CAPITALISM AND UNFREE LABOR

TRANSNATIONAL CAPITALISM AND CLASS FORMATION

AMERICAN NIGHT:
Symposium on Alan Wald’s Trilogy

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THE GUILFORD PRESS
NEW YORK LONDON

Printed in the U.S.A.
Left Politics and Literary History

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In American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War (2012), Alan Wald brings to a close his trilogy about 20th-century U.S. literary leftism, which began with Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left (2002), followed by Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade (2007). Wald is a truly remarkable scholar, having interviewed hundreds of writers and their associates and read thousands of creative, biographical, historical, journalistic, and critical works relevant to his project. In the trilogy, Wald narrates with passion — and for the most part sympathy — the long curve of the Communist-led literary movement that began in the Depression years and ended, or at least came to a definitive pause, in the 1960s. In Wald’s telling, the arc of “Communist literary modernism” is a tragic one, marked in its closing stage by mourning over the loss of the revolutionary vision of the 1930s. In all three volumes, the serpent in the garden is, for Wald, “Stalinism.” Constituting from the 1930s onward the principal threat to both artistic and political integrity, in the postwar years “Stalinism” took the form of the doctrine of “late antifascism,” which, according to Wald, conjoined a near-hysterical misestimate of postwar realities in the capitalist world with a dogmatic insistence upon uninterrogated
loyalty to the USSR. Communist literary modernism, argues Wald, was faced with the task of at once maintaining an allegiance to working-class emancipation and contending with the diminished possibilities for meaningful action. While the continuing focus upon the deleterious effects of “Stalinism” supplies coherence to Wald’s portrayal of the decline and fall of the U.S. literary left over several decades, in American Night this preoccupation retrospectively rewrites — and in the process negates — a good deal of what Wald himself has previously had to say about American literary radicalism. Where Wald is most elegiac, he is also, arguably, most deterministic.

As a literary historian, Wald has always taken as his signature strategy the conjunction of biography with literary criticism. His conception of biography is a sophisticated one, captured in his quotation from the Communist poet Thomas McGrath: “All of us live twice at the same time — once uniquely and once representatively. I am interested in those moments when my unique personal life intersects with something bigger” (AN, 319). While many of the portraits of literary radicals in Exiles and Trinity amply testify to the revelatory power of this approach, in American Night Wald brilliantly displays the power of biography to transcend the anecdotal and to anchor literary analysis in a rich and complex historical concreteness. Especially in the two chapters featuring a series of African American writers, titled “Lonely Crusaders, Parts One and Two,” Wald demonstrates the multiple levels of textual interpretation opened up by research into an author’s specific insertion in history. Ann Petry’s The Narrow (1953), he shows, draws not only upon Petry’s experiences as “a woman of the Left engaged with social struggle into the mid-1940s” (AN, 197) but also, specifically, upon Petry’s acquaintance with the novelist and journalist Carl Ruthen Oford and the leftist photographer Weegee (Arthur Fellig), as well as her mentoring by the Columbia University writing instructor Mabel Louise Robinson, who is recast as African American in the novel. Paradoxically, however, awareness of these historical links highlights all the more Petry’s use of a looping, non-linear narrative structure calling attention to the necessarily multi-perspectival nature of reality, the “morsels and fragments of human existence” (AN, 178).

Similarly, the characterization of the artist Eva Blount in Richard Wright’s The Outsider (1954) gains in historical depth when she is viewed as a composite of Wright’s own wife, Ellen Poplar, and other Communist women with whom he had had affairs. Eva’s marriage
to the CP leader Gil Blount — a demonic caricature in the novel — replicates Wright’s perception of the relationship between the New Masses illustrator Lydia Gibson and her husband, the cartoonist and CP leader Robert Minor. Cross Damon’s rebellion against the constraints of the CP is thus linked with — though not reduced to — the “aggressive wish-fulfillment” accompanying his creator’s “world-class mid-life crisis” (AN, 173, 162). I only wish I had had American Night at my elbow the last time I taught this troubling and difficult novel!

Embedded in Wald’s emphasis upon biography is not just a practical aid to interpretation but also a valuable theoretical contribution to the materialist study of literature, indeed, any of the arts: the particularity of a given writer’s life embodies the abstract in the concrete; the specificity of the writer’s text points to the distillation of historical contradictions in a form at once mediated and immediate. At the same time, Wald’s methodology, which he designates as both “collective biography” (AN, 294) and “communal autobiography” (AN, xii), portrays his writers as a group subject engaged in a common, if at times internally riven, project. The Masses & Mainstream (later Mainstream) critics Samuel Sillen and Charles Humboldt limn the polarities in Communist-sponsored reviews of individual books and larger literary trends; while a cluster of lesbian, gay and bisexual literary figures, ranging from the feminist theorist Rebecca Pitts to the novelists Willard Motley and William Rollins, constitutes a large enough body to warrant designation as the “Homintern.” Moreover, Wald’s decision to focus attention upon lesser-known writers — “Far better to err by generosity toward the many neglected than by circling wagons around the iconic few” (AN, 282) — enables him to explore a red line of literary history all but obscured by the effects of contemporary McCarthyism, as well as by the hegemony of Cold War assumptions about aesthetic value that would seep into the groundwater of literary criticism in subsequent decades. Placing the left at the center, Wald’s trilogy testifies to the continuing influence of leftist politics and values during the entire span of American modernism, rescuing from oblivion a host of writers who deserve both scholarly examination and, in quite a few instances, popular recuperation.

Despite the stellar achievement of Wald’s trilogy — which to my knowledge no other scholar of the U. S. literary left could begin to approximate — its methodology, and the politics embedded therein, invite critical commentary. Central to Wald’s narrative of the left’s
failure to create and foster a revolutionary movement is his assessment
that the doctrine of "late antifascism," which drew upon a tragic miscalculation of historical forces and locked the CPUSA into allegiance to a
destructive foreign power, created in leftist writers and critics a rigidity
and paranoia that, ironically, mirrored the repressive efforts of the
state. Although Wald evinces considerable admiration for individual
writers and critics who identified as "Communist" or "pro-Communist"
from 1945 onward, he evaluates them largely on the basis of their
ultimate adherence to the Party line. Figures close to the Party cen-
ter come in for particular opprobrium. The Party functionary and
cultural critic V. J. Jerome — who has cameo appearances in both
Exiles and American Night — is a "congenital ideological rottweiler"
(AN, 61); "convulsions of self-loathing ... perhaps redolent of the
conversion experience of the Protestant Reformation" resulted in
Sillen's embrace of Communism (AN, 65). By contrast, Humboldt,
who was wise enough to jump ship after Nikita Khrushchev's 1956
"secret speech," is forgiven his sin of having "put his name to a fool-
ish apology for Zhdanov" and is adjudged "a latent genius of the
literary left" (AN, 83). Figures who continued to align themselves
with the CPUSA throughout the 1950s, however, are portrayed as
unprincipled or willfully blind. Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Du Bois
are castigated for having "assembled ironclad rationales for fusing
the cause of racial liberation in the United States to idolization of the
Soviet Union" (AN, 153). Thomas Bell, author of two distinguished
proletarian novels, All Brides Are Beautiful (1934) and Out of This Furnace
(1941), is said to have been "unconscionably silent about the Stalinist
horrors" (AN, 60). For the poet and critic Walter Lowenfels, who in
the 1950s "became the cultural face of the Communist Party for the
new generation ... Stalinism was never refuted, just sidestepped"
(AN, 271, 274); his diverse and uneven oeuvre is represented in the
text, moreover, by quotation of what Wald admits to be an instance
of his most banal poetry, "The Poem That Can't Be Stopped," which
warrants the designation of Lowenfels as "a lamebrain socialist clone
of Lawrence Ferlinghetti" (AN, 281). McGrath, who turned to Mao-
ism in the 1960s, apparently managed in Letter to an Imaginary Friend
(1962-85) and other works to "expres[s] revolutionary desire free of
the familiar cant of late antifascism" not because of but in spite of the
"retrograde" politics that made him "live in a world of his own private
Stalinism" (AN, 270). That McGrath's "private Stalinism" — whatever
that means — may have generated and sustained his "revolutionary desire" is, it would seem, unimaginable.

In Wald’s telling, the well-nigh undeconstructable term “Stalinism” obviates the necessity to examine Party positions in any significant detail. For instance, the CP’s postwar attempt to correct its Popular Frontist wartime opportunism — which lost it the allegiance of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, among others — is dismissed as simply a “post-Browder Leftist lurch” (AN, 131–32). The complex politics involved in the CP’s attempt to resuscitate its earlier commitments to antiracism and militant unionism — critically but carefully detailed by Harry Haywood (1978) — surely warrant a more dialectical treatment.

Wald asserts that, as a literary critic, his principal interest, following Raymond Williams, is in the “structures of feeling” manifested in the literary radicals he examines, rather than in their “reflections of line” (xiii). Insofar as many of his judgments of individual writers end up hinging on their positioning in relation to the Communist “line,” however, this claim is often contradicted in practice. One cannot have it both ways: either these Party politics matter, deserving more than passing examination and judgment, or they do not. Although Wald’s general conclusion that the project of building socialism and moving to communism derailed in the latter part of the 20th century is incontrovertible, his designation of the root cause of this failure as “Stalinism” is assumed rather than proven. This lapse is especially regrettable in the light of the body of scholarship portraying the CPUSA-led left in markedly more favorable terms (e.g., Gerald Horne, 1988, 1994), as well as that calling into question the demonization of the Stalin era in the USSR (e.g., Grover Furr, 2011).

Wald’s uneven treatment of the “structures of feeling” discernible in the writings of Cold War-era leftists is linked to his avoidance of a fuller confrontation with the substance of their politics. On the one hand, he astutely describes the profound sense of disorientation and loss expressed by writers like Kenneth Fearing, who in 1956 decried “the death of ‘a long phase of our society,’” and Josephine Herbst, who in the same year wrote of “the ruins of memory” (AN, 104). Indeed, Wald argues, mourning spills over into a “Left Melancholia” for writers whose disavowal of Communism entails an abandonment of the system of understanding and belief that had structured their sense of themselves as ethical and historical beings (AN, 217).
While at times misplaced in his commentaries on individual figures — as in his skewed analysis of Sillen’s “self-loathing” — Wald’s use of psychoanalytic concepts to describe the grieving response registered at the level of “communal autobiography” is bold and inventive; the postwar literary left did indeed experience collective trauma, and Wald ably limns its dimensions and consequences. This impulse guides Wald’s decision to bookend the trilogy with the career of Guy Endore, who began as the author of Babouk (1934), a Marxist historical novel about the Haitian Revolution; was blacklisted in 1951; gave testimony to a closed session of Huac in 1958; and, before his death in 1968, served as the principal publicist for Synanon, the countercultural California drug rehabilitation organization that would be accused of cultism and criminal activity in the 1970s (Exiles, 1–8, AN, 313–15). Endore’s writerly life encapsulates, for Wald, the political contradictions of his time.

On the other hand, Wald’s designation of the categories of experience mediating the writers’ connection with history draws upon certain explanatory paradigms that accord uneasily with a narrative about Marxism and Marxists. For instance, he continually draws upon Lizabeth Cohen’s formulation of a “Consumers’ Republic” as the cultural dominant of the postwar period (Cohen, 2004); he invokes the notion of a “new contingency” to account for his writers’ loss of confidence in the Communist world view. Although Cohen’s formulation is highly influential in the field of cultural studies, it substitutes a relatively superficial commentary on the postwar burgeoning of consumer culture for a materialist analysis of such matters as the effects of the expulsion of Communists from unions, the co-optation of class struggles, and the ruling-class ideological onslaught accompanying the expansion of the U. S. global empire. As Wald’s own readings reveal, the reaction of many leftist writers and critics to the restricted political and cultural domain in the postwar United States transcended a liberal antipathy to market relations. Wald does not clarify, moreover, whether what he calls the “new contingency” is an objective feature of the historical process or the phenomenological reflection of that process in thought and feeling. Or, for that matter, a specifically literary challenge facing writers: he proposes, for example, that, as the 1950s progressed, the novelist Willard Motley found himself faced with the choice between “social realism” and the “new contingency” (AN, 215).
Wald intermittently mentions — and in his conclusion prominently features — Theodor Adorno's notion of "negative dialectics" as the "most promising guide" to the response of Cold War-era leftist writers and critics to the brave new world of imploded revolutionary dreams and hegemonic capitalism (AN, 303). But this analytical concept, while enjoying the imprimatur of Frankfurt School Marxism, functions somewhat inconsistently throughout Wald's argument. At times the literary enactment of "negative dialectics," generally understood as the rejection of positivist rationalism, describes a reaction to the "universal commodification of desire" (AN, 296); at others, the "specter of a lack" (AN, 316); at still others, the "secret of expressing the political through the personal" (AN, 258). Wald's invocation of Adorno is so diffuse and far-reaching as to divest the notion of "negative dialectics" of its explanatory power.

Perhaps the most problematic feature of American Night is the way in which Wald's conflation of politics with epistemology undermines some of his own appreciative analyses of mid-century literary radicalism in the earlier volumes of the trilogy. Central to Wald's thesis about the decline and fall of the pro-Communist left is the proposition that, in the wake of World War II, the doctrine of "late antifascism," which imposed an outdated and ossified paradigm upon a changed historical reality, laid claim to a basis in Marxist science — what he calls the "Cult of Reason" (AN, 84–116). While Wald is clearly justified in asserting that, especially seen in retrospect, this doctrine lacked solid grounding in the politics and economics of the postwar years, his characterization of this erroneous logic as an embrace of "certainty" boomerangs back upon the terms in which he has portrayed — and often valorized — the texts produced by literary leftists active in the previous two decades. Although throughout the trilogy Wald has frowned upon the "Stalinist" affinities of various writers and critics, he has nonetheless expressed considerable admiration for literary works premised upon confidence in Marxist theory as a means of illuminating social reality. In Exiles, Wald's testimony to the achievement of Mike Gold, however moderated by his repugnance at Gold's stalwart CP politics, draws upon a recognition of Gold's unwavering commitment to fostering a literature that would advance the cause of proletarian revolution (Exiles, 39–70). In Trinity, the Arthur Miller who wrote militantly class-conscious theater criticism for the New Masses is
valorized largely for his conviction that "socialism was reason" (Trinity, 215). In American Night, by contrast, Wald lampoons not only the rigidity and dogmatism he attributes to various postwar Masses & Mainstream commissars but also, at times, Marxist reasoning as such. For instance, Wald asserts that such writers as Kenneth Fearing, Ann Petry and Thomas McGrath, "affected as they were by the phenomenological turn and the new contingency . . . do not lecture the reader on permutations of Hegelianism," but instead "demonstrate through the experiences that they depict in imaginative literature that thinking in contradictions is forced on those living in a society driven by the fundamental antagonism of commodity production" (296). Wald here shadow-boxes with a mechanical Communist opponent who presumably would view high-flown dialectical philosophy as more authoritative than "experience"; one wonders whom he might conceivably have in mind. The "Communist cultural tradition from which the literature [of the new contingency and Communist literary modernism] emerged [was] a trajectory" Wald concludes, "that had been animated by positivist rationalism," by "the Communists' proclivity toward the Cult of Reason" (AN, 295).

In American Night, Wald reads back onto the history of much of the literary left of the 1930s and early 1940s the analytical paradigm he has developed specifically to examine and criticize the literature of political mourning featured in the trilogy's final volume. Fearing had written of 1946 as "this curious interim between two ages, when history has dropped the curtain upon one of them but seems in no hurry to give the next one its shape and color" (AN, 22). In Wald's telling, however, the tragic destiny to which much of the literary left was consigned in the 1950s was, it turns out, prefigured, indeed predetermined, in the Marxist rationalism dominating leftist literary production all along.

In a section titled "The Indeterminacy of Art" in the conclusion to American Night, Wald writes: "My predilection is to prize texts of imaginative literature for their artistic capacity as truth-tellers affected by, yet transcending, any formal partisan affiliation of their authors" (297). Does this mean that the epistemological uncertainty of The Narrows makes it superior to Petry's The Street (1946), where — according to Wald's earlier estimate — Petry's "decision not to dramatize facile answers [was] grounded in a social-realist strategy, quite unlike the modernist and postmodernist advocacy of an open-ended play of
signifiers wherein the reader may construct his or her own contingent meanings" (*Trinity*, 127)? Embedded in Wald’s stated preference for literary works that ask questions rather than offer answers is, it would appear, the premise that — as he puts it in his praise of the “existentialist shading” in Abraham Polonsky’s *The World Above* — literary works of “moral complexity” are those that “probe the more fundamental questions of how one lives one’s life beyond ideology” (AN, 229). The definition of “ideology” invoked here is intrinsically derogatory. If the term signifies reductionism, dogma, and loss of psychic autonomy, of course Wald is right. But if the term signifies, more broadly, the political values, understandings, and commitments that guide one’s life, then the term implicitly relegates political identity and action to a “less fundamental” zone of experience than the realm of the personal. For Wald, however, the literature that continued to advance the outlook of the CP in the late 1950s into the 1960s was “the prisoner or creature of officialdom” (AN, 282). Even as Wald sensitively portrays the “Left Melancholia” accompanying the declining arc of the literary left, then, he finds in the works of Communist literary modernism that he most values a kind of wisdom, albeit one gained through the harsh discipline of disillusionment. His decision to encapsulate this arc within the career of Guy Endore, whose story began in the preface to *Exiles*, suggests a process of painful but necessary maturation: Endore’s tragicomic ending as a journalistic proponent of Synanon was the bitter consequence of his acceptance “that he had been completely misguided about the Soviet Union” (AN, 315).

Wald closes his account of mid-century literary radicalism with the autobiographical observation that participation in the New Left, the crucible within which his own political and ethical consciousness was nurtured, made him “acutely aware of the moral perils of misplaced trust in any state regime” (AN, 321). I emerge from the same historical moment; and I agree with Wald that one of the principal tasks — indeed, probably the principal task — facing historians of the left, literary and otherwise, is to analyze the roads taken and not taken by radicals of the previous century, so that present and future participants in leftist movements will at the very least not repeat the errors of our predecessors. At a time when capitalism is no longer naturalized as the air that we breathe, and the “idea of communism” is once again being widely discussed — it is no longer the political position that dares not speak its name! — a critical interrogation of
the failures (as well as the successes) of the leftist past has particular urgency. It is precisely for this reason, however, that the equation of a series of presumably cognate terms — "officialdom," "the Party," "state regimes," the "Cult of Reason" — as well as the collation of these under the rubric of "Stalinism" — needs to be called into question, since the prohibitive specter of the "party-state" currently looms over these potentially productive current discussions (see Badiou, 2010; Dean, 2012; Douzinas and Zizek, 2010). Many literary radicals of the past century hitched their wagons to the star of a party and — for a period or for a lifetime — committed themselves to its worldview in general and its "line" in particular.

If we feel indebted to the 20th-century writers of the left for their bold imagining of literature and criticism as means to advance the cause of social revolution — if we recognize them as "exiles from a future time" — then we owe it both to them and to ourselves to find ways to bring that future time into being. Alan Wald has done a superb job of bringing these figures out of the shadows of history. Other students of literature and politics may now bring alternative perspectives to bear upon the study of the literary radicalism of the past century, which continues to have remarkable relevance to the problems and challenges of our own time.

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REFERENCES

Reply

ALAN WALD

I AM HONORED TO HAVE such a virtuoso and prominent set of interlocutors from several generations of scholars of the Literary Left discussing my trilogy on the Communist presence in U. S. literature: Rachel Rubin, Chris Vials, and Barbara Foley. How fortunate to be the beneficiary of critiques that are even-handed and generous, and which raise questions that prompt me to elaborate ideas that were either imperfectly formulated or left out entirely. By gently pressing me to further contemplation about critical issues, these sympathetic commentators are advancing discussion in exactly the manner that this particular topic requires.

For those unfamiliar with my trilogy, here is the argument in a few paragraphs: Literary Radicalism is always stranger than we think; nowhere does it prove to be more strange than where we once assumed that it was most familiar to us. The longer I conducted research about U. S. pro-Communist writers in the mid-20th century, the more I felt as if I were writing the literary history of a non-existent genre. I began the first volume, about the forging of this Left tradition in the 1930s, with the view that I was filling in the history of a half-known literary presence and its somewhat mysterious creators. No writer is simply one thing, and many kept their inner lives sealed off from scrutiny.