Generic and Doctrinal Politics in the Proletarian Bildungsroman

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My topic in this essay is the relationship between form and politics in the left-wing fiction produced in the United States during the Depression. In particular, I wish to examine the usability of the form of the bildungsroman for revolutionary political ends. Many Depression-era writers turned to the developing form of the "collective" novel, as well as to the testimonial form of the fictional autobiography, which was closely tied to the worker-authored "sketch" celebrated in the Soviet Union (Foley). But large numbers of left-wing novelists opted for what critics of the time called "conversion plots" and wrote what were essentially proletarian bildungsromans—accounts of the process whereby a non-class-conscious worker develops into a seasoned and committed fighter for the proletariat. These writers were thus attempting to adapt to radical ends a genre that is often seen as the most typically bourgeois of novelistic modes.

What are the consequences and implications of this choice? Did the "conversion plot" serve proletarian writers well, supplying—as Georg Lukács would argue—a generic model that would dialectically embody the broad contradictions of history in a single concrete instance? Or did the use of the bildungsroman format doom these writers in advance by committing them to an irre-
forms and techniques must be hammered out to express the fresh substance, the faster tempos and rhythms of the new world order" ("Editorial" 3). Such novels as Dos Passos's USA trilogy, William Rollins's The Shadow Before, and Clara Weatherwax's prize-winning Marching! Marching!—all texts experimenting with innovative styles and structures designed to convey both conflict and totality—were greeted with enthusiasm in the left press (see Schneider, Adler, Bashe). But the literary left never theorized what was "experimental" about these texts or writers or held them up as models. In general, Marxist critics evinced little disquietude that inherited novelistic forms might come into the revolutionary camp trailing the mists of bourgeois ideology. When reviewers found fault with texts written in classically realistic modes—for instance, Grace Lumpkin's To Make My Bread, Fielding Burke's Call Home the Heart, Jack Conroy's A World to Win—they rarely developed a theoretical argument relating politics to genre (see Nadir, Jerome, Le Sueur). Granville Hicks, literary editor of the New Masses in the proletarian period, wrote a series of articles called "Revolution and the Novel" in which he argued that the novel form "lends itself to many purposes and all points of view." Even though the novel "has closely corresponded to the rise of the bourgeoisie and has fully expressed . . . the mind of the bourgeoisie," he argued, "it cannot be limited to one class" (19). In Hicks's view, proletarian novelists who opted for the form of the "biographical" novel ran no risk of reproducing bourgeois conceptions of subjectivity or experience.

Indeed, while 1930s Marxists reacted positively to literary experimentation, they generally discouraged writers from using techniques that ruptured narrative illusion in order to call direct attention to political doctrine. Depression-era left-wing criticism is replete with approving references to texts that "weave" or "blend" politics into the tale of a character's attainment of class-consciousness. Contrary to the stereotype of the Communist critical commissar bludgeoning novelists into writing party propaganda, the typical 1930s Marxist critic endorsed an aesthetic of seamless transparency, denigrating texts that engaged in "preaching," "editorializing," or "sloganeering." Even though the critics urged writers to create
texts that would be weapons in the class struggle, instilling revolutionary optimism and representing the “way out” from the miseries of capitalism, they chastised novelists who produced “the revolutionary equivalent of the Cinderella formula” (Calmer 17). “Tendentiousness” (a concept taking in a grab bag of rhetorical strategies and devices, from hectoring narrators to pontificating mentors to implausible “conversion” plots) was branded by “Stalinists” and “Trotskyists” alike as “leftist” (see Murphy, Foley). The debates over documentarism, expressionism, and realism that filled the pages of Soviet and German left-wing journals were never fought out on U.S. soil. Indeed, both Brecht and Lukács were relatively unknown to the American cultural left. But insofar as their antipathy to “leftism” led them to embrace a doctrine of showing rather than telling—a kind of left Jamesianism—the American Marxists embraced, if only by default, an essentially Lukácsian conception of realism.¹

American Marxists of the 1930s would thus have been shocked if they were reincarnated as flies on the wall of a typical 1980s MLA session on the politics of novelistic realism. For the fundamental assumption guiding much—if not all—postmodernist discussion of the classical modes of realism is that they reproduce and support dominant ideology. As distilled in the work of two exemplary theorists, Catherine Belsey and Lennard J. Davis, the postmodernist critique of realism makes three main points. First, realism privileges individual psychology and individual experience. Protagonists presumably serve as synecdoches for their time and place: the intensive totalities projected through the stories of their individual destinies embody in microcosm the extensive totalities of their social worlds. But these protagonists usually turn out to possess intrinsic qualities of “character” that are simply “revealed” through experience: in Catherine Belsey’s formulation, “character, unified and coherent, is the source of action” (73). In the classic bildungsroman, as Lennard J. Davis puts it, “the idea that the subject might be formed from social forces and that change might have to come about through social change is by and large absent” (119). Protagonists are routinely portrayed as autonomous moral agents, who end up either “reconciled to” or “pitted against” the social order. Second, realism purports to consider conflicting value systems, but at base it cannot tolerate contradiction. In particular, narrative closure operates as an ideological mechanism guaranteeing that disturbing issues are laid to rest and that competing discourses are subordinated to the text’s hegemonic discourse through narrative “inevitability.” “The logic of [the structure of classic realism],” Belsey notes, “precludes the possibility of leaving the reader simply to confront the contradictions which the text may have defined” (82). Third, realism co-opts readers into agreement by positioning them as “always already” in concurrence with the politics shaping the narrative. The technique of free indirect discourse (for example, “she came to see that . . .”) epitomizes realism’s co-optative strategy. A character “realizes” the truth which guides the novel, and to which the reader, in collaboration with the narrator, has been privy all along. The reader is thus, in the Althusserian sense, “interpellated” as what Stephen Heath calls “the unified and unifying subject of [the text’s] vision” (85).

The implications of this argument for the proletarian novel should be apparent. The logic of the postmodernist critique of realism is that, hard as they might have tried to make realism serve the ends of a revolutionary politics, the proletarian novelists were headed for failure by their adherence to an intrinsically conservative and repressive mode of writing. The line of political argument explicitly urged in a text—the necessity for militant participation in class struggle, the falsity of petty bourgeois aspirations, even the desirability of communism as an alternative to capitalism—cannot move the reader leftward if it is embedded in a discursive mode premised upon a bourgeois epistemology and bourgeois assumptions about selfhood. The very posture of political certainty encouraged by realistic form produces an effect of ideological closure; if a text wishes to query the existing order of things in a thoroughly-going way, it must instead adopt what Belsey calls an “interrogative” form, one that decents all putatively authoritative expressions of politics. Despite its posture of confronting and unmasking reactionary idealisms with an unflinching portrayal of “what is,”
the argument goes, realism turns out to be not an ally but an antagonist to the project of literary radicalism. However left-wing their intentions, proletarian writers who worked in the form of the realistic novel ended up confirming the very world order that they originally set out to oppose.

Not all commentators—on proletarian fiction in particular or on the novel in general—concede that realistic form presupposes naïve empiricism or authoritarian control (e.g. Levine). Some critics argue that the novel is in fact uniquely empowered to articulate oppositional discourses. For example, feminist critic Diane Price Herndl, citing Bakhtin's doctrine of novelistic heteroglossia, argues that the novel is historically a "feminine genre" and that "[n]ovelistic discourse achieves a state of non-definability, of otherness, of freedom from hierarchy" (13). Peter Hitchcock, also invoking Bakhtin in his formulation of the "dialogism of the oppressed," writes that "[w]hat is important in theorizing working-class fiction is not form for form's sake, but the struggles over form. ... The interrogative text of which Belsey writes may be antirealist in the classic sense, but nevertheless we should entertain the possibility that such a text may still be realist" (97). Carole Snee takes issue with the "dominant critical practice which argues that because the realist novel has been concerned historically with the individual, and its narrative structures operate through one—or a series of—individual consciousnesses, its philosophy is always essentially liberal." On the contrary: the realistic novel "does not simply at best reveal and interrogate the dominant, unstated ideology, or exist uncritically within it, but can also incorporate a conscious ideological or class perspective, which in itself undercuts the ideological parameters of the genre"—that is, goes against the generic political grain. Klaus, discussing the difficulties posed by the bildungsroman form to socialist writers, notes that the focus on a central hero runs the risk of effacing "the central fact of the class struggle to the lives of individuals" (Literature of Labor 127). In short, most present-day advocates of the continuing viability of novelistic realism posit a tension between form and idea: even if a text's doctrinal content may pull it to the left, inherited novelistic conventions will usually pull it to the right. If realistic texts manage to be oppositional, this occurs in spite of, rather than because of, inherited generic tendencies. These critics are anything but reborn Lukácsians.

So far we have been speaking of novelistic realism, or the realistic novel, in general terms. Critics of the bildungsroman, a subspecies of both these larger categories, have generally concurred that this genre is if anything the quintessentially bourgeois form of the novel. Hegel, describing the conventions of the emergent novelistic form epitomized in Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, noted that such texts depict "the education of the individual at the hands of the given reality. ... For the conclusion of such an apprenticeship
usually amounts to the hero getting the rough spots knocked off him. . . . In the last analysis he usually gets his girl and some kind of job, marries, and becomes a philistine just like all the others” (quoted in Swales 50). Dilthey, without Hegel’s irony, coined the term bildungsroman to describe a novel featuring a hero who “enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world” (quoted in Hardin xiv).

Subsequent theorists of the bildungsroman have sought to broaden its ideological scope, noting that the genre can stress conflict over accommodation (Shaffner) and, especially in its modernist variants, can allow for irony and open-endedness (Swales, Sammons). Even the genre’s staunchest advocates concede, however, that it is premised upon fundamentally bourgeois notions of self. As James Hardin notes, the great majority of bildungsromans feature accommodation through their depiction of “the intellectual and social development of a central figure who, after going out into the world and experiencing both defeats and triumphs, comes to a better understanding of self and to a generally affirmative view of the world” (Hardin xiii). Even texts that portray alienation or rebellion presuppose a division between self and society, a “confrontation with society” (Steinecke 95). The bildungsroman projects, according to Martin Swales, “a tension between a concern for the sheer complexity of individual potentiality on the one hand, and, on the other, a recognition that practical reality—marriage, family, a career—is a necessary dimension of the hero’s self-realization, albeit one that implies a limitation, indeed a constriction, of the self” (51). Moreover, the genre is based upon a largely a priori conception of individual identity. As Jeffrey Sammons puts it, “the concept of Bildung is intensely bourgeois: it carries with it many assumptions about the autonomy and relative integrity of the self, its potential self-creative energies, its relative range of options within material, social, even psychological determinants” (42). Even when the bildungsroman focuses on society as well as subjectivity, then, it presupposes a “character” possessing intrinsic potentialities who enters an “environment” that either fulfills or restricts his or her individuality. The bildungsroman, which purports transparently to convey the essential qualities of both the self and the world, thus furnishes the textual epitome of “programmatic individualism” (Visser).

What is at stake in this analysis is by now, I hope, clear. If the left-wing 1930s critics are right, the form of the “biographical” novel was ideologically neutral; whether or not a writer successfully conveyed a revolutionary vision depended upon whether or the above “wove” or “blended” radical politics into the story of the protagonist’s “conversion” to class-consciousness. If the postmodernist critics of realism are right, the writers of proletarian bildungsromans were doomed to failure. To test the relative validity of these two hypotheses, we shall now turn to an analysis of two proletarian bildungsromans.

My paradigmatic text in this discussion of politics and form in the proletarian bildungsroman is Myra Page’s Moscow Yankee (1935). Since I, like other scholars of noncanonical texts, must assume my audience’s lack of acquaintance with my material, I shall briefly recapitulate what this novel is about. Moscow Yankee is in one sense unusual among proletarian novels in that it takes its hero, Andy, an unemployed Detroit auto worker, to the USSR during the First Five-Year Plan and thus raises directly the issue of socialism. (Almost all U.S. proletarian novels delineate class struggle in the capitalist United States.) In its portraiture of a hero who, through experience and ideological struggle, moves from non-class-consciousness to revolutionary commitment, however, the novel presents an exemplary instance of the “conversion” plot. Moreover, because its politics are so explicit, Moscow Yankee brings to the fore important questions about the politics of representation in the proletarian novel. The novel’s plot has two main strands. The central plotline deals with Andy’s personal growth into a partisan of the socialist USSR. This metamorphosis is effected through three experiences: working on the assembly line at the Red Star tractor plant and becoming a tovarisch (comrade) of his fellow worker Sasha; arguing
politics with some American Communist expatriates, the white Mac and the black Ned; and falling in love with the winsome young tovarisch Natasha, who teaches him that socialist construction is inseparable from changed personal relations between and among people. This personal plot reaches its climax when Andy realizes that he wants to be free of his obligation to his American fiancée, Elsie, who writes him whining consumerist letters and at one point announces that she plans to join him in the USSR. The dilemma is, how is Andy going to free himself honorably from Elsie (who can’t be blamed for her low level of consciousness, not being herself a “Moscow Yankee”) and end up with his new true love? The key issue raised in the main plot, then, is that of the politics of personal loyalty in the context of class loyalty. The traditional bildungsroman focus upon the individual’s maturation through experience is thus invested with revolutionary doctrinal content.

The novel’s subplot, which involves two American engineers working in Moscow, addresses the politics of production. The “good” engineer, Boardman, who favors any industrial regime privileging “science, engineering, efficiency” is counterposed with the “bad” engineer, Crampton, who is fixated on “speed, money, costs” (146). The plant’s machinery is itself endowed with vital force, being described as a “beautiful, quivering nerve center” (22). The production subplot reaches its climax when some white Russians who are enemies of socialist construction attempt to sabotage Red Star. After a suspenseful chase by Ned, the nefarious activities of the former countess Katia Boudnikova and her entrepreneurial sidekick Alex Turin are thwarted. The key theme raised in the subplot is the necessity for workers’ steadfast commitment to building and defending the material infrastructure of the emerging socialist society.

Clearly Moscow Yankee raises all kinds of revolutionary politics. But it also offers what many contemporary critics would see as a classic case of realism’s antipathy to, and foreclosure of, contradiction. For the two plots are brought to termination not by any political logic or synthesis but by simple narrative juxtaposition. The sense of inevitability accompanying the strong narrative trajectory produces the sense that issues have been resolved, when in fact they have been sloughed over. The suspense and emotional satisfaction deriving from each plotline are displaced onto the other. The main plotline has posed the thesis that the “personal is political” and has argued that socialist construction entails a thoroughgoing fight against traditional notions about gender. There is even a minor subplot about a former prostitute, Zena, who straightens out and regains self-esteem as an assembly-line worker: developing the productive forces, it is implied, also develops human potentiality. Yet Andy is himself let off the hook regarding his personal politics. He never has to decide between Elsie and Natasha, since—somewhat implausibly—near the end of the novel he receives from Elsie a “Dear John” letter, followed closely by a letter from one of Andy’s former buddies who tells him that Elsie was a bad lot all along, having been fooling around with one of Andy’s other buddies ever since Andy left. At the same time, even though the novel has raised the question of worker control of production, this issue is forgotten amidst the flurry surrounding the threatened explosion of Red Star. When Andy decides to stay in the USSR and do his bit for socialist construction, the actual social relations that socialism entails at the point of production are no longer a point of contention and query in the novel, which ends with Andy happily cuddled up with Natasha and participating in his first Soviet May Day. The personal plot here usurps rather than parallels and interpenetrates the public plot.

It could thus be argued that conventions of bildungsroman narration foster political opportunism in Moscow Yankee. Suspense has displaced conceptual argument onto narrative trajectory, thus foreclosing further confrontation with the issue of personal responsibility raised by the Elsie/Natasha plot. Similarly, ideologically coercive (if emotionally satisfying) conventions of romantic closure can be seen to secure Andy’s reconciliation with the new society through his discovery of the right love partner. Andy may not have become a “philistine,” as Hegel wryly noted of the typical bildungsroman hero; but it would seem that the narrative’s focus on “getting] his girl” has helped to render moot any further consid-
eration of the question of egalitarianism at the point of production, which was initially addressed in the production plot. Moreover, the bildungsroman's synecdochic presumption that one person's story embodies in microcosm larger social contradictions prohibits skepticism about the typicality of Andy's tale. What Andy "realizes" about the virtues of socialism is what the reader learns—in fact, what the reader is positioned to have known all along, and to have pitied Andy for not knowing. Even though Moscow Yankee is, on the level of manifest content, clearly motivated by revolutionary politics, one could argue that the novel's reliance upon inherited realistic plot conventions—in particular, on the individualistic conventions of the bildungsroman—substantially damages, even subverts, the text's political intentions. The New Masses reviewer's complaint that the novel ended with a "pink sunset" (Field 26) can thus be attributed—although the reviewer did not say so—not just to Page's utopian politics, but to her option to tell her story through the vehicle of the bildungsroman. According to the postmodernist critique of realism, it is the generic politics of the bildungsroman that undermine the doctrinal politics of communism.

In my view, however, the issue of politics in Moscow Yankee is not this simple. For generic politics not only undermine but underwrite doctrinal politics in Moscow Yankee. Politics are not just a textual phenomenon: the actual line of the 1930s left, specifically with regard both to what was called the "woman question" and to the issue of the role of the productive forces in socialist construction, figures crucially into the opportunistic closure of Moscow Yankee. In relation to gender issues, the communist-led left was in some respects the best act in town. There were trials for male chauvinism in the party; women were organized as both workers and housewives; theorists linked women's emancipation to the abolition of classes (see Rosenfelt, Foley, Pitts, and Inman). Yet the left never arrived at an adequate analysis of the political economy of work performed in the home and thus never broke with the capitalist ideological dualism between the spheres of domesticity and production. As a consequence, the 1930s left never consistently repudiated, and in fact frequently reproduced, mainstream ideas about what men and women simply "are." The proletariat was routinely encoded as male in the discourse and iconography of the left; particularly in the post-1935 period of the Popular Front, the legitimacy of the capitalist nuclear family was rarely questioned. When Moscow Yankee ends with Elsie turning out to have been a bad girl who wouldn't have benefited from living in Moscow anyhow, and with Andy and Natasha building their Moscow love nest, what is involved is not just an uncritical deployment of conservative narrative conventions. A less-than-revolutionary doctrinal politics about gender both articulates and is articulated by the premise of novelistic realism that character is "given" and that social value is embodied in personal romantic fulfillment.

Similarly, ambiguities in the communist line about socialist construction are reproduced in the production plot's evasion of the issue of workers' control. The formulations of socialism by the 1930s left were contradictory. On the one hand, socialism was a way station on the road to communism; it entailed the creation of new human beings and new social relations, contingent on people realizing their full "species being" by abolishing alienation and taking control over both the forces and the relations of production. On the other hand, even amidst the fervor of the First Five-Year Plan, socialism entailed the full retention of wages, the institution of material incentives (Stakhanovism), the continuing division of mental and manual labor, and other aspects of capitalist social relations. Even though Soviet workers participated actively in socialist construction, the immediate practice of communist distribution—from each according to commitment, to each according to need—was looked down upon as "vulgar egalitarianism," the "psychology of primitive peasant 'communism'" (Stalin 107; Bettelheim). The foreclosure of contradiction that accompanies the "pink sunset" portrait of Andy's "conversion" to socialism at the end of Moscow Yankee is thus not simply a function of Page's use of monologic and repressive narrative conventions. The novel's interrupted discourse concerning production relations also reflects the tendency of the entire 1930s left to posit communism as something for the future, and to adopt an attitude toward the building of
socialism that was at once mechanistic and voluntarist: tractors plus proletarian enthusiasm would create the new world.

The anomalously "conservative" tenor of the ending to *Moscow Yankee* thus results not from a simple opposition of revolutionary form to radical content, but from a *complicity* between doctrinal and generic politics. The form exerts its most bourgeois influence when and where the text's "line" is least revolutionary. There is, to be sure, a tendency to reproduce dominant ideology built into certain bildungsroman conventions. Larger social contradictions—such as that between capitalist and communist relations at the point of production—can be sloughed over to the extent that the form is focused, finally, on an individual fate and an individual consciousness. Because production relations do not figure as a problem for Andy to confront and resolve, they do not figure in the resolution to the novel. But the bildungsroman form does not itself cause the issue of production relations to be abandoned. One might speculate instead that Page opted to tell her tale as a bildungsroman precisely because she herself saw this issue as "background" rather than as a social and political contradiction crucially determining the nature of Andy's relations with his coworkers.

Yet the political wheel needs to be spun one more time. For the question must then be asked: How damning—from a "left" standpoint—are the conclusions I have reached here? Does the presence of foreclosing and co-optative mechanisms in the novel's form, or of tendencies toward sexism and a doctrine of productive-forces determinism, mean that *Moscow Yankee* loses all its force as an articulation of revolutionary politics? This is a particularly urgent question in the present-day context, when not only the Sunday morning pundits but even many who claim to be on the left are joining the chorus of condemnation of all that has gone forward during the past seventy years under the banner of socialism or communism. I would suggest that despite the many "bourgeois" ideological traces in *Moscow Yankee*, the novel has plenty to say about creating new and better types of human interaction in a new and better type of social order. There is inspiration in its message of "I have seen the future, and it works"—not just, I believe, for unreconstructed leftists like myself, but also, as indicated by the novel's largely sympathetic reviews in the contemporaneous mainstream press, to readers closer to the center (e.g. Marsh). Even if conventions of realism co-opt readerly disagreement in *Moscow Yankee*, the reader is positioned to agree that Moscow is a good home to be accommodated to, and that a red factory worker is the ideal bride to effect the protagonist's social reconciliation. The novel's revolutionary message is mitigated but by no means canceled by the text's formal and doctrinal residue of capitalist ways of thinking about, and representing, human potentiality. Even if the postmodernist critics are right that realistic novels coercively position their readers, it is still legitimate to ask whether this coercion is exercised for good or bad ends. Page would no doubt respond that the end justifies the means.

Before closing, it will be useful contrast to glance at another proletarian novel, one that departs significantly from conventions of narrative transparency while retaining the routine focus of the bildungsroman on an individual's initiation, education, and maturation. Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* takes as its protagonist Mazie Holbrook, a young girl who grows toward adulthood in a context of extreme deprivation, both material and psychological. Because the novel is unfinished (Olsen started but abandoned it in the 1930s), Mazie's development into adulthood is not delineated. But the novel clearly indicates that it was to depict Mazie's growth toward class consciousness; Olsen, moreover, has stated that her protagonist was eventually to become a union organizer (Rosenfelt 399). In its method and plan, if not in its final result, *Yonnondio* is a "conversion" novel squarely within the tradition of the proletarian bildungsroman.

*Yonnondio* departs from this tradition, however, both structurally and ideologically. The narrative continually intersplices the protagonist's experience and consciousness with those of other family members, particularly her mother and father, Anna and Jim. Mazie's reactions of helplessness and anger when watching Anna being battered by Jim are counterposed with Anna's thoughts; Mazie's feelings of "boundlessness and selfness" (119) during a rare moment
of untroubled mother/daughter love are juxtaposed with her mother’s sensation of inhabiting a “bounded body” (120). Furthermore, both Mazie’s and Anna’s experiences of Jim’s violence are counterposed with his own confused sense of guilt and powerlessness: “And as he sat there in the kitchen with Mazie against his heart, and dawn beat up like a drum, the things in his mind so vast and formless, so terrible and bitter, cannot be spoken, will never be spoken—till the day that hands will find a way to speak this: hands” (95). Bildungsromans routinely posit the hero’s uniqueness and subjectivity as given: even if she or he is affected by social relations, these do not constitute her or him. In *Yonnondio*, the relation of self to socius is reversed. Even though Mazie, as a distinct individual, possesses “traits” of curiosity and resilience that equip her to be the novel’s “hero,” these qualities of “character” are not a priori, nor do they furnish “causes” for Mazie’s acts. Rather than an autonomous individual moving through an “environment,” Mazie is the social relations that encompass her; in a sense, she is the working class.

*Yonnondio*’s diffusion of focus away from its protagonist also has an important rhetorical effect: Mazie’s growth does not bear the burden of teaching the reader the politics that shape the text. The reader’s attainment of greater class consciousness hinges upon him or her inferring general lessons from the totality of the character’s experiences. In *Moscow Yankee*, the reader’s knowledge is contingent upon identification with Andy; if the hero does not come to a definitive position on the question of production relations, neither do we. In Olsen’s novel, by contrast, no single character is obliged to “realize” the text’s revolutionary doctrine. Even though it is clear that the novel is structured according to the pattern of the “conversion” narrative—and it is a significant loss to left-wing literature that Olsen never completed her tale—it is also clear that issues not fully understood by Mazie—or any other character, for that matter—will not therefore be sloughed over. Truth is contained in, but not restricted to, what the hero learns.

*Yonnondio* manages to project its collectivist politics not only through structural modulations upon the individualistic bildungsroman plot but also through its bold use of narratorial voice. Whereas

in *Moscow Yankee* political values and ideas are left to be conveyed by character development, event, and dialogue, in *Yonnondio* the narrator articulates what the author believes; the text “tells” as well as “shows.” Some of *Yonnondio*’s devices for producing commentary are conventional; the passage cited above describing Jim Holbrook’s incoherent anger, for example, combines tagged free indirect discourse with intrusive omniscient commentary. While recognizably didactic, the passage remains within the stylistic confines of narrative realism. On several important occasions, however, Olsen abandons standard narratorial omniscience and adopts a free-floating voice that makes no pretension to narrative transparency. For example, when a minor character named Jim Tracy, a coworker of Jim Holbrook, rebels all by himself against exploitation and ends up on a chain gang, the text introduces a long typographically inserted passage in which the voice of an unidentified coworker declares:

I’m sorry, Jim Tracy, sorry as hell we weren’t stronger and could get to you in time and show you that kind of individual revolt was no good, kid, no good at all, you had to bide your time and take it till there were enough of you to fight it all together on the job, and bide your time, and take it till the day millions of fists clamped in yours, and you could wipe out the whole thing, the whole goddamn thing, and a human could be a human for the first time on earth. (79)

In this passage, revolutionary doctrine is conveyed in working-class language. But it is not articulated by a given individual—these are not Jim’s thoughts—nor does it emerge as a “natural” consequence of Jim Holbrook’s and Jim Tracy’s experiences at the point of production. Like the Bolshevik theory outlined in Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* the call for workers’ insurrection in *Yonnondio* is a response to exploitation that comes, epistemologically, “from the outside” (Lenin 374–75). If Olsen’s strategy here is “leftist,” the term, in my view, warrants not opprobrium—as for most 1930s Marxists—but commendation. The politics of class in *Yonnondio* bypasses economism and projects revolutionism largely because the text has discovered strategic ways of intersplicing “showing” with “telling.” As with its dispersal of “character,” the novel finds ways
to embed the collective in the individual; in its dispersal of narrative authority the novel experiments with methods for conveying authorial politics. *Yonnondio* is a bildungsroman, but to a degree it contests the individualistic and transparent premises of the genre.

As in the case of *Moscow Yankee*, however, the political wheel must be spun one more time. For Olsen’s achievement in pressing the bildungsroman form to new political limits in *Yonnondio* is not simply a function of her *avant la lettre* experimentation with postmodernist methods for interrogating subjectivity and subverting ideological closure. Olsen’s “line” is, on certain crucial issues, also more “left” than that of Page in *Moscow Yankee*. While the plot of *Moscow Yankee* hinges upon a traditional gendered division between a “private” love plot and a “public” production plot, *Yonnondio* continually reverts to the relation between production and reproduction—of people, of social relations, of consciousness. Opportunistic displacement between plotlines is precluded in *Yonnondio* largely because the novel admits to no fundamental difference between labor at the point of production and labor in the home. Moreover, while both novels are radically egalitarian, *Yonnondio* continually stresses the necessity for workers’ “fists” and “hands” to break into articulateness. Page’s novel leaves unsettled the issue of whether or not eradicating the division of mental and manual labor is necessary to the construction of socialism. Olsen’s novel—while set in a context of anticapitalist class struggle that does not require her squarely to address socialist relations of production—still suggests that “a human [will] be a human for the first time on earth” only when workers gain the capacity to speak with something other than their hands. Olsen’s experiments with a narrative voice that ruptures realistic illusionism are not merely formal; they bespeak her larger political concern with the new types of articulation that both enable and are enabled by the revolutionary process. As in *Moscow Yankee* there is in *Yonnondio* a confluence of doctrinal and generic politics.

What can we conclude, then, about the adequacy of the postmodernist critique of novelistic realism as applied to 1930s proletarian fiction? How usable were “bourgeois” literary forms to revolutionary writers? As I hope to have suggested here, there is a conservative *tendency* embedded in the classic form of the bildungsroman; Hicks and other 1930s critics were, I believe, in error when they posited that the novel bore no ideological freight from its bourgeois heritage. A proletarian writer like Page, who more or less uncritically adopted the conventions of the genre, reproduced a number of traditional distinctions between male and female, public and private. A writer like Olsen, who worked against the genre’s structural and stylistic grain, projected more revolutionary conceptions of potentiality, both individual and social. But, in both cases narrative strategy is inseparable from political “line.” While the implication of the postmodernist critique of realism would seem to be that narrative transparency is in and of itself politically “bad,” and narrative subversion politically “good,” the dialectic of generic and doctrinal politics in the two novels examined here indicates that the relationship between politics and form in the novel is more complicated, more nuanced. Particularly when pressed to adopt experimental techniques to articulate collectivist politics, the traditional “bourgeois” form of the bildungsroman proved usable—perhaps to a surprising degree—by the 1930s proletarian novelist. But even when the proletarian writer acceded to bourgeois ideological pressures of various kinds, emergent left-wing ideas had a stubborn way of making themselves felt and heard in and through the bildungsroman—regardless of the residual forms and discourses that hemmed these ideas in and inhibited their full expression. Amid all the current talk about the unalloyed failures—economic, political, cultural—of twentieth-century movements for class emancipation, it is important to acknowledge the 1930s literary proletarians’ often compelling representations of a world by no means powerless to be born.

**Notes**

1. Brecht’s dramatic theory and practice were greeted sympathetically and intelligently in the U.S. left press (e.g. Burnshaw) but did not spark any
polemics. Lukács published in Partisan Review an important essay, "Propaganda or Partisanship?" that drew praise from Philip Rahv; Lukács did not, however, function as the locus of any defense of realism in contradistinction to modernism (see Lukács, Rahv). The finer points in Lukács's sophisticated Hegelian defense of realism were not articulated in the American setting, where the best-known spokespersons for Third International aesthetic theory were "official" figures like Bukharin, Radek, and Lunacharsky. Alan Wald, however, remarks that "Angel Flores, who edited Dialectics and the Critics Group series, told me on the phone before he died that Lukács was a big influence in his circle" (personal communication).

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