

Perhaps some things should not be the objects of inquiry, especially critical inquiry. Some powerful segments of our society these days seem to think so. Why did Sheldon Sacks want to call the journal *Critical Inquiry*, in that now far-off time? Perhaps one topic to reflect on is just that value of critical inquiry in itself, as a traditional feature of the American university and of the publications it sponsors, such as *Critical Inquiry*. Are there, or should there be, topics not open to critical inquiry, for example, the utility of critical inquiry? In a democracy, is it right to make critical inquiries into democracy itself?

I am inhibited in writing this statement by not knowing all that much about the current conduct of *Critical Inquiry*, beyond feeling that it is doing splendidly and that each issue contains superb essays in a wide variety of areas. I feel greatly honored to be on the editorial board. But I don't know how many submissions there are, how many are solicited and how many come out of the blue. I don't know beyond a general idea of collective rigor just how decisions are made about which essays to publish. I don't know just what plans you have for the future. I look forward to learning about all that.

I suggest four topics of special importance these days for critical inquiry. They might be areas to be especially on the lookout for or to solicit essays about, or they might be the subjects of special issues.

1. My *métier*, as you know, is now and always has been literary study. Though I know that literature is only one topic among many that *Critical Inquiry* covers, nevertheless I think the continued social role of literature is especially problematic these days. Why should we any longer read and study literature? Is it not already a thing of the past, dead as the dodo, an object of interest only to moldy fig antiquarians? Literature (in the old-fashioned sense of novels, poems, and plays) once played a central role in the *Bildung* of our citizens, in their training in the ethos of citizenship. It was a weird feature of education in the United States that the chief means of this particular form of *Bildung* was the literature of a foreign country, a country, moreover, that we defeated over two hundred years ago in a revolutionary war of independence. Now all that has rapidly changed, even though a lot of reading no doubt still gets done. Seven million copies of the gothic mystery stories of Barbara Michaels were in print several years ago. Nevertheless, the sensibilities and ideologies of most U.S. citizens are determined more and more by television, cinema, and the newer media: DVDs, the internet, computer games, and so on, not by books either highbrow or lowbrow. These media are of course a major force in globalization. What will happen, or ought to happen, to literature and to literary study within this new mediatic regime? Alan Liu, who has thought about this more profoundly than most, sees the major question for literary study today as the question of what will happen to literature in the age of the new media. He speaks of the "future literary," that is, a migration of the uses of language we call literary into other media. One concomitant of the displacement of literature by new media is the disarray in which the traditional disciplines of literary study find themselves these days. Should English departments cease to exist or become departments of cultural studies, or departments of world Anglophone literature, or what? How can one imagine a globalized comparative literature, with the apparently intractable language problems of a widening beyond Europe and America? It is not even certain that all cultures have a concept of literature consonant with ours. How can comparative literature, with its commitment to Western theory and Western methodologies and with its use of English as the dominant language be other than another example of Western cultural imperialism? *Critical Inquiry* might make an important intervention in this area.

2. A second topic for *Critical Inquiry* (and critical inquiry) might be the effects of the new media on the sensibilities, the ethos, the interior life of our citizens. I mean not just a description of the new media or an analysis of their products, along the lines of film studies for cinema, but a reflection on what sort of citizens the new media will produce or are producing. Liu, once more, has done superb work in this area, as in his big new book, *The Laws of Cool: The Culture of Information*. Simon During has written an essay called “Literary Subjectivity,” meaning the subjectivity of those old-fashioned people for whom reading literature was a central feature of their lives. What is the difference between “literary subjectivity” and “digital subjectivity”? I imagine a contrast between a book or paper person, let us call him “Horace,” and a cyberperson, let us call him “Jimjim.” The former has since childhood spent a great deal of time reading literature, that is, entering into imaginary worlds or virtual realities by way of the words on the pages of printed books. This is to a large degree how he gets a life. Jimjim, by contrast, has used a computer since early childhood. He now spends eight hours a day (or, more precisely, *a night*, since he stays up until the small hours) online, playing computer games, chatting in chatrooms, communicating with friends from all over the world by way of AOL Instant Messenger, or exchanging emails. That’s how Jimjim gets a life. What is the difference in subjectivity between these two? It does not go without saying that Jimjim is necessarily inferior to Horace. Jimjim’s involvement with his media is active, interventionist. Jimjim writes a lot, with fluency and power, while Horace is in danger of being passively determined by other people’s words. Reading books does not necessarily make one a good writer, whereas Instant Messenger is superb training in succinctness and economy, even elegance, of style. Nietzsche observes in *Ecce Homo* that he only became himself when he resigned his professorship at Basle and stopped reading so he could think for himself and start writing. “My eyes alone,” says Nietzsche, speaking of his weakening eyesight,

put an end to all bookwormishness [Bücherwürmerei]—in brief philology [Philologie]: I was delivered from the “book”; for years I did not read a thing—the greatest benefit I ever conferred on myself—That nethermost self [jenes unterste Selbst] which had, as it were, been buried and grown silent under the continual pressure of having to listen to other selves (and that is after all what reading means [und das heisst ja lesen!]) awakened slowly, shyly, dubiously—but eventually it spoke again.

In citing Nietzsche, the reader will note, I am doing the thing he is warning against. In citing him in English translation I am, moreover, manifesting that hegemony of English that I said above I see as a big problem. Editor Mitchell’s call for statements lists the long series of methodologies or subdisciplines that have appeared since *Critical Inquiry* was founded. Perhaps these still remain caught more than we might wish within the assumptions of the print epoch. What new ways of thinking and of critical inquiry might be appropriate for the new media age we are entering?

3. A third topic for continued critical inquiry is the social roles these days of the university and of the humanities and social sciences within the university. Most people agree that these roles are rapidly changing, as is the research university itself. Distinguished books have been published on this topic, for example Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins* and Jacques Derrida’s *L’Université sans condition*. Nevertheless, the mission of the university, its intersection, so to speak, with its milieu, is changing with such great rapidity that the last word on this topic has not yet been said. These changes include, for example, the suspension of affirmative action, the shift in funding from government sources to industry sources, the reduction in political influence either in government or in media news analysis of professors, and

the shift of a great deal of higher education away from the universities altogether into schools run by corporations. A continual effort to take stock of what is happening is in order. One possible somewhat sinister reason that universities have been left pretty much alone (in spite of Lynne Cheney's relatively ineffective efforts) in the current shift to the right is that those in power no longer think universities—their students, faculty, and administrations—are worth bothering much about, so little social influence do they have. As long as those in power control the media, for example radio talk shows and network news, they may think, the universities can go on teaching whatever they like. What should we do in this situation? How can we understand it and act effectively on the basis of that understanding?

4. My fourth and last topic is introduced somewhat tentatively. I have some sympathy with Stanley Fish's rebuke to professors who think their teaching is a way of doing things political with words, who think that teaching and scholarly writing are performatively effective in the political realm. That may be so, and it would in any case be a mistake to exaggerate any political leverage university teaching and writing may have. Nevertheless, it is difficult these days just to stand by doing nothing, to go on, as Fish appears to want us to do, teaching within the parameters of our disciplines, doing what we do around here. In my case that might mean teaching *Middlemarch* or *The Last Chronicle of Barset* without thinking very much, if at all, about whether reading those novels is a good thing to do in this place and time, whether it really has any social utility. We live, however, in a country ruled by a president who was not elected. We have been plunged into a permanent state of war. The political rhetoric of our leaders approaches closer and closer to Orwellian doublespeak or, to put it bluntly, lies. The economy is in terrible shape, the stock market far, far down, workers' pensions sharply diminished. Huge deficits are actual and foreseen. Our tax system, especially with the new changes proposed, is widening further and further the gap between rich and poor. The administration's educational policy is to punish minority young people for not doing as well on standardized tests as affluent white children from the suburbs. Racist or reactionary judges are being put forward for high benches. A reasoned and sober forecast, with lots of data, by three distinguished social scientists, sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, says a war in Iraq could cost as much as 1.7 trillion dollars. I say nothing of the many casualties almost certain to result from any attempt to "liberate the Iraqi people," as I heard it called on television the other night. Liberate them for what? Long-term occupation by American forces? Hundreds of billions are being spent for a missile defense system that few scientists think can possibly work. The media keep the public in a continual state of paranoia and terror so that expert analysis describes us all as suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Our healthcare system is a catastrophe. Forty million citizens do not have any healthcare coverage. The environment is being irrevocably trashed, our forests cut down, the Clean Air Act abrogated, the Arctic Wildlife Refuge slated for destruction for the sake of oil that will represent a mere six-month supply for the United States, though it will make a lot of money for some oil executives. Meanwhile global warming proceeds apace. Our constitutional civil liberties are being eroded day by day as we become more and more a nation of citizens under total surveillance. What I am writing at this moment on this computer is accessible to new forms of electronic surveillance, especially once I send it as an email attachment. Worst of all, the United States, in its defiance of international law and in its claim to make preemptive strikes whenever those in power here decide our national interests are threatened, has become the chief rogue nation in the world, armed to the teeth with weapons of mass destruction. As I say, it is difficult to stand by while all this is going on and teach Victorian novels in a traditional apolitical way. I am not talking about the obligation to have personal

political views, but about the question of how these ought to be a component of my professional activities in teaching or writing, about the question of how practical politics ought to be a feature of *Critical Inquiry*. My strategy has been to teach and write about old literary works in the context of one “timely” problematic or another, “Victorian and Modernist English Novels: Moments of Decision” for the last two years, “Victorian Multiplotted Novels as Models of Community” this year. Is that enough? Should I still teach literature? What good is literature these days? The question for critical inquiry is just how a journal like *Critical Inquiry* can intervene, if it should, in however small a way, to do something about this present political situation. This is by no means easy to figure out and decide about.

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