

911: Criticism and Crisis

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Critical Inquiry: a journal dedicated to the task of restoring criticism to its rightful home: namely, a perpetual state of crisis.

—Kenneth Burke

The stately pace of the quarterly journal makes it almost impossible to reflect on current events in a timely fashion. By the time one's words appear in print, they will already have been overtaken by events. The horizon of recent history and imminent possibility, the context of choice and decision making will have changed in unforeseeable ways. What point, then, could there be in producing a timely utterance that will be outdated by the time it is heard? How can we know, as we write in this moment of "hot" historical time, what will have been the right thing to say?

The answer, of course, is that we cannot know, and that this might be a reasonable basis for maintaining silence. A studied and studious silence might be the best strategy in a period of compulsive, noisy talking, a period when every commentator must have an opinion, and every opinion maker is scurrying about to find confirmation of their most cherished convictions. Certainly, the information overload that has jammed the circuits of the global media since the terrorist attacks on Washington and New York on 11 September 2001 makes it very difficult to get any clear, distinct, or compelling message through. Only the simplest messages, generally conveyed by images, have any hope of making an impact. It is a moment when words are overwhelmed by pictures, when critical discourse and reasoned inquiry is drowned in a flood of rhetorical figures

and stark oppositions: Good versus Evil, God versus Satan, Us versus Them, Civilization versus Barbarism—all the stereotypes and icons required to motivate Holy Wars, Crusades, jihads, Armageddon, and Apocalypse. Meanwhile, the invisible figure of terror spreads like a virus through the collective consciousness of the American people as surely as the powdered toxin of anthrax circulates through the U.S. postal system. The visual images circulate with equal virulence: the exploding towers of the World Trade Center; of the Pentagon in ruins; the face of Osama bin Laden as the mastermind of international terrorism; the sprouting of American flags on automobiles and store windows; the desolate images of Afghanistan, a wasteland of destruction being subjected to yet further destruction by American bombs; the alternating file footage of bombs and food parcels dropping out of American planes; the sea of faces—many seas, in fact—from the photos of the victims of the World Trade Center attack, to the crowds of angry Muslims in the streets of Pakistan, to the endless parade of talking heads, experts, journalists, military advisors, politicians, officials, combatants, victims, and “innocent bystanders.”

The flood of images overwhelms language so completely that the Event itself seems almost unnameable. There is a kind of awkwardness in even giving a label or title to what happened or is happening, as signalled for instance, by the habit of referring to the “bombing” (which it was not) of the World Trade Center as if it condensed the entire event into a single image, to the exclusion of the Pentagon and the hijacked plane crashing in Pennsylvania. The television networks called it “The Attack on America,” and the *New York Times* created a new section exclusively devoted to its coverage entitled “A Nation Challenged,” which sounds like euphemistic psycho-babble compared to the depth and breadth of the trauma. Is this adequately described as a “challenge,” and, if so, is it to “a” nation or to an entire world, a species?

Perhaps, as I write on 31 October 2001, it is simply too soon to give this event a name. Perhaps it will always be too soon, and we will have to be content with the simple mention of the date, 11 September 2001, as a date that will be engraved on America’s collective memory forever (the commemorative medallion industry is already gearing up to make a profit). Or, perhaps even more simply, the first intuition of a symbolic, almost numerological naming—911, the number of emergency—which was among the first inchoate attempts at symbolic interpretation on the very day of the Event. 911, however, does not name the Event. It is Day One of an event whose days are unnumbered, indefinite, an emergency in which the emergent order has yet to make itself clear. No end to the Event seems visible except an interminably slow return to a “normalcy” framed in anxiety and punctuated by more terrible events—misdirected bombs,

purposeful suicide bombers, assassinations, massacres, victories, refugees—the whole hideous pageant of war and terrorism.

This is clearly not the *Lovely War* scenario of the Persian Gulf, a thirty-day spectacular miniseries in prime time with (almost) total victory and few casualties on our side. This is a war for which almost no good outcome is imaginable: a plunge into a new form of indefinite, tentative warfare, without a well-defined enemy or outcome. Suppose, for instance, that by Christmas 2001, when you are reading this, the headlines read “Taliban Defeated, Kabul Occupied by Northern Alliance”; then you will be holding your breath to see if the “victors” commit atrocities (as they have in the past) and whether a stable, democratically representative government can be installed, or whether the Taliban will simply retreat to the mountains to continue a guerilla war, or slip away to bases in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Or suppose the headlines read “Osama bin Laden confirmed killed, assassinated, dies in bombing raid, commando assault, commits suicide in his bunker, body not found.” This, predictably, would only be the prelude to his elevation to martyrdom and the spawning of thousands of new martyrs to take his place. He is already now a ghostly figure, a spectral image that cannot be killed, especially if his body is never found. Suppose he were to televise his own death live by satellite uplink? What words would neutralize the effect of this image on the Arab world?

Or suppose a utopian and impossible outcome. The Christmas headlines announce that the Taliban have agreed to turn bin Laden over to a third party, an international court that would include Islamic judges and legal traditions and command the highest respect as a neutral arbiter. Bin Laden and his associates are then brought before this court. A thorough investigation and public exposure of the evidence against them is conducted, with the full intelligence resources of both the Islamic world and the West. Instead of martyrdom, Bin Laden is given a fair trial as a criminal under both Western and Islamic codes. Instead of a lynching or assassination under the rules of “Texas justice,” an internationally legitimated inquiry into terrorism and its causes is launched. The most glorious outcome would then be that the Islamic nations would take the lead in dealing with their fundamentalists (and perhaps the U.S. could find a way of reigning in its own homegrown brand of fundamentalism, fascism and racism). This process would then lead on to a further inquiry—a critical inquiry—into the basic structural conditions that give rise to terrorism, and a world-wide Marshall Plan is mounted to eliminate poverty, disease, and oppression.

All this would be predicated, of course, on the United States being willing to give up custody of bin Laden and acknowledge the authority of an international court over him. It would mean this country would have to behave like a citizen of this world, rather than its Last Empire. It would have to subject itself to international law, agreeing in principle to

having its own crimes investigated. That is why this utopian scenario is so unlikely, alas, to come true.

So why should criticism not remain silent when all it can offer are dystopian scenarios of endless, indecisive war or utopian visions of a world where John Lennon's "Imagine" would be the International Anthem? Why not maintain a studied, studious, even strategic silence to await the moment when a critical perspective becomes possible? Why not wait for the dust to clear, the still-smoldering fires in the ruins of the World Trade Center to die out? The answer is contained in Kenneth Burke's memorable summary of *Critical Inquiry's* mission as a journal "dedicated to restoring criticism to its rightful home: namely, a perpetual state of crisis." Criticism cannot wait for the crisis to be over to have a "perspective" on the events. Criticism is more properly understood, in fact, as a cultural practice that is, in some deep sense, synonymous with crisis.

The critical is not just the act of judging or appraising. The critical moment is, as the *OED* reminds us, "the crisis or turning-point of a disease," "of the nature of, or constituting a crisis." The critical involves "suspense or grave fear as to the issue; attended with uncertainty or risk," while at the same time "tending to determine or decide," as in the decisive moment when a "critical mass" is achieved in a nuclear reactor.

Like it or not, then, *Critical Inquiry* will not be able to remain silent in the midst of a crisis that challenges our very capacity for judgment, analysis, and critique. As always, however, our voice will not be univocal, but dialectical and dialogic, a staging of what William Blake called "Mental Warfare"—a reflection on and an antidote to the "Corporeal Warfare" that threatens to sweep across the world. This is, as everybody seems to agree, a war without limits, boundaries, or clear goals. It is not adequately described as a war against terrorism since every side regards its antagonists as the true terrorists and its own warriors as martyrs and heroes. And at this point the number of sides has not even become clear, as the U.S. attempts to hold together a shifting, unstable alliance of momentary convenience to support a war whose aims (revenge? the imposition of Texas justice? the killing of one man? the rooting out of a terrorist organization that circulates like a virus throughout the entire world system? the building of a stable nation-state in Afghanistan?) are likely to become less clear as time goes on.

This is not, then, a "call for papers" on the current crisis. We have had an overabundance of papers that claim to have a "critical perspective" on these events, a superfluity of Cassandra-like prophecies in reverse. There is nothing quite so irritating at a moment like this as the pose of critical certainty, of smug assurance that one could see this coming a long way off, that one knows exactly why it happened (whether it is regarded as the judgment of God, as Jerry Falwell put it, or the judgment of history, as so many pundits have claimed, or simply the eruption of radical evil and madness). Nor does this seem like an interesting moment

to debate whether this crisis means the end of postmodernism or its final realization. The critical voices that seem to matter most at this moment are those that seem prepared to acknowledge that this event might exceed our categories of critical judgment and require some new ways of thinking. If the Pentagon is sending its planners to consult with Hollywood screenwriters about possible terrorist scenarios, why shouldn't criticism be prepared to think outside the box as well? Perhaps we might even consider revisiting some old ways of thinking (about, for instance, a world order dedicated to international peace and justice, with an end to fascism, racism, sexism, political oppression, and crushing economic inequality) that have been widely discredited in the face of a patriotic consensus that this is not the time for debate, not the time for critical disagreement, and certainly not the time for questioning the American possession of the moral high ground.

But of course it is, and must always be, the right moment for raising this question if the very idea of America is to have any meaning. Americans are now being asked not to be critical, not to question the judgment of our leadership. Journalists are being prevented from covering the war; filmmakers are being urged to produce patriotic propaganda; college professors are being criticized for being skeptical about our war in Afghanistan. All these tendencies must be resisted in the name of a deeper patriotism than that signalled by flag-waving.

It is the right moment, then, for untimely utterances and awkward silences, a time for examining what cannot or should not be said and for reflecting on the conditions of sayability and the unspeakable. Consider the things that have been said in the last two months that were instantly villified as beyond the pale of acceptable discourse:

—that whatever else you might say about them, the suicide bombers who flew commercial airliners into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon were not “cowardly.”

—that the event of 11 September was “Lucifer’s greatest work of art.”

—that this was God’s judgment on America’s turn toward secular values.

—that this was God’s judgment on the Christian and Jewish infidels who have desecrated the sacred soil of Saudi Arabia, killed thousands of Iraqis, and supported the repressive policies of Israel toward the Palestinians.

—that this was payback time for a half-century of American world dominance and specifically its misguided policies in the Middle East, its backing of repressive, reactionary Arab regimes as part of policy of cold war containment and greed for cheap oil.

—that this is a war we could lose, perhaps are losing already, and will certainly lose if we sacrifice civil liberties, the rule of law, and political or critical deliberation to a never-ending “state of emergency.”

—that this is the systemic result of global capitalism, and could well

be the oft-predicted “end of history,” the true face of the New World Order, the Mother of All Battles, Armageddon, Holy War, and the beginning of the collapse of human civilization.

—that there are no “innocent victims” on either side in a terrorist war, that the lives of the people being killed in Afghanistan right now are just as sacred as the lives of those killed on 11 September, and that wrapping oneself in the mantle of their innocence is just as misguided as consigning one’s antagonists to the role of “Evil Doers.”

None of these things can be said right now, but all of them are being said anyway and will continue to be said in the coming months. Official, approved, and politically correct discourse will continue to be filled with paradox. The war will be “right on schedule,” but will stretch indefinitely into the future. A victory will be declared if bin Laden is killed or captured, but the state of emergency will continue as long as one terrorist remains. Periodic warnings of unspecified impending attacks will alternate with urgings to behave as if everything is all right. The American people will return to “normalcy,” but things will never be the same. Dissent from U.S. policy and disagreement with partisan political objectives will be denounced as unpatriotic divisiveness that threatens our basic freedoms. Any day now someone will tell a war protester, “We are fighting for your right to free speech, so shut up!”

John Coetzee has argued that the true vocation of criticism is to “interrogate” and “decenter” the classic, the touchstone of ultimate achievement in the arts, the masterwork of the human imagination. If criticism is faithful to this task, suggests Coetzee, it has a chance to be “one of the instruments of the cunning of history.” But we also know, as Stockhausen reminds us, that there is an art of evil as well and that it comes out of the human soul. Oscar Wilde’s small masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, reminds of the equivocal moral status of the work of art. Dorian Gray comes to see “evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful.” Criticism cannot confine itself only to the contemplation of the benign, life-affirming classics, but must reckon as well with the weave of good and evil, pity and terror in the dark passages of tragic art and tragic events. In the midst of all this confusion, in the midst of all the urgings to say the right thing or to say nothing at all, it is the patriotic duty of every American citizen to continue to do his or her job. Our job is critical inquiry.