



Whither Critical Inquiry?

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Whither *Critical Inquiry*?

Lorraine Daston

Critical Inquiry has established its deserved reputation for must-readability by being unclassifiable. It is neither an academic journal serving a particular disciplinary audience (though some of its articles could have been published in such a journal) nor a journal of general cultural commentary (though, again, there is some overlap). Moreover, some of the best articles published in recent issues are also unclassifiable in style and genre—but all fresh, stimulating, and written with clarity and verve. It seems to me that the greatest risk for *Critical Inquiry* is becoming predictable and uniform, just as the greatest risk for the humanities is becoming hermetic. Hence my suggestions about where to go and what to do next are deliberately helter-skelter, tending in no one direction in particular.

1. *Frameworks of interpretation*: Humanists have immersed themselves in theories of every stripe for decades now, and, at its best, theory illuminates whole new objects of inquiry and reveals new ways of seeing old ones. *Critical Inquiry* has often been in the vanguard here. What *Critical Inquiry* (and the humanities in general) have not undertaken is a confrontation (or, less tendentiously put, an encounter) with rival frameworks of interpretation in the human sciences—that rubric embracing anthropology and economics, primatology and psychology. Rational choice theory, game theory, and other models of human conduct are frankly imperialistic in their aims. But insofar as there has been any humanistic response to them, it has been a rolling of eyes heavenward and a shrugging of shoulders about the absurdity of it all (sentiments and gestures richly reciprocated by the other side, especially the indifference). Yet much of the relevant empirical evidence by which such theories might be evaluated lies squarely within the province of the humanities—indeed, of humanistic theory. Gender perspectives on ra-

tional actors, historical perspectives on the criteria of rationality, historical perspectives on rational choice theory itself are all urgently needed, and they are surely not going to come from the human sciences themselves. This is not simply a matter of the weary war between the faculties; it is a matter of how all manner of decisions—political, social, and economic—are being routinely made, firmly embedded within these interpretative frameworks. To be concrete: how about articles devoted to the history and mythology (in the sense of Roland Barthes) of the algorithm? of cost/benefit analysis?

2. *Matter*: My favorite among recent issues was “Things”—more, please! More visual essays like Sidney Nagel’s “Shadows and Ephemera” and more meditations on the significance of familiar objects like Jeffrey Schnapp’s “The Romance of Caffeine and Aluminum.” Perhaps a series of occasional essays (or poems or photographs) on the ubiquitous and hence invisible stuff of daily life, to render weird and wondrous the mundane and prosaic: Scotch tape, baking soda, rayon, plywood. There is a particular humanistic take on the material and the technological—part historical, part aesthetic, part critical, part ethnographic—that lights things up from within and seems to me very much in the spirit of intellectual (and sometimes literal) double takes *Critical Inquiry* at its best provokes.

3. *Media*: From time to time, as the editors deem fit, a reflective essay on the occasion of a remarkable museum exhibition or website or advertisement or performance (stage, film, television, street) would enliven the pages of *Critical Inquiry* and its unrelieved diet of articles. What I mean is not a review—plenty of other people are already reviewing all and sundry—but a reflection about how one might think about such a thing as a philosopher, a literary scholar, a cultural historian. How might it be conceptualized, not in the abstract (as in media theory), but in the concrete, on the basis of this specific event? Preferably, it should not be the art historian who meditates on the museum exhibition (unless it’s an exhibition at a museum specializing in something other than art), nor the film theorist pondering the movie. What is wanted is to train the analytical gaze on objects foreign to one’s discipline and to see what happens to both object and discipline as a result.

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4. *Cultural energies and recognition*: Still on the contemporary scene, why do creative energies flow in some channels but not others? And why are some creators (for example, artists) visible, even hypervisible, and others with far larger followings (for example, certain website designers, car designers, designers in general) invisible? Can *Critical Inquiry* persuade scholars to take the large and subtle historical literature that addresses these questions for, say, Renaissance Italy or nineteenth-century France and pose them for the here-and-now? It is an oddity in a culture otherwise so obsessed with individual recognition that some of its most striking creative products—one thinks especially of advertising—are indeed handsomely remunerated but unsigned. Issues of authorship, property rights, but also collective habits of viewing and valorizing are all in play here. Again, this is an opportunity for humanists to make sense of a world still in formation, using tools they've honed over decades.

5. *How humanists know what they know*: The philosophical literature on epistemology and the historical literature on scientific practices, especially in English, is overwhelmingly slanted towards the natural sciences. That is the source of both problems and examples, and, insofar as even the social sciences figure in such analyses, they appear as pale imitations of the natural sciences. Except for some older work on hermeneutics (mostly translated from other languages and traditions) and one study of the history of footnotes (by Anthony Grafton), there is almost nothing on the epistemology and practices of humanists. Historians of science have written about how biologists learned to see under the microscope, how botanists learned to characterize plants in succinct Latin, how physicists learned to abstract from messy phenomena to mathematical models. But how do art historians learn to see, historians learn to read, philosophers to argue? What is the history of the art-historical slide collection, the initiation into archival research, the graduate seminar? Insofar as any epistemological question about the knowledge of humanists has been posed, it has centered on the objects of that knowledge (for example, Dilthey's all-too-well-known opposition of the ideographic and nomothetic). But what about an epistemology based upon the practices of humanists, on what they do?

6. *Translations*: Perhaps the humanities everywhere suffer from insularity because of the enormous reliance on language as a precision instrument, but the situation is particularly acute in the United States, where politics and geography conspire to make us systematically ignorant of life and letters beyond our borders. *Critical Inquiry* has made admirable attempts in the past to acquaint anglophone readers with what is going on elsewhere that is new and noteworthy; these efforts ought to be intensified and expanded

to include intellectuals around the globe, whether or not they are academically affiliated or would even designate themselves as scholars. In addition to translating bellwether pieces that have appeared in other languages, perhaps short articles on approaches unfamiliar to anglophone audiences but causing ferment elsewhere might be commissioned from time to time. The need to deprovincialize the humanities has never been more acute.