Critical Response

I

The Little Magazine and the Theory Journal:
A Response to Evan Kindley’s “Big Criticism”

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Around 1970, according to most accounts, there was a paradigm shift in literary studies: criticism moved from practical readings to theory, embracing new texts such as Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences.” One less-often-told story is the change not in the statements of criticism but in the institutions of criticism, for instance in journals. The cases of Kenyon Review and New Literary History provide a compressed version of that history, and I offer it here as a counterpoint to the account presented by Evan Kindley (“Big Criticism,” Critical Inquiry 38 [Autumn 2011]: 71–95), where he uncovers the foundation funding to journals like Kenyon Review in the 1940s and how that created what he calls Big Criticism. As opposed to a paradigm shift to theory, he argues that Big Criticism set the terms of criticism that continued through to theory. While he brings up some fascinating information, I think Kindley is mistaken in his larger speculation.

In 1969, the Kenyon Review closed its doors after a thirty-year run. Founded during the Great Depression by Kenyon College, it had become an unlikely success. It succeeded in large part because an ambitious president of Kenyon had lured John Crowe Ransom to Gambier, Ohio to edit it. Ransom was a well-known poet and critic, a prominent member of the

Fugitives in the 1920s, and author of the manifesto “Criticism, Inc.” in 1937, and though he had his own particular ideas about poetry he enticed a wide circle of people to write for Kenyon Review—not just New Critics but New York intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and Philip Rahv and creative writers like Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and his one-time students Robert Lowell and Robert Penn Warren. Along with Partisan Review, Kenyon became the leading forum of American letters of the late 1940s and early 1950s; though Kenyon tacked more to the literary than the politically inflected Partisan, Kenyon published many Partisan authors (for instance, three of the essays Trilling reprinted in his best-selling Liberal Imagination first appeared in Kenyon). However, by the late 1950s Kenyon Review was losing steam, with Ransom retiring in 1960. Thereafter Kenyon appointed Robie Macauley editor in an effort to remake the journal into a more mainstream forum, but Macauley soon migrated from that academic perch to edit fiction for Playboy. After a failed search for a new editor and a lackluster replacement, the journal languished, and in 1967 a new president of Kenyon questioned the outlay for such an enterprise, which totaled over $40,000 a year at the time (about $271,000 in 2011 dollars). He felt it no longer served its purpose promoting the college and had become a cash drain.


3. See Janssen, The Kenyon Review 1939–1970, p. 346. Ransom was originally recruited in 1937 with a salary of $4,500 ($67,590) plus a rent-free house, a significant raise from his salary at Vanderbilt; see ibid. p. 15.

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Kenyon was one of the “American Big Four,” a group that also included Partisan Review, Sewanee Review, and Hudson Review.\(^4\) They capped a wave of “little magazines” arising in midcentury, and they rode the surge of postwar American culture. They reached their peak in the 1950s, although they seemed to lose their cultural position in the 1960s. They were supplanted by two new kinds of journals, what I’ve called the theory journal and the creative writing journal, which basically split the functions that little magazines like Kenyon and Partisan performed, the former taking the critical side and grafting it to the platform of the scholarly journal, and the latter taking fiction and poetry and separating them out in a primarily literary magazine. (Kenyon was to reopen in 1979 as a creative writing journal, which it continues as today.) They paralleled a rising division in literature departments, as creative writing was taught progressively more by a separate faculty and criticism became the domain of theorists.\(^5\)

1969 also saw the launch of New Literary History, arguably the first of the theory journals. Like Kenyon, New Literary History was seeded by an ambitious president, albeit of a university rather than a college, the University of Virginia. To accommodate a newly hired senior professor, Ralph Cohen, the president agreed to provide $14,000 a year for five years ($86,000 a year in 2011 dollars) to print and develop the journal, as well as office and other support. It also benefited from the heyday of library subscriptions, so its regular list quickly grew to around 5,000.\(^6\)

New Literary History led a wave of journals inaugurated over the next decade, including Diacritics (1971), SubStance (1971), Boundary 2 (1972), Feminist Studies (1972), New German Critique (1973), Critical Inquiry (1974), Glyph (1977), Discourse (1979), and Social Text (1979) from those in literary studies, and Signs (1975) and October (1976) from those in neighboring fields. By 1985, they became the dominant journals carrying criticism. They grew in the enhanced loam of the American research university, bolstered by massive federal support after Sputnik, notably the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 and the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965. While the bulk of support went to the sciences, the

\(^4\) See Derwent May, “The Little Magazine—VII: The American Big Four,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 Apr. 1968, p. 434. Contrast this to Kindley’s “Big Three” (p. 87). Others include Southern Review, which was founded in 1935 but ceased in 1942, which Janssens discusses in *The American Literary Review*, as well as many journals taking the name of their colleges.


\(^6\) See Ralph Cohen, “History and Change: An Interview with Ralph Cohen,” *New Literary History* 40 (Autumn 2009): 919–43; the support was extended for a sixth year, so totaled over half-a-million dollars in current dollars.
funding raised all boats and in turn enforced similar criteria.\textsuperscript{7} One sign of their serving the research agenda of the enhanced university was that theory journals were named for conceptual categories like critical inquiry or signs rather than for a college, as many of the earlier little magazines and subsequent creative writing journals were. They were research beacons rather than college banners.\textsuperscript{8}

The shift in journals followed what Christopher Jencks and David Riesman called “the academic revolution.”\textsuperscript{9} The revolution was not of students but of professors; Jencks and Riesman observe that, by the late 1960s, for the first time in the history of American higher education professors concentrated more on research than on teaching, their disciplines than their campuses, and graduate education over undergraduate. The theory journal reflected this shift, tipped toward research, disciplinary knowledge, and graduate education.

The midcentury little magazines like Kenyon Review had been oriented toward general education, the goal of the postwar university announced in plans such as Harvard’s “Red Book,” General Education in a Free Society (1946), and the Truman Commission report of 1947.\textsuperscript{10} Kenyon purveyed culture to an expanding, postwar audience hungry for it; it carried, for instance, generalist essays such as “The Novel of Manners in America” in its first number in 1950, as well as pieces by Jacques Barzun on music, Eric Bentley on theatre, and R. P. Blackmur on Thomas Mann. The essays did

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  \item One example showing this tendency in naming is the Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, founded in 1960, which changed its name simply to Contemporary Literature in 1968.
  \item Published as Harvard University, General Education in a Free Society: Report of the Harvard Committee (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), and the President’s Commission on Higher Education, Higher Education for American Democracy: A Report of the President’s Commission on Higher Education (New York, 1948). See also Gerald Graff, Professing Literature: An Institutional History (Chicago, 1987), particularly his chapter on general education.
\end{itemize}
not have footnotes and were composed in the language of letters familiar to readers of George Orwell (in fact, Orwell was a correspondent for *Partisan Review* during the 1940s). The 1950 issue also included two stories, one by Robert Penn Warren. It was a journal of letters rather than a scholarly journal.\(^\text{11}\) In contrast, the theory journal, replete with notes, tended toward a more academic language as well as scholarly armature, invoking technical terms and frequently reflecting on methodology, and, in the words of the editorial statement of *New Literary History*, it tried to establish the theoretical understanding of literature or, in the words of the introduction to the first issue of *Critical Inquiry*, an “examination of the assumptions underlying particular discriminations about works of art.”\(^\text{12}\) The theory journal enjoined an advanced readership, of a growing body of those attending graduate school in literature or other humanities as well as professors. It answered to a professional cohort (formalized in peer review) rather than to a general readership.

I flesh out this history in “The Rise of the Theory Journal,” where I sketch the movement from early twentieth-century modernist magazines through midcentury little magazines up to the late-century theory journal.\(^\text {13}\) Each responded to its particular circumstances, not just in terms of intellectual movements, but in terms of funding and support; in general, the early-century magazine relied on patronage, whereas the midcentury magazine drew on the more impersonal patronage of colleges and large foundations, and the late-century theory journal was a product of general university funds (which largely came from federal and state funding).\(^\text{14}\)

Histories tend to portray criticism as a kind of relay race, with ideas passing from thinker to thinker; I argue instead for a cultural materialist history of criticism that looks at the ways in which institutional conditions, like these models of funding and the protocols they carry, inflect contemporary criticism. I also suggest that we compile a book history of criticism. We usually take objects like journals or anthologies as the casing that holds criticism and as after the fact, but I look at them as proactive, producing the expec-

11. As Ransom commented in a letter to Allen Tate, “there are literally scores of willing and practiced critics but as you know there are few literary men—men of letters, shall I say” (quoted in Janssens, *The American Literary Review*, p. 257).
14. See Lawrence Rainey’s account of the role of *The Dial* (1920–29) and other magazines in creating modernist literature in his *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), where he observes that “The Great Depression effectively eliminated the structures of private patronage that had sustained modernism’s growth” (p. 105). See also Williams, “The Rise of the Theory Journal.”
tation we have of criticism and regulating its form—for instance, the twenty-or twenty-five-page scholarly article with apparatus rather than the essay of various lengths and without notes.

One way to think of journals is in terms of film history. Studios and producers are often key parts of film history and have distinct signatures. Journals are like studios and editors are like producers, and we need to pay more attention to this dimension of the history of criticism. In standard reference works like *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, there are no entries for journals, such as *New Literary History*, *Critical Inquiry*, or *Signs*, nor any mention of their founding editors, like Cohen or Sacks. I think that there should be.

I revisit this history because it offers a very different, and I think more accurate and historically thick, account than the one Kindley proposes. I have a good deal of sympathy for Kindley’s article because it directs attention to the institutional conditions of criticism, in particular the funding for midcentury journals. But I think that he only presents a narrow and partial slice of evidence and from it makes a leap to a questionable conclusion about criticism overall.

Kindley aims to revise the generally accepted history of contemporary criticism that casts the rise of theory as a momentous break (about which he cites my “The Rise of the Theory Journal” in passing); rather, he sees it as continuous with midcentury criticism. As he puts it, “little magazines like *SubStance*, *Glyph*, and, indeed, *Critical Inquiry* itself provide evidence, if any is needed, of the continuity of criticism’s objective situation over time that so many commentators (detractors and boosters alike) have preferred to narrate as a radical break” (p. 93). This strikes me as an exceedingly peculiar claim since his examples provide evidence for the opposite. *SubStance*, *Glyph*, and *CI* were all founded in the 1970s, as I’ve recounted, resulted from a very different institutional situation and carried very different writing from earlier journals. They were deliberately created as new ventures, and they were certainly not little magazines in the conventional sense; they were scholarly journals, but they sought to produce new theoretical knowledge rather than augment tradition in the way of the philological journal.

In one respect, I’m sympathetic to Kindley’s effort to revise the story of theory that casts it as a revolution that put the spirit of the sixties between covers. That view might have some relevance to certain kinds of criticism,

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15. Kindley minimizes the poetry and fiction in midcentury journals (p. 88), in order to bolster his argument that the journals were vehicles of justification. However, this is inaccurate. Criticism occupied more pages, but both *Partisan* and *Kenyon Reviews* carried major writers, at least three or four per issue, as mentioned in note 2, and it was a clear part of their purpose.
such as feminism, but it doesn’t apply to other practices, such as hermeneutics. The more salient change, in my understanding, stems from criticism’s responding to and assimilating the research protocol of the post-Sputnik university. Theory journals were a showroom of research, and criticism became research; it moved away from practical criticism and strove to become a human science, uncovering the structural operation of language, interpretation, gender, and society.\(^\text{16}\) That is why so many journals were formed—to serve this new research imperative, which policy and funding directly promoted. While midcentury journals pitched themselves against the pedantry of philological journals, theory journals pitched themselves against both the scholasticism of the philological journals and the humanistic letters of the little magazines, like Kenyon.

The central institution for Kindley is the large philanthropic foundation, and he claims that foundations undergird literary culture between mid and late century, thus effecting continuity between criticism and theory. For evidence, he begins with an account of R. P. Blackmur’s personal connection to a head of the Rockefeller Foundation and the foundation’s offer to support the journals he believed were the most important. Kindley cites a cache of letters between Blackmur and a who’s who of prominent literary figures—Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Auden, and so on—asking for their opinions. This makes for fascinating reading and gives the tactile feel of history to the article, as we overhear Stevens’s kibitzing or Moore’s quipping that Partisan Review is too doctrinaire. Foundations no doubt took part in the transformation of higher education after World War II, but the problem is that Kindley claims it at the expense of everything else.\(^\text{17}\) He


17. He also does not account for the fact that the Rockefeller support was temporary, for three to five years, which had a downside for continuing enterprises like journals, a point bitterly complained of at the time, as reported by Reed Whittemore: “In the late Forties the Rockefeller Foundation was enticed by John Crowe Ransom and others to subsidize several magazines partially for a number of years. Then they abandoned the project. The directors of other large foundations now frequently cite this subsidy, whose termination brought hardship to the magazines in question and therefore unpopularity to Rockefeller, as one of their reasons for not getting mixed up with little magazines” (Reed Whittemore, introduction to “Foundations and Magazines: A Symposium,” Carleton Miscellany 4 [Spring 1963]: 46). The symposium includes twelve other contributors, including Dwight McDonald, Hayden Carruth, Allen Tate, and some foundation people, and they comment on the problems that Whittemore lays out. Robie McCauley, for instance, notes that journals were simply too small, “two desks in
ignores the support of colleges and universities—for example, the sizeable amount of support that Kenyon College provided for Kenyon Review. Kindley dispatches the question of such funding by quoting a 1946 letter in which Stevens asserts that the “universities probably contribute nothing, or very little, in dollars and cents to their support” (p. 85). This is a juicy quote, but it is deceptive as evidence. Though he had experience in business, Stevens is not a reliable source on the matter, and he was simply wrong. The real story, that the college generously supported the journal, leads in a very different direction than Kindley’s line of argument. It suggests, as Gordon Hutner holds, that such a journal’s purpose was promotional. The overarching mandate, then, is not justification to a foundation, as Kindley claims, but advertising or promotions, cultural institutions that gained provenance in the postwar era. I would add that it also suggests a new institutional culture, in which more plentiful institutions of higher education competed for prestige through cultural banners like journals, and they competed for governmental support.

The major institution that influenced the possibilities of criticism in this era was not the foundation but government, a factor that Kindley is largely silent on. Before World War II, US universities received little government funding for research, and research was done in independent labs—in part because government was leery of universities and universities mistrusted government—but after the impoverishment of the Great Depression and mobilization of World War II the relation turned around. Government support grew with the threat of the cold war and the shock of Sputnik, the fruit of which was the space race, which ushered in what Roger Geiger and others call the Golden Age of American higher education. Again, foundations played a role, but the main source of funding was not Big Philanthropy but Big Government, which indicates a different objective situation of criticism; it was a side effect of the new welfare state.

There is a way in which foundations and Big Government con-

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18. As Menand recounts, “though it had the size and lethal potential of a beach ball, Sputnik stirred up a panic in the United States” (Menand, “The Marketplace of Ideas,” p. 3). See Rebecca S. Lowen, Creating the Cold War University: The Transformation of Stanford (Berkeley, 1997), for a case study of the shift, as well as standard histories such as Roger L. Geiger, To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940 (Oxford, 1986) and Research and Relevant Knowledge: American Research Universities Since World War II (Oxford, 1993), both of which consider the place of foundations and the latter of which narrates the building of the “Federal Research Economy” and its fruition in the “Golden Age” from the 1960s through 1980.
joined—in the cold war promotion of American culture, which fed cultural exploration but had an underside. As Frances Stonor Saunders shows in *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, USIA and CIA funding was funneled through foundations precisely because they had an extragovernmental status and thus could skirt direct oversight. For instance, *Partisan Review* was a prime recipient of CIA funding laundered through the Rockefeller Foundation. Kindley does not mention this dimension of midcentury philanthropy. In this regard, the support for literary culture served American exceptionalism, promoting the capitalist over the Communist system as one that produced wonderful new art, literature, and criticism.

At core, I think the problem stems from Kindley’s desire to fit criticism under Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s general theory of the social sciences rather than to look at the more variegated factors of its actual history. At best, the notion of justification is similar to the idea in the sociology of professions that the practices of a profession operate to legitimate that profession (although I’m not sure how justification improves on this idea of legitimation). However, it operates on a very high level of abstraction, one that Boltanski and Thévenot label unapologetically as metaphysics. Kindley thus projects a metaphysics of criticism, with justification the spirit that governs it, although this is perhaps spliced 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.

Kindley stretches the reach of justification to almost absurd lengths, at one point claiming that it has been the purpose of criticism since Aristotle (p. 92). Setting aside the anachronism of calling what Aristotle did criticism—there was little criticism as we know it before the eighteenth century—if justification is an inherent part of criticism, then how is it specific to midcentury foundations? This again points to Kindley’s slide to metaphysics rather than to history, claiming an innate, transhistorical purpose to criticism.

19. Saunders cites the Church committee’s report that the CIA found reputable foundations such as the Rockefeller were “the best and most plausible kind of funding cover” (Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* [New York, 1999], p. 135). See also Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville, 1988), which has substantial discussion of the Rockefeller Foundation, particularly in chapter 5, “Forging a Postwar Aesthetic: The Rockefeller Foundation and the New Literary Consensus,” pp. 113–41, and which is unmentioned in “Big Criticism.”

Historically, rather than trying to fit criticism into the overarching rubric of justification, I think a more fruitful avenue would be to consider the shift to bureaucratic protocols of the post-Sputnik era. This is a matter of the welfare state and its bureaucratic channels, which require a stream of reports and other manners of accounting for each project. We experience this in the many evaluations and annual reports we have to file each year. These bureaucratic measures seem even more relevant to the university that has emerged over the past three decades, in which grant getting and knowledge transfer seem to override research for its own sake, as Sheila Slaughter and Larry L. Leslie’s *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University* details.22

Beyond the particulars of my disagreement with “Big Criticism,” one reason why I’ve spent time on it is because I think it displays a tendency of recent criticism. If the master word defining the theory era was *text*, the master word of our era is *archive*, and there is a tendency to present intriguing and very local archival material from which one makes a grand speculation. The speculation gains credibility from the accumulation of archival material. It’s impressive when you read notes that reveal their sources as box 6, folder 15, and they seem inarguable. Similar to what Roland Barthes called the reality effect, I think that they perform a history effect. Such a procedure broadcasts a realistic account, but it is in fact primarily rhetorical; because the scholar has access to such arcane material, we assume that other statements are based on this bedrock of fact.

Finally, I do want to emphasize that I share Kindley’s aim in trying to understand the institution of criticism and to produce an historical account of its modern genesis. It strikes me that we are in a moment of revision, when previous histories, like Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature*, now twenty-five years old, speak for a different moment. A new generation, like Kindley and Mark McGurl, whom Kindley cites, is starting to rewrite the history of postwar literature and criticism. I just think it needs to stay closer to the facts (there’s a difference between counterintuitive and counterfactual), and I would like it to be a cultural materialist history.

21. This is a point that Jonathan Culler observes in his “Literary Criticism and the American University,” *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Norman, Okla., 1988), p. 30. He notes the increase of peer review and evaluations, remarking that “the continuing professional evaluation on which promotions, grants, and prestige depend may thus generate a more specialized yet more innovative criticism than would some other arrangement” (ibid.). In retrospect, he told me in an interview that “I would now say that I was rather too positive about the capitalistic model of the university” (Culler, “The Clarity of Theory: An Interview with Jonathan Culler,” interview by Williams, *Minnesota Review*, no. 70 [2008]: 81).