

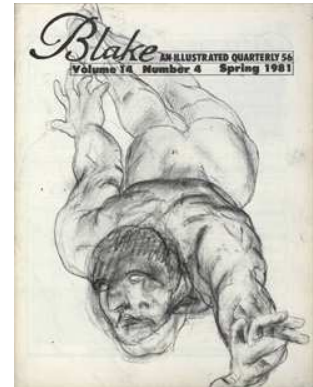
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R E V I E W

Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*

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REVIEWS

After the New Criticism Frank Lentricchia

Frank Lentricchia. **After the New Criticism.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. xiv + 384 pp. \$20.00.

Reviewed by Nelson Hilton.

Franks Lentricchia's study of the last twenty odd years of literary criticism in America, *After the New Criticism*, should be of interest to any reader of Blake who has been idling "within a structure of higher education where fortresslike walls isolate the various areas of humane learning from one another" (pp. 135-36) and who would like to get briefed on the decade's coming title fight. The title, as Humpty-Dumpty explains to Alice, concerns "who is to be master," or, if the reader prefers Obi Wan Kenobi, who is to possess "the force"; and the contenders are the devouring empire of structuralist and poststructuralist criticism, with its annihilating vision of the subject, and Blake, with his prolific, self-annihilated subject. It will be a fitting conclusion (i.e., synthesis into thesis) for a history which begins with "The Place of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*," or really even earlier, since Lentricchia reports that readers of *Fearful Symmetry* know that that book had forecast the whole of [Frye's] literary theory as well as the furious rebirth of interest in a problematic writer, and also that, "Its general critical claims aside, the *Anatomy* gave the Blake revivalists their proper poetics" (p. 4). Lentricchia's opening round is directed against the conception of art in

"apocalyptic humanism" which "reminds us (if ever we needed reminding) of Frye's Blakean commitments" (pp. 96, 23). That conception surfaces again towards the end of the book, in a discussion of Harold Bloom, where Lentricchia notes "the portentous (and nostalgic) first sentence of *The Visionary Company*" that when Blake died, "the firm belief in the autonomy of a poet's imagination died with him" (p. 323). So one may even read Blake into the origin or center (if one for the nonce believes in such things) of Lentricchia's history and enter the lists for his name's sake (*In hoc signes . . .*).

"The difficult term 'history,'" Lentricchia tells us in his Preface, "plays a decisive role" in his argument, which has as one fundamental concern the exploration and critique of the "subtle denial of history" he finds in "vast areas of contemporary criticism." The thrust of this concern appears in the titles of chapters four and five--the book's most significant sections, and, according to the Preface, the ones which present the author's perspective most overtly--"uncovering History and the Reader: Structuralism," and "History or the Abyss: Poststructuralism." Lentricchia opposes "conceptions of a 'history' which would generate itself as a unity and a totality while resisting

forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation, and difference . . . which would deny 'histories'" (p. xiv). So it would seem we are offered a "histories of criticism," and indeed the first half of the book--"A Critical Thematics, 1957-77"--also devotes chapters to Frye, "Versions of Existentialism," and "Versions of Phenomenology." There is, however, a consistent base perspective worked up out of early Barthes, Jameson, Said, Foucault, and, ostensibly, non-Yale-co-opted Derrida (Lentricchia claims "no originality" [p. xi]) which continually directs us to acknowledge "worldly determinates," "the real state of sublunary nature," "historical life," "ensnaring relations," "enormous constraints," the "ineffaceable historicity of discourse": "the force that defines and appropriates tradition and knowledge and encloses our cognitive reach within their boundaries" (pp. 10, 24, 26, 100, 143, 175, 154). We seem to glimpse this ground in the following discussion of Heidegger's existentialism, which, says Lentricchia, "is an escape from the real implications of his master metaphor of the world as *workshop*. For the metaphor demands that the world be placed not in an existential context but within a frame of economic and political power." This statement could be pressed, to follow a common Lentricchian strategy, to an apparent contradiction (ergo, the reader of the book will understand, cognitive nullity): how can the world be placed within one frame? and how do economic and political power dictate a situation where metaphors make demands? As for Heidegger, his metaphoric failure is another indication that his "philosophy is fundamentally nostalgic and world-weary"--an improvement, at least, over Frye's "thoroughly despairing and alienated understanding of the possibilities of historical life" (pp. 100, 26).

Lentricchia offers a wonderful mine of summaries and recapitulations which in themselves make his book useful and deserving of our thanks. But since *After the New Criticism* will stand or fall according to the reader's response to the conception of history that Lentricchia urges not only for the practice of literary history, but for literary criticism as well, that conception deserves further consideration. In particular, a reader of this journal would want to ask, how would Lentricchia benefit the study of Blake? We are told of "the powerful constitutive forces of the historical process (political and economic contexts, class differences, and so on)" that Culler's idea of the reader (in *Structuralist Poetics*) "somehow . . . blocked out," and we are offered for ratification Saussure's situation of "discourse, literary and otherwise, in its true home in human history" and the concomitant "recognition of the powerlessness of the individual subject, his passive and repressed status . . . and . . . of the vast and frightening force of human collectives to seize discourse for the ends of power" (pp. 111, 119-20). We are asked to approve Lentricchia's admiration for the early work of Barthes and its conclusion that "'literary history is possible only if it becomes sociological'" but to reject the "intertextuality or Writing" of the later Barthes as solipsistic fantasies of "a seeker of pleasure in isolation from social, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of selfhood" (p.

145). For the student of Blake, a particularly moving and gripping example of the power of the Foucaultian "discursive formation" to control what is "'within the truth' (*dans le vrai*)" is offered by Lentricchia's remarks on Frost:

. . . if one would not write poetry in a void as did Robert Frost (when he achieved magazine publication only five times between 1895 and 1912, a period during which he wrote a number of poems later acclaimed), then one had better assent to the rules of discursive policy by placing oneself within the confines of those systems that determine biological or poetic truth for one's time. To refuse to conform is to accept a place, whether one intends to or not, alongside society's more dramatically visible outcasts: the criminals, the insane, racial minorities, and the indigent, who are brutally and unhesitatingly subjected to the power that divides and silences. (p. 197)

Well, Lentricchia would no doubt reprove our presumption, but perhaps we should "commit ourselves to this void, and see whether providence is here also" (*MHH* 17).¹ It is certainly a wonderful irony (unintended or not) to read in this book, published by the University of Chicago Press, that "to be critically *dans le vrai* in 1980 is to speak under the imprimatur of certain preferred presses and journals" (p. 198).² This sniping could be continued at length to show how Lentricchia wishes to replace what we might call imagination with the pre-pleasure-seeking Barthes' conception of semiological systems "put into operation, put into force *by force*" (p. 132). But for all this, we might remember (as Lentricchia never does) even the supremely privileged Derrida's observation that "the force of the work, the force of genius, the force, too, of that which engenders in general . . . is the proper object of literary criticism."³ Finally, on the force of Lentricchia's own historiography, we might note his remark that Foucault's "naked statement of his goals as a historian is not evidence of what could be (and has been) termed old-fashioned historicist naiveté, but of a passionate belief that genuine history writing is not only possible, but is *made possible* by Derrida's revision of traditionalist thought in general and of structuralism in particular" (p. 191, Lentricchia's emphasis again). Seeing as how Foucault is cited only in translation (indeed, *The History of Sexuality* seems to have arrived just in time to dominate the "Afterword"), Lentricchia was perhaps unaware of Foucault's "passionate" and stinging criticism of Derrida and his "system" appended to the second edition of *Histoire de la folie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972). The Derridean "revision of traditionalist thought" that Foucault sees is "a petty pedagogy that has been powerfully determined by history, which. . . . teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text. . . . A pedagogy which . . . gives to the voice of the master-teacher that unlimited sovereignty which authorizes its unending retelling of the text."⁴

"Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"--"an elegant attack on the traditionalist position in general" (p. 160)--is the

most cited of Derrida's works in *After the New Criticism*. As Lentricchia often reminds us, that warhorse (now fourteen years old!) introduced "the structurality of structure" and the concept of "the center . . . the creation of the 'force of desire.'" In something like an ultimate act of wish-fulfillment, desire attempts to establish the center beyond fictive status as objective reality." Lentricchia adds, "The impact of Derrida on the traditionalist position can be measured most precisely, I think, by his singular success in stirring up that old unmasterable anxiety about the center" (p. 165). Lentricchia rides these concepts far: through Sartre, through Stevens, through "systems of last-ditch humanism" (p. 33), but most effectively when he introduces a quotation from *Anatomy of Criticism* to show "How uncannily Frye anticipates and, then, crucially rejects" the future Derridean position: "Criticism as knowledge . . . recognizes the fact that there *is* a center of the order of words. Unless there is such a center, there is nothing to prevent the analogies supplied by convention and genre from being an endless series of free associations . . . never creating a real structure" (p. 14). Frye's conception of human desire, Lentricchia notes, "causes form or structure to come into being while remaining itself unconditioned by law"; it is "the sure ground, the guarantee of Frye's ultimate humanism" (p. 15). "Over and over," Lentricchia tells us that Frye tells us, "the literary universe is a representation not of the way things are, but of the ways of human desire" (p. 19). It would be inappropriate to ask Lentricchia what he would do with Blake's principle that "The desire of Man being Infinite the possession is Infinite & himself Infinite" (*NNRB*), but we can remark the striking absence from *After the New Criticism* of any concern for one who has for the last decade presented desire in another perception to the American critical scene, Jacques Lacan (mentioned only once, in passing).

The second, ante-climactic part of *After the New Criticism* is devoted to "The American Scene: Four Exemplary Careers." The "subjects" are "Murray Krieger's Last Romanticism," "E. D. Hirsch: The Hermeneutics of Innocence," "Paul de Man: The Rhetoric of Authority," and "Harold Bloom: The Spirit of Revenge." One may ponder the fact that two of these critics grappled with Blake in books at the early state of their careers, and a third is reported to have remarked that "Blake was a de-structor before deconstructionism." Despite some reservations about a "retrograde and anti-intellectual . . . desire . . . to be an original theorist," Lentricchia is most sympathetic to that revengeful spirit, Harold Bloom. And early in his discussion it is remarkable to see Lentricchia become fixated on the idea of "firm belief" which appears in the opening line of *The Visionary Company* (cited above, first paragraph). After quoting the line, Lentricchia carps, "Yet . . . only a few sentences after speaking of Blake's 'firm belief in the autonomy of a poet's imagination,' [Bloom] writes

of skepticism and discontinuity" (p. 323). Nonetheless, "Bloom's vacillations aside, what is essential to his romantic line is a full commitment to the mythopoetic imagination. It is a commitment earned (Blake's 'firm belief') only because it takes irony into account and transcends it; a commitment with large extrapoetic sources and implications" (p. 323). Lentricchia does not dwell on the power of his own insight here, but begins the following paragraph with: "Still, the notion of 'firm belief' is a redundant phrase which may, and in this instance does, betray subversive perceptions" (p. 324). The student of Blake realizes with a shock that because of Bloom's indirect reference Lentricchia evidently considers "firm belief" to be one of Bloom's "Blakean indulgences," a quality he merely "celebrates in Blake" (pp. 343, 325). It is an intriguing comment on influence and anxiety that, through Bloom, Blake has elicited such attention.

There can, I think, be little doubt as to the absolute value of the work of the two men Lentricchia urges that we "return to," Derrida and Foucault (in that order, it seems). And few will question Lentricchia's understanding of their sense that they, and we, "are at the end of an era" (p. 208). Yet it is a curiously "undecidable" phenomenon that, in America, the same "discursive formation" that has published Lentricchia, prompted this review, translated Foucault, and summoned Derrida to Yale and California to lecture in English has also ever more strongly brought forward the figure/presence/texts/study of William Blake.

Then I asked: does a firm persuasion that a thing is so, make it so? He replied. All poets believe that it does, & in ages of imagination this firm persuasion removed mountains; but many are not capable of a firm persuasion of any thing. (*MHH* 12)

¹ On the question of Blake in the void, see Morris Eaves, "Romantic Expressive Theory and Blake's Idea of the Audience," *PMLA*, 95 (Oct. 1980), 784-801; on Blake and Foucault, see Daniel Stempel, "Blake, Foucault, and the Classical Episteme," forthcoming in *PMLA*.

² Doubly ironic (unintended or not) because of Lentricchia's fascination with the significance of imprimatur: "[Joseph] Conrad's perception will not explain why the MLA granted its imprimatur to Culler" (i.e., the James Russell Lowell Prize for *Structuralist Poetics*), or, to realize that Poulet and phenomenology had caught on in the late sixties, "we need only recall the imprimatur of the Harvard University Press on Sarah Lawall's exposition, *Critics of Consciousness* (1968)" (pp. 104, 64).

³ Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification," in *Writing and Difference*, trans., intro., add. notes, Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 20.

⁴ The original reads, ". . . je dirai que c'est une petite pédagogie historiquement bien déterminée. . . . Pédagogie qui enseigne à l'élève qu'il n'y a rien hors du texte. . . . Pédagogie qui . . . donne à la voix des maîtres cette souveraineté sans limite qui lui permet indéfiniment de redire le texte" (p. 602).