

Review · Brian W. Shaffer

IN *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture*, Giles Gunn worries the disappearance of a moral dimension in contemporary academic discourse. In this “excruciatingly intellectualistic age that is so obsessed with thought but so suspicious of ideas” (61), Gunn writes, “the question now being asked is not whether discrimination or judgment remains the goal of critical inquiry, but whether valuational procedures belong in critical discourse at all” (ix). For Gunn, however, unlike cultural conservatives such as Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, our current “crisis of disbelief” is not the product of any “breakdown of conventional moral prescriptions,” or of a “forgetfulness of the sacred.” Instead, it reflects a critical climate in which justifications for moral reasoning are mistrusted, due to their institutionalization in ways that strike many as but “subterfuges for the expression of various kinds of social, cultural, political, and even religious privilege” (x).

In this alternately explicative and polemical study, Gunn maintains that only a “pragmatic,” “dialogic” and “loosely hermeneutical” mode of thinking will enable us to recapture a place for the “moral imagination,” for a “criticism of life,” in the interpretation of culture. To this end, he devotes entire chapters, comprising the centerpiece of his book, to considerations of Mikhail Bakhtin, Kenneth Burke and Clifford Geertz — all figures for whom the importance of literary texts consists in “the forms of otherness they mediate to us” (68).

Contrary to this understanding of the aims of critical theory, according to Gunn, the currently ascendant deconstructive poststructuralism denies the properly pragmatic, dialogic and hermeneutic aspects of interpretation. He places such thinkers as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan in this camp to the extent that all of them “turn criticism into a science and then reduce the science of criticism to a study of the grammars of discourse that not only delimit but essentially constitute cultural experience” (41). Taking Saussure’s “linguistic” findings for “metaphysical” ones, these critics, for Gunn, wrongly “lay the

The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture, Giles Gunn, Oxford University Press, 1987. \$24.95 cloth. \$7.95 paper.

problems with discourse at the door of language” (143). For them, because cultural forms are necessarily “arbitrary constructions that bear little or no intrinsic relation to the things to which they refer,” “web[s] of artificial and largely self-serving constructs” (41), the only allowable intellectual mode is “disbelief,” the only critical stance, “playful cynicism” (42). “Put simply,” Gunn charges, deconstructive poststructuralism, “according to its own testimony, and despite the proximity of its own practitioners,” leaves the cultural critic with little to do (43).

Gunn’s riposte to this “intellectually brilliant” challenge is neither to ignore it nor to deem it a *fait accompli*, but to turn deconstruction loose upon itself, on the one hand, and to answer it with his own brand of critical inquiry—culled from Bakhtin, Burke, and Geertz—on the other. In the first instance, Gunn points to the mysterious fact, as Gerald Graff and Terry Eagleton have recently done, that the discourse of poststructuralism survives “the demolition of its own critique,” and that “the authority of its own rhetorical performance” somehow remains untouched (58). Additionally, he rightly notes that the self-referential discourse of deconstruction, even for its salutary evasion of “logocentrism,” is inordinately “egocentric.” “Thus,” Gunn holds, “while the language of the discourse is successfully subverting everything within it, the voice of the discourse is effectively subordinating everything outside it” (58)—all of which conduces to “solipsism.”

In the second instance, Gunn pits Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic model of critical discourse against Derrida’s “monologic” one. For Russian critic Bakhtin, all discourse is “dialogic” due to the fact that every utterance, each text, “is always subordinate to context, and every meaning related to a larger putative whole in which each has the potential of conditioning, as well as being conditioned by, others” (145). Gunn aptly notes that Bakhtin would associate Derrida’s monologism, no matter how linguistically subversive, with authority and dogmatism—with the “artificial and self-authenticating constraints of some system of understanding” (59). Further, Bakhtin would counter Derrida’s sense of language as “the prison-house of thought and the distorting mirror of experience” by insisting that it is only so when “employed in a discourse that is monologic, totalitarian, closed” (144). In this way, for Gunn, Bakhtin celebrates those virtues Derrida ultimately denies: pluralism and alterity.

Like Bakhtin, American critic Kenneth Burke views art as “a type of

oppositional activity” whose disruptive voice seeks to “undermine any one rigid scheme of living” (75). Concerned with the relationship between discourse and action, between hermeneutics and power, Burke is for Gunn a pragmatic cultural critic who uses comedy as an instrument of interpretation and social change. Burke’s “comic realism” Gunn maintains, “is founded on the belief that insight . . . is most often afforded by improbable juxtapositions and unlikely, often outrageous, comparisons” (80)—what Burke calls “perspectives by incongruity.” Burke further shares Bakhtin’s penchant for the comic in literature, believing that its innate cultural irreverence, what Bakhtin calls its “Carnavalesque” nature, guards admirably against aesthetic (and by extension ideological) codification and rigidity. As Gunn notes, for Burke comedy “remains a cure-all because it does not rest in its own realizations but rather contains the seeds of its own counterstatements within itself” (86).

American anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s “hermeneutic” understanding is also seen as a helpful corrective to much prevailing critical thinking: “instead of regarding signs as assertions to be deconstructed, codes to be deciphered, or messages to be demystified, Geertz wants to conceive of them as idioms to be interpreted, texts to be read” (108). Resisting those theories “of art and culture that attempt to isolate them from the practical contexts that give them life” (99), Geertz emphasizes “context” as much as “text,” visualizing artist, audience and aesthetic form alike as all “part of a collective experience that considerably transcends them” (108). In this way, for Gunn, Geertz’s broadly cultural view of art counters the post-Flaubertian conception of it as purely stylistic, autotelic and, hence, definable in aesthetic terms alone. As Geertz himself notes, “one can no more understand aesthetic objects as concatenations of pure form than one can understand speech as a parade of syntactic variations, or myth as a set of structural transformations” (108).

Other chapters of *The Culture of Criticism and the Criticism of Culture* engage such topics as the American Studies movement and the relation of religion and literature; but it is fundamentally to the exposure of an imbalance in cultural criticism and to an attempt at redressing this imbalance that the heart of the book is dedicated. By terming his own “hermeneutics of replenishment” an “alternative” to rather than a “replacement” for the prevailing “hermeneutics of suspicion,” Gunn is true to the spirit of his triumvirate of mentors who allow for, even encourage, the coexistence of

contraries and the engagement with otherness.

Whether or not one is in sympathy with the approach to cultural investigation promoted here, Gunn's book has much to recommend it. For one thing, this subtle yet lucid work demonstrates that all of our interpretations, whether for the purposes of remythologizing or demythologizing, deciphering or deconstructing, are inevitably "forms of prejudice," and that we must therefore attend to where these prejudices will lead us, and not merely to their presuppositions. Further, Gunn's therapeutic intellectual history usefully resurrects the category of "experience," long banished from the criticism of culture by the category of "language," in order to expound a sense of criticism as "an exploration of the possibilities and limitations life reveals when viewed from within the work's own felt scheme of values," and not merely as a "measurement of the work's fulfillment of its own conditions for being" (25). While opponents of this orientation will accuse it of raising, more than settling, important questions about twentieth-century critical discourse, and of being retrograde in its resistance to prevailing intellectual habits—in this case, to the pseudo-formalist premises and self-cancelling practices of deconstruction, all but taken for granted by many—it is precisely as a cogent reexamination of and challenge to them that Gunn's study is most significant. It accomplishes what John Dewey would have the most productive acts of cultural self-reflection do:

We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us (73).