Cultural Criticism and Society:

Historical and Comparative Views

A special session; session leader: Morris Dickstein, Queens Coll., City Univ. of New York

1. "Wordsworth and the Problem of Authority in Cultural Criticism," Michael Fischer, Univ. of New Mexico

2. "The Career of an American Metaphor," Andrew Delbanco, Columbia Univ.

3. "The Politics of Cultural Freedom: The 1950s in India," Margery Sabin, Wellesley Coll.

4. "From Culture to Ideology: A Postmodern Tale," Eugene Goodheart, Brandeis Univ.

Cultural criticism has always been a two-way street, as well as a way of traveling across widely feared but wholly arbitrary boundaries. In the simplest sense, it could be described as the social or contextual critique of literature or the arts, but it very easily reverses gear to become a critique of society itself in literary or aesthetic terms, terms which look beyond economics and formal politics to emphasize the structure of feeling, quality of life, or the deep pattern of human relationships. The Romantics, in their criticism, their social writings, but also in their poetry, and the Victorian men of letters, in their favored mode of social prophecy, were among the first to work both sides of the street. Carlyle's great essay on the Condition of England, "Signs of the Times," emerges indisputably from his critical writings on German literature, just as Ruskin's social criticism emerges from his work on art and architecture and Arnold's social polemics, his first Essays in Criticism, and his writings on religion emerge from the 1853 Preface to his own poetry.

It was Raymond Williams who synthesized this tradition in Culture and Society, theorized it in The Long Revolution, defined its terms in Keywords, and applied it in a fresh way to English culture in The Country and the City. But even before Williams, critics as different as Van Wyck Brooks, F.R. Leavis and Lionel Trilling, in their creative indebtedness to Arnold, showed how the Victorian concern with the effects of industrialism, capitalism, and democracy could be applied to twentieth-century problems and twentieth-century texts. At the same time, what Williams, Leavis, and Trilling did for the Victorians the Frankfurt school did for the parallel German tradition of Kulturkritik, excavating the Hegelian dimension within Marxism yet also sharpening the critical and utopian edge of German idealism. These German intellectuals used philosophy as the English used literature--as a critique of social forms, a vehicle for humanistic argument, a way of raising questions that lay perilously between the merely social and the merely literary.

Cultural criticism is not simply a form of literary sociology. Raymond Williams puts this succinctly in a chapter called "The Analysis of Culture" in The Long Revolution. On the one hand, he writes: "Art reflects its society and works a social character through to its reality in experience. But also, art creates, by new perceptions and responses, elements which the society, as such, is not able to realize. If we compare art with its society, we find a series of real relationships showing its deep and central connections with the rest of general life." But on the other hand, he adds, we cannot rest with "the simple comparison of art and society," but "must start from the recognition that all the acts of men compose a general reality within which both art and what we ordinarily call society are comprised. We do not now compare the art with the society; we compare both with the whole complex of human actions and feelings." (69)

Williams' concluding phrase, "the whole complex of human actions and feelings," is the very definition of culture for any cultural critic. Cultural critics see art less in formal terms, or even in strictly historical terms, than as an articulation of the mental and social elements of a human world, just as they see society as a kind of intricate text that can be scrutinized as closely as we have long since learned to examine works of literature. Yet today we see the effects of this cultural outlook more among younger historians than among literary critics. Once completely dominated by political, military, and diplomatic materials, historians, influenced by both literature and anthropology as well as popular culture, have begun in recent decades to look more closely at such 'soft' subjects as the history of mentalites, the history of the family, the history of sexuality, of housework, or leisure and amusements.

As Richard Wightman Fox and Jackson Lears write in the introduction to a forthcoming collection of essays, The Power of Culture, "We are in the midst of a dramatic shift in sensibility, and 'cultural' history is the rubric under which a massive doubting and reconfiguring of our most cherished historical assumptions is being conducted. Many historians are coming to suspect that the idea of culture has the power to restore order to the study of the past. Whatever its potency as an organizing theme, there is no doubt about the power of the term 'culture' to evoke and stand for the depth of the re-examination now taking place." One illustrious example was Warren Susman 1985 collection of essays, Culture as History, not one of them on a traditional historical subject but dealing instead with topics like the 1939 World's Fair and the beginning of a culture of celebrity with cherished national icons like Babe Ruth.

Superficially, it would seem that exactly the same ferment in taking place in literary studies today with the arrival of the New Historicism and the enormous vogue of cultural studies. The formal, language-based approaches of the New Criticism in the 1940s and 50s and deconstruction in the 1970s have been succeeded by a proliferation of social and cultural studies. Their aim has been to reintegrate literature and the arts into their historical contexts and analyze aesthetic forms and cultural ideas as social constructions of a particular era. Yet cultural studies has been far less conscious of its own history than of the histories it analyzes. While acknowledging the influence of the Frankfurt school, of Foucault and Althusser, of Raymond Williams and the Birmingham school, it generally ignores or disparages the previous history of cultural criticism in England and America. Though Williams himself is a respected figure, there is hardly a sentence in the lines I quoted from him that could not be quickly dismissed today as idealistic, abstract, utopian, circular, naive, or subjective. Far from making a complete break with deconstruction, cultural studies today applies deconstructive methods to social subjects. For what Raymond Williams calls "culture," which tries to embrace "the whole complex of human actions and feelings" in any given place and age, critics today are more likely to substitute Foucault's notion of "power" or his analysis of discursive practices, Althusser's notion of ideology, or Gramsci's idea of hegemony, the last of which at least leaves slightly more scope for what E.P. Thompson, in his critique of Althusser, calls "human agency."

My purpose in organizing today's session was to try to bring today's cultural criticism face to face with its despised or forgotten antecedents. Cultural criticism today has immensely expanded its field of interest while narrowing its methodological scope and the range of its sympathy. It is clearly marked by its suspicion of literature as a form of ideology or indoctrination, by its strong and explicit political program, especially its vicarious identification with the marginal and the dispossessed, by its focus on race, gender, and class, and by its occasional attempts to salvage literature as a field of negotiation or subversion which somehow resists rather than simply expresses the force of social power or ideology.

For this session I have invited four distinguished critics not associated with any obvious school or viewpoint to offer some historical perspective on the issues raised by cultural criticism today. The first speaker, Michael Fischer of the University of New Mexico, is best known for his books and essays on criticism itself, such as Does Deconstruction Make Any Difference? (Indiana, 1985) and Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism (Chicago, 1989). But he is also a strong student of English Romanticism. In his paper he will deal with the problem of authority in contemporary criticism--an issue raised by Richard Rorty and others--by reaching back to the Romantics, especially to Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads as a significant early encounter with this issue.

The second paper will parallel Fischer's English example with an American one. Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University has been working on the problem of evil in American culture. His paper will trace the changing metaphors by which Americans have represented evil and examine the contexts in which each of these metaphors emerged. In doing so, he will compare the approach of cultural critics today with that of predecessors like Trilling and Niebuhr and, before them, Collingwood and Cassirer. Like Fischer, his aim will be to highlight contemporary practice by dealing with a concrete cultural issue. Delbanco's focus is on the varieties of historicism, past and present, and I suspect he will use the problem of evil to focus the differences.

Delbanco's previous work includes a book on William Ellery Channing (Harvard, 1981) and The Puritan Ordeal (Harvard, 1989), but he also become one of our most accomplished critical essayists on American literature, history, and religion for The New Republic and other periodicals.

In recent years, cultural studies has been concentrating less on England and America than on third-world and post-colonial settings and issues. This is what Margery Sabin of Wellesley College will take on in the third paper. Sabin has been doing research in London and elsewhere on the post-colonial tensions and conflicts in the India of the 1950s. She has been studying the files of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which tried to influence Indian intellectuals by funding journals like Quest--among other things, by trying to encourage the revival of native traditions. This in turn was resisted by many Indians who feared an upsurge of nationalism and Hindu fundamentalism--exactly what has since occurred--and remained more sympathetic to some Western attitudes.

Sabin will explore this paradoxical situation to provide a historical framework for understanding the concept of "cultural freedom" within a post-colonial context. Like the other speakers, indeed, like most cultural critics, Margery Sabin's work has been extremely varied, including a book on English Romanticism and the French Tradition (Harvard, 1976) and The Dialect of the Tribe: Speech and Community in Modern Fiction (Oxford, 1987). But she also has two recent essays in Raritan related to issues of colonialism, one on China ("Lu Xun: Revolution and Individual Talent"), the other on India ("The Suttee Romance").

The final paper by Eugene Goodheart, who, in his range of interests and his personal intensity, has always been my definition of a contemporary literary intellectual, as well as a sharp student of contemporary criticism. His talk will follow directly from the issues raised by Sabin's paper. (He warns me that his essay may be the most polemical, a prospect I don't find the least bit frightening.) Goodheart will examine how the notion of culture, which in the past provided the ground for an idealist critique of industrial society, has more recently been attacked as an expression of ideology. His paper, as I understand it, will examine the claims of ideology critique by juxtaposing an essay by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski with the writings of the African novelist Chinua Achebe. [Without defending European claims of universalism, Kolakowski emphasizes the Western traditions of self-criticism and self-correction, while Achebe argues that Enlightenment universalism is a mystification that simply masks the self-interest of European imperialism.] This issue is at the heart of both the criticism of ideology and third-world cultural studies, and it does much to explain why recent cultural critics have ignored or rejected most of their predecessors.

Eugene Goodheart studied with Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun at Columbia and presently teaches at Brandeis University. He is perhaps best known for his many books on cultural criticism, literary history, and theory, such as Culture and the Radical Conscience (Harvard, 1973), The Failure of Criticism (Harvard, 1978), The Skeptic Disposition in Contemporary Criticism (Princeton, 1984, 1991), Pieces of Resistance (Cambridge, 1987), and Desire and Its Discontents (Columbia, 1991).