

Reaction and Response

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We are living through Thermidor. The backlash is both political and intellectual; even within the academy it takes many forms. So do the responses to it; they are various and mutually incompatible. But if there is no consensus about what is wrong and what to do about it, still, it is possible to discern a common thread running through at least some of these statements. For want of a better phrase one might call it a renewed commitment to materiality. The refusal or the breaking of this commitment is, conversely, the distinctive tactic of reaction.

There are many reasons for the current malaise in criticism. One, no doubt, is the root conservatism of American intellectual life (a conservatism that is not, of course, incompatible with political liberalism). But some of the blame must also fall on the partisans of “theory.” Of all the respondents, only Harry Harootunian and Mary Poovey were willing to inquire whether the claims of poststructuralism might have been at all overstated. Their position is clearly a minority one, yet it strikes me as obviously correct. Hyperbole was, in particular, the favored trope of an extreme, and ultimately debilitating, linguistic idealism. For someone like me—a *soixantehuitard*, but only in the sense of having been born in 1968—the challenge facing theory today is to escape from these dead ends while retaining the fierce radicalism that has made *CI* one of the best journals on earth. The choice between progress and regression is therefore false, whether posed by theorists or antitheorists. The situation is more complex.

A case in point is my own field, the history of art. Here reaction appears principally as a return to iconology. Not the historicist aesthetics of the early Panofsky nor Tom Mitchell’s “rhetoric of images,” but the standardized method that dominated the discipline after World War II. Iconology of this

sort endlessly rehearses the claim that one can explain (explain *away*) pictures by displacing their meanings to texts. It takes as its premise the unity and priority of a “discourse,” or “ideology,” or “culture”—in short, a *logos*—which it then professes to discover bodied forth in artworks. The result is a quasi-Platonic theory of imitation, *mimesis*, masquerading as historicism. Today’s neo-iconology typically makes nods in the direction of Foucault or of New Historicism; the articles tend to be deliberately anecdotal, and the *logos* in question tends to bear the name of sexuality or power instead of philosophy or history. The result, however, is a flight from the artworks themselves; neo-iconology renounces formalism in order to focus on immaterial Ideas. This combination of an idealized content or culture with a vaguely *marxisant* politics effectively guts the Foucauldian and New Historicist projects of their critical force. Yet—and here’s the point—what has licensed this return to vulgar Platonism is, precisely, the fetishization of a derealized, immaterial Language. This fetishization is a parody of poststructuralism; but it is one that both its enemies and its friends have often allowed to pass uncontested. The result is that it has been possible for many art historians to forget theory while seeming always to bear it in mind.

Over and against this tendency we may set an oft-voiced desire for more or better close reading (as in the statement of J. Hillis Miller). The wish is a familiar one. It has been some twenty years since Paul de Man called for a return to philology—a return, that is, to the study of rhetorical structure and, by extension, of the materiality of the letter. De Man would be the first to insist that this returning, this *nostos*, never reaches its destination. Yet his own late attempts to work out a materialist alternative to the ideology of the aesthetic remain powerful, and for two reasons. The first is the rigor that comes from these works’ insistence on the priority of the text; this is the legacy of New Criticism. The second is their deconstruction of the opposition between art and history, aesthetics and politics. What has been lost in much work that appeared under the banner of cultural studies is, precisely, this willingness to draw radical conclusions from a rigorous commitment to *the specificity of things*. Just this commitment, on the other hand, characterizes some of the best art-historical writing of the 1990s: Tim Clark on modernism, Joseph Koerner on Casper David Friedrich, Whitney Davis on predynastic Egypt. But this de Manian art history represents only one

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version of a broader historical materialism. Clark, for instance, exemplifies a tradition of English socialism going back to Ruskin, one which takes formal questions (the contour of a Venetian arch, say, or the rendering of a prostitute's thigh) to be fundamentally ethical, that is to say political, in nature. Similar possibilities underwrite the very different work of Michael Fried and Leo Steinberg's constant, even heroic battle against textual reductivism in the history of art. One may even discern a family resemblance to Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss on the *informe*. Current interest in the materials of art—in the media themselves, that is, in stone, paint, ink, presses, clay, celluloid, and circuit boards—has an obvious affinity with such work (though in truth the results, at this early stage, look mixed). In each case, what is often disparagingly called formalism amounts to an exemplary commitment to objects, to ethics, to politics—and an attendant rejection of both neo-iconology and the idealization of culture. Such worldly formalism is neither a turn to therapeutics nor a flight from content, but the very enactment of “revolutionary possibility.”

Another promising tendency is a renewed engagement with the sciences (compare Lorraine Daston, Sander Gilman, and Poovey). It is hard to overstate the urgency of this task. The passing of theory has left a vacuum in which sociobiology, genetic reductivism, and cognitive science have flourished. These disciplines are blithely annexing core humanistic questions of intentionality, agency, memory, sexuality, cognition, and language. In itself such annexation might not be a bad thing—perhaps we should not shed a tear for the humanities—if only the arguments of people like Steven Pinker were not so impossibly crude. But the imperial hubris of the sciences is not a reason for disengagement; just the reverse. Standing as it does at a nodal point in the academy, *Critical Inquiry* is uniquely positioned to contribute to these debates through a combination of fierce polemic and willingness to listen. Of late, critical engagement with the sciences has tended to focus on the historicization of knowledge. This project is crucial—it is one place where the polemic comes in—but it is only half the battle. I would like to see a move beyond critique and toward active, collaborative inquiry. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel's *Iconoclash* is a promising sign, as (I'm told) are some recent MLA sessions. But the opportunities for important work at the intersection of the new sciences and the old humanities are almost limitless. Such collaborative projects would have the same rewards, hence the same very high risks, as encounters with psychoanalysis did at the start of the last century. They could collapse into an inane scientism, or they could provide critics with a new and hitherto-unimagined vocabulary. First, however, it is necessary to reassert the importance of nonempirical research to the sciences. Doing so will require a renewed engagement with something like

materialism, or even naturalism. Poovey on facts, Daston on objects, Gilman on the medical humanities, Arnold Davidson on sexuality: these are just the tips of some very big icebergs.

Engagement with the natural sciences should not be confused with the fetishization of technology. Enthusiasm for things digital is so prevalent (compare W. J. T. Mitchell, Miller, Gilman, Catharine Stimpson, and Jerome McGann) that a contrarian voice seems useful. There remains, for instance, a significant gap between what technology can presently perform and what theorists seem to find interesting. So when a prominent theoretician characterizes “the relief/alleviation we feel when we freely float in cyberspace (or, even more, in Virtual Reality)” as “the experience of possessing another—aetheric, virtual, weightless—body,” I want to change those active verbs to conditionals.¹ *Were* we to float, we *might* feel such-and-such (then again, we might not). Discussion of what technology companies may perhaps someday produce is not theory but speculation, which may be less a prerequisite for “living in our century” than an escape from it. No coincidence, therefore, that a thoroughly tendentious equation of mediation with dematerialization underwrites so much work in this domain. The rhetoric of the virtual routinely denies not just our hylic, real, weighty bodies, but the physicality of the image as well, as though new media were, somehow, no longer media. This is not new, for all the bombast. It is, on the contrary, depressingly familiar.

One might usefully contrast ongoing hyperbole about the internet to Proust’s description of the telephone as a magical device that, with time, loses its power to enchant. Recognizing the usefulness and the popularity of computers does not require us to conclude that they will change our very subjectivities, the phenomenology of time, or even usher in a posthuman age. On the contrary, they could, like Proust’s phone, be important not for their novelty but their banality, their susceptibility to what Robert Pippin calls the “forgetfulness of the ordinary itself” (p. 426). In this way, interest in the digital is fully compatible with an immensely productive turn to the everyday, to quotidian things, in recent historical criticism. I have in mind not just Pippin’s statement but Harootunian’s Wellek lectures, Miriam Hansen on vernacular modernism, Fried on Menzel, and above all Bill Brown on thing theory. These projects are diverse, but all in their various ways participate in the broadly materialist project I’ve been describing. It should go without saying that this latest “turn” is as endless as de Man’s return to philology and that it is political by definition; it attends to the very stuff of politics.

1. Slavoj Žižek, “No Sex, Please, We’re Post-Human!” <http://lacan.com/nosex.htm>

From everyday things it is a short jump to everyday language. One reason for the current predicament lies in the inability of radical linguistic doubt to sustain the demands of the everyday (compare Pippin, Poovey). It is hard “to live this skepticism,” as Stanley Cavell might put it. This dilemma is not really all that new; it repeats the later Wittgenstein’s engagement with skepticism and the ordinariness of language. If poststructuralism sought a way out of metaphysics, so too did the *Philosophical Investigations*; the latter may well be more congenial to current preoccupations. Too often criticism has treated this philosophy superficially or dismissed it (bizarrely) as conservative; it has underrated, or ignored, its revolutionary possibility. However, one of the great achievements of *Critical Inquiry* has been its ability to bring “Anglo-American” philosophy in general, and the tradition of Wittgenstein in particular, into sustained conversation with criticism and theory (I think, for example, of Cavell’s critique of de Man and Gayatri Spivak’s response way back in *The Politics of Interpretation*). Precisely because of its long engagement with “continental” philosophy, criticism is now poised to engage more fully than ever before with the analytic tradition. Of course, *CI* has gone a long way toward exploding that very opposition. In its pages, therefore, this encounter would amount to an interrogation of theory from within criticism—an immanent critique, if you like—and that can only be good for what Gilman calls “the self-conscious awareness of the methodological approaches that one uses” (p. 384).