

What subjects might *Critical Inquiry* take up in the next years that reflect this period, this time? What must theoreticians and critics explore now?

To help foreshadow a future for theory and criticism I have taken six bits of texts:

1. *From reading TV*. Blocks of writing on the TV screen often have howling errors in grammar and spelling. Three examples from the first month of 2003. On 7 January, the CNN show *American Morning* was reporting on a British study of happiness. “Existence” was “exsistence.” On 13 January 2003, as Joseph Lieberman was announcing his presidential run, the crawl had an item about the actor “Jim Carey,” an *r* now gone from his name. On 20 January 2003, a weather report wrote of “high pressue in the Rockies,” another *r* pushed off the screen.

The rules of the linguistic game are under more than usual pressure. One siege engine is the inevitability of historical change, especially as new voices experiment with and claim a natural language. Another is the punning and funning of pop culture, substituting boyz for boys. Here the assaults on the rules are both rebellions against a dominant culture and imaginative play. A third siege engine is the relentless pounding of ignorance—in conversation, in classrooms, in the media. Learning and demonstrating the rules of language seem as obsolete as learning to churn butter. Spellcheck, more proof of our reliance on technology, perpetuates mistakes if the spelling it is meant to be verifying would be correct in another context. No spellcheck would underline as a mistake “Carry Blue Terrier.”

Theory and criticism cannot become the Grammar and Orthography Police, the GOPs of literacy, but they must ally more vigorously with sociolinguistics and trace the evolution of languages as English—who knows for how long—becomes a global language. Morally, critics should ask how much they care if Jim Carrey and pressure lose their *r*. Is this the inexorable mutation of language, or a sign of freedom on the part of its users, or the drool of slackers? Historically, the evolution of English in the next thirty years will show patterns of political and cultural powers—as it has since the nineteenth-century and the educational regimes of British imperialism.

2. *From reading my email*. A whimsical friend sends me a test, “Question for the day”:
The “fabulous invalid” is a tag that best describes:

- a) Broadway theater
- b) New York publishing
- c) The humanities in general

Support your choice with concrete examples.

My friend loves the theater and does humanities publishing in New York. His test might be another, jauntier symptom of the malaise and marginality, which feed off each other, that the arts and humanities often express in modern and postmodern society. Theoreticians and critics must decide what tone is most appropriate to their moment: apocalyptic visions and jeremiads because of the state of culture, hope because of the possibilities of culture, nostalgia because of the loss of culture, or paranoia and hand-wringing on the part of the humanities (except for media studies). Significantly, a connection exists (or exists) between the means of distribution of this test and the content of the test, which asks for a comparison of the terminability of what have been three powerful, rulemaking cultural forces. The new technologies—here email—are dynamically and irresistibly shaping the memory, use, and dissemination of words. The Broadway theater was affectionately named the “Fabulous invalid” before these technologies, but their emergence has given theater trouble and helped to threaten the authority and practices of New York publishing, with all its cosmopolitan sophistication, and the humanities, with their disciplinary contours and academic settings. These technologies now also distribute many of our

contemporary narratives and characters—for example, the Zeldas and Pikmin characters of the videogames I do not play. They enable new sites of expertise, be it faux expertise or the right stuff. Bloggers are our newest faculty.

Everyone knows this—just as whitewater rafters know they are in turbulent water. What I have just written is a commonplace. However, in part because we are moving so quickly, we have yet to develop the most competent and far-reaching of river guides. To live in and work for our century, and Schiller warns us that we have no choice, Criticism, Inc. will take as a primary subject these new technologies, their consequences, the economic and political powers that control them, and the powers they might confer on individuals, even if their ownership is concentrated. (Note my assumption that there might still be a version of John Crowe Ransom’s Criticism, Inc., now an affinity group whose passion and profession is to analyze and judge culture.) If I have a laptop, how much can Rupert Murdoch or Sumner Redstone, who have built media juggernauts, or Michael Powell, who as chair of the Federal Communications Commission seems to welcome juggernauts, limit my judgments? Limit my ability to ask about creations, inventions, and performances in the age of electronic reproduction and reinvention? No answer is certain; the need for the questions imperative.

3. *From reading an academic press book.*

I wish I was a rapper. There are certainly times when I wish I could just drop an album and channel all my ideas, anger, humor, and energy into some music and be done with it. Though I do spit games out of my own platinum mouthpiece like a rapper, I also write books. In doing so, I have always tried to bring a certain energy to my writing; a hip hop energy, if you will. I am also a competitor and I love the competitive nature of both hip hop and the NBA.¹

Is this the voice of a twenty-first-century American Scholar, or even the New World Scholar, or even the new world scholar? Putting the personal voice front and center? Moving from high to low and from album to book as easily as moving from one dance partner to another? From one foot to another in the dance? As convinced as Emerson, the great ancestor, that “gowns and pecuniary foundations, though towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit.” Yes, this is a voice of the twenty-first-century American Scholar. He treats strangers to the new, to hip hop, tactfully. He seeks to entertain, to instruct, to be on point, not to intimidate. For the uninitiated, he offers a “Glossary of Hip Hop Terms.” The glossary has no word or phrase that might be a synonym for *hybridization*, but that is what criticism and theory will continue to find compelling, cultures and genres that are alien to some but familiar to others, cultures and genres that can become familiar if strange and strange if familiar, cultures and genres that are in process and in the process of connecting and crossing. But what are the elements to be mixed to form hybrids? Much more than genders, much more than races and ethnicities, much more than genres and disciplines and cultural forms, much more than cultures. It may be nothing less than terrestrial and nonterrestrial organisms, life forms, themselves.

4. *From reading a flyer in the briefing book for a board meeting of a nonprofit organization.*

ILC, the International Longevity Center, invites your participation in The Literature of Longevity: A Seminar Series, “Finding My Way: The Autobiography of an Optimist,” with Evelyn Stefansson Nef. “Finding My Way” is the autobiography of Evelyn Stefansson Nef that reveals the continuous blossoming of a woman born in humble

1. Todd Boyd, *The New H.N.I.C. (Head Niggas in Charge): The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* (New York, 2002), p. ix.

circumstances in Brooklyn in 1913 who became an accomplished writer, authority on the Far North, linguist, psychotherapist, art collector, and philanthropist. It includes tales of her friendships with such personalities as Buckminster Fuller, Marc Chagall, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Margaret Bourke-White...Monday, February 3, 2003.²

The construction of terrestrial subjectivities will continue but expand its forms. Of the blueprints that will emerge, two will upend dominant notions of what is appropriately the human. Cultural representations of aging, the temporal extension of body and sensibility, will grow, choreographing different dances with death. Especially in affluent societies, the equation of the lifespan with fourscore years and ten will seem like an obsolete limitation on the self. Yet, even though a robust geriatric society, kicking up its heels, will claim some of the privileges of youth, the chronologically young may find the growing population of the elderly demanding, expensive, and insistent upon invoking memories that seem increasingly remote. None of Evelyn Nef's friendships appear in the index of the writer who prefers albums to the page.

Yet those who push the lifespan further, who extend the human body and sensibility, will still be traditionally human. We will have both new human forms (yes, clones) and a plenitude of new forms with human capacities (computers, robots, nanocreatures). What will they write? Paint? Film? How will we judge their creations? I suggest blind auditions and aesthetic versions of Turing's test about a computer's "humanity."

5. *From reading another email that has been downloaded from a website.*

ADDITIONAL COURSE OBJECTIVES AND EXPETATIONS

Pepperdine University Affirms:

That God is

That He is revealed uniquely in Christ

That the educational process may not, with impunity, be divorced from the divine process

.....

As you [the students] investigate, I believe that you will develop a greater sense of personal responsibility, respect for self and others, a desire to serve others, and that your spiritual commitment will demand of you the highest standard of academic excellence.³

And, yet, there is and will be a profoundly contradictory impulse towards further establishing and regaining a master narrative, be it of politics or of religion. Foundational texts will be read and reread. For those who believe in them, theory and criticism will become again the systematic uncovering of certainties and of the hidden architecture of the associations of sensibility. For those who believe neither in any particular master narrative nor in master narratives, theory and criticism will be an entrenched defense of postmodernism even as the struggle among master narratives intensifies. Theology, never absent from critical inquiries, will be far more present. The spirit of the twenty-first-century American Scholar may be condemned as too particularistic, in its art and politics, or too self-indulgent, or enraptured with style over substance, or too indifferent to the highest standards of academic excellence. The period between the end of World War II and 11 September 2001 may be recalled as a golden age of cultural innovation and pluralism.

2. From a flyer, with format but not language changed, distributed by the International Longevity Center. I sit on the Board of Directors of this institution.

3. Taken from the website of Pepperdine University, 27 January 2003, the course description of Art 371: Sculpture, in the Fine Arts Division, <http://seaver.pepperdine.edu/finearts/Faculty/Privitt/sculpture.htm>. In fairness, many of the features of the course description might be found in many syllabi in United States higher education.

6. *From reading a scientific magazine.*

Antarctica's thick blanket of ice...has been contracting, most gradually but sometimes swiftly, since the height of the last ice age, 20,000 years ago. The greatest reduction has occurred in West Antarctica, where the ice sheet is considerably more fragile than its counterpart to the east. Because the western sheet has changed quickly in the past, scientists have been unsure whether recent dramatic ice losses reflect normal variability or the start of an ominous trend toward total collapse. In the wake of a catastrophic collapse, rapidly rising seas would flood coastal communities around the world.⁴

The alliance of theory, criticism, and environmentalism, terrestrial and beyond the terrestrial, will flourish. Even without being apocalyptic, our sense that our survival depends upon environmentalism will become more intense. But theoreticians and critics will have to know science and technology, will have to do the arduously hard work it takes to learn these subjects and develop a sophisticated understanding of what nature means and how nature works. Nature has its changing representations, but it is far more than a simulacrum (or so I believe).

Who are the critics and theoreticians that we must read? The writers of speculative and science fiction. Will we continue to read? Oh, yes.

There is one more thing I must say. The moral and political act to which *Critical Inquiry* must return again and again is cruelty—from the cruelty of indifference to that of the most agonizing torture. Cruelty has many sources; cruelty takes many forms. The presence or absence of cruelty measures the morality and politics of a person, a state, a corporation. These words sound neutral. The feeling behind them is not.

—Catharine R. Stimpson
New York University

4. Robert A. Bindschalder and Charles R. Bentley, "On Thin Ice?" *Scientific American* (Dec. 2002): 101.