

Twenty Years of *Critical Inquiry*

W. J. T. Mitchell

Anniversaries have a way of creeping up on you. We may have been too busy getting out the magazine to spend a lot of time celebrating, much less reflecting on, two decades of publishing. A lot has happened, in and out of our pages, in that time: a transit from the cultural aftermath of the sixties with its utopian and radical hopes, through the age of Reagan and postmodernism to the present moment of—what? A New World Order after the fall of the Soviet Union? An end to history or the beginning of a new millennium? A series of generational ciphers—X, Y, Z . . .—waiting to be decoded?

One thing seems clear: *Critical Inquiry* has flourished in these decades because criticism has flourished. Since our founding date in 1974, the world of criticism has been transformed and scores of new critical journals have been started. New intellectual movements, critical fashions, methods, archives, subject areas have changed the whole face of critical discussion. Feminism and gender studies, cultural studies, semiotics, deconstruction and poststructuralism, new historicism, studies in media and mass culture, the new art history, the new anthropology, the new history of science, new theologies. . . . Simply to list our special issues and fora since *On Metaphor* in 1978 is to glimpse the contours of an intricate and unpredictable intellectual journey: *On Narrative; The Language of Images; Writing and Sexual Difference; The Politics of Interpretation; "Race," Writing, and Difference; Against Theory; Pluralism and Its Discontents; Canons; The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis; Literature and Social Practice; Politics and Poetic Value;*

Art and the Public Sphere; Identities; and Questions of Evidence, as well as special sections on “Heidegger and Nazism,” the Paul de Man controversy, the New Art History, and (most recently) “God.”

It would be nice to be able to say that a set of firm, consistent, and rigorous principles have guided us throughout this itinerary, that we have never been guilty of opportunism or an unprincipled pandering to fashion. The truth, however, is a bit more complicated, and more difficult to summarize. The fact is that our editorial principles have been multiple, sometimes conflicting, often improvised and ad hoc. Our relation to “fashion,” for instance, has been consistently ambivalent. There is no use denying that we have wanted to remain abreast of fashion and, if possible, well in advance of it. At the same time, there has been a consistent determination to remain independent of any particular critical fashion, to air the debates not only within but about the newest critical movements, and to revive earlier debates (on the aims of formalism, the role of intellectuals in Nazi Germany, the foundational moments of disciplines, the impact of Foucault before he was “Foucault”). While we have made clear our solidarity with African American studies, feminism, gender studies, cultural studies, and our respect for the living traditions of critical theory, deconstruction, and Marxist thought, we have also tried to steer clear of becoming the house organ for any approach, method, political/professional agenda or critical movement. When it looked as if this sort of independence might itself be a concealed position, a kind of American neopragmatism and “pluralism,” we put the spotlight on that possibility with a special issue entitled “Pluralism and Its Discontents,” an issue that turned out to be anything but a celebration of liberal “tolerance” and “flexibility.”

A second cluster of principles involving a preference for stylistic elegance, general accessibility, and “good writing” has been consistently invoked and contested in our editorial discussions, and it is closely tied with the attempt to remain independent of any special critical language, to avoid jargon and coterie discourse wherever possible. That doesn’t mean that we have felt competent to set ourselves up as the universal standard of clear critical prose; *Webster’s* has often taken a beating in these pages, especially when we felt some critical or expressive turn was at stake. The revolutions in critical thought of the last twenty years have sometimes found their voice in esoteric, strange, and exotic idioms, in new terms and syntactic turns, in the knowledge and experience of minorities (political, intellectual, institutional) improvising new languages, new modes of eloquence. Our aim has not been some universal standard of clarity based

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in classical English prose style, but a negotiated standard that makes conversation, access, understanding, and (above all) new thought possible.

Some readers will no doubt feel that this "negotiated standard" has been honored more in the breach than the observance. They will point to the cacophony of critical languages, the incommensurability of styles, positions, and disciplinary formations that have appeared in these pages. What is necessarily invisible to these readers is the editorial labor, the thousands of hours of fact and quotation checking, the interminable debating over the fine points of style and nuances of translation, both linguistic and disciplinary. The aim of this labor is to make moments of polyphony possible, or at least to expose the crucial fault lines and turbulences that constitute the world of contemporary criticism. This seems like a good moment to acknowledge this invisible labor, which has been expertly supervised by James Williams for the last eight years, and which has been carried out by several generations of devoted Managing Editors, Manuscript Editors, and Research Assistants: Michael Boardman, Linda Rhoads, Mark McLaughlin, Toby Gordon, Janet Silver, Carolyn Williams, Mary Caraway, Susan Olin, Margaret Berg, Ellen Feldman, David Schabes, Ann Hobart, Mari Schindele, Joanne Schlichter, James Hills, Robert Squire, Michael Sittenfeld, Paul Peppis, Robin Jaslow, John Chaimov, Michael Sosulski, John O'Brien, Jessica Burstein, Peter Struck, Maureen McLane, David Grubbs, Aeron Hunt, Jennifer Peterson, Karen Heaney, and John Tresch.

One notable result of *CI*'s intellectual independence, openness to experimentation, and willingness to negotiate standards of "good" writing and "general" interest has been a certain unpredictability in what and whom we will publish. We have felt that it was crucial for this journal to engage in a process of continuous reinvention of its mission and identity. We have resisted the temptation to become a journal of nothing but special issues, each of which require years of planning and foresight. (A certain laziness may also have a providential function here.) We have tried to maintain the smallest possible backlog so that we can get new essays in print quickly. We have tried to be faithful readers of the mail, especially of the over one thousand unsolicited manuscripts we receive annually. We have tried not to micromanage debates or special topics, preferring the delights of the single provocative essay to the stolid comforts of comprehensive coverage. We have wanted to be surprised by what comes over the transom, on the theory that this is also what will surprise our readers. We have tried not to be too clear about what exactly is an appropriate topic for *CI*, preferring to let our contributors lead us on.

CI has been known as a forum for controversy and debate on the critical issues of the day. One of our principal criteria for acceptance of a manuscript for publication has been "arguability," the likelihood that it will produce interesting disagreements. The criterion of "interest" is, of course, itself a shifting and multiply articulated standard, partly a func-

tion of general notions of argumentative rigor and specific disciplinary notions of what is current and relevant. But these highly respectable and conventional academic standards have not been our only consideration. We have also tried to find space for risky, improvisational efforts, for texts that strain the limits of academic and professional decorum, for positions whose claim on our attention may not be fully articulated, but based in hunches, passions, and intuitions. Put another way, we might say that the “safe” scholarly article, the solid and stolid “contribution to knowledge,” the essay that fails to arouse either ambivalence or controversy within our editorial group, has not been our model of the *CI* article. We have been willing, on occasion, to find space for articles that might not be at the “cutting edge” of their specific disciplinary field, but that serve an informative or provocative function for the mythic “general reader” that *CI* hopes to produce and address. This mythic reader, we’re happy to say, sometimes turns out to be a real person, what Marx called a “flesh-and-blood individual,” and not merely a “subject” constituted by some professional, academic, or ideological “discourse.” One of our leading utopian notions has been the conviction that there could be a scholarly journal read by people, not just stored in libraries for the purposes of information retrieval. Although libraries pay our bills and insure our accessibility to many thousands of readers, the statistic that matters the most in our annual report is the number of “individual subscribers,” which we are happy to report is at an all-time high.

This may also be the place to admit that *CI*’s editorial group has rarely functioned as “one happy family,” but something more like the dysfunctional, contentious, internecine quarrel that constitutes contemporary criticism. Even the notion of making an anniversary statement like the present one has not gone unchallenged in our midst. Is this merely a fatuous exercise in self-congratulation, a sober attempt at self-examination, or something more like a confession with a potential value for some future case study of the pathology of late twentieth-century critical culture?

It’s not for us to judge what this anniversary means, whether the rough principles outlined here have been the right ones, or whether we’ve succeeded in living up to them. That task properly belongs to our readers, who are hereby invited to evaluate our performance, and to give this journal a taste of its own medicine—a ruthless critique of everything we have done and been. We invite letters of up to one thousand words, reflecting on the history of *Critical Inquiry*, identifying its notable successes and failures, and offering suggestions about future directions. What topics have we neglected? What is the “next thing” that we must address? What can we do to remain faithful to Kenneth Burke’s memorable description of our mission: “*Critical Inquiry*: a journal whose goal is to return criticism to its proper home, namely, a perpetual state of crisis.”

We also hope that you enjoy our recent, current, and forthcoming issues, which, in characteristic fashion, have no single agenda, but some very singular voices: Georges Canguilhem on Foucault then and now; Jürgen Habermas on Simmel; Jane Gaines exploring “feminist heterosexuality and its politically incorrect pleasures”; Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank on shame and affect; Frances Ferguson on pornography; Susan Buck-Morss explaining how to “see capital”; Karl Werckmeister on the Kafkaesque; Jacques Derrida on Louis Marin; Roberto Retamar on the fate of the Cuban Revolution at the end of the cold war; Carol Clover on white appropriation of black culture; and a pair of documents from the recent and still very relevant past: E. P. Thompson’s classic statement, “Agenda for Radical History,” and his important monograph on Christopher Caudwell, the pioneer of British Marxist literary criticism.

This also seems like a good opportunity to remind you of some projects in the works, and alert you to some new possibilities for the future. Homi Bhabha’s long-awaited special issue, “Frontlines/Borderposts,” is now in its final stages of preparation. Harry Harootunian and Kristin Ross are assembling a special issue on “the everyday.” Lauren Berlant is currently planning an issue on the question of “intimacy and/in the public sphere.” Meanwhile, our most recent series of special issues, *Questions of Evidence*, has now been assembled in book form, augmented with continuing discussion and debate on the status of evidence in literary and art history, the philosophy and history of science, and the law.

As for the longer future, we hope to avoid having our twenty-fifth anniversary creep up on us the way the twentieth did, especially since this anniversary will occur in 1999, the final year of the millennium. This seems like the right moment to issue a call for papers on the topic of the *fin de siècle* or *fin de millénium*, essays depicting our moment in both the rearview mirror of history and the periscope of futuristic projection. Although we are no more superstitious about dates than about walking under ladders, why take chances? We welcome, therefore, essays and proposals under the following rubric:

Fin: The Millennial Moment

The second half of the twentieth century, the period from the end of World War II to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, is by now coming into focus as a distinct historical era. Whether we designate it with geopolitical terms like “the cold war,” the “nuclear age,” or the “postcolonial era,” with economic labels like “late capitalism” or “postindustrial society,” or with all-purpose cultural rubrics like “postmodernism,” it now seems clear that the end of the twentieth century is drawing this period to a close, and opening up a new historical vista whose shape is as yet

undefined. What will be the dominant social, cultural, and political issues of what has been prematurely named “the New World Order”? What ideological categories and metanarratives, what real and imaginary totalities, will frame the period concept that opens the twenty-first century? If Fredric Jameson is correct in arguing that postmodernism has been a “periodizing hypothesis,” an attempt to “think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place,” how do we think a present (the end of the second millennium) whose momentous global changes may augur a reawakening of a historical sense (or its final extinction), and an inevitable reckoning with a historical closure to postmodernism?

There is no deadline for submission of essays on this topic, and we will not wait until 1999 to start publishing provocative statements. Our plan is to collect all the best essays in a *CI* book to appear at the end of the century when, no doubt, something totally different and unexpected will be looming on the horizon.

As a final note, this seems a good occasion to say thank you to a number of people who have been crucial to the work of *Critical Inquiry*, and to welcome several new members to our Editorial Board. *CI* would not exist, of course, if it had not been for the initiative of Sheldon Sacks, who founded this enterprise in 1974 when everyone was sure that a general critical journal without a secure disciplinary, professional, or “field” constituency would have no chance of survival. The early success of *CI* in the seventies was largely a result of Shelly’s energy, and of the visionary support of Wayne Booth, Arthur Heiserman, and Robert Streeter, who established the editorial group’s tradition of contentiousness and civility. Elizabeth Abel and Robert von Hallberg joined this group as coeditors in the late seventies and made decisive contributions to the editorial direction of the journal in what might be described as our “middle period.” We would also like to say thank you to departing members of our editorial board: M. H. Abrams, James Ackerman, John Cawelti, Thomas Flanagan, Barbara Hardy, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., Philip Kurland, and Cameron Poulter, and to bid welcome to new members David Tracy, Homi Bhabha, Sander Gilman, and Lorraine Daston.

Above all, we want to thank our Biggest Editorial Board, namely, our community of faithful readers, some of whom have stuck with us for twenty years. Many of *CI*’s most memorable moments have come in the pages of our Critical Response section, where critical heat and light has been shed on every crucial topic in contemporary criticism. (My personal favorite is the opening to the first response we received to Henry Louis Gates’s “*Race, Writing, and Difference*”: “The moment I unwrapped

the cover of the Fall 1985 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, I knew I was in for trouble.”) An engaged, contentious, opinionated readership has always been the key to the success of this journal. If our pages have made you feel content and reassured, we have failed utterly. So log on to your e-mail right now and tell us what you think. The address is:

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And visit our home page. The URL is:

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