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Literature, Liberalism, and the Current Cultural Radicalism

As discussions of contemporary literary theory point out in fascination as well as frustration, the present situation in literary studies is dominated by an unusual variety of approaches and literary theories, ranging from the rediscovery of (Russian) formalism and the work of Bakhtin, to narratology, structuralism, hermeneutics and reader response criticism, poststructuralism and deconstruction, the new historicism, cultural materialism, various forms and stages of psychoanalytical criticism, the new pragmatism, the so-called race, class, and gender studies (not to be confused with an earlier women's studies, ethnic studies, or queer studies), colonial studies, and a newly emerging field of cultural studies in which the study of high and popular culture is supposed to merge. In the last two decades, these approaches have followed - and often replaced - each other in quick succession. They confront the student of literary theory and American literary criticism with a bewildering array of possibilities - and the daunting, seemingly never-ending task of trying to catch up with the latest developments in the field. And yet, despite the pleasing self-image of a postmodern plurality of approaches, carefully nurtured by a new academic "theory-industry," it is striking to realize that, at a closer look, this Babel-like diversity of voices is linked by a surprising similarity of premises and critical purposes. This common purpose is, in fact, acknowledged in the frequent use of the term "critical theory" as a welcome umbrella concept for contemporary literary theory, and the fact that there is such a link is not really that surprising after all. New positions and approaches in the humanities do not just represent a progress in methodology. Inevitably, they also function as cultural acts of self-definition and self-empowerment. They present new research, but also, and even more importantly so, its cultural interpretation. They are, in other words, developed in the service of certain values by which they are decisively shaped and for which they function as a source of authorization and legitimation.

Seen from this point of view, what we are witnessing today in American literary theory and American literary criticism is a confrontation of, and struggle between, two major sets of premises and systems of value: a post-War liberalism that emerged in reaction to the political radicalism of the Thirties, and a new form of radical thought which I want to call cultural radicalism in contrast to prior forms of political radicalism because it is no longer the realm of politics, but that of culture, which is considered the major tool of domination as well as the major resource for resistance. Both positions, liberalism and cultural radicalism, have developed a wide variety of different and often conflicting critical approaches, ranging, in the case of American liberalism, from new critical formalism and the so-called myth and symbol school in American Studies to the cultural analysis of a Lionel Trilling or Irving Howe, and, in the case of cultural radicalism, from the linguistic play of deconstruction to such explicitly political approaches as cultural materialism, the new historicism, and recent forms of race, class, and gender studies. Different though as these approaches may be in many important respects, they share basic assumptions about society, power, and the role of culture which do, in turn, shape their characteristic attitude toward literature.

This common set of assumptions makes contemporary critical theory far more homogeneous and predictable than it itself wants to acknowledge. In the following essay, I shall try to describe contemporary American literary criticism from the point of view of intellectual and cultural history, that is, as an intellectual system, in order to compare its views about society, literature, and individual identity with those of the liberal consensus that dominated American literary criticism in the post-War years and shaped the study of American literature as a field of academic study decisively.

Such an approach seems to me to hold two advantages. To start with, it provides a certain degree of distance from the current flood of positions by discussing them not primarily on their own terms and with the concepts they have introduced themselves. As long as one remains within the self-definition, and thus the self-fashioning, of a critical approach, one is also at its mercy, because one cannot escape its terminology, and hence cannot arrive at an outside perspective which would make it possible to describe it as a cultural strategy. If the major disagreement in interpreting a literary text is that of whether this text is affirmative or subversive, for example, then certain premises about society and the function of literature are already accepted as given and their dimension as a rhetorical strategy is easily obscured. This, in fact, is the current situation in literary theory and American literary criticism in which concepts such as resistance, opposition, subversion, deconstruction, or cultural critique have gained such seemingly self-explanatory and self-evident authority that their underlying political analysis, rhetorical purpose, and tacit aesthetic premises are hardly ever examined. There clearly exists a tendency at present to suppose that the critical or marginal perspective automatically represents a privileged, self-authorizing position.[1] In contrast, a discussion of contemporary American literary criticism as a cultural strategy (in the sense of Kenneth Burke) may provide a new base for comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the two dominant critical perspectives and their different versions of why literature matters. This comparison is not committed to either one of these positions. There must be a good reason why a liberal view of literature was held by a whole generation of leading post-War intellectuals, just as there must be a good reason why the next generation finds a more radical vision more plausible. It is one of the major shortcomings of current debates that they hardly ever try to take such questions of historical and cultural function into account. In contrast, my claim is that the question of why literature matters must be placed in the context of cultural and intellectual history.

II.

The new cultural radicalism in American literary criticism is right in arguing that the view of literature which dominated literary studies in its professional take-off phase after World War II until roughly the 1970s was not just the result of a growth in serious, "non-ideological" scholarship. In the U.S., the post-War version of why literature matters emerged in response to a dramatic disillusionment about the political commitments of the pre-War period. After the sobering realization of the naiveté of one's own ideological position, literature promised to lead the way out of this ideological entrapment. For many, it emerged as the only possibility to show commitment in an apparently nonideological fashion. Liberal criticism thus reconstituted itself anew out of the radicalism of the Thirties and the formalism of the New Criticism.[2] From the one, it retained the idea of an ultimately moral or social purpose of literature, from the other, a set of procedures of literary analysis that could professionalize literary criticism and provide it with interpretive know-how as well as institutional legitimation.

This promise of professionalism was desperately needed because a directly mimetic interpretation of literature had become an embarrassment after the utopian ideals of communism had turned into the cruel realities of Stalinism. In this context of disillusionment and self-doubt, literature gained an important new function. It was redefined as a unique form of communication that had the potential to complicate simple, single-minded, that is, "ideological" interpretations of the world. As a privileged source of what Lionel Trilling called the moral imagination, literature thus reemerged as one of the few credible bulwarks against the deceptive simplicities of ideology.[3] "Complex" literature seemed to provide a chance to counter the reductionist versions of the world provided by political parties. To protect the integrity of literature as an independent, non-ideological realm of communication became an important act of engagement. The promise of art replaced the promise of socialism.

From these premises, all significant theoretical claims of the liberal view of literature follow quite plausibly: Its often misunderstood or polemically reduced argument for aesthetic "autonomy" was directed against the political instrumentalization of literature.[4] The turn toward the analysis of literary form was necessary, because there had to be a convincing description of the different, unique ways in which the literary work created meaning. Furthermore, it was equally important to insist on the distin-

1 Very often, in the familiar, often triumphant insistence on the historicity of all acts of interpretation and evaluation, the implication seems to be that the historicity and politics of the critic are sufficiently clarified by the mere fact that he or she is able to point out the historical embeddedness of the arguments of others.

2 A note on terminology: In one of the founding texts of this reorientation, Lionel Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*, Trilling himself uses the term "liberal intellectuals" to refer to a political criticism that values a writer like Dreiser over James. Consequently, Amy Kaplan and others speak of "Trilling's anti-liberal polemics." In retrospect, what Trilling called liberalism would now be called leftism or political radicalism.

3 For the constitution of a post-War liberal approach toward literature in the U.S., Trilling's essay "Reality in America" in his *The Liberal Imagination* is a milestone. In this essay, Trilling provides an exemplary critique of an older left liberalism identified with the intellectual historian Vernon Louis Parrington and his simplistic "public-document" view of literature: "Whenever he was confronted with a work of art that was complex, personal and not literal, that was not, as it were, a public document, Parrington was at a loss." (2)

4 Misunderstood, because the claim did not necessarily mean that literature had nothing to do with reality, but that it was related to reality and culture through communicative conditions of its own. The challenge which emerged out of this anti-mimetic stance was to describe these specific conditions, and the subsequent history of literary criticism is also that of the changing views and versions of what constitutes this specifically literary dimension of literature. This history leads from the assumption of an ontologically different mode of existence to linguistic models of difference, and, finally, to repeated attempts to focus on the concept of fiction as a distinguishing feature of literature. In Wolfgang Iser's most recent reconceptualization of the fictive as a combination of the real and the imaginary, these attempts have reached a new quality of moving away from "essentializing" notions of what constitutes literature, while the idea of a distinct and different form of communication is retained.

guishing power of aesthetic value, for only if literature had a structure of its own could it be sufficiently "complex" to defy ideology. This led to an often scathing criticism of popular culture as, principally, a form of kitsch. Where resistance to ideology is linked to literary forms of defamiliarization or negation, popular culture betrays this potential of negation for commercial reasons. This typically "modernist" bias, which looks to literature to battle the suffocating reign of social and intellectual convention, also explains an increasing distance to realism and a mimetic theory of literature, because its appropriation by Marxism had turned realism into an example of what literature should not be or should not become. Instead, post-War liberalism created a theory of American literature centered around the idea of "the American romance" in which the shallow optimism of American culture was subtly questioned and undermined by indirect, symbolic, and thus ambiguous, modes of representation that supported the theory of an inherently "complex" and non-referential potential of literary language.[5] At the same time, this theory of language contained a theory of effect: It was embedded in the vision of a reader "growing" in competence and independence in the encounter with a text that offers resistance to conventional explanations of the world and therefore challenges the individual to throw away the crutches of cultural orthodoxy. The experience of a generation of critical intellectuals, regretting in retrospect their own or their culture's tacit acceptance of the claims of a political party and a political cause, led to a renewed emphasis on the liberal idea of individual autonomy and an identity that would be stable enough to resist the conformist pressures of society. Finally, this promise of individual growth and social regeneration through literature became the basis for the liberal project to institutionalize the study of literature as an academic pursuit. This elevation of literary studies to the level of a legitimate academic discipline in higher learning, from which following generations profited enormously, can be considered as, ultimately, the major impact of post-War liberalism on literary studies. Liberalism had succeeded in convincing society that not only the individual, but society as a whole would profit and be strengthened by the special potential of literature to instigate and further individual growth.[6]

It was this promise of individuality, however, which also created a major problem for liberalism when the student movement and the counter-culture began to carry the search for individual freedom further than liberalism itself had ever thought of doing. A generation raised on a rhetoric of individual self-determination became aware of the boundaries that post-War liberalism actually set to self-realization, and they challenged liberalism by a penetrating and relentless critique of the actual economic, social, and cultural limits posed to individual choice. Individual identity, it was realized, was really a normative idea tied to a restrictive set of social and discursive rules in which the

5 See Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* and a whole series of works on the American romance in its wake.

6 In the liberal approach, there exists a wide variety of opinions and positions on how individual growth can be achieved through literature. For Trilling, it is the complication of our perception of reality which counts; his exemplary literature is what he calls the moral realism of the James of the middle period. For the myth and symbol school, it is the subversion of an official American consensus through the symbolic and allegorical modes of the romance, for which the "dark romantics" Hawthorne and Melville provide the best examples. The disagreements about who the major American writers are can be directly attributed to a prior analysis of how literature can best contribute to individual development.

much vaunted "pluralism" excluded many manifestations of difference. From this point of view, cultural constructions of a social, ethnic, racial, sexual or "engendered" identity are always already there before the individual "grows" into them, and they function as seemingly natural forms of defining individual possibilities.[7] "Identity" thus becomes social ascription, and to achieve "autonomy" inevitably means to draw arbitrary boundaries. From this point of view, "identity" is a concept based on exclusion and the continuing cultural presence of racism, sexism, or homophobia, which stigmatize "other" forms of identity flatly contradict, and ultimately render hypocritical, the egalitarian promise of liberal democracy.

The discovery of these subtle, seemingly natural effects of hierarchization and exclusion through the "invisible" power of discursive regimes led to a radical redefinition of what constitutes social control and paved the way for a radical theory ideally suited to explain the vexing problem of why capitalism had been able to avoid the often predicted class conflict despite glaring economic and social inequalities. In this redefinition, the work of Herbert Marcuse played a crucial role in leading the student movement and the New Left from political to cultural radicalism. In fact, Marcuse's idea of repressive tolerance can be said to stand at the beginning of contemporary cultural radicalism. For what unites this cultural radicalism in the final analysis is its reconceptualization of what constitutes power. As long as the exertion of power was equated with force and violent acts of suppression, arguments about the repressive nature of liberal democracies were not terribly convincing. Taking its cue from Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance - reemerging, for example, in Sacvan Bercovitch's argument about the shrewd containment achieved by a liberal rhetoric of consensus[8] - political power is thus severed from its equation with force and broadened into a concept that includes the creation of consent by language, symbolic systems, and discursive practices.[9] In this view, power is not primarily exercised from the outside. Rather, it is embedded in cultural forms and creates consent from "within" without the need of physical coercion. For liberalism, culture is primarily of interest as a potential realm of creativity, for the new radicalism it is the major source of the "naturalization" of oppressive social hierarchies.

By the term cultural radicalism, I thus want to designate all those approaches in literary criticism after the linguistic turn which regard culture (and hence literature) as an "invisible" form of social control and domination. While earlier forms of "left-wing" political radicalism placed their hopes in radical change on a Marxist analysis of

7 An interesting example is provided by the development of critical discussions of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. While the liberal debates of the 50s centered around the question of whether "lighting out for the territory" constitutes true freedom or its deformation by American individualism, recent discussions stress the role and fate of Jim as the true test of freedom.

8 Thomas Claviez has suggested, although not in these words, that Bercovitch drew his argument about the shrewd containment of resistance through a liberal consensus on "America" from the work of Herbert Marcuse.

9 In his analysis of the current state of capitalism, Marcuse introduces the central argument which inspires and anchors almost all of the current cultural radicalism by asking whether consent cannot be considered the supreme form of manipulation: "Mit anderen Worten, sie [eine Wahlanalyse] kann die entscheidende Frage nicht aufwerfen, ob nicht die Zustimmung selbst das Werk von Manipulation war ..." *Der eindimensionale Mensch*, 135.

capitalist society, the subsequent disappointment over its lack of acceptance by the "masses" pushed radicalism toward the analysis of "systemic effects" of the social order that are beyond the comprehension of those who are subjected to them. Political radicalism tied its analysis to a particular political movement or party within the spectrum of political possibilities, and, more specifically, to the eventual ability of the oppressed to gain a certain measure of awareness and political consciousness through the experience of their oppression or disenfranchisement. In contrast, the various forms of cultural radicalism, in one way or another, emphasize fundamental "systemic" features such as the prison house of language, the ideological state apparatus, the symbolic order, ideology redefined as semiotic system, the discursive regime, logocentrism, patriarchy, or "Western" thought which pervade all acts of sense-making and thus also determine political behavior and individual identity, because they constitute the very concepts and modes of experience through which the social order is perceived. This systemic exertion of power can be especially effective because there is no way of experiencing the real power relations of the system outside of its cultural categories. The theories which the various critical manifestations of cultural radicalism hold about the actual source of this "invisible" power vary considerably. But the basic reliance on the idea of structural power (strukturelle Gewalt) is always the same.

What stands at the center of the current conflicts between liberal and radical interpretations of American literary history is, in other words, not a disagreement between one position that denies social meaning and function to art and another one that reaffirms it, but a struggle between two different versions of that relation, and, linked with it, a fundamental disagreement about the "real" condition of American society, the possibilities of individual choice, and, as a consequence, the potential of literature. For liberalism, the individual is challenged to struggle against the coercive powers of a society which needs the constant challenge of art to prevent itself from becoming ossified, but which is also sufficiently liberal and far-sighted to grant spaces of individual self-determination. For this development of individual identity, literature can offer major forms of inspiration and encouragement. In contrast, the common denominator of the various approaches within the current cultural radicalism in literary studies lies in their focus on a systemic limit to this struggle for self-realization, because the individual, including the writer, is subject to forces quite beyond his or her comprehension. This is true to such an extent that even oppositional gestures must be considered mere effects of the system and the promise of reform its shrewdest strategy of containment.

Within this context, radical approaches can be distinguished according to their different versions of what constitutes this systemic effect. A history could be written, in fact, about the continuous redefinition and radicalization of the fundamental idea of an "invisible" systemic source of power: While structuralism's description of the prison-house of language is still content to demonstrate the inner operating logic of the linguistic (or semiotic) system itself (already attacked by liberalism for its "anti-humanist" elimination of the idea of individual agency), the various forms of post-structuralism, including deconstruction, provide this prison-house of language with a political meaning by redefining it as major manifestation of Western rationalism or logocentrism. And while poststructuralism still sees language (and with it literature) as a potentially anarchic counter-force which it hopes to liberate by deconstructing its binary systemic logic,[10] the various recent forms of a new historical and political turn in literary studies - which have quickly relegated deconstruction to a radical has-been - criticize such hopes as illusory and, by either following the lead of Althusser, Foucault or Lacan, point to the effect of such all-pervasive structures as "the ideological apparatus," the discursive regime, the "political unconscious," or, more recently, the cultural construction of race, gender, and sexual preference. This trajectory of radicalization was, in fact, anticipated in Marxist literary studies by the transition from class analysis to marketplace criticism which, in retrospect, emerges as something like a connecting link between older and newer forms of radicalism. The radical promise of marketplace criticism already lay in the ubiquitous presence of the market as a systemic feature that seemed able to explain the effective neutralization of resistance by the system. At the same time, however, this version of systemic cooptation still implied a choice between resisting the temptations of the market or "selling out" to it, and thus retained an ultimately moralistic stance. In American literary criticism, marketplace criticism played an important role in the emergence of a new revisionist view of American literary history. In the final analysis, however, it remained an episode because it was not yet "systemic" enough.[11]

In American literary criticism, the "systemic" approach of cultural radicalism has had interesting consequences for literary interpretation. Guided by the goal to revise liberal versions of American literary history, the new revisionist versions are almost exclusively concerned with the possibility or impossibility of cultural opposition.[12] If the major heroes of liberalism, such as, for example, the writers of the American Renaissance, stand for the heroic possibility of saying "No! in Thunder" to the conformist pressures of the social system, then it must be the major task of cultural radicalism to unmask the unwitting complicity of these liberal heroes with an inhuman capitalist, racist, sexist, and homophobic system.[13] In keeping with the different stages in the development of cultural radicalism, this oppositionalism has two basic choices and two characteristic manifestations: Critics can either demonstrate to what extent the cooptive powers of the system are at work in the literary text (and, preferably and

10 This line of argument is extended by others in the search for phenomena that appear to have the potential of resisting discursive domination such as the body, sexuality, madness, or desire, only to provoke new discussions intent on showing that these phenomena, or at least their perception and experience, are discursively constituted as well.

11 See, for example, the studies by Trachtenberg, Gilmore, Lears, Wilson, and Kaplan.

12 This almost exclusive focus on the question of oppositionalism is more than the narcissistic preoccupation of a generation with its own counter-cultural past. Rather, it must be understood as logical consequence of cultural radicalism's political analysis: If power is, in principle, "everywhere," the question of containment or resistance must indeed become crucial for all acts of interpretation.

13 Liberalism is not blind to such features of classic American literature but approaches them differently. For example, Twain's racism in the depiction of "Nigger Jim" in his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is related to other versions of the Gilded Age by liberal critics in order to reveal the radically egalitarian dimensions of Twain's version which coexist with his condescending treatment of Jim. For cultural radicalism, on the other hand, such taking account of the writer's good intentions and relative merits is beside the point. Rather, the point is that even well-intentioned writers were subject to all-pervasive cultural constructions of race in order to demonstrate the power of such constructions exactly in those aspects of the text of which the writer was not aware.

ideally, in its very gestures of opposition),[14] or point to a subversive potential of literature, but now to one that derives from the "violence" or inner contradiction of the very systemic aspect that undermines liberal visions of individual agency. If there is subversion or "deconstruction" at work in the text, then not by the individual but by the systemic feature that shapes the individual's self-definition, so that the presence of a larger systemic force is confirmed even in the description of subversion.

A summary of the new, revised American literary history could thus be short: Most of the classical texts of American literature are complicit with the system. Some seem to resist complicity by deconstructive effects of language, or by the unforeseen, explosive effect of the literary representation of such phenomena as sexuality, desire, the body, or, most often, "the other." However, some of those texts which seem to resist do not really do so at a closer look and thus have to be unmasked. And finally, some which look fairly conventional or surprisingly realistic in their mode of literary representation are excused, because this representation stands in the service of a therapeutic search for new, not yet established forms of selfhood. Basically, however, the two choices remain unwitting complicity or subversion.[15] Either Hawthorne's writing questions the concepts of the culture in which he wrote, or its apparent stance of resistance remains, as Sacvan Bercovitch argues in exemplary fashion, part of a ritual of consent, so that the American Renaissance, in contrast to liberalism's celebration of its nonconformism, is unmasked as a force against basic social change.[16] Both of these radical options have their usefulness and professional pay-off. In the first case, one has the authority of the famous writer on the side of one's own critique of the system, in the second, the radical critic can assert his or her own superior radicalism by unmasking even the purported nay-sayer. Between these options, cultural radicalism moves back and forth in a kind of see-saw logic: Whenever a radical analysis points to possibilities of opposition, somebody else will criticize it for being naive in view of the sweeping cooptive powers of the system. Where this leads, on the other hand, to an insistence on the effective systemic containment of opposition, still somebody else will criticize this claim as a universalization of power and hence as defeatist in its implications.

As I have written in a different context, "in this debate, diametrically opposed answers to the question whether a past text was complicit or subversive seem to coexist as equally valid options."[17] Both positions can argue their case with equal plausibility (or implausibility) because of a new conception of the literary text and the task of

14 A weaker version of this same argument is to point to the far-reaching entanglement of a writer like Melville in the historical crises and political debates of his time, so that it can be said that his work is not constituted by primarily aesthetic goals and considerations but by "politics." Similarly, David Reynolds sees the writers of the American Renaissance not, as liberalism did, as alienated from their culture but as emerging out of its popular forms which they actually domesticate.

15 See the fine and very fitting observation by Bercovitch: "Recently, the subversive in literature has been raised to the transcendent status once reserved for the noble, the tragic and the complex." *The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter,'* 152.

16 In a typical characterization in the introduction to *The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter,'* Bercovitch provides a classic description of what I call the "systemic effect": "*The Scarlet Letter* is a story of socialization in which the point of socialization is not to conform, but to consent." xiii.

17 See my essay on "Cultures of Criticism: *Moby-Dick*, Expressive Individualism, and the New Historicism," 223.

interpretation. For liberalism, literary form became a major focus of literary studies, because it was form that distinguished literature from other, more directly referential modes of communication and thus held the key to its potential for a complication of meaning. These complex meanings of literature were accessible only to the degree that one knew how to interpret its form. The interpretation of form thus became essential for an adequate understanding of literature and the codification of a body of knowledge about narrative structure and formal strategies the center-piece of a professional literary education. For cultural radicalism, the formal level is crucial as well, but for different reasons: Form is important not as a self-contained structure with its own potential for the transformation of meaning, but as the element into which the power effect is inscribed. Since the systemic effect derives its power from the fact that it is not visible, it cannot be represented and identified on the level of content. To identify the political meaning of a literary text on its content level was the major mistake of political radicalism. To repeat this mistake would not only mean to retreat to a pre-professional stage of literary studies. It would also mean to betray one's own political analysis of the system.

Thus, one of the major revisions of an earlier political radicalism by the new cultural radicalism is to shift the search for political meaning from the representation of politics to the politics of representation.[18] In keeping with cultural radicalism's focus on discursive practices as forms of exclusion, any "representation" is conceived as, in principle, already an attempt to impose boundaries and thus functions as a form of cultural coercion in which the metaphysics of a culture are naturalized and skillfully upheld. For liberalism, art promises to transcend politics, for cultural radicalism, everything, and especially an apparently non-political element like literary form, is inevitably political. The analysis of form therefore remains crucial for a political interpretation. It can only be considered successful, however, if it manages to lay bare the power effect that is inscribed in the mode of representation itself. "Formal" analysis thus becomes a search for manifestations of that which is hidden from view, and since it is not a particular form of representation or representation in a particular generic context, but representation per se, which exercises power, the most rewarding targets for such an analysis are those elements of the text where the systemic closure of literary representation is disrupted by absences, inconsistencies, contradictions or other disparities that reveal the tyranny or "violence" of the representation itself.[19]

18 The special role of the rhetorical figure of the chiasm in cultural radicalism is another example of its radical claim that things are exactly different from what they appear to be.

19 The founding text here is Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production* which provides the basic methodological inspiration for Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, British cultural materialism and some of the newer revisionist studies. See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch who tries to apply the idea to Hawthorne: "Pierre Macherey argues that gaps and silences in narrative structure - the sorts of indirection in which Hawthorne specializes - demarcate the limits of ideology. According to Macherey, they are symptoms of fissures in the culture, the contradictions that the system can neither absorb nor wholly exclude. His theory seems especially pertinent to classic American literature, which abounds in strategies of process through hiatus, and to Hawthorne's work in particular." *The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter,' 92f.* In Macherey's approach, the psychoanalytical concept of the symptom is applied to society as a whole, so that gaps, silences, inconsistencies or contradictions reveal the system's "unconscious." On this point, see especially Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.

In this type of "symptomatic" interpretation, there is no need for an innertextual contextualization which would ask how recurrent and thus representative an instance of textual disruption is for the text as a whole. For liberalism, this innertextual context is a most important point of reference in the interpretation of a literary text, because it is also the potential source of a creative transformation of the referential dimension of language. For cultural radicalism, on the other hand, a case of textual disruption is of interest because it is regarded as symptomatic of the system. The context that matters is thus not that of the literary text but that of a prior political analysis of this system. One striking consequence is the devaluation of experience as a source of knowledge and meaning. The implied reader of liberalism must be shaken out of the habitualized acceptance of cultural conventions in order to revive the possibility of genuine, that is, "unconventional" and hence authentic, experience. The greater the potential for authentic experience, the greater the potential for individual growth (and, correspondingly, for aesthetic experience). For cultural radicalism, on the other hand, there is no way of experiencing the "real" power relations of a system outside of its cultural and ideological categories. Since there is no way of being "outside" language, ideology, or discourse, our experiences, including those called aesthetic experiences by liberalism, can only reenact invisible systemic effects. If experience can no longer provide knowledge, however, what can? Only critical theory can. It alone can tell us in what way textual inconsistencies and contradictions reenact or deconstruct power relations of the system. In consequence, critical theory becomes a precondition for the intelligibility of literary texts.[20]

Cultural radicalism's substitution of aesthetic experience by theory, or, to put it differently, its redefinition of literary form as ideological mimesis, has a price, however: These textual disparities which are read as symptomatic manifestations of a power effect, are always already determined in their meaning and will, in principle, always signify the same thing.[21] In a certain sense, liberal readings are also highly predictable. When liberalism searches for the meaning of literary form, one can predict a focus on such aspects as complexity or ambiguity. But the way in which this complexity is described depends on the formal strategies of the text and thus has to be determined in a close reading. When cultural radicalism interprets the meaning of textual disparities, one also knows what it will find, namely manifestations of power relations. This time, however, there is no need to go into a detailed reading of formal strategies. All one has to do is to identify the contradiction as such, in order to be able to claim that there is an "absent cause" at work in the text. As Wolfram Schmidgen has shown in a brilliant analysis, the interpretive practice of cultural radicalism is anchored by this confirmation of an "absent cause" which critical theory tells us must be there. This means, in turn, that the plausibility of an interpretation is not determined by the plausibility and skill of a close reading of the text, but - since the absent cause is, in principle, everywhere and thus need not be pursued in detail - by the "powerfulness" and the radical credentials of the theory that anchors the interpretation and of which the interpretation presents an allegorical version. Interpretive disagreements nowadays are therefore most often disagreements about how radical an analysis really is.

What role can literature still play in such an intellectual system? Does it, can it, still matter? At first glance, the answer seems only too obvious. Cultural radicalism constitutes itself against liberalism's sacralization of art and literature in order to show that literature is not, as liberalism claims, a source of authentic regenerative experience, but, quite on the contrary, an - often unwitting - accomplice in the ideological formation of a society through discursive regimes. The role of literature in cultural radicalism is to be part of a linguistic system, symbolic order, system of representation, ritual of consent, or discursive practice, in short, of a disciplinary practice. This conflation of text and context explains a very characteristic move of cultural radicalism to downplay the importance and function of the fictive as a special mode of communication with specific conditions and possibilities of its own. For liberalism, literature defines human potential, including the potential to gain a certain measure of freedom against the pressures of the social and cultural system. For cultural radicalism, literature offers an object lesson on the working of the linguistic or ideological system. It is primarily of interest as a discourse that participates in, and reinforces, the system's power relations. Accordingly, the concept of the aesthetic - in liberalism the key term for an exceptional creative achievement - loses its special status. Many critics within cultural radicalism can only conceive of the aesthetic as a term which obfuscates questions of ideological effect, so that rhetoric replaces aesthetics as the crucial category of analysis. If used at all, the attribute "aesthetic" has thus come to refer to a powerful rhetorical effect at best, that is, to the experience of a special power of the literary text which may very well signal that an ideological effect is transmitted with special skill and efficacy. Hence, in another memorable chiasm, the power of art has become the art of power.[22]

Why not give up on literature, then? It is here that one encounters an interesting paradox in current cultural radicalism. For although the classical American texts and writers have been repeatedly unmasked as unwitting accomplices to a system of invisible power relations, radical critics return to them again and again, instead of dismissing and relegating them to obscurity. If one reason for this remarkable case of re

20 An example that I find especially striking is provided in a recent discussion of one of the first African American novels, William Wells Brown's *Clotel or, The President's Daugher* (1853). From a liberal point of view, this text shows so many deficiencies in structural and narrative organization that it was always read as expression of a still considerable confusion about the potential of literature and the goals of emancipation. From the point of view of cultural radicalism, on the other hand, this weakness is redefined as a strategy of deconstruction: "Brown unmasked the conventionality of both signs ... simultaneously asserting and denying unity of self. In so doing, he effectively deconstructed the notion of essentialized self." (Peterson, 564) It is theory that turns former weaknesses into deconstructive strengths: Because Brown writes as a member of a marginalized group, he must act as marginal groups do in current political theory.

21 Thus, one of the unforeseen consequences is an amazing homogenization of literary texts that belies a rhetoric of difference. Formal aspects such as imagery, or structural recurrences, setting, character, plot, point-of-view, style etc. are no longer of interest, because they are all rhetorical manifestations of a representational power effect and thus of a single function. This homogenization of the text finds its equivalent in an equally sweeping homogenization of the ideology at work in the text. Only if it is sufficiently general, can one expect it to be "everywhere." One result is that the differentiations in sociological and historical readings of texts achieved in the 70s have all been thrown overboard and concepts such as "logocentrism," Western thought, or patriarchy have come to prevail that operate at a breathtaking level of generalization and stereotypization.

22 See Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* and my analysis in "Radical Aesthetics."

petition compulsion lies, as these critics would undoubtedly claim, in the continuing cultural authority and presence of these classical writers, then such interpretations must do their own share in perpetuating this presence. What would be the alternative, however? To ask the question is to recognize the inherently parasitic nature of the new cultural radicalism in literary studies. Since cultural radicalism constitutes itself in the rejection of the political and literary theories of liberalism, it needs liberalism's work and results to be able to do its own work. Of course, it could also, as it frequently does, move to those writers on the margin whose marginalization seems to allow them to stand outside the grip of discursive regimes, but such revised priorities have their limit in the restricted usefulness of this literature for an analysis of systemic effects. Cultural radicalism needs literary texts that can be described as enacting this systemic effect. It angrily questions or rejects their presumed aesthetic superiority, it dismisses claims about the regenerative and individualizing power of literature as illusory, it denies literature's uniqueness by analyzing literary texts as yet another manifestation of a discursive regime, but it needs them in order to be able to do all this. If it would terminate this practice, on the other hand, and offer its own body of exemplary works, it would have to develop criteria for selection, analysis, and evaluation that would have to do more than to stand in contrast to a liberal theory of literature.

III.

The interpretive consequences of the debate I have traced can be clarified by considering, in brief, the changes in the critical reception of one of the "classics" of American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. For liberalism, the novel was a godsend for its theory of American literature, because it tells the exemplary story of a nonconformist individual who asserts herself against Puritan pressures of social stigmatization, learns to speak for herself, and acquires a "heroic" individual identity in this process. Melville's enthusiastic comments on the "power of blackness" in Hawthorne's work provided welcome support for the liberal view of a courageously rebellious, if not shrewdly subversive, form of literature that did not, however, merely indulge in a fantasy of individual liberation, but also dealt with the problem of social responsibility. For Hawthorne, individualization is a process in which one not only learns to take on responsibility for oneself and the interpretation of one's own life but also for the community. In contrast to an official American ideology of individualism, Hawthorne's narrative of victorious self-assertion was thus linked to the complication of a conventional promise of individualism. This exemplary "moral realism" finds its expression in Hawthorne's programmatic rejection of the realistic novel of manners and in his plea for the romance which penetrates the deceptive surface of reality and gets to the "truth of the human heart."

Hawthorne's celebrated ambiguity, his continuous oscillation between allegorical and symbolic modes of representation, can be connected with the cultural meaning of his work. His resistance against the power of cultural convention and the emphasis on the individual's right for determining meaning against the orthodoxies of her culture are acted out in the changing interpretation of the letter A which the adulteress Hester

Prynne has to wear on her dress as a punishment for her deed. As a form of "conventional" signification, the scarlet letter stigmatizes Hester and traps her in the role of sinner. The story the novel tells, however, is that of Hester's gradual transformation of the meaning of the letter, until it is no longer conceived as a mere allegory of sin but as a symbol with multiple and ever growing possibilities of meaning. For the liberal critic, this individualization through interpretive struggles exemplifies literature's best potential: As Hester transforms the meaning of the letter A, she also transforms Puritan society and creates a space for individual self-determination. By resisting a realistic mode of representation and thus complicating the perception of moral meaning, Hawthorne skillfully draws the reader into this struggle for interpretation, so that a negotiation between an individual's transformation of meaning on the one hand and communal claims on the other may also be enacted on the level of reception. Here, too, individualism is thus encouraged as well as complicated.

Liberalism could not hope for a text that would be better suited to illustrate its basic view of the relation between literature and society, individualism and social responsibility. There is therefore hardly a major study of American literary history in the 50s and 60s which does not put *The Scarlet Letter* at its center. And there is hardly a radical revision of American literary history that does not feel challenged to address the question of Hawthorne again. As in the case of other writers, the first attacks on the liberal Hawthorne are made from the perspective of marketplace criticism. Hawthorne, it turns out, was not aloof from the market, so that it seems that his critique of the power of social convention is severely compromised by his wish to be accepted by the public. His ambiguities reflect his own predicament to be successful and yet to preserve the integrity of his art: "Hawthorne's predicament shapes the novel's characters and structures and can be discerned in the very texture of the world he creates [...] For Hawthorne, the effort to articulate a cosmos is intimately bound up with his uncertainty as an artist who has to sell but wants to speak the truth."[23] Clearly, Hawthorne's anxieties over his lack of success in the marketplace do not fit the image of a supreme nonconformist saying "No! in Thunder." In addition, the fact that Hawthorne, at one point, called the highly successful competition of domestic novelists "a damn'd mob of scribbling women" reveals that he did not hesitate to act out his anxieties through the hierarchizing effects of gender categories. However, the marketplace represents a systemic effect of co-optation that the writer can, in principle, still resist, if he fights his own craving for success and public recognition. Co-optation is bad enough, but it is not yet "policing" or containment through invisible systemic effects. And although marketplace criticism undermines the liberal version of resistance, it does not yet deal with the liberal claim that it was a special aesthetic value of his work that led to Hawthorne's standing in American literary history. Obviously, this liberal claim posed a special challenge to cultural radicalism, because it implied that the canon of classic American literature was based on considerations of genuine merit and not of power.

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23 Michael T. Gilmore, "To Speak in the Marketplace: *The Scarlet Letter*," *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 72.

For the revisionist challenge to the liberal canon, the question of aesthetic value therefore became central. In a major piece of revisionist criticism, Jane Tompkins drew on anti-foundationalist debates about literary evaluation to demonstrate that the description of Hawthorne's novels as "masterpieces" was the result of the clever institutionalization of a national literary tradition by the publisher James T. Fields who needed a suitable candidate for the status of an American classic and skillfully elevated Hawthorne to that role. It was only after Hawthorne's reputation had been established safely in American literary criticism that the elements of his work that are now considered his true aesthetic achievements were gradually "discovered." If Hawthorne was not elevated to the level of classical American writer because he was good but is now considered "good" because he was chosen to fill out the role of classical American writer, the apparent aesthetic value of his work must be culture- and institution-specific and thus "discursively produced." Tompkins' argument is supported by Richard Brodhead who points out that "Fields's real accomplishment is less that he saw how to market literature than that he established 'literature' as a market category. [...] Fields found a way to identify a certain portion of that writing as distinguished - as of elevated quality, as of premium cultural value; then to build a market for that writing on the basis for that distinction." (55)

Tompkins' and Brodhead's radical subversion of the liberal belief in aesthetic value has one basic shortcoming. Even if this aesthetic value is not "actually there" in Hawthorne's novel but was ascribed to it by institutionalizing the category of "literature," the question remains why a novel like *The Scarlet Letter* has continuously found readers long after Fields' skillful maneuver and independent from the changing interpretations of literary criticism. Are people reading and enjoying the novel simply because they are being told that it is a classic? Clearly, it is one thing to say that Hawthorne's reputation was made by Fields and quite another to claim that it depends on Fields. Inevitably, the next stage of radical revision had to link the question of Hawthorne's powerful connections to the question of the powerful effects of his work. For Sacvan Bercovitch, who has put Hawthorne at the center of his own influential reevaluation of the American Renaissance as an essential part of the formation of an American liberal middle class ideology, *The Scarlet Letter* enacts a ritual of consensus exactly by telling a story of dissent whose "free enterprise democracy of symbol-making" shrewdly guides the reader "toward accommodation" and thus "absorbs and refashions the radical energies of history."[24] In this reading, the novel becomes a case study to demonstrate "the capacities of culture to shape the subversive in its own image" (150): "My assumption is that oppositional forms, like those of cohesion, cooptation, and incorporation, are fundamentally and variously forms of culture." (152)

It is striking to see the changes three decades of Hawthorne-criticism have brought. For liberal critics, the consistency of Hawthorne's literary strategies of ambiguation determined the possibilities of articulating a "mature" individualism. The plot level is therefore of little interest. What matters is the complicating of meaning by the suggestiveness of Hawthorne's imagery, his symbolism, and his ambiguity. For cultural radicalism, discussions of form in such terms are all part of a deceptive promise of the

24 See Bercovitch, *The Office of 'The Scarlet Letter,' 92, 90.*

possibility of individual agency. In marketplace criticism, this agency is severely compromised by market pressures. But it is, in principle, still a possibility, so that the question of how Hawthorne met the challenge has to be determined by looking at the actual treatment and fate of "resistance" in his texts. For the "institutional" arguments of Tompkins and Brodhead, on the other hand, considerations of formal strategies remain minimal. Finally, in Bercovitch's extensive analysis of the dominant ideological system of liberalism, textual aspects are almost exclusively discussed as rhetorical moves in the interest of, or temporary distance to, that ideology. This must also affect the interpretation of central formal aspects of Hawthorne's work such as his ambiguity. For liberalism, ambiguity is a major term of valorization, because it points to both the polysemic suggestiveness of literature and an awareness of the contradictory nature of life in exemplary fashion. For marketplace criticism, it dramatizes the dilemma of having to decide between two equally tempting sources of self-esteem, public recognition and the integrity of art. Finally, for Bercovitch's focus on "structures of consensus founded upon the potential for dissent" (159), ambiguity is part of a "metaphysics of choosing": "*The Scarlet Letter* reconstitutes inconclusiveness, in all of its luxurious uncertainty of meaning, into a unified design, grounded in the dynamics of liberal culture: the necessary friction between private interest and the public good; the ironies of personal agency; and the ambiguities of group pluralism through which consensus is established and sustained." (114)[25]

IV.

Because cultural radicalism is primarily interested in the possibilities of dissent, subverson, and resistance, it hardly ever addresses the question of alternate social organization, that is, of a social order that would be able to accommodate all those radical individualists without establishing new forms of coercion. The reason, I think, lies in a basic assumption of cultural radicalism that makes the political allegorization of literary texts as a form of ideological mimesis possible in the first place: In current cultural radicalism, it is, in the final analysis, the idea and terminology of textuality that provides the basis for political analysis and political vision. Terms developed in the analysis of literary representation or linguistic analysis - such as closure, dialogicity, heterogeneity, semiosis, hybridity or free play - can thus become key terms for the analysis of power relations and power effects. Because of an equation of reality and textuality, textual relations and social relations become interchangeable, if not identical. This equation is useful in two ways. On the one side, it provides the theoretical basis for a political analysis of power relations in which the authoritarian "policing" power of a system can be made transparent by analyzing the control a

25 In talking about the issue of slavery at another point in his argument, Bercovitch says:"We might call the novel thick propaganda. Its range of possibilities includes most forms of resolutions generated by the ante-bellum North. To repeat the logic of Hester's vision, injustice is to be removed by some 'divine operation,' which, however, has not yet done its office. This representation of conflict as ambiguity, and of ambiguity as an absence-to-be (an injustice to be eliminated) is not substantially different from the Liberian solution (deportation of African Americans) endorsed by Harriet Beecher Stowe and enacted in the happy ending to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by her mulatto hero, George Harris."(89)

textual structure or interpretation exerts over meaning. On the other side, the equation can provide something like a *mise en abyme* for a possible alternative in the organization of social relations. Questions about alternate social arrangements are thus implicitly addressed (and answered) in the valorization or rejection of texts. The argument for another (free, anarchic, multicultural) organization of society comes to rest on the authority of a certain type of textual or semiotic organization. Because a radically dehierarchized model of social relations cannot be imagined on the level of social organization, the experimental text is used as an analogy for such forms of organization. Social justice can thus be reimagined on the model of textual dehierarchization, and political commitment can be expressed without actually having to enter the field of politics. It is by no means accidental that literary studies have become one of the last havens for radicalism in our time.

Ironically enough, cultural radicalism thus still needs literature, maybe even more so than ever. In the analogizing of reality and textuality, semiotic and social system, literature can make the presence of power "visible" and its radical critique of systemic cultural coercion plausible. Inevitably, however, such a "textualization" of power has consequences for the definition of power and its explicit or implicit opposite points of reference, freedom and justice. The instances of power or violence for which textual analysis can shape our awareness are, above all, those arbitrary acts of exclusion and hierarchization that are part of any sense-making process or identity-formation. If the exclusion of certain dimensions of semantic free play or the discursive construction of hierarchies become the central standard for identifying power, then this also implies an altogether new, quasi-semiotic understanding of power: Wherever meaning is created by limiting the free play of semiosis, wherever there is representation in literature governed by the "tyranny" of the referent, wherever texts are interpreted so that meaning is arrested and controlled, there is exclusion and thus coercion at work.[26] From this point of view, power is indeed "everywhere" and the universalization of power cogent. Transferred to the level of social relations, power resides, in principle, in any kind of hierarchy, any kind of social interaction, any drawing of boundaries, so that, in a notable rereading of James, and, specifically, *The Golden Bowl*, Mark Seltzer sees "a power of normalization" at work, "a disciplinary method that induces conformity and regulation not by levying violence, but through an immanent array of norms and compulsions [...] an immanent policing so thoroughly inscribed in the most ordinary social practices that it is finally indistinguishable from manners, cooperation, and care." (p.61) This widening of the meaning of the term power is so all-embracing that it must ultimately include all forms of intimacy, of inner-directedness and psychic self-regulation, and, in the final analysis, all forms of social relations.[27]

26 The often nasty culture wars about the canon that are waged at American universities at the moment and that hardly have a very inviting effect on European observers, find their explanation here, because in view of cultural radicalism's textualization of power, the canon can become supreme evidence of "symbolic" coercion.

27 Love, for example, is also a struggle for power, and the ensuing manipulation of anxiety can be seen as exercise of power in the name of love. Thus, Seltzer can argue: "Far from being opposed, love and power in *The Golden Bowl* are two ways of saying the same thing." (66)

Such a radicalization of the concept of power has as its own tacit norm a utopian egalitarianism based on the promise of a complete dehierarchization in social relations (or, where absolutely unavoidable, asking for only temporary and short-lived hierarchies). If "power inheres in the structure of relations among characters" (p.70), however, and the bond thus formed is, in principle, "reciprocally coercive," power must ultimately be seen as a word for everything that puts requirements on the self and thus stands in the way of one's own wishes for self-realization.[28] In looking for the vision of freedom and justice that is implied by this redefinition of power, one arrives at a claim for the right of uncoerced and unfettered difference. If power resides in the drawing of arbitrary boundaries, or any kind of asymmetry in relations, freedom must be defined through the right of the individual to be freed from these impositions and to realize his or her individual choice.[29] From this point of view, liberal concepts of "identity" and individual growth must be seen as highly restrictive indeed. The idea of "growth," for example, can only refer to the successful internalization of a social role and thus to another imprisonment of the self. If there is a common denominator in the revisionist discussions of *The Scarlet Letter*, it is the complaint that Hester does not go "all the way" in her liberation and lets herself become trapped by ideological notions of social responsibility, mutuality etc. A civic notion of individuality is thus contrasted with the idea of an entitlement of individuals to be free of reciprocal obligation and the pressures of social interdependence. Consequently, where individual choice and possibilities of difference become the only undisputed values, the role of literature in history can appear as a series of disciplinary regimes that limit self-realization without overt repression.

We are here, it seems to me, at the heart of the current revisionist challenge: Although it sees itself as a political turn in literary studies, cultural radicalism represents, at a closer look, another turn of the screw in the cultural history of individualism. This is its skeleton in the closet, the absent cause it itself cannot and does not want to acknowledge and theorize. However, many of its most characteristic aspects begin to make sense in this context: its vague equation of politics with oppositionalism, its equation of power with rationalism, its "presentism" in interpretation, and, finally, its self-fashioning through imaginary marginalization, "patchwork" identities, and cultural crossover movements. Radicalism's universalization of power can be most plausibly explained by the fact that power is now defined as structural, systemic limitation to individual choice. This can help to solve one of the most perplexing, and occasionally vexing, puzzles connected with cultural radicalism: the phenomenon that a movement which claims to be so thoroughly political, is actually surprisingly uninterested in politics, and presents its own politics only in frequently shadowy and rudimentary

28 These arguments are developed in more detail in an analysis of mine of the liberal and the radical view of the work of Henry James. See "Power Relations in the Novels of James: The 'Liberal' and the 'Radical' Version."

29 So that in an interpretation of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, one of the key texts of current debates, Ivy Schweitzer argues, for example, that "motherhood (is) incompatible with female desire, autonomy, or independent subjectivity." (169) The solution, here, too, is "semiotic," by moving through the paternal linguistic network to the "archaic language" of the semiotic," (184) so that motherhood can be redefined as a "metonymic space where perceiving subject and perceived object are fused." (186) "Freedom" can thus only be achieved on the level of the textual.

form.[30] Instead, cultural radicalism relies on a basic dualism of the system and the oppressed. It is satisfied to "unmask" manifestations of power, because its politics of individual self-empowerment quite logically focus on those instances of inequality, asymmetry, coercion and hierarchization that stand in the way of the individual's desire and entitlement to be different. This epic struggle between systemic effect and unfettered self-realization, rational control and desire, representation and semiosis, free play and closure, unity of self and fluid self-fashioning also explains a - for a self-announced historical criticism - curiously a-historical, "presentist" approach to literature in which interpretation often consists of little more than measuring past texts against contemporary claims of emancipation or fantasies of "real" dissent. In this way, cultural radicalism's own agenda is projected into history and becomes the standard for judging literary texts of the past, instead of treating these texts also in their alterity, that is, as manifestations of the different possibilities and limitations of another culture and period.

Instead of being merely an indulgence in irrationalism, cultural radicalism's critique of rationalism must also be understood in the context of a politics of individual self-empowerment, because rationalism establishes norms that censor the free, unrestricted expression of desire, sexuality, or the imaginary as legitimate forms of individual self-realization. Finally, the wide-ranging identification of a privileged class of academics with a marginalized "other" can best be explained in the context of the politics of an expressive individualism for which the historically oppressed become the new role models because they can give political authority to the search for cultural difference. The reference to historical victimization, in fact, provides the crucial argument to link the politics of this new expressive individualism with a political critique of society. Again, the important point here is to understand that this individual self-realization is sought on the semiotic level, on which whiteness or maleness can function as signifiers of power, so that the marginal can move into the position of a symbolic alternative for a process of imaginary refashioning. Hence the striking paradox that the culture of African Americans or Native Americans is appropriated for the society at large while they themselves remain socially excluded from it.

What we encounter in cultural radicalism, then, is the paradox of a radicalized form of individualism pursued in the name of a radical egalitarianism. This egalitarianism needs radical dehierarchization to eliminate remaining cultural restrictions, but it also needs the cultural construction of difference to escape from the consequences of radical equality. Thus, contrary to its own self-perception, "cultural radicalism does not provide a political critique of individualism, but a more radicalized version of this individualism, not a critique of individualism by 'politics' but a critique based on the politics of expressive individualism."[31] This expressive individualism can best be described by comparing it with a prior form of utilitarian or "economic" individualism. What distinguishes the two stages are different sources of self-esteem and hence different ideals and models of self-realization. In this development from economic to expressive individualism, the essential point is the new and historically unheard-of usefulness of culture for matters of self-definition and self-empowerment. While in economic individualism, hard work and self-discipline were considered preconditions for economic success and social recognition, it is now the assertion of cultural difference which has become the major source of self-esteem. This change in the sources of self-esteem is the logical outcome of an ever intensified process of individualization and, coming along with it, of an increasingly radical cultural dehierarchization. In this process of individualization the individual has to assert his or her self-worth in opposition to those forces that stand in the way. Initially, these were obvious sources of inequality such as caste, class, or patriarchy. With the increasing democratization of Western societies - in itself a result of individualization - these structural sources of inequality have been undermined in authority, and have, in fact, often been dissolved or weakened decisively. Inequality remains, but it can no longer be as easily attributed to institutionalized social structures. Hence the search for new "systemic effects" of inequality, and hence an increased importance of self-fashioning by cultural difference. If the source of power is cultural, then culture must also serve as the source of counter-definition and the search for self-realization must become the search for alternate cultural options, including those of politics. Ironically, it is thus not a ritual of consent that "absorbs and refashions the radical energies of history," as Bercovitch has it, but a new stage of expressive individualism, articulated most forcefully by cultural radicalism, that redefines political engagement as one cultural option of self-realization among many. The individual that is liberated from systemic power effects by evading a stable identity in a new flexibility and fluidity of the self is also in a position to treat forms of social or political engagement as optional extras on a menu of individual choice and to exchange them rapidly for other pursuits.[32] This situation is, in fact, enacted in current literary criticism in exemplary fashion in which new oppositional options are constantly "tried out" and replaced by more recent and more promising possibilities. In this sense, the current cultural radicalism actually fuels the conditions it deplores because it has contributed its own share to the transformation of "politics" into a cultural practice of self-definition.

Liberalism, then, seems right in its often harsh criticism of cultural radicalism. Unfortunately, however, this criticism has been largely defensive. It has neither acknowledged the cultural logic of individualization that leads from the modernist challenge of cultural conventions to radicalism's focus on structural effects which liberalism itself ignored, such as, for example, the hierarchizing effects of gender categories. Nor has liberalism been able or willing to acknowledge the immensely productive side of the radical revision of literary history which have drawn our attention to manifestations of power and politics in supposedly neutral debates about aesthetic value, or to the presence of a liberal interest in self-definition in "classical" American literary history. The current cultural radicalism in American literary studies has unearthed a number of important political, historical, discursive, and literary contexts of which liberalism

30 By this, I mean, above all, that one hardly ever finds any attempt to take the actual political problems or options into consideration that would emerge from radicalism's critique of power.

31 "Cultures of Criticism: *Moby-Dick*, Expressive Individualism, and the New Historicism," 226.

32 I have tried to describe this redefinition of politics as cultural activity in an essay on the contemporary American artist Jenny Holzer. See my "Radical Aesthetics."

simply did not appear to have been aware or which it did not want to acknowledge.[33] The major analytical gain, however, lies in the awareness to what extent discursive practices entail hierarchies of power, structures of domination, and forms of subtle coercion, that is, in the awareness to what extent every discursive practice contains elements of coercion.

But what are the consequences of this insight? It seems to me that cultural radicalism often forgets the heuristic status of its own claims. If identity would really be radically "plural" or heterogeneous, there would be no continuity of self and thus only schizophrenia. If there were no social glue provided by a ritual of consensus, the logical consequence would be civil war.[34] If history and fiction were both nothing but "textualizations," it would not be possible to "unmask" certain approaches to literary history as ideological. If the claim for truth were nothing but a claim for power, what sense would it make to argue with liberalism? If the aesthetic is the political, on what basis can one distinguish between literary texts of the same political persuasion? In each case, a genuine insight - made possible by cultural radicalism's new sensitivity to power effects - is turned into a false generalization that fails to consider questions of degree, context, creative response, and the possibility of transformation.

Which finally brings us back to *The Scarlet Letter* and its interpretation. As long as one reads the novel only as a shrewd liberal version of containment, one may out-radicalize the book but one also silences it as a historical voice of its own. In particular, one ignores that the novel itself offers its own analysis of the social and cultural forces of coercion, as does almost all of Hawthorne's work which focuses on questionable historical genealogies, the tyranny of moral convention, or the self-destructive consequences of (male) self-authorization. In all of these instances, however, there is one major difference to radical readings of the novel: Although Hawthorne shows the tyranny of moral principles, he also insists that they are needed, albeit in a humanized, "liberalized" form. Otherwise, as the Custom House-Preface to *The Scarlet Letter* implies, the result will be a corrupt state of interest group politics which does no longer acknowledge any principles whatsoever. For Hawthorne, a compromise between the claims of the individual and the moral and social order is thus vital. One can either regard this view as "dated" (or, typically liberal), or take the work seriously as a form of cultural commentary with good reasons of its own. In the first case, one can in fact dispense with literature. In the second, it becomes a challenge exactly because it offers a different view and version. If cultural radicalism is not content to act out yet another "power effect," namely the rewriting of *The Scarlet Letter* according to the discursive regime of expressive individualism, it would thus have to interpret the novel not only

33 Examples are provided by the studies of Davidson, Brodhead, Reynolds, or Buell that surpass liberal studies of the 19th century in their wealth of historical information and contextualization.

34 See, for example, Hewitt's reference to an aspect of consensus which Bercovitch seems to ignore: "Whether or not Mead was correct in his prediction about the direction of human evolution, his microscopic thinking seems sound: one way of achieving the integration of people who are economically and morally in conflict is by acts of imagination in which they perceive the common ground that makes them alike rather than the matters on which they disagree." *Dilemmas of the American Self*, 208.

on the basis of its own radical convictions but also take it seriously as a challenge to these convictions.

If the radical view of literature is parasitic in the sense that it has no explanation of its own on how the art of power is related to the power of art, then we must go back to the liberal view, that is, to a view of literature as an expression of human potential. If the radical analysis of the subtle power and hierarchizing effects of language and literature appear convincing, on the other hand, then we must add an awareness of the regulatory and disciplinary effects of that kind of human potential. However, if it does not appear sufficient to limit the interpretation of literature to an analysis of its power effects, because such an exclusive emphasis erases fiction's transgressive potential for creative boundary-crossing, then the task would seem to set literature's potential for exploration and experimentation in relation to its potential for "containment" and to trace the interaction between these two functions of fiction. Clearly, containment restrains, but it is also, in a very elementary sense, necessary for the creation of society and identity and, thus, provides a necessary precondition for an extension and liberation of the self. Such "boundary-crossing," on the other hand, inevitably takes the transgressive energies of the self in a certain direction and thereby also channels and contains them.

The current cultural radicalism is not willing to admit this dialectical dependence because it argues exclusively from the point of view of individual liberation from which containment can only appear as a barrier to the self. There are, it seems to me, two options available at this point: One is to defend this position at all cost and to remain trapped in the endless reenactment of a radical critique that can only treat literature as a political allegory of co-optation, coercion, and containment. The other choice lies in addressing also the social side of the self, that is, its dependence on containment. For this project, literature, as a supreme articulation of individual desire and self-empowerment, and, at the same time, as a supreme medium of cultural socialization through aesthetic effects, provides an exemplary object of study and an overwhelming wealth of material. In that sense, literature continues to matter a lot.

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