A Political Criticism Without Politics

Evan Carton and Gerald Graff, "Criticism Since 1940," The Cambridge History of American Literature, edited by Saucvan 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, which contains seven lengthy chapters on the New Criticism, the emergence of academic criticism after World War II, the "nationalizing of the New Criticism," the development of the myth and symbol schools, American literature in the Frankfurt School, Marxist cultural criticism, and poststructuralism, a chapter on the political potential of deconstruction, with an aside on the Frankenstein monster and Marxian 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 American literature in the New 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 not 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 "materialist" criticism there is a detailed explanation of French feminist literary theory, but no demonstration of its influence on reinterpretating the work of major female American authors. Instead, one finds a layout 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 poststructuralism, 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 "race" and literature. "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 discussions concerning 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 Saucvan Bercovitch is dealt with only in a few scattered sentences (a fate shared by G. Thomas Tansill 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 following sweeping indictment of the criticism of the Fifties: "Indeed, few scholars of that time hesitated to argue that the American work was 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 cultural criticism nor of that of any other ethnic group! Although there is a fairly extended discussion of postcolonial criticism, there is no reference to American debates on multiculturalism, let alone the only critical study of American popular culture mentioned is Andrew Ross' No Respect. The canon debates are mentioned several times in the context of literary history, but there is no indication that, since this text is part of a history of American literature, I had expected a book on the American debates on multiculturalism. In the chapter on "materialist" criticism a rational and "responsible" account of some long-cherished radical sectarian criticisms, their major project to give a politically oriented criticism a rational and "responsible" shape. The major line of defense of 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 and "media detractors," they have also set themselves the task of 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, hermeneutical theory, phenomenological criticism, reception theory, pragmatist approaches, ethnographic criticism or Freudian psychoanalysis. In the chapter on deconstruction, the Yale critics are said to have "invented" 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 the book would 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 aim of The Cambridge History of American Literature, proudly claim to have put great emphasis on disensus. But it is a disensus 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 nature 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 orthodoxy to critical scrutiny. It seems to be their major project to give a politically oriented criticism a rational and "responsible" shape. 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gers that a political oriented criticism of today is blamed for is something that academicians like to avoid. Meyer Spacks' claim that "contemporary how, of validity" (412-13). Consequently, "con­
structivists" or antifoundationalist theory need not delegitimate all claims to empirical knowl­
dge or practical agency" (429).

However, deconstruction appears to hold more oppositional potential for the authors than to a currently influential forms of histo­
ricit and materialist criticism and antifounda­
definition of ideology, e.g. leads to the "per­
sistent problem" that this position "leaves no place for understanding knowledge and thereby for political criticism itself" (400). A major problem not only of his approach is "to over­
state the uniformity of ideology" (411). But, "statistical showing of the contexts in which ide­
ology 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 "ob­
jectives and essentialist modes of thought with political conservativism" (413). Historically, "es­
sentialist 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 aes­
thetic value is a self-contained and immutable textual property, they have been less self-criti­
cial of their own attributions of political value to texts" (422). In its "self-deceptive presen­
tism" (427), "some new historicism has ad­
vanced a totalizing view of history that, in its quest to improve society, and its projection of a generalized 'postmodern condition upon the past, undoes any meaningful historicalism" (427). 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 adding an instance of the theoretical necessity and perhaps even the practical possibility of a socialist or other alter­
native to dominant capitalism. As a result, re­
sistance or subversion risks becoming possibly as pervasive and as unmeasurable as the power it opposes. . . . A point is soon reached which is almost necessarily submerged or denied for its vulnerability to cooperation, for there is always some discursive frame of reference that will support either de­
description" (435).

In this ongoing critique, the main criterion is that of the possible political effects of con­
temporary 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 decon­
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ates" (428). Indeed, "the notion that deconstructivists, or those who make such claims" (368-69). Occa­
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