

When I received Tom Mitchell's request for advice about the future, I at first tried to ignore it. But suddenly a voice from within—my editorial "Self" from the "founding years"—burst in with the following tirade. You will find after the tirade a much calmer, wiser, only slightly hypocritical response.

Submission Number 1:

To: The Future Editors of *Critical Inquiry*

From: Anon, te Only Truly Wise Former Editor Still Alive

My Dream of an Old/New *CI*

As everyone knows, predictions about the future turn out to be mistaken 99.9 percent of the time. So even though our editor has asked for predictions, I resist any temptation to predict a gloomy—or even a cheerful—future for all genuinely serious academic journals. Instead I offer what I would do if I were living in some utopia and got chosen as editor of *CI*. Some of my suggestions are brilliantly ironic (for example, number 5). Some will seem to many of you, especially the youngest ones, pointless. But the next to the last one, number 4, is utterly solemn; indeed, it disguises a bit of frustrated despair about our present "critical" scene.

My first step would be to ensure that all contributions—regardless of subject matter or purpose—be made accessible to a broader audience, including old farts like me. *CI* at present does fairly well on the matter of careful editing—as compared to many journals where the editors seem just to let flow whatever gets poured in. But a surprising number of current entries leave me (and other older readers I've talked with) utterly confused and turned away. Far too often, after reading a few opening paragraphs of several essays, I simply throw *CI* to one side and turn to one or another journal like *TLS* where editors seem to require authors to write intelligibly.

Does a statement like that one convince you that as an old-timer I've simply lost it? Well, I can still read and admire Hegel and Heisenberg and Homi Bhabha, even while wishing that I could have taught them—along with Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler and Fredric Jameson and others—how to construct intelligible sentences and paragraphs.

What are the editorial steps that—though I find *CI* obeying them more often now than they did five years ago and that I often find annoyingly ignored by postmodernists, full of polysyllabic endocrinological crapifications, especially of the youngest generation, with far too many long sentences—are too often neglected, driving many readers away, while sometimes seducing a few? (Besides, there's too little clever irony of the kind I just employed.)

Here are a few suggested rules:

1a. Be sure your assistant editors attack any awkward, overly loose sentence.

1b. Require that all authors abide by the Booth Simplicity rule (BS): no page allowed that has more than three words with more than three syllables.

1c1. Permit in each article no more than three words that were invented after the year 2000. Never accept an article that includes any of Booth's many coinages, especially rhetorology.

1c2: Since I can have no hope that this rule will be followed, here's a substitute: ask each author who uses fancy but necessary new terminology to provide a brief glossary at the end of the article rather than assuming an audience of five or ten who are up on the new terminology.

2. Publish no article that the editors themselves don't fully understand, even if the author happens to be famous. If none of the coeditors can offer a thesis summary in one sentence,

answering the question, So what?—out!—or, at least, “do some revising!” (I resist offering as examples some articles by *CI*'s actual current editors!)

After the drive for increasing clarity, increase the number of “special issues,” each one carefully supervised by someone, whether an official editor or not, who has a strong motive for either some new movement or a return to a neglected, old, but valuable practice. The recent issue “Things” provides an excellent example of that admirable *insistence on coherence*. Though too many of even the chosen essays fail to address the question, So what? the whole issue had clearly been focused from the beginning with careful editorial suggestions. Let's have more of that kind. (Should I boast that I recently was a CELJ judge who, violating conflict of interest, voted for its award of the prize for best special issue?)

4. Insist on more attention to the meaning of the words *critical* and *inquiry*.

4a: *Inquiry*: Too many current essays seem to me to do no genuine *inquiring*. Many are only evangelical preaching (disguised with academic polysyllables); they read as if they had been rejected by editors in some field far outside “the humanities.” Even the essays devoted to some form of literary criticism too often commit the kind of a priori criticism that Ronald Crane once labeled “the high priori road”: the author is predetermined to find this or that evidence for this or that ideological conviction, and when the evidence is found, as the author always can claim, the critical task is over, with little attention to whether the “found” evidence is really there or only invented by the hypothesis.

Genuine inquiry requires that the author openly consider more than one hypothesis about the thesis or topic or question. Again and again I find myself annoyed by articles presenting a plausible case for this or that point, but with not a hint about rival hypotheses or sound argument about why they don't hold up.

4b: *Criticism*: Even more troublesome to me—unable to repress my wisdom—is the fact that too many essays give little or no attention to “criticism.” They fail to tackle the grounds for judgment about the good or bad—the success or failure—of works of “art” (I define *art* as the whole range of human effort to make something new that is worth making).

When we wise ones founded *CI*, we had diverse goals, but at the center was our hope to provide more support for, and examples of, the kind of “formal” criticism that appraises “made” quality, probing how the parts support the whole. Real criticism judges the value of what's been made—always a tough task but one practiced by all powerful minds from the ancients until—well, *almost* yesterday. Whatever the future brings, there will be some would-be creators attempting some human *achievement* that will stand up, when criticized, as essentially superior to similar attempts.

In short: every author submitting an article to *CI* must in the future be required to offer proof that he/she/it has read at least one essay by the Chicago School of Criticism, at least one essay by the best of the New Critics, and—just to be specific—at least a few chapters of Barbara Herrnstein Smith's book on *Closure*. Whether in fiction, poetry, painting, sculpture, movies, architecture, or critical argument, structure counts. It will count in any new field that hasn't yet occurred to us in 2003. But, no matter where, the art of *making something better than what was there before* is too often ignored these days, as we join a world that thinks better-or-worse doesn't matter; what matters is only conceptual innovation.

As various forms of formalism have become outmoded, we have tended to think that because they were indeed often extremist and dogmatic or dully repetitive, their central quest for close attention to literary quality no longer counts. How long has it been since I read an article in *CI* that forced me to acknowledge something like, “Oh my God, I read that work badly and

didn't realize how great it is; this author has really shown me how to read it right, how to see its true greatness"?

Well, maybe I've missed one or two such articles along the way, but I'd like to see a lot more. It was the quest for that kind of critical revelation, that kind of "close reading" attention to quality, that we had in mind when we founded the rag. It could be summarized as, "Let's try to find authors who can teach readers the critical difference between a genuine creative achievement—whether a Greek tragedy or a postmodern poem or novel—and a piece of slovenly *uncreative* rambling. (I ain't claiming that *CI* never meets this standard, only that it's not far enough above "the average" in the "old days.")

The search for more genuine *inquiry* about *criticism* would not have to be the center of all *CI* issues. We could continue to explore all important social and philosophical and political issues, and the "religious" problems of the kind that deconstruction introduced by echoing traditional theological probings into the "incomprehensible." (I am still shocked that *CI* never paid any attention to my essay "Deconstruction as a Religious Revival.") But surely at least once a year *CI* should have an issue devoted to appraising the true quality of this or that human achievement, digging into just what, in any one area, makes the difference between better and worse.

5. A basic rule for the future is that once a year at least one essay by a "founding" editor be published, featured with a photo on the cover.

[Note that I have honorably resisted the temptation to insist that you go back to our noble practice of not tricking customers with photos on the cover. Won't you ever realize that cover illustrations carry the clear message: "This is not an *intellectual* journal?"]

As ever your admirer,

Anon

Submission Number 2

To: The Future Editors of *Critical Inquiry*

From: Wayne Booth

There are moments when I fear that the future of criticism, like the future of our world, is doom-ridden. But the very existence of *Critical Inquiry*, with its many successes out there in that "world," refutes my absurd pessimism.

Keep up the good work.

Your admirer,

Wayne Booth, calmly and sincerely forgiving you for turning down his brilliant essay defending various forms of hypocrisy, including the perhaps silly coinage "hypocrisy upward."

—Wayne Booth
University of Chicago