

# Sheldon Sacks

1930–1979

It is strange to write for the pages of this journal a statement which will not come under the eye of its founding editor, Sheldon Sacks. For nearly five years everything that appeared in *Critical Inquiry*—articles, critical responses, editorial comments—was a matter of painstaking and passionate concern to Shelly Sacks. With a flow of questions and suggestions and a talent for unabashed cajolery, he generated articles and rejoinders to those articles. He worked tirelessly in editorial consultation and correspondence with contributors, especially young writers, helping them to discover the best way of giving form to their ideas. Among the essays submitted to this journal he searched eagerly, even anxiously, for those which seemed, in his words, “right for *C. I.*”

What was right for *C. I.* was never, for Shelly Sacks, a cut-and-dried choice. In his own intellectual life, in his teaching and writing, he delighted in arguing important general questions: theories of representation in the arts, points of possible intersection between linguistic science and literary criticism, the interplay of social forces and cultural expressions. Not surprisingly, in reconnoitering for *Critical Inquiry*, he found special satisfaction in identifying writers who shared his passion for re-examining fundamental topics in the intellectual disciplines. If such writers made their case forcefully, so much the better: in choosing an essay for publication he assessed its capacity to stimulate interesting counterargument.

At no time, however, did Shelly Sacks confuse his own beliefs with the nature of intellectual discourse. As an editor he was hospitable to writers whose premises he questioned and whose conclusions he deplored. Nor did Shelly attempt to achieve a spurious catholicity by following a quiet quota system designed to give each major line of interpretation—deconstructionist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, what have you—an occasional airing in *Critical Inquiry*. For Shelly each article stood on its own ground: if its author dealt responsibly and freshly with an interesting problem, that was enough. And, along with his commitment to theoretical inquiry, he responded warmly to the personal, the offbeat, the idiosyncratic. He regarded the feature Artists on Art, for example, as a central element in our design.

As an editor Sheldon Sacks was above all a shaper. He labored to find and suggest connections in the phenomena of intellectual life. Even the construction of a table of contents for a typical *Critical Inquiry* issue became for him an opportunity to influence the reader's experience of

what we offered. The eminence of an author or the allure of a title were put to one side as Shelly sought to orchestrate, through placement, a kind of intellectual counterpoint from one essay to another. Unheard melodies, doubtless, for many of us, but for Shelly real and sustaining.

In this valedictory note we have spoken of Sheldon Sacks' editorial accomplishment—in our friendly view, a very distinguished one—rather than of the personal qualities which made working alongside him an exhilarating experience. We should report, however, that for more than half the life of this journal Shelly was ill and knew that the time available to him was likely to be relatively brief. Faced with this diminishing perspective, he did not—indeed it is more accurate to say he could not—moderate his involvement with the life of this journal. At his death, as at the launching of this enterprise, he held to the high ambition that *Critical Inquiry* encourage comeliness, vigor, and continuity in the discourse of our time.

The appropriate “critical response” to this great loss is that Sheldon Sacks' editorial colleagues, and our publisher, the University of Chicago Press, pledge whatever talents and energies we possess to the continuing life of the journal he imagined and brought into being.

Robert E. Streeter  
Wayne C. Booth  
W. J. T. Mitchell