VINCENT B. LEITCH

AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM

FROM THE 30s TO THE 80s

American Literary Criticism
from the Thirties to the Eighties

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PREFACE

IN THE 1880s departments of literary study first began to appear in leading American universities. Within a generation multifaceted struggles were under way between advocates of an elitist, literary aesthetic and advocates of a somewhat populist viewpoint emphasizing the sociological foundations of poetic art. In the 1930s the antagonistic dialogue between conservative New Critics and Marxist literary theorists constituted an especially strong form of this struggle, which manifested itself in other vigorous forms into the 1980s, as, for example, in the conflict during this decade between Yale School deconstructors and leftist proponents of cultural studies. American literary criticism between the 1930s and 1980s exhibited continuous struggles between various "formalistic" schools of criticism devoted to linguistic, ontological, and epistemological habits of mind and certain "cultural" movements committed to sociological, psychological, and political modes of thinking. On one side of this divide stood New Criticism, the Chicago School, phenomenological criticism, hermeneutics, structuralism, and deconstruction. On the other side were Marxist criticism, the New York Intellectuals, myth criticism, existential criticism, reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and the Black Aesthetic movement. At their worst these two contending wings of academic literary criticism fostered characteristic disorders of reading: one tended to discount the reader and aggrandize the text whereas the other tended to ennoble the reader and dominate the text. One conceived of the literary work as a miraculous, semi-autonomous aesthetic artifact and the other conceptualized literature as a valuable cultural production grounded in anthropological, economic, social, and political history. Characteristically, one veered toward liberal and conservative political views and the other toward leftist and left-liberal perspectives. In the final analysis, however, this large-scale dialectic or allegorical division tells us remarkably little about the detailed *history* of American literary criticism between the 1930s and 1980s.

Following the struggles of the 1930s, the New Criticism gained and maintained ascendancy for almost two decades over the academic discipline of English and American literary studies, flanked on one side by relatively isolated literary historians, biographers, and Myth Critics and on the other by increasingly marginalized literary journalists, linguists, textual bibliographers, and assorted radicals and mavericks. Significantly, the late 1950s and the 1960s witnessed a reversal: myth criticism matured and a wave of Continental philosophy swept the discipline, both weakening the hold of an already flagging formalist crticism. Among the imported schools and movements derived from European philosophical traditions were existentialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, and Neo-Marxism. In addition, the rise of certain indigenous schools and movements, notably reader-response criticism, feminism, Black Aesthetics, and new left Marxism contributed to the decline of New Criticism. Little by little, contemporary commentators characterized this whole historical shift as the superseding of modernism by postmodernism, which, though provocative, offers inadequate explanation.

After the early 1930s numerous literary critics in America started to move "beyond humanism" in three different ways. First, the Marxists, New Critics, Chicago Critics, and the New York Intellectuals dismissed the New Humanism of Irving Babbitt, Norman Foerster, Paul Elmer More, and Stuart Sherman. Propounded during the teens and twenties, Neo-Humanist doctrine struck leftist cultural critics as a reactionary amalgamation of aristocratic, moralistic, and religious ideas. At the same time more conservative formalist critics rejected Neo-Humanism because it relied on ethical criteria for aesthetic evaluation, confounded religion and art, and dismissed modern and experimental literature. Second, leading academic literary critics after the twenties rarely displayed any deep-seated attachment to ancient Greek and Roman literature. This signaled a significant erosion of foundations in classical learning and the undermining of long-standing intellectual traditions stemming from Renaissance humanism. With few exceptions, leading American critics were primarily preoccupied with post-Renaissance vernacular literature. However ambiguously, the values associated with classical humanism were subjected to more or less continuous interrogation from the 1880s and afterwards. Third, literary critics in growing numbers between the 1930s and 1980s mounted assaults against humanism's transcendental stance toward existence and its patriarchal and Caucasian domination of culture. Indeed, the "death of man" widely pro-

claimed in the 1960s culminated in explicit antihumanistic thinking, characterizing the founding premises of structuralism, deconstruction, feminism, Black Aesthetics, and much contemporary leftist criticism. Construed as a religious, cultural, and political philosophy perpetuated for centuries by white European male aristocrats, "humanism" seemed a repugnant creed for increasing numbers of American literary critics. Depending on the emphasis, the move "beyond humanism" came to signify the progressive destruction of the centrality of European aristocratic values, of classical learning, of religious foundations, of patriarchal hegemony, of "logocentric" theories of literature, and of self-effacing devotional modes of interpretation. This historical struggle occasioned considerable losses and gains, which critical schools and movements demonstrated in complex and special ways, as this history documents in detail. But to thematize the complicated developments in modern American literary criticism as an epochal move "beyond humanism" is to engage in a considerable simplification of history.

While a number of historical accounts of contemporary American literary criticism exist, there is no history covering the six decades from the thirties to the eighties. Of the four recent texts in this area, Grant Webster's *The Republic of Letters* (1979) stops at the early 1960s and limits its inquiry to two major schools; Arnold Goldsmith's *American Literary Criticism 1905–1965* (1979) also ends at the early 1960s and leaves out the New York Intellectuals, the phenomenologists, and the existentialists; Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (1980) confines its investigation to the period from 1957 to 1977; and René Wellek's *American Criticism, 1900–1950* (1986)—the sixth volume of his *A History of Modern Criticism* (1955–86)—offers summary treatments of the Marxists, Chicago Critics, and New York Intellectuals. While the period preceding the 1930s is fairly well covered, the subsequent six decades in American criticism lack comprehensive historical documentation. Particularly scanted in recent histories are important contributions from feminists, Black Aestheticians, and Leftist Critics of the Space Age.

This book provides accounts of thirteen American critical schools and movements of the period from the early 1930s to the mid-1980s. Each chapter presents a history of a specific school or movement, covering pertinent social and cultural backgrounds, main figures and texts, key philosophical and critical theories and practices, and significant relations with allied and antagonistic contemporaneous movements both here and

abroad. For each school the text examines pedagogical programs, ideological commitments, and processes of institutional emergence, formation, and influence.

In writing the history of modern American academic literary criticism, I follow many of my predecessors by employing the "schools and movements" method of organization. On the one hand, the "schools and movements" approach lends coherence to the works of the seventy-five or so critics treated here, which otherwise is difficult to obtain. On the other hand, this pragmatic method has the added advantage of dividing chapters into discrete histories. Thus, historical differences are not homogenized by larger, overarching or monistic patterns of cultural evolution, teleology, continuity, unity, devolution, or cyclicality. One inevitable disadvantage, however, is that independent figures appear only in marginal roles. Displaced from this history are the individual careers of such critics as René Girard, Hugh Kenner, Harry Levin, Lewis Mumford, Morse Peckham, and Helen Vendler, and such important poet-critics as Donald Hall, Richard Howard, Randall Jarrell, Charles Olson, and Wallace Stevens. The insights provided by individual critics who do not ally themselves with theoretical shifts are invaluable and innumerable. But the history of practical criticism and individual theoretical insights is not my subject. One assimilates it in studying the literature of particular times and places; it does not lend itself to comprehensive consideration outside this context. I console myself with the knowledge that in most cases these literary intellectuals get careful consideration in essays and books on their works and that many will be treated in the forthcoming *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Modern American Critics,* edited by Gregory Jay for the Gale Research Company.

In past studies, one liability of the "schools and movements" approach has been the oversimplification of core beliefs, commitments, and practices. To mitigate this tendency, I initiate investigations of the historically marginal and contradictory forces and elements that structure each movement. For example, related European critics and groups, internal disputes and struggles, historical precursors, contributions from minor figures, inner transformations, and external challenges and conflicts are treated so as to preserve the rich heterogeneity present within the boundaries of specific schools and movements. More important, the conventional "schools and movements" method of organization is supplemented here with a mode of institutional analysis that retrieves the formative roles played by journals, conferences, university presses, granting agencies, research institutes, professional organizations, educational foundations, pedagogical programs,

and the creations of new fields and subdisciplines (for instance, Comparative Literature, American Studies, Semiotics, Narratology, Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, "Theory," and Cultural Studies). This attention to institutional matters broadens and complicates the concept of school and of movement through more material modes of historical analysis.

Practiced in America for eight decades, psychological criticism constitutes a type of criticism rather than a school or movement. While this study offers no chapter on psychological criticism, it in fact devotes more discussion to its pervasive presence than to any one school or movement. In particular, much of the text concerns itself with the controversial legacies of Freud, Jung, and Lacan.

I shall conclude by listing areas for future detailed investigation. Worthy of inquiry are the linkages between the history of literary criticism and the histories of scholarship, of literary journalism, of the immigration of literary intellectuals, of translations, of textual bibliography, of literary history, of pedagogy, of libraries, of publishers, of book stores, and of the university. In the case of the university, especially in the period after World War II, topics deserving extended consideration directly relevant to the history of literary criticism include the proliferation of graduate literature programs, the emerging definitions of "literary research," the pressures upon critics of "professionalism," the specifications of criteria and credentials for tenure and for advancement, the formations of composition and creative writing as subdisciplines, the creation of learning skills and writing centers, the effects of departmental expansions and retrenchments on literary canons and on course offerings, the prevailing organization of knowledge into departmental units, and the general decline of higher education and of literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s. One final topic warranting special scrutiny is the complex role of the federal and state governments in establishing and administering endowment funds, research guidelines, affirmative action goals, and support for libraries, institutes, publications, translations, new programs, conferences, and foreign-language study. My premise here, as throughout the text, is that the history of criticism is not separable from economic, social, political, cultural, and institutional history.

March 1986 V.B.L.

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CHAPTER ONE

Marxist Criticism in the 1930s

FOR THE CONTEMPORARY historian of literary theory and criticism in America perhaps what most distinguishes the decade of the 1930s is the formation of four significant groups: the Marxists, the New Critics, the Chicago Critics, and the New York Intellectuals. Needless to say, the histories of these schools lead backward to earlier times and forward to later years; and, too, the development of each movement links up with wider social forces and analogous groups in other places. While the emergence of heterogeneous and competing schools of criticism clearly calls for differentiated historical analyses, the field of economic, political, and intellectual forces of the 1930s serves as a common, however fragmented and complex, ground of development. The "Great Depression" nicknames the numerous socioeconomic phenomena and cultural problems that marked American history in the 1930s.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

During the frenetic month of the "Stock Market Crash" in October 1929 the value of stocks on the New York Exchange plummeted thirty-seven percent. For the next dozen years America remained in a severe economic depression. At a high of 452 in September 1929, the stock average of the *New York Times* bottomed at 52 in July 1932. The personal income of Americans declined by more than fifty percent between 1929 and 1932. Unemployment reached roughly twenty-five percent in 1932 with 13 million people out of work. Whereas wheat earned $2.16 a bushel in 1919, it sank to thirty-eight cents in 1932. For the same dates, cotton peaked at nearly forty-two cents and bottomed at about five cents per pound. Approximately one million farms were lost to mortgage holders between 1930 and 1934. Traditional agrarian modes of existence were in serious jeopardy throughout the Depression. When Franklin D. Roosevelt took office as

president in March 1933, four-fifths of the nation's banks were closed: the monetary system was near ruin. In the recent assessment of one moderate historian: "The crash had revealed the fundamental business of the country to be unsound. Most harmful was the ability of business to maintain prices and take profits while holding down wages . . . with the result that about one-third of the personal income went to only 5 percent of the population."[1]

The accumulation of capital and its unbalanced distribution during the 1920s resulted from swollen profits, huge dividends, and massive tax savings to the wealthy. The consequent large money supply created an era of feverish speculation. At the same time excessive savings led to a decline in demand. What characterized the economy was, on the one hand, low wages, high prices, capital concentration and monopoly and, on the other hand, weak enforcement of antitrust regulations and widespread suspicion of collective bargaining by labor unions. In short, governmental mechanisms to balance economic inequalities were ineffective or nonexistent.

The "New Deal" of Franklin Roosevelt sought to remedy the failures of governmental policies, charting a course between the excesses of laissez-faire and socialist economics. In a sense, the New Deal of the 1930s installed a welfare state upon a capitalist foundation. In 1935, for example, Roosevelt fostered the now landmark Social Security Act, the National Labor Relations Act, the Works Progress Administration, and the Revenue Act. The latter Act, to cite some specifics, raised surtaxes on income over $50,000, imposed graduated taxes on incomes over five million dollars (up to a seventy-five percent maximum rate), created an excess profits tax on corporate earnings, and established estate and gift taxes. Despite such reforms, Roosevelt himself memorably admitted in his Second Inaugural Address (1937): "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." Throughout the 1930s and into World War II such conditions persisted.

SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM IN AMERICA

Given the ruinous economic conditions of the Great Depression, it was not surprising that Marxist thought became a vital force during the 1930s in America. But we can go back half a century into the American past and find evidence of a growing socialist movement. In 1877 the Socialist Labor Party was formed, later came the Socialist Democratic Party in 1897, the Socialist Party of America in 1901, and the Industrial Workers of the World

(the "Wobblies") in 1905. American voters had a socialist option in the presidential elections of 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, and 1920. In the election of 1912, for example, Eugene V. Debs received 900,000 ballots—six percent of the popular vote. The same year thirty-three cities had socialist mayors. At the time of the 1932 election the socialist Normal Thomas gained 900,000 votes and the communist William Z. Foster got 103,000. With a million voters in the early part of the twentieth century, Marxist-inspired movements in American constituted an active, if marginal, political force.

Left wingers departed the Socialist Party in 1919 to establish the Communist and Communist Labor Parties, which were united in 1923. Until the mid-30s, many American communists regarded socialists as dupes and fascists. In these early days the Communist Party of the United States pretty much followed the lead of Moscow. At first a secret organization, the Party became legal in 1923. Until 1935 the Communist Party was a sectarian, ultraleft organization. But between 1935 and 1939, the period of the populist "People's Front," the Party softened its approach, seeking support from liberals of many persuasions, including New Dealers. This dramatic turnabout was inspired by the Communist International. With 7,000 members at the start of the 1930s, the party attained a membership of 75,000 by 1939 and its influence in some circles often exceeded these numbers.[2] Among other things, the Spanish Civil War—like the later Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s—radicalized many Americans, as did the economic depression. While the United States remained neutral in this struggle, the Soviets supported the Spanish Republic against the fascists, earning the admiration of many people. Key intellectuals supported the efforts of the Communist Party during the 1930s—some as members and others as sympathizers ("fellow travelers").

In September 1932 fifty-three artists and scholars, including, among others, Newton Arvin, Malcolm Cowley, Granville Hicks, Sidney Hook, and Edmund Wilson, signed a letter in support of the revolutionary Communist Party and of the presidential candidacy of William Z. Foster. The League of American Writers—a Popular Front group set up in 1935—included such writers as Nelson Algren, Van Wyck Brooks, Erskine Caldwell, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Clifton Fadiman, James T. Farrell, Waldo Frank, Lillian Hellman, Ernest Hemingway, Langston Hughes, Archibald MacLeish, Lewis Mumford, William Saroyan, John Steinbeck, Nathanael West, William Carlos Williams, and Richard Wright.[3] During the 1930s leftist periodicals ranged from the dogmatic *Daily Worker* to the

doctrinaire *New Masses* and from the scholarly *Science & Society* to the literary *Partisan Review*. To be sure, a generation earlier important literary intellectuals had supported socialist programs and works: William Dean Howells, Edward Bellamy, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser, to name just five leading figures. And earlier journals welcomed socialist criticism: *Comrade* (started 1901), *The Masses* (1911), *New Republic* (1914), *The Liberator* (1918), *The Nation* (after liberalization in 1918), and *The Modern Quarterly* (1923). Despite all their internal differences, organized Marxist-inspired groups persisted in America from the late nineteenth century till the mid-twentieth century. Artists, scholars, and intellectuals frequently participated in the various Marxist activities of the day.

While different socialist and communist cadres and parties experienced internal disputes, "red scares" brought outside threats into existence. The first significant scare came during the last days of World War I. Following the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917 and Sedition Act of 1918, many socialists landed in jail: more than a hundred Wobblies were convicted in Chicago for opposing the war and Eugene V. Debs received a twenty-year sentence for statements tending to cause resistance to the draft. (Debs was later pardoned by President Harding.) In 1919 The General Intelligence Division of The Department of Justice started to collect files on radicals. The same year 249 radicals, including Emma Goldman, were deported to Russia without the benefit of court hearings. The next year the New York Legislature expelled five duly elected socialist members. Hysteria against socialists and communists provided the essential backdrop for the judicial sentences in the infamous Sacco-Vanzetti case decided in 1921.

The second significant "red scare" spanned the years from 1947 to 1954; it was the internal counterpart of the external Cold War. In March 1947 President Truman issued an Executive Order requiring all future federal employees to sign a loyalty oath. (Over a four-year period the order affected three million people.) The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which restricted labor unions, called for labor leaders to take oaths that they were not members of the Communist Party. In 1948 Alger Hiss, a prominent citizen, was convicted in a celebrated case over lying about espionage. A more extreme fate befell Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed a few years later for espionage. The McCarron Internal Security Act of 1950 required communist or communist-front organizations to register with the attorney general. Enforcement was put in the hands of the Subversive Activities Control Board. (The Supreme Court ruled in 1965 that this Act was in violation of