I am very pleased to have received such an intelligent and informative response from Jeffrey Williams (“The Little Magazine and the Theory Journal: A Response to Evan Kindley’s ‘Big Criticism’” Critical Inquiry 39 [Winter 2013]: 000–00). In most cases, I believe the claims that Williams makes and the claims that I make are ultimately compatible, though the emphases are, perhaps inevitably, rather different. I will focus on a few of Williams’s major objections to my argument, but I’d like to begin by declaring my respect and admiration for his path-breaking work in this area and a sincere desire to continue the conversation further.

Most of Williams’s criticisms of my article are methodological. He believes I rely too heavily on archival material as the basis for “grand speculation” (a fault he finds endemic to much contemporary scholarly work) and faults me for presenting “a narrow and partial slice of evidence” that needs to be supplemented by a “more accurate and historically thick” account of the phenomenon—the institutional support of criticism at mid-century—that I purport to describe (pp. 000, 000).1

It seems to me that there is a certain asymmetry between “Big Criticism” and the response it has elicited, which puts me in the happy position of

1. “Thick” is, in fact, a surprising choice of words here, given the association of this word with Clifford Geertz’s “thick description”; Williams certainly covers more territory than my article, but it’s not thicker in the Geertzian sense. See Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York, 1973), pp. 3–32.
being instructed without (as I see it) being contradicted. Williams’s re-
sponse—largely adapted, as he notes, from his valuable “The Rise of the
Theory Journal”—surveys the field of academic literary criticism from
the 1940s to the present day in the light of the changing economics of
higher education. In contrast to Williams’s synoptic narrative approach, I
am indeed electing to stay local, and even, if you like, partial, and to adopt,
to a certain extent at least, the temporal perspective of the actors I describe.
My article is very specifically focused on a single moment in literary and
intellectual history, when the question of large-scale financial support for
the enterprise of literary and cultural criticism was still very much up in the
air. By 1946, the “institutionalization” of criticism was already under-
way—as I note, the majority of the survey respondents held some kind of
academic position—but the enterprise I have called Big Criticism had been
only tentatively established.

The particular historical situation I describe in “Big Criticism,” like all
historical situations, was indeed local as well as temporary. But this, for
me, is exactly its analytic value. What I sought to bring to light, by drawing
attention to an archive of correspondence that addressed itself so specifi-
cally to the contemporary state of the field, were the expectations, ambi-
tions, and anxieties of the actors involved in order to give a sense not only
of how institutions functioned in that moment but of what was expected of
them in the future. I agree with Williams about the danger of jumping too
quickly from “intriguing and very local archival material” to “grand spec-
ulation,” but dealing with archival materials at least has the virtue of re-
minging one that everything proceeds from a local site (p. 000). I would
insist, with Bruno Latour, that even social phenomena that we think of as
taking place on a very large scale (such as the rise of theory or the cold war)
are always possible to reduce to local situations and that there is much to be
gained by restricting our analysis in this way. Archives are not repositories
of transcendental truth any more than published texts are, but they do
provide a valuable record of these sites or, more frequently, of many of
them; the virtue of an archive like Blackmur’s papers at Princeton is that it


Evan Kindley, a PhD candidate at Princeton University, is completing a
dissertation entitled “Critics and Connoisseurs: Poet-Critics and the
Administration of Culture.” He works at Claremont McKenna College and is
managing editor of the Los Angeles Review of Books. His email is
ekindley@princeton.edu
collects traces from many different sites (associated with individuals, like Wallace Stevens, but also institutions, like the Rockefeller Foundation and Princeton University) and shows how they were, at a particular time, connected and gathered into a network.³

Aside from our methodological differences, then, there is also a difference of object. Williams seems to find my focus on the institution of the philanthropic foundation as opposed to the research university perverse or misleading, given the well-established importance of the university in the postwar period.⁴ It would indeed be difficult to argue against this consensus, and I readily admit that the university is the dominant institution of American literary culture after 1945. In the past twenty-five years, the relation between literature (particularly modernism) and the academy has become a frequent subject of critical and scholarly interest, an approach pioneered in the 1980s and 1990s by scholars like John Guillory, Langdon Hammer, and Gerald Graff. For the most part, the sociology of literature has concerned itself exclusively with the influence of the academy.⁵ This emphasis on the educational institution no doubt owes a great deal to the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, as well as to professional anxieties about the ongoing crisis of the academic labor market in the humanities and beyond (about which Williams and his cohorts at The Minnesota Review, most notably Marc Bousquet, have written so well). It is important to continue this work, as scholars like Williams, Bousquet, Mark McGurl, Stephen Schryer, and Christopher Newfield are doing today.

But I don’t claim, as Williams says I do, that “the central institution [of the postwar period] is the large philanthropic foundation,” though I do

³. In Reassembling the Social, Latour refers to this process as “localizing the global”: “as soon as the local sites that manufacture global structures are underlined, it is the entire topography of the social world that is being modified. Macro no longer describes a wider or a larger site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally micro place, which is connected to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces. No place can be said to be bigger than any other place, but some can be said to benefit from far safer connections with many more places than others” (Bruno Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory [Oxford, 2007], p. 176).

⁴. The ambiguity of the term postwar probably contributes to the heightened appearance of disagreement between Williams and myself. In “Big Criticism,” I use it in a very immediate sense—the story I tell occurs in the wake of World War II—but of course it is often used to name a historical period that extends into the 1980s or even, in some usages, to the present day. See Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945 (New York, 2005), for instance, who concludes with 2005, the year of the book’s release.

indeed want to highlight the foundation as an understudied macro actor in the economy of postwar literature (p. 000). Though they don’t begin to approach the size of the investment that universities made in criticism after 1945, philanthropic foundations did take an interest in criticism in the postwar period; without them, university-based projects like the Gauss seminars at Princeton and the Kenyon School of English at Kenyon College would never have been established at their respective institutions. Even today, the culture of academic literary criticism would function very differently without the frequent intervention of philanthropic institutions like the Guggenheim, Lannan, Mellon, and Whiting Foundations (as the acknowledgments page of many a scholarly monograph will attest).

My emphasis on the philanthropic foundation in “Big Criticism” is intended not so much to shift the focus away from academia as to expand the frame of institutional analysis and to reintroduce the local motivations, intentions, and expectations of some of the historical actors themselves. If today it seems perfectly evident that the dominant institutions supporting literature and criticism in the postwar period were the state and the university, in 1946, at the inception of this long and perhaps too vaguely defined period, this outcome was far from clear. As Albert O. Hirschman suggests regarding a different historical turning point—the expansion of capitalist civil society in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—we may limit our understanding by attending to the unexpected effects of what did happen at the expense of what was expected to happen but didn’t:

On the one hand, there is no doubt that human actions and social decisions tend to have consequences that were entirely unintended at the outset. But, on the other hand, these actions and decisions are often taken because they are earnestly and fully expected to have certain effects that then wholly fail to materialize. . . . The expectation of large, if unrealistic, benefits obviously serves to facilitate certain social decisions. Exploration and discovery of such expectations therefore help render social change more intelligible.

6. As Williams points out, the role of foundations as fronts for the CIA’s support for literary and cultural magazines associated with the non-Communist Left has been highlighted by Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (New York, 1999), but there has been little scholarship in the field of literary studies since then building on her discoveries. In any case, foundations are obviously a secondary interest for Saunders, who is primarily concerned with the role of the state in promoting anti-Communist ideology. See also Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

It was the expectations of actors like Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, Wallace Stevens, and so on—expectations whose expressions the institution of the foundation made possible—that primarily concerned me in “Big Criticism.” I agree with Williams that there is “a difference between counterintuitive and counterfactual,” but I would add that the intuitions of historical actors are also facts (p. 000). If there is a fundamental disagreement between Williams and myself, it’s that I think we need to pay close attention to the “effects that wholly fail to materialize” alongside a materialist analysis of those that have.

Here I should perhaps clarify that my interest, in “Big Criticism,” is less in the effects the Rockefeller Foundation survey actually exerted upon literary culture—which were, indeed, as these things go, fairly minor and temporary—than it is in the formal relationship between critics and administrators that it reflects, which was, it seems to me, significant and relatively unprecedented. The interpellation of literary experts as experts by bureaucratic administrators, who require a certain type of rationale in order to act on a massive scale, is what most interested me here; and my final rhetorical questions were meant to effect a similar interpellation. The philanthropic foundation interests me precisely because, unlike the firm or the university, it lacks a clear sense of mission, a sense of what outcome is most desirable to bring about. Critics are thus valued not because they provide a certain type of service or produce a certain type of good but because they are capable of defining (collectively) what good might be.

It may well be that this question was decided, at least temporarily, by the time we enter the post-Sputnik era that is Williams’s primary focus. On the subject of theory journals, Williams is unquestionably an authority, and while I see more of a continuity between little magazines like Kenyon Review and journals like Critical Inquiry than he does, I wouldn’t want to dispute his conjecture that theory, as an intellectual formation, owes more to the welfare state and the space race than it does to philanthropic justification. For a few decades, anyway—until the culture wars of the 1980s, one might say—the notion of criticism as research was a black box that neither institutions nor individual researchers cared to open. Most of the evidence marshaled by Williams and his sources suggests that government support for the humanities after Sputnik was a side effect more than a positive program, but I certainly take his point that any history of Big Theory—a term I introduced with some hesitation into my own article—would have to take these institutional conditions of possibility into account. I find convincing Williams’s argument that the moment of theory—or, to be more precise, of the influence of structuralism and poststructuralism in literary studies—must be related to the academic revolution
and to the rise of the culture of research. It is true that my article mostly looks backward, to the account of elite patronage provided by Lawrence Rainey in *Institutions of Modernism*, but it could just as well have looked forward to the work done by Williams or any of the scholars of postwar literary history that he cites.8

But I still fail to see how this obviates the argument that I make in “Big Criticism” about the crucial link between criticism and justification in the immediate postwar period (and, indeed, in our own). Here is the one place where I think there is a genuine misunderstanding between Williams and myself and not merely a difference of emphasis or method. Williams thinks that I make too much of the concept of justification, which he accuses me of elevating to a metaphysical level or positing as a “transhistorical,” transcendental aim of criticism (p. 000). Attributing a much grander philosophical ambition to me than I have the courage to profess, Williams characterizes me as “project[ing] a metaphysics of criticism, with ‘justification’ the spirit that governs it, although this is perhaps spiced with systems theory, so that the system of the foundation generates such reactions in a closed loop. My objection, other than eschewing metaphysics, is that the loop is never closed, and criticism responded to other force fields besides this one” (p. 000). On the contrary, justification, for me, is only one of many operations critics can perform; it just happens to be one that takes on a special utility in the mid-twentieth century (just as judgment did in the eighteenth). As I hope I’ve already made clear, I share Williams’s desire to keep the range of possible influences on postwar criticism open, and I’m sorry if I have given any impression of determinism. In fact, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s recourse to the concept of justification was originally developed against what they saw as an overly deterministic conception of social interaction in the sociology of Bourdieu, in which unconsciously calculating agents, endowed with various levels of cultural, social, educational, and financial capital, struggled for dominance across a variety of fields. Boltanski (a former student of Bourdieu) and Thévenot were more interested in observing how individual social actors come to agreement by appealing to higher common principles as well as to the constraints of the particular situation. (It is in this sense that they speak, metaphorically, of a “political metaphysics” as “a bivel[ue] configuration, incorporating both the level of particular persons and a level of higher generality.” Economics, which appeals to objective measures of production and consumption as well as to abstract principles like fairness, would

be, in this sense, a political metaphysics.)\(^9\) Though I have not strictly im-
plemented the methodology put forward in \textit{On Justification}, I took inspi-
ration from Boltanski and Thévenot’s emphasis on justification as 
contingent and situation-based, as well as the intuition (subsequently de-
veloped by Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in \textit{The New Spirit of Capitalism})\(^10\) 
that critical justification plays a particularly important role in the dynam-
ics of capitalist development.

“If justification is an inherent part of criticism,” Williams asks, “then 
how is it specific to midcentury foundations? This again points to Kind-
ley’s slide to metaphysics rather than to history, claiming an innate, tran-
shistorical purpose to criticism” (p. ooo). I am certainly not proposing an 
“innate, transhistorical purpose to criticism”; if anything, I view criticism 
as precisely the opposite: an immanent, contingent activity that has served, 
over the course of literary history, to justify a wide variety of aesthetic and 
intellectual practices. What is specific to the postwar moment, I suggest, is 
the conjuncture between very specific types of bureaucratic institutions—
the philanthropic foundation as well as the university, the state, and the 
corporation—and an impulse to adjust a local situation to higher princi-
ples that are, if not universal or transhistorical, at least common enough in 
human societies to deserve description and understanding alongside more 
traditionally materialist explanations. This, it is clear, is a conjuncture 
about which we still have much to discover, and I thank Jeffrey Williams 
for indicating many possible avenues for future research.

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(New York, 2005).