

A Political Criticism Without Politics

EVAN CARTON and GERALD GRAFF, "Criticism Since 1940," *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 8: *Poetry and Criticism 1940-1995*, gen. ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996), 261-471.

The text under review is part of a volume which is the third one published in the eight-volume *Cambridge History of American Literature*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch. Actually, the volume is No. 8 in the series, and apart from the fact that, after a chronological beginning, we are all of a sudden jumping from No. 2 to 8, it holds a few other surprises as well. The volume consists of two separate, unrelated parts, one devoted to poetry and the other to literary criticism after 1940. Since these two "altogether different sets of material and narrative forms" (dust jacket) require different kinds of in-depth knowledge, the following review will only deal with the volume's section on criticism. This text of more than 200 pages is really a book of its own which contains seven lengthy chapters on the New Criticism, the emergence of academic criticism after World War II, the "nationalizing of the New Criticism" and the development of the myth and symbol school in American literary criticism, feminist criticism, deconstruction and poststructuralism, a chapter on the political potential of deconstruction, with an aside on the Frankfurt School and Marxist cultural criticism, and, finally, a chapter on cultural studies and the new historicism. I must admit that, since this text is part of a history of American literature, I had expected a book focusing on the history of American literary criticism and, above all, on the changing perceptions of, and critical approaches to, American literature. However, criticism on American literature is relegated to a more or less marginal role in this volume of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. The bulk of the text consists of yet another survey of the current theory-scene, most of which remains entirely unrelated to American literature. It is like buying a book on the history of the French film, only to find out that the book really deals with films currently shown in France, most of which are American.

To be sure, recent developments in the study and criticism of American literature cannot be separated from larger developments in literary theory. It would have been

very useful if the authors, who are well qualified for such a job, would have set themselves the task of demonstrating how contemporary literary theory has changed our view and interpretation of American literature. Strangely enough, however, this is an issue which is never addressed in the text. For example, in the chapter on feminist criticism we get a detailed explanation of French feminist literary theory, but no demonstration of its influence on reinterpreting the work of major female American writers. There is also no indication of the crucial debates about the sentimental and the domestic novel which have played such an important role in revising our view of American literary history. In the otherwise excellent chapter on deconstruction and post-structuralism, we are treated, among many other things, to an extended explication of Derrida's rereading of Plato, but there is not even the slightest suggestion of how deconstruction or poststructuralism have changed our understanding on American literature, nor is there any reference to central debates such as those about "The Turn of the Screw" or "Billy Budd," which became test-cases for the possibilities and problems of a deconstructionist approach to American literature. In the chapter on "materialist" criticism there is no mentioning of recent market-place criticism of American literature, and in the chapter on the new historical criticism the only work on American literature mentioned out of a rich body of major revisionist studies is Walter Benn Michaels' book on *The Gold Standard* (what would critics of the New Historicism do without it!). The work of Sacvan Bercovitch is dealt with only in a few scattered sentences (a fate he shares with Perry Miller). Leo Marx and Alan Trachtenberg are mentioned by name, but none of their works are identified by title, not to speak of their influential arguments on the theory and method of American Studies. The New York Intellectuals of the 1940s and 1950s are excluded because they did not produce academic criticism, so that their "largely nonacademic and cross-disciplinary criticism might be central to a different kind of account" (264). This also includes the work of Lionel Trilling (whose theory on the difference between English and American literature is evoked in one sentence), despite Trilling's influential years at Columbia University. There is, in general, a tendency to trivialize theories of American literature or to even misrepresent them, as, e.g. in the follow-

ing sweeping indictment of the criticism of the Fifties: "Indeed, few scholars of that time hesitated to argue that the curriculum should be a vehicle for American ideology . . ." (272). But, at least, the authors do not discriminate. There is one paragraph on Henry Louis Gates' concept of "signifying," but beyond that there is no description of African American criticism, nor of that of any other ethnic group! Although there is a fairly extended discussion of post-colonial criticism, there is no reference to American debates on multiculturalism. The only critical study of American popular culture mentioned is Andrew Ross' *No Respect*. The canon debates are mentioned several times as a crucial touchstone of recent ideological struggles, but we never get any information about their actual contents. As the dust cover informs us, the authors wanted to "discard" "the traditional synoptic overview of major figures . . . in favor of a history recounted from within unfolding processes - a history of interstices and relations, equal to the task of considering the contexts of art, power, and criticism in which it is set." It is important to realize what this means in this case: If one is looking for an analysis of theories of American literature, or a history of criticism on American literature, or an introduction to different approaches to American literary history, this is clearly not the book to go to.

How useful is the text as a description and analysis of contemporary literary criticism? There are characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Both are linked to the goal the authors pursue with their text. They approach current criticism not with the intention of faithfully documenting available choices, but selectively and with a specific purpose in mind, namely that of assessing the political potential of current critical positions. Thus, certain approaches which are thought to have no oppositional credentials do not qualify. There is no description, for example, of structuralist criticism, narratology, semiotics, intertextuality, hermeneutic theory, phenomenological criticism, reception theory, pragmatist approaches, ethnographic criticism or Freudian psychoanalysis. In the chapter on deconstruction, the Yale critics, including De Man's influential version of deconstruction, play no role, although there is a section on the debate provoked by the discovery of De Man's war-time writings. In the chapter on the new historicism, there is a long discussion of Foucault, but no reference

to the influence of Geertz. Although the authors suggest in their concluding remarks that a politically oriented criticism should not restrict itself to political criteria alone, this appears to have been an afterthought, because they have done exactly that. At the beginning, the authors, in accordance with the general aims of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, proudly claim to have put great emphasis on dissensus. But it is a dissensus narrowly defined, namely one about the goals and oppositional potential of a "politically oriented criticism."

In this ongoing debate, the authors take their own, independent stand. This is, in fact, the major virtue of their text. They are not only determined to defend political criticism against conservative attacks and "media detractors," they have also set themselves the task of submitting some long-cherished radical orthodoxies to critical scrutiny. It seems to be their major project to give a politically oriented criticism a rational and "responsible" shape. The major line of defense against conservative attacks is to argue that the canon and curriculum were never as disinterested and free of historical influences and political interests as critics claim: "Is it really the case, for example, that the courses in Western Civilization, whose recent modification the *Times* laments, had 'existed for centuries' before the 1970s? As we shall see, these courses were not centuries old at all but went back no further than the 1920s, and they were inspired by what were at the time often frankly acknowledged to be political and propagandistic motives after the conflagration of competing nationalisms in World War I" (267-68). Actually, this reorientation could be considered as an early form of identity politics: "If blame must be assigned, then, for imposing identity politics on literature, it should be directed at the nationalist politics without which the study of national literatures would never have come into existence in the first place" (269). Even jargon, it turns out, is not a prerogative of contemporary theory, for already the New Criticism was accused of using technical terms that violated literary sensibility. What the authors try to undermine in this way is the assumption of a golden era of literary studies before the recent politicization. Radicalism cannot even be blamed for relativism, for "complaints about student relativism were already pervasive by the 1940s and 1950s . . ." (289). Time and again, the authors thus sug-

gest that what a politically oriented criticism of today is blamed for is something that academic criticism has been blamed for all along. This is a point well-taken, but it skirts around the real issue, for, clearly, to defend a theoretical approach against popular misconceptions cannot serve as an intellectual justification of that position.

Yet the text is by no means one of uncritical partisanship. It has its most interesting points in its criticism of many current radical claims and procedures. There is an ongoing attempt, for example, to rescue deconstruction from the perception that it is "a species of irresponsible relativism," but the authors also concede, "in fairness," that "these caricatures have been given credibility by some who call themselves deconstructionists or who praise deconstruction for abolishing all norms and standards" (355). "Thus the notorious deconstructionist concept of interpretive 'undecidability' does not mean, as many have asserted, that any interpretation of a text is as good as any other or that interpretations are inarguable and not subject to rational dispute. Derrida argues, as we shall see, that complete license in interpretation is as illusory as complete infallibility" (363-64). Against "reductive deconstructionists," the authors maintain that "Derrida is not suggesting that there is something *inherently* subversive about writing . . . or that the doctrine of self-present truth is *always* necessarily complicitous with authority, though one can find reductive deconstructionists who make such claims" (368-69). Occasionally, however, Derrida himself is to blame. In an "unwise" minimizing of the anti-Semitism of De Man's war-time articles, Derrida and other defenders "have needlessly given credence to the charge that deconstruction is little more than a way to make texts mean whatever is convenient for the interpreter and to relativize moral distinctions out of existence" (387). But, "while contemporary political criticism in some instances may challenge the truth or evidentiary merit of certain truth claims, . . . its proper target is not the viability of truth claims as such but how these claims *function* in particular social contexts" (412). Politically oriented critics must recognize therefore "that their projects cannot make sense in the absence of some arguable standard of validity" (412-13). Consequently, "constructivist or antifoundationalist theory need not delegitimize all claims to empirical knowledge or practical agency" (429).

However, deconstruction appears to hold more oppositional potential for the authors than some currently influential forms of historicist and materialist criticism. Althusser's redefinition of ideology, e.g., leads to the "persistent problem" that this position "leaves no place for undistorted knowledge and thereby for political criticism itself" (409). A major problem not only of his approach is "to overstate the uniformity of ideology" (411). But, "statements about the inescapability of ideology or the subject's interpellation by ideology are empty without an empirical analysis of the specific historical conjuncture . . ." (413). This also means that one cannot simply equate "objectivist and essentialist modes of thought with political conservatism" (413). Historically, "essentialist thinking has as often been involved in opposing the dominant order as supporting it" (413). Unfortunately, "while cultural critics have vigorously challenged the notion that aesthetic value is a self-contained and immutable textual property, they have been less self-critical of their own attributions of political value to texts" (422). In its "self-deceptive presentism" (427), "some new historicism has advanced a totalizing view of history that, in its inability to imagine change and its projection of a generalized 'postmodern condition' upon the past, undoes any meaningful historicism" (428). Similarly, Foucault's "sweeping view of the working of modern power subvert(s) his own evident intellectual, political, and moral goals" (432). Decentering "the Marxist view of power means abandoning Marx's vision of the theoretical necessity and perhaps even the practical possibility of a socialist or other alternative to dominant capitalism. As a result, resistance or subversion risks becoming precisely as pervasive and as unmeasurable as the power it opposes. . . . A point is soon reached at which almost anything can be praised for its subversiveness or damned for its vulnerability to cooptation, for there is always some discursive frame of reference that will support either description" (435).

In this ongoing critique, the main criterion is that of the possible political effects of contemporary literary criticism. Or, as the authors put it: "In what way and to what degree can literary criticism be politically significant?" (390). Thus, after a long chapter on deconstruction and poststructuralism, a second chapter is added (Ch.6: "From Textuality to Materiality") in order to dispel the often-held view that deconstruction paralyzes political

action and to determine "whether deconstruction is 'really' oppositional or escapist" - a question, however, that "cannot finally be answered . . . for whether deconstruction entails either of these outcomes depends on how it is deployed and the contexts in which it operates" (393). In other words, "the notion that certain theories or textual practices are necessarily oppositional or hegemonic assumes uncritically that we can calculate their political effects without knowing the contexts in which they operate" (391). But what, exactly, are the political effects we should be looking for? What should be opposed for what reason and to what extent? It may make sense to suggest that judgments of the oppositional potential of a text ought to become "contextual, or, in Marxist terms, 'conjunctural,'" and that they remain "empty without an empirical analysis of the specific historical conjuncture" (413). However, on the basis of what political goals and convictions are we to evaluate these contexts and conjunctures?

It actually seems to be the tacit assumption of the authors that their patient correction of unreasonable and "irresponsible" theoretical claims will lead political criticism toward "undistorted" (409), "genuine knowledge" (442), so that it need no longer shy away from "empirical analysis." In view of the authors' strong support of poststructuralist and antifoundationalist positions one would like to find out more about their concept of undistorted knowledge and empirical validation. But even more so, one would like to find out more about the political agenda of this political criticism. Unfortunately, the authors remain elusive on this crucial point. In their introduction, they provide a sketchy characterization of their own position by asking "what critical and pedagogical practices are most suitable to the achievement and maintenance of a democratic culture?" (263). There is, however, never an elaboration or definition of what constitutes a (truly?) democratic culture. Instead, the reader has to settle for a number of scattered and unsystematic hints at possible political goals. At one point, the authors refer to the loss of "a socialist or other alternative to dominant capitalism" (435) as a major problem for current forms of oppositional criticism, at another point they speak of "the need of oppressed groups for 'greater freedom and power'" (448). At one point, they use the word "social revolution" (448), while two pages later they speak of "democratic social

reform" (450), and then, after insisting that "a publicly and professionally responsive criticism" (452) should also "communicate responsively with the numerous constituencies outside the cultural left" (451), they quote Patricia Meyer Spacks' claim that "contemporary education fits citizens for a contemporary democracy better than does the education of yesterday" (453). They conclude the book by saying that "literary study retains significant political potential, including the potential to develop intellectual and affective resources that may '[help] people live their lives'" (453).

On what political goals and effects should a politically oriented criticism focus, then? By moving, in a strategy of continuous retreat, between socialist alternative, "social revolution," "democratic social reform," "democratic culture," "contemporary democracy," and, finally, "people's lives," the authors have covered a lot of bases, but clarified nothing. All of these words make a world of difference in terms of political organization, social consequences and political activities. We also never never get a clue *how*, that is through what means of formal organization and modes of aesthetic experience, literature can serve such a political agenda? As many other current revisionists the authors seem to assume that the magic word "political" is self-authorizing and self-explanatory and thus in no need of further elaboration. Again and again, the argument thus comes to rest on the authority of oppositional consensus-words such as "political," "democracy," "anti-imperialism," or "oppression." But a democratic, oppositional, or anti-imperialistic politics can be based, to name only a few of the more obvious choices, on socialist, social democratic, liberal, ecological and, in some cases, even conservative positions, all of which are equally "political," although they can have entirely different consequences for people's lives. Similarly, if one wants to take political action against oppression, one needs a concept of justice and an idea of how to adjudicate conflicting claims. (There is presently a rich body of work on these two issues which is ignored completely.) As long as the "political effects" at which the authors aim are not spelled out more concretely, this type of American-made political criticism without political theory and without politics will remain on the superficial level of a rebellious gesture and will have its major function in a form of rhetorical and professional self-empowerment. But, perhaps, this is exactly its attraction.