The Proletarian Novel

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In the context of US literary history, the term “proletarian novel” is most applicable to a grouping of approximately one hundred novels that were produced during the years 1929–1941. During the Cold War, and for several decades beyond, the proletarian novel was derogated as aesthetically bankrupt and relegated to the dustbin of literary history. The poststructuralist-based antipathy to totalizing narratives, as well as the identity-based model of “intersectionality” guiding much more recent “gender, race and class” scholarship (based on the premise that an individual’s identity is produced as the intersection of class, race, and gender affiliations), have continued to marginalize these leftist texts. Scholars participating in the current resurgence of interest in the proletarian novel—and proletarian literature more generally—are thus called upon first to engage in considerable ground-clearing and stage-setting, both literary-historical and theoretical.

The emergence of the proletarian novel is inseparable from its historical context, which was characterized by three interrelated extraliterary developments: the political and economic crisis of the Depression; the emergence of Soviet socialism and its far-flung challenge to capitalism; and the growth of the American Communist Party (CPUSA), which exercised widespread influence upon writers, first through the John Reed Clubs and subsequently through the League of American Writers and its large American Writers Congress gatherings. It is important to be aware, however, of predecessor literary texts and schools—sometimes explicitly invoked by proletarian novelists—that enabled this literary genre to emerge. Slave narratives, which exhibit similar concerns with oppression and resistance, characteristically featured first-person narrators whose emotional and political development anticipates the class-conscious maturation of proletarian protagonists. Many texts routinely grouped under the rubric of “naturalism”—such as Stephen Crane’s Maggie: A Girl of the Streets (1893), Hamlin Garland’s Main-Traveled Roads (1891), and Frank Norris’s McTeague (1899)—grounded much of their pessimistic determinism in an analysis of the roots of poverty in the class system. Political utopias and dystopias—presented most famously in Edward
Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, 2001–1887 (1888) and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) — raised the mirage of a socialist future — as well as of the tragic cost of its nonrealization — well before the 1930s. Early twentieth-century socialist novels — Ernest Poole's *The Harbor* (1915) and, most famously, Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) — placed the class struggle front and center in their treatments of urban industrialism. The *International Socialist Review* and then the *Masses* provided a forum for class-conscious literature and anticapitalist cultural critique.

The radical upsurge of 1919, while rapidly quelled, quickened the political consciousness of many 1920s writers. Journals such as the *Liberator* and its successor, the *Workers Monthly*, continued the work of the *Masses*. The principal organs of African-American radicalism, the *Messenger* and the *Crusader*, defined the postwar New Negro as both cultural radical and social revolutionary. Such novels as Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922) and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), while focused more on satire and psychology than class struggle, stressed capitalist commodification as the root cause of their protagonists' alienation. Novels about immigrant experience, such as Samuel Ornitz's *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl* (1925), Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925) — injected a searing skepticism into their tales of the pursuit of the pseudodemocratic American Dream. Many novels routinely discussed in the context of the 1920s-bounded and culturally focused Harlem Renaissance — Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter* (1930), Claude McKay's *Banjo* (1929), and even Jean Toomer's highly experimental *Cane* (1923), often seen as the Renaissance's founding text — contain hard-hitting indictments of racial violence and class hierarchy. As the decade progressed, moreover, writers and intellectuals became increasingly aware of the harsh conditions experienced by the working class, for whom there had been no Roaring Twenties. The execution of the Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolommeo Vanzetti in 1927 galvanized the radicalism of many writers, not least among these John Dos Passos, who would emerge as, arguably, the most important practitioner of the proletarian novel.

To point out such continuities with past texts and traditions is not to engage in an obligatory nod to literary history; nor is it to query the usefulness of viewing the proletarian novel as a distinct genre that came to fruition in a distinct period. It is simply to remind us that the proletarian novel cannot be placed in a temporal ghetto. Categories such as "naturalism" and "Harlem Renaissance," while useful for some purposes, displace economic and political concerns and set arbitrary temporal boundaries, thereby obscuring the "red thread" running through much US literary history — a point that would be stressed by proletarian literary theorist Granville Hicks in his 1933 revisionary literary history, *The Great Tradition*. It is evident, moreover, that some proletarian novelists saw their projects as explicitly aligned with these preceding texts and traditions. Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936) is based upon the slave narrative archive at Fisk University; Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) is modeled upon Dreiser's tale of crime and punishment in *An American Tragedy*; Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930) invokes both *The Jungle* and *Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl*.

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While in retrospect the proletarian novel constitutes a genre possessing substantive and temporal coherence, its key concerns were subjected to debate and underwent development even during the decade of its heyday. Starting in the late 1920s and gathering momentum by 1932, discussions in the principal leftist cultural organ, the *New Masses*, queried the parameters of the genre. What was the difference between a proletarian novel, a radical novel, and a revolutionary novel? Did the term “proletarian novel” signify authorship, readership, subject matter, or political perspective? Although the quintessential proletarian novel was envisioned as embodying all four of these criteria of differentiation, the operational definition generally settled upon by the mid-1930s was that the proletarian novel described the lives of working-class people from an anticapitalist perspective, one that was intended to arouse militant — at times revolutionary — class consciousness in the text's readers. After 1936, when antifascism superseded revolutionary class struggle among the Communists' strategic priorities, the term “proletarian novel” virtually disappeared from the *New Masses*, the *Partisan Review*, and other journals of the left. It was during the latter half of the decade, however, that the most complex and accomplished proletarian novels emerged, indicating that the challenge of creating effective class-conscious fictional narratives continued to inspire writers throughout the decade.

From the outset the proletarian novel was significantly influenced by international cultural developments, particularly in the Soviet Union. Gold's 1921 *Liberator* essay, “Toward Proletarian Art,” called upon American artists and writers to produce their own version of the *Proletkult* movement emerging in the young Soviet Union. Discussions among the theorists in RAPP, a late-1920s Soviet writers' group — particularly with regard to encouraging working-class authorship and documentary writing — were reproduced in the pages of the *New Masses*. Walt Carmon and later Joshua Kunitz were commissioned with the task of keeping US literary radicals abreast of Soviet developments. A number of US writers contributed to *International Literature*, the journal of the Comintern-sponsored International Union of Revolutionary Writers. But US proletarian writers have been unjustly lambasted for subservience to “directives” issued from the USSR. The recommendations of the 1930s Kharkov conference were duly noted and largely ignored. “Socialist realism,” which in the early 1930s supplanted the call for proletarian literature in the USSR, never caught on among the Americans. Articles by such luminaries as Anatoli Lunacharsky, Maxim Gorky, and Georg Lukács appeared in US left journals throughout the 1930s, but evidently carried less weight than statements by such prominent Americans as Gold, Hicks, and Joseph Freeman. The program outlined in the 1936 anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* was a pure product of America.

Although the standard Cold War account of 1930s literary radicalism would dismiss proletarian novelists as practitioners of a plodding realism, impervious to the subtleties of modernism, in fact the 1930s writers evinced a high regard for literary experimentation. Even those proletarian novelists who opted for conventionally realistic narrative modes were often compelled to draw upon a range of new literary devices to expand their texts' rhetorical range. When they failed to embody left
politics in familiar narrative conventions, their critics were often exacting. Many on the literary left, critics and novelists alike, exhibited great interest in utilizing highly experimental novelistic forms to articulate a leftist politics; Clara Weatherly's *Marching! Marching!* (1935), a novel making use of multiple points of view and a collective stream of consciousness, was the winner of the 1935 *New Masses* contest for the best proletarian novel of the year. Writers and critics on the left may not have generally admired T. S. Eliot, whom they dismissed as a reactionary aesthetic. But they had a complex relationship to such writers as Marcel Proust and James Joyce and they often spoke of their own project as "modern" in terms comparable to Ezra Pound's formulation of "making it new." The post-World War II equation of modernism with a politically quietistic high modernism, itself a product of the Cold War consensus, was alien to the proletarian literary radicals.

If US proletarian writers were neither taking orders from Moscow nor handing over modernism to advocates of art-for-art's-sake, neither were they, as a group, as "left" as has often been supposed. Most of the literary proletarians repudiated the view that art should be propaganda. Although there was a certain amount of talk about literature as a weapon in the class struggle, a close scrutiny of debates over literature and politics carried on the pages of *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, and the organs of John Reed Clubs reveals that, if anything, many on the US literary left endorsed a cognitivist as opposed to an agitational aesthetic. Many left-wing writers and critics felt uneasy with didacticism and preferred literary strategies that seamlessly conjoined politics with narrative; a discourse involving terms like "weaving," "blending," and "merging" dominated in discussions of novelistic aesthetics. To a degree, of course, such complaints were directed at plain old clumsy writing. But they also evinced a widespread and for the most part uninterrogated acceptance of the bourgeois aesthetic premise that a text should show, not tell.

Although aesthetic principles cannot be traced back to political programs without going through multiple mediations, the literary left's embrace of a largely bourgeois aesthetic program is provocatively linked with various reformist tendencies in the broad political program and outlook of the CPUSA. Even at the height of its radicalism — expressed in such a document as William Z. Foster's 1932 *Toward Soviet America* — the CPUSA sent out contradictory signals about the relationship of reform to revolution, of electoral politics and American "democratic" traditions to revolutionary proletarian internationalism. While these tendencies increasingly prevailed during the Popular Front era, they had been present from the forming of the CPUSA in 1919. One can speculatively connect premises about politics with premises about form: just as leftist organizers should not talk too insistently about revolution, bringing in Communist ideas "from the outside" in the Leninist sense, so should literary texts not too insistently jar their readers with political analyses — conveyed through speeches, mentor characters, or even narratorial voice — coming "from outside" the experiences of literary characters. Even though the literary radicals — like 1930s Marxists generally — called for the "better world" of classless egalitarianism, at times they were hesitant about how best to do so in practice.

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Two other features of contemporaneous leftist doctrine and practice are relevant to
a consideration of proletarian fiction. Critics of the left, then and now, frequently
charge that Marxism—in both theory and practice—precludes appreciation of the
special oppression of women and people of color. The record of the 1930s left with
regard to both issues—the “Woman Question” and the “Negro Question,” in
the terms of the day—is somewhat mixed. Left-wing iconography often gendered the
proletariat as muscledly masculine; Communist doctrine adequately theorized the
unpaid labor of women in the home. There was a “women’s page” in the New Masses
that featured recipes, along with discussions of child-rearing and husband-handling.
Yet in both the New Masses and party organs specifically directed to women, such as
Working Woman, women’s participation in the class struggle was emphasized; birth
control and abortion rights were promoted; and the altered gender relations in the
USSR—complete with the abolition of formal marriage—was often highly praised.
With regard to antiracist struggle, the CPUSA’s record is less ambiguous; without
doubt the party was the leading antiracist force in the US during the 1930s. The
vigorous campaigns against lynching and Jim Crow and supporting sharecropper
unions were widely publicized, as was the struggle against “white chauvinism” in the
ranks of the party itself, epitomized in the 1931 intraparty “trial” of Harlem janitor
August Yokinen. In the early 1930s, Communist-led protests against evictions—such
as the one described in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952)—established the party’s
urban antiracist credentials. The largely party-led National Negro Congress addressed
issues ranging from industrial organizing to police brutality to demands for relief;
the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) put multiracial unionism on the map.
Yet the call for class-based multiracial unity—“Black and white unite and fight”—
exists for many years in contradictory coexistence with the call for Negro self-
determination in the South’s Black Belt. Although the CPUSA continually reviled
what it called “narrow nationalism,” it advocated the fostering of “the national con-
sciousness of the Negro people” and acknowledged that the future “Soviet America”
in the Black Belt, however transitional, would be not socialist, but “democratic.”
The ambiguous relationship between Negro nationalism and proletarian interrac-
ialism in Communist theory and practice would at once spur activism and sow confusion,
both in political organizing and in the proletarian literary texts representing the
imbications of race in US class struggles.

Scholarly discussions of proletarian fiction have frequently deployed a taxonomy
based upon the range of subject matters covered in the genre. Proletarian novels
generally fall into five thematic categories; needless to say, any given text can straddle
several categories.

Strikes novels. This grouping includes Weatherwax’s Marching! Marching!; Robert
Cantwell’s The Land of Plenty (1934), another novel set among lumber workers; and
Leane Zugsmith’s A Time to Remember (1936), which treats job actions among workers
in a New York department store closely resembling Ohlbach’s. John Steinbeck’s
In Dubious Battle (1936) and The Grapes of Wrath (1939) both portray the violence
accompanying strikes in the California fields. In addition, a number of pioneering
proletarian novels address the 1929 textile strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, where the CPUSA first attempted labor organizing in the South. Among the Gastonia novels are Mary Heaton Vorse’s Strike! (1930), Grace Lumpkin’s To Make My Bread (1932), William Rollins’s The Shadow Before (1934), Fielding Burke’s Call Home the Heart (1932), and Myra Page’s The Gathering Storm (1932). The high percentage of women novelists treating this strike may be attributable to the legendary role played by the singer and union leader Ella May Wiggins, who was killed by the police.

Novels centering on race and antiracism. Overlapping significantly with the Gastonia novels – where white–black unity emerged as a key issue – this grouping includes such Gastonia sequels as Lumpkin’s A Sign for Cain (1935) and Burke’s A Stone Came Rolling (1935), as well as the stories about Southern racial violence and left organizing gathered in Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children (1940; not strictly a novel, but a unified work of fiction). William Attaway’s Blood on the Forge (1941) treats the use of African Americans as scabs during the massive 1919 steel strike, the defeat of which was the single most drastic loss for organized labor in the first third of the twentieth century. Three historical novels figure significantly in this category, for they relate past struggles against racism to the 1930s: Guy Endore’s Baboock (1934) and Arna Bontemps’s Drums at Dusk (1939), both of which treat the Haitian Revolution; and Bontemps’s Black Thunder (1936), a fictional recapitulation of the aborted slave revolt in Richmond, Virginia, led by Gabriel Prosser in 1800. It bears noting that many novels included in other categories had subplots relating to fighting racism, which was recognized as a central concern by many proletarian writers.

“Bottom Dogs” novels about nonclass-conscious workers. Taking its name from Edward Dahlberg’s 1930 novel about a worker who falls into the lumpenproletariat, this category includes a number of works dealing with hobos and migrants, such as Nelson Algren’s Somebody in Boots (1935) and Tom Kromer’s Waiting for Nothing (1935). B. Traven’s novels about rootless sailors and would-be miners (The Death Ship, 1926, translated 1954, and Treasure of the Sierra Madre, 1928) are pre-1930 texts nonetheless belonging within this subgenre of the proletarian novel. Other texts portray workers who react to their exploitation by scabbing (Louis Colman’s Lumber, 1931, and James Steele’s Conveyor, 1935) or displacing their alienation into sexual or racial aggression (James T. Farrell’s Studs Lonigan trilogy, 1934, 1935, 1936, and Wright’s Native Son and Lawd Today, written in the late 1930s, published in 1935). Many other types of proletarian novels, it should be noted, bring in nonclass-conscious workers as part of their structuring character systems.

Novels featuring the development of class-conscious, sometimes Communist, protagonists. These texts feature a range of protagonsts and situations. Jack Conroy’s The Disinherited (1933), an early instance of this subgenre, features the gradual radicalization of a young miner who becomes a left wing organizer; Myra Page’s Moscow Yankee (1935), more dramatically, portrays the changing consciousness of Andy, an unemployed Detroit autoworker who goes to work in a Moscow tractor factory during the USSR’s First Five-Year Plan and decides to stay. Agnes Smedley’s largely autobiographical Daughter of Earth (1929, 1934) depicts the painful maturation, political and emo-
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tional, of a young woman resisting both class and gender oppression. Isidor Schneider's From the Kingdom of Necessity (1935), also based on the writer's own life, examines the radicalization of a gentle poet; Edward Newhouse's You Can't Sleep Here (1934) treats the political maturation of a young journalist living in a Hooverville in New York's Central Park. Albert Maltz's The Underground Stream (1940) offers a sophisticated representation of a Communist union organizer who is kidnapped and murdered by homegrown US fascists. Stretched a bit, this category can also accommodate Ernest Hemingway's account of a protagonist achieving full life in the shadow of death in his famous antifascist novel set in the Spanish Civil War, For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940).

Novels featuring everyday working-class life. This grouping, often focusing on the effects of capitalism upon families, contains a significant number of texts authored by women. Meridel Le Sueur's The Girl (1978) and Tillie Olsen's Yonnondio: From the Thirties (1978) (both written in the 1930s) examine working-class women's lives—not avoiding such issues as abortion and marital rape—in the context of class exploitation. Mike Gold's Jews Without Money and Thomas Bell's All Brides Are Beautiful (1936) treat families for whom what Marx called the "dull compulsion of economics" is an ever-present reality. Conroy's A World to Win (1935) contrasts the lives of two brothers following different ideological routes but rediscovering their closeness in the midst of class struggle. Josephine Herbst's Rope of Gold trilogy (1933, 1934, 1939) traces multiple generations of a middle-class family, exploring the complex connections between status pressures and political choices on the one hand and the emotional dynamics between husbands and wives, parents and children, on the other. John Dos Passos's USA trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936) - examined below in some detail - covers the gamut of subgenres, but for purposes of classification fits perhaps better here than anywhere else, since it offers an exhaustive portrayal of the varieties of false consciousness afflicting the denizens of capitalist society in the opening decades of the century.

While a taxonomy based upon subject matter enables us to map out the thematic concerns embedded in proletarian novels, our understanding of the ways in which radical writers met the challenge of working left-wing politics into fictional form is better enhanced if we consider subgenres based not upon topic but instead upon narrative strategy. Granville Hicks, in an influential 1934 New Masses series titled "Revolution and the Novel," proposed a formally based taxonomy that provides the scaffolding for such an investigation. Somewhat revising Hicks's categories, we can think of proletarian novels as clustering into four general types: fictional autobiographies, Bildungsromans, multiprotagonist social novels, and collective novels. The fictional autobiography features a first-person working-class narrator-hero who, in the course of the tale, comes to a class-conscious understanding of the forces that have shaped his or her life. Thus Mike Gold's Jews Without Money—which consists of about 85 percent autobiography, according to its author—depicts the coming of age of a young Jewish-American Communist on New York's Lower East Side. The closing epiphany—only on the text's somewhat notorious last page does Gold's Mikey hear
the revolutionary soapbox speech that changes his life — is largely validated by the reader's awareness of the close convergence of experiencing character with narrating author. In Daughter of Earth, Agnes Smedley's portrayal of the internal struggles experienced by her protagonist "Marie Rogers" — combining Marxist social analysis with psychoanalytic probing of subjectivity — is reinforced by the text's felt autobiographical presence. In Jack Conroy's The Disinherited, "Larry Donovan"'s decision to abandon the route of petit bourgeois escapism and accept his place in the muck and mire of proletarian life is buttressed by the experientially based realism with which his work experiences are described. In all these fictional autobiographies, the gaining of mature selfhood is portrayed as inseparable from the acquisition of class consciousness. And while the genre's stress upon authenticity runs the risk of a certain economistic workerism, these texts' representations of proletarian self-actualization provide compelling reading.

The proletarian Bildungsroman (the novel of individual development) also focuses on a single protagonist, but in a patently fictional way: this is the most conventionally novelistic of the modes of the proletarian novel. Often depicting the transformation of false consciousness into class consciousness, this genre ordinarily deploys omniscient narration and an array of minor characters representing a range of political potentialities and stances. Thus Myra Page's account of Andy's politicization in Moscow Yank — his gradual alignment with a new social order struggling to come into being — is linked with his growing love for an emancipated "new Soviet woman." A production plot, focused on the effort to maximize output while democratizing the division of labor, parallels the love plot. Grace Lumpkin's Gastonia strike novel To Make My Bread, which is loosely based on the life of the martyred Wiggins, depicts the emergence of proletarian consciousness in Bonnie McClure, a woman descending from the mountains to the factory: in microcosm, the novel represents the birth of a class. Meridel Le Sueur's The Girl portrays an anonymous young Minnesotan waitress whose preparations for out-of-wedlock motherhood are simultaneously preparations for class warfare. Guy Endore's Babouk relates the dialectical transformation of African tribal collectivity into a steel force to resolve to murder the oppressor: Babouk's own internal contradictions mirror the course of historical necessity.

These and other proletarian Bildungsromans vary in the degree to which they restrict the reader to the parameters of the protagonist's awareness. Page's novel, as it approaches closure, relies excessively upon its conventional love story to paper over contradictions in its treatment of politics and economics. Lumpkin's novel rarely exposes the reader to any knowledge or voices to which Bonnie is not privy; anticapitalism is implied on every page, but revolutionary politics are virtually absent, except through a vaguely leftist mentor character appearing briefly at the end. Le Sueur's text, with its nearly inarticulate protagonist and its conjoining of child-bearing with changing the world, runs the risk of biologizing — and restricting to women — the development of class consciousness. Endore's novel, by contrast, continually inserts historical information about the twentieth century into his narrative of the Haitian revolution, thus hectoring the reader into seeing the present-day implications of Babouk's story. Moscow Yank also means efficaces the impact of differing narratorial voices, political awareness primarily Bildungsroman, the reader's is to challenge the legitimacy of individualism upon which the Wright's Native Son — no text of the genre — exhibits by a writer using a conventional political understanding. In 1937 New Challenge American writers to "accept encourage them, but in or achieved, first, by Wright's nationalism, which runs for other denizens of the urban spectral range is supplied in bestial terms and overall consciousness of other Negroes Max — much more analytically American Tragedy — clarifies In his Jamesian prefatory models for Bigger in the with that of Lenin and f there are "millions" of B of this multilayered modality is to be accepted as grasping Marxist politics in order for the reader to Intuiting the potentialists to bear the burden of abandoning altogether the the multiprotagonist soc large cast of characters Bontemps's Black Thun varying degrees of court debate about the "Righ
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Babouk’s story. Moscow Yankee’s reliance upon romantic conventions lessens but by
no means effaces the impact of its hero’s development into a communist. Despite their
differing narratorial voices, however, all these texts attach the reader’s growth in
political awareness primarily to the main character’s development. In the proletarian
Bildungsroman, the reader’s identification with a class-conscious protagonist can serve
to challenge the legitimacy of the capitalist social order that validates the possessive
individualism upon which the genre was originally based.

Wright’s Native Son – not routinely read as a proletarian novel, but in fact a key
text of the genre – exhibits some of the inventive techniques that could be deployed
by a writer using a conventional novelistic single-protagonist form to project a radical
political understanding. In this novel Wright was faced with a near-insuperable chal-
lenge: how to depict the grounding of Bigger Thomas’s consciousness and actions in
an analysis of capitalist social relations while keeping the reader centered in Bigger’s
thoughts, even as Bigger is shown to have only the most limited understanding of
the forces that have shaped him. This challenge is compounded by the felt necessity
– central to the CPUSA’s line on the “Negro Question,” and elaborated by Wright
in his 1957 New Challenge essay, “A Blueprint for Negro Writing” – for African-
American writers to “accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to
encourage them, but in order to transcend them” (Wright 1978: 40). This feat is
achieved, first, by Wright’s presentation of contradictions within Bigger’s crude black
nationalism, which runs from approval of Hitler to an inchoate desire for oneness with
other denizens of the urban Black Belt. The material basis of Bigger’s limited con-
ceptual range is supplied by such devices as newspaper headlines describing Bigger
in bestial terms and overheard conversations revealing the similarly restricted con-
sciousness of other Negroes of the South Side. The long speech by the CP lawyer Boris
Max – much more analytical than its structural counterpart in the trial scene in An
American Tragedy – clarifies the thesis that Bigger is part of a “nation within a nation.”
In his Jamesian preatory essay “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright notes the many
models for Bigger in the Jim Crow South but then – comparing Bigger’s alienation
with that of Lenin and Gorky observing the Houses of Parliament – observes that
there are “millions” of Bigger Thomaseses, and that many of them are white. The effect
of this multilayered mode of representation is to limn the logic whereby black nation-
alism is to be accepted and then transcended. Bigger does not need to be portrayed
as grasping Marxist politics (“What I killed for, I am,” he famously insists at his end)
in order for the reader to trace the dots connecting race with class.

Intuiting the potential pitfalls accompanying the reliance upon single pro-
agonists to bear the burden of political education, many proletarian writers opted to
abandon altogether the single-protagonist format and to explore the possibilities of
the multiprotagonist social novel, that is, a conventionally realistic text in which a
large cast of characters embody multiple class and ideological positions. In Arna
Bontemp’s Black Thunder, a range of characters, black and white, not only display
varying degrees of courage and fear but also expose the reader to a philosophical
debate about the “Rights of Man” beyond the range of Gabriel Prosser himself. The
continuing relevance of this debate to mid-1930s antiracist movements is subtly implied. Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty* uses the occasion of the lumber mill strike to explore the potentiality for self-rule in the group of workers who make the mill function. It is thus also a novel about the possible seeds of socialism in the capitalist present. William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* treats the Moss brothers as a tripartite protagonist whose conflicts, among themselves and with their environment, embody the principal contradictions within the emerging black proletariat. While Attaway's novel can still be faulted for restricting the reader to the confines of the characters' awareness—a flaw that Ralph Ellison in his 1941 *New Masses* critique attributed to Attaway's incomplete grasp of Marxist dialectics—as a multiprotagonist social novel it bypasses many of the individualistic limitations of the *Bildungsroman* and proves a useful vehicle for representing the tragic outcome of the 1919 steel strike.

Perhaps the most successful—and certainly the most inventive—mode of 1930s proletarian fiction is the collective novel. Similar to the social novel in its portrayal of a broad range of social types, the collective novel goes further by unabashedly taking a whole society as its protagonist. In creating this expanded sense of collectivity, sometimes the text breaks down the notion of "character" as such, creating a group-consciousness in which individual voices become indistinguishable. In Clara Weatherwax's prize-winning novel about striking lumber workers, the workers' meditations about how to respond to a fellow-worker's on-the-job death are rendered as a kind of collective murmur. At times the collective novel features fictional characters who never meet: in Josephine Herbst's *Rope of Gold*, the left-wing journalist Victoria Chance and the union organizer Steve Carson never cross paths. Clearly readers must figure out for themselves why these characters inhabit the same volume: active engagement of the reader in the process of comprehending—and hence shaping—the total social structure is a vital component of many collective novels. Sometimes the text abruptly shifts registers, moving from the fictional lives of individuals to narratorial proclamations about politics and history: the famous interchapters in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which eloquently announce the movement from "I" to "we," constitute a formal culmination of earlier experiments with the collective novel. Still another technique used by collective novelists is the introduction of documentary materials—headlines, leaflets, songs—requiring the reader to separate the wheat from the chaff and to contemplate the construction of historical discourse itself as arena of class struggle. Although this device is also used in the proletarian *Bildungsroman*—as in *Native Son*—its deployment in the collective novel often plays a more significant role, for it figures centrally in the text's interrogation of the relationship between language and ideology. And where the multiprotagonist social novel routinely relies upon conventions of narrative transparency to project its conception of the social order, the collective novel frequently engages in what might be called "critical totalization." Even as they are invited to connect the dots that limn the social totality, readers are made aware that the nature of that totality is itself a matter of political contestation.
The writer who most fully explored the potentialities of the collective novel – indeed, whose name is often associated with its origination and development – is John Dos Passos, whose USA trilogy represents the culmination of attempts to fuse novelistic experimentation with anticapitalist critique. Drawing upon an ecumenical political leftism and written in a kaleidoscopic style drawing upon futurism, cubism, and cinematic montage, the novels of the trilogy provide a trenchant account of politics, economics, and daily life in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The Forty-Second Parallel covers approximately 1900–16; Nineteen Nineteen focuses on the war years, 1917–19; The Big Money covers 1920–28, with provocative nods toward the 1929 stock market crash and the Depression. Overlaid upon the political movements occurring in these periods are significant shifts within Dos Passos’s own political outlook. The Forty-Second Parallel portrays the nation’s emergence as a global capitalist power and the prewar activities of the Socialist Party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) from the standpoint of the free-wheeling, somewhat bohemian radicalism characteristic of the author throughout most of the 1920s. Nineteen Nineteen depicts the carnage of the Great War, the imperialist power grab of the Versailles Peace Conference, and the revolutionary upsurge of 1919 from the closest approach to Marxism in the author’s dramatic political orbit. The Big Money narrates its history of labor repression and growing consumerism from a stance more technocratic than Marxist, invoking the sardonic spirit of Thorstein Veblen.

Each novel consists of four types of interspersed materials: fictional narratives, biographies, Newsreels, and Camera Eyes. The fictional narratives treat a range of characters – from blue-collar workers to media moguls, left-wing organizers to Hollywood starlets – whose lives embody in microcosm the effects of ideological obfuscation, sexual commodification, the lure of the “big money,” and, occasionally, radical politics upon a range of representative Americans. Some characters appear in only one volume, others in all three; some lives intersect frequently, while others remain solitary and marginalized. Although Dos Passos’s distanced and ironic approach to his characters has been criticized as mechanical and behaviorist, his array of imagined types is intended to convey a far-reaching critique of the ways in which capitalism dulls human capacities for understanding and love.

The biographies are prose poem jeremiads, alternately ironic and eloquent, depicting men (and one woman, Isadora Duncan) who, for better or worse, shaped culture, technology, and politics in the early twentieth century. Dos Passos’s heroes – while rarely portrayed without a trace of irony – include Eugene Debs, Luther Burbank, Wesley Everest, Joe Hill, Big Bill Haywood, John Reed, Randolph Bourne, “Fighting Bob” La Follette, the Wright Brothers, Frank Lloyd Wright, Isadora Duncan, and Thorstein Veblen. His villains – or at least objects of contempt – include Theodore Roosevelt, Minor C. Keith, the House of Morgan, Woodrow Wilson, William Randolph Hearst, Samuel Insull, Henry Ford, and Rudolph Valentino. Two of the most gripping biographies are of anonymous figures: the “Body of an American” buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (to whom the hypocritical top-hatted Wilson “brought a bouquet of poppies”) and “Vag,” the unemployed Depression-era
hitchhiker, failed by the American Dream, whose anti-Whitmanian portrait closes *The Big Money*. At once challenging the mythology of the "great man" view of history and exploring the role of the individual in history from a class-conscious standpoint, the biographies link the lives of the fictional characters to larger historical forces of which they are largely unaware.

The Newsreels consist of one- to three-page clumps of newspaper headlines, advertising slogans, fragments of speeches, and snatches of popular songs. Principally the newsreels satirize the capitalist mass media's promulgation of jingoism, antiworking-class propaganda ("Jobless riot at agency"), voyeuristic identification with the lives of the rich and famous, consumerist values, and plain old lies ("Lenin Dead"). Occasionally, however, they include snatches from the left press ("Workers March on Reichstag"; "Ex-Servicemen Demand Jobs"). The effect of this ideological montage is at once to reveal the dominant discourses by which consent is manufactured and to highlight the importance of forging, and publicizing, an alternative language through which to comprehend the class struggle.

The Camera Eye passages, written in a stream-of-consciousness style reminiscent of James Joyce, are musings, often verging on incoherence, representing Dos Passos's own gradual growth into the author of the text. The passages in *The Forty-Second Parallel* cover the author's childhood, privileged but sad and sequestered. *Nineteen Nineteen* reveals the authorial self coming of age as a wartime ambulance driver, would-be soldier, and witness to the fizzling of the 1919 upsurge. In *The Big Money*, the Camera Eye explores his mission as a writer of wavering leftist partisanship who reaches clarity as he participates in the movement to save Sacco and Vanzetti. In the famous climactic words of the trilogy, he denounces those who have "taken the clean words our fathers spoke and made them slimy and foul," and declares, "all right we are two nations." Although we as readers are invited to identify with this moment of clarity, we can do so only if we have done the work Dos Passos has set before us in the preceding 1,500 pages. For there is labor involved in penetrating through reification; to grasp what has produced the riven totality that is the USA entails a multi-leveled understanding of the dialectics of history.

Dos Passos always maintained some distance from the left—even when writing *Nineteen Nineteen*—and the doctrinal politics guiding much of USA invite leftist critique. His "representative" range of characters contains not one nonwhite, and those African-American, Asian, and Hispanic characters making brief appearances conform to denigrating racial stereotypes; Dos Passos lagged considerably behind other white leftist writers who were attempting to grapple with the realities of race in the United States. Although he ably targets the capitalist social relations that warp gender identities, most of Dos Passos's female characters evince even less agency than the males. Dos Passos's portraits of leftist organizers and activists are often cynical and, especially in *The Big Money*, express his growing affinity for caricaturing Communists as "Stalinist" hatchetmen. Even at his most impassioned, moreover, Dos Passos voices disappointment that the nation has been taken over and betrayed, more than commitment to abolishing the class system he has so brilliantly anatomized. The political assumptions and assertions among proletarian novels of American history, as well as the generic roles language text represents one of the high points of Jean Paul Sartre's judgment.

While clearly not all fact in proletarian novel, it is a text not aligned with literary traditions. Nathanael West's *A Real American Hero*, a narrative of the "bottom dogs" proletarian *God (1957)* contains, among other things, the music of their Bahamian accent upon the exploited. William Faulkner's *Light in August* represents a rereading of proletarian both Joe Christmas and abolitionist-descended Joe Armitage. The chapters describe the descent from the hills in resonant of classical tragic narrative. Even writers who were affected by the radicalism of the novel, which they might.

Finally, it bears noting that appear in the years following the novel *Cold War.* Chester Himes's *Lonely City* deduced traces of the Marxism Alexander Saxton's *The Cynics* sympathetic portrait of postwar years as the so-called history in a wide range Hattie Arnow publishing novels by le Pohl, Cyril Kornbluth and Cyril Kornbluth's radical futurist conti Robinson. Novels by Mi bleed, 1982* examined perspective. Novels fact
Hitman portrait closes great man view of history class-conscious standpoint, larger historical forces of newspaper headlines, adversarial songs. Principally the of jingoism, antiworking-classification with the lives of "Lenin Dead." Occasion-Workers March on Reichseconomic montage is at once manufactured and to highlight language through which sciouness style reminiscent, representing Dos Passos' passages in The Forty-Second and sequestered. Nineteen ambulance driver, wouldn't urge. In The Big Money, the leftist partisanship who are Sacco and Vanzetti. In the sea who have "taken the clean," and declare, "all right we identify with this moment of as Passos has set before us in a penetrating through reificat is the USA entails a multi-the left - even when writing much of USA invite leftist cri not one nonwhite, and those brief appearances conform considerably behind other white realities of race in the United nations that warp gender identif less agency than the males. are often cynical and, espe caricaturing Communists as l, moreover, Dos Passos voices and betrayed, more than commonly anonymized. The political assumptions and assertions embedded in USA hardly represent the most radical thinking among proletarian novelists. Nonetheless, in its dialectical and totalizing grasp of American history, as well as its acute awareness of the hegemonic and countervegemonic roles language necessarily plays in narrating that history, the USA trilogy represents one of the high marks of US literary radicalism and supplies the basis for Jean Paul Sartre's judgment that Dos Passos was the greatest writer of his time.

While clearly not all fiction writers of the 1930s participated in the project of the proletarian novel, it is a testament to the influence of the genre that various authors not aligned with literary radicalism can be read as reacting to its themes and conventions. Nathanael West's A Cool Million (1934), primarily a parody of Horatio Alger narratives, treats its hapless hero, Lemuel Pitkin, as a quintessential nonclass-conscious protagonist. His literal dismemberment - he gradually loses various limbs and organs in the course of the narrative - is a surreal play upon the conventions of the "bottom dogs" proletarian novel. Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) contains, among other things, a folkish challenge to proletarianism. The sequence in which Janie and Tea Cake enjoy their labor "on the muck," reveling in the music of their Bahamian fellow-laborers, contains an implicit refutation of the emphasis upon exploitation and suffering in contemporaneous proletarian fiction. William Faulkner's Light in August (1932) can be read as a non- or even anti-Marxist reworking of proletarian themes: the Depression-linked peripatetic existences of both Joe Christmas and Lena Grove are recast in archetypal terms, even as the abolitionist-descended Joanna Burden is suggestively linked with Scottsboro's outside agitators. The chapters in Aftahom, Aftahom! (1936) portraying Thomas Sutpen's descent from the hills into the slave-based plantation economy of the plain, while resonant of classical tragedy, acknowledge the power of a Marxist modes-of-production narrative. Even writers who stayed away from the American Writers Congresses were affected by the radicalism of the decade and, in particular, the model of the proletarian novel, which they might reject but found difficult to ignore.

Finally, it bears noting that the genre of the proletarian novel did not simply disappear in the years following World War II. Early novels of the Cold War, such as Chester Himes's Lonely Crusade (1947) and Ellison's Invisible Man, bear many embedded traces of the Marxism - and Communist experience - which they repudiate, while Alexander Saxton's The Great Midland (1948) goes against the flow with its abidingly sympathetic portrait of a Communist union organizer. Howard Fast emerged in the postwar years as the source of a steady stream of novels examining the red line of history in a wide range of historical contexts: Truman Nelson, Lloyd Brown, and Harriet Arnow published left-wing novels during the height of McCarthyism. Pressures of the Cold War led many left-wing novelists to turn to science fiction; Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, in The Space Merchants (1952), were early practitioners of a radical futurism continuing to this day in the work of such writers as Kim Stanley Robinson. Novels by Margaret Walker (Jubilee, 1966) and John Oliver Killens (Youngblood, 1982) examined African-American experience from a highly class-conscious perspective. Novels focusing on labor conflicts and strikes (John Nichols's The Milagro
Beanfield War, 1976, Denise Giardina’s Storming Heaven, 1987) continued to feature the class struggle. Such contemporary writers as E. L. Doctorow, Dorothy Allison, Barbara Kingsolver, Russell Banks, Marge Piercy, and Octavia Butler have devised a range of imaginative means for exploring concerns resembling those that animated proletarian writers of the Depression decade, even as the discourse of “postindustrialism” predominates among pundits and sociologists alike. We can anticipate that, as long as the capitalist system generates contradiction and conflict, novelists will continue to produce texts that can—through a continual reconfiguring and updating of the category—be termed “proletarian.”

References and Further Reading


In 1919, Arthur W. Calhoun conjures the American family from its traditional form. He means to react against an era that he now categorizes as "sentimental and nationalistic" (Calhoun 1919: 322), and toward his own time as a "time of revolution and the revaluation of the domestic upheaval. These things...inevitable" (p. 33). After that time, Calhoun conjures a new family that is "scientific, pedagogically-oriented, and individualistic. This is not to say that marriage shall be eliminated. More on will emphasize the "sign and race perpetuation" (calhoun 1919: 37). These new family birth control and "equality of opportunity" where necessary, can see Calhoun's history as "new family life" in the way we encounter whenever tainty, Calhoun's work and family in the early because it celebrates ri