is a telltale symptom that this is an act of literary murder and inheritance, masked in the film by a thin feminist veneer—so that Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway can both incorporate and displace hers. What could have been a thoughtful project of queer/feminist revision, a rethinking of what thinking-back-through-our-mothers-if-we-are-women might mean if "we" are (gay) men, becomes instead a repetition of Oedipus as matricide, inflected by the cannibalistic energies unleashed by the maternal body, especially one whose potency (who *is* afraid of Virginia Woolf?) has long been acknowledged. That Cunningham has succeeded in making Woolf his footnote—reviewers gently remind us to read her novel after we've seen his film—recalls us to the task of redrawing as well as disbanding boundaries, not to preserve the precincts of identity politics, but to identify the modes and motives of boundary crossings in a field of play in which the power of the living over the dead, and of the culture industries over the writerly text, have more than redressed the prestige once accorded an elite modernism, a prestige for which "Virginia Woolf" (as Brenda Silver has shown) has served as an insistent if contested signifier.

But how, in fact, can we define Woolf's literary value against what proposition three describes as "the overwhelming forces of mass culture and commercial entertainment" without recourse to traditional humanistic language: psychological depth, formal complexity, verbal richness and intensity? Can we only always reproduce the established terms of the modernism/postmodernism, high culture/mass culture debates? Are there non-Arnoldian criteria for defending the humanities? The subject, perhaps, of another special issue.

But no issue would be as special as the one that proposition five invites us to imagine because the question that it poses—whether criticism and theory in the twenty-first century "may have to explore other media of dissemination besides those of the printed text . . . or even language as such in its prosaic, discursive forms"—cannot, by definition, be adequately answered discursively. *Critical Inquiry*, the journal, not the practice, would need to forgo the forms of intellectual production and consumption enabled by the printed text and take the leap from analog to digital culture. Others could imagine this far better than I, but some of the ingredients would seem to be the web dissemination of computer-generated multimedia graphics with interactive properties positioning "readers" as components in nonverbal feedback loops.

Only by association in, or in at least a collective attempt to design, what I believe is called a distributed cognitive community could we find out what it would mean to wire critical inquiry through the circuits of postmodernity.

What else is to be done is far less visionary: the creation of textual and institutional networks that try to juxtapose, rather than to oppose, humanists and scientists, localists and globalists, modernists and postmodernists, and that ask loyalists on both sides to engage the language of the other. Where that fails, journal editors and conference organizers will need to generate frameworks that elicit responses across these divides, that promote dialectical structures of thought, and that accommodate structures of feeling in which mania and depression are not the unspoken causes or consequences of ideology but the subjects of critical conversation about the place of affect in inquiry.

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