Renarrating the Thirties in the Forties and Fifties

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Daniel Aaron, writing about American literary communism at the turn into the 1960s, concluded that the literary radicalism of the 1930s had been one more “turn in the cycle of revolt” characterizing the generational politics of American writers since the early 19th Century. The American writer’s “running quarrel with his [sic] society” springs “as much from his identity with that society as from his alienation,” Aaron argued. When this rebellion fails to sustain itself, the writer is “gradually absorbed into the society he has rejected.” Like earlier “experiments in rebellion,” the 1930s movement had its “ancestors and founders, its foreign prophets, its manifestoes, its saints and renegades.” It “began in joy and end[ed] in disillusionment,” although (here Aaron was probably alluding to the early signs of civil rights activity) “amidst its monuments and ruins are the shoots of rebellion to come” (20, 22).

Aaron’s narrative contains several consolations. First, the American writer’s “odyssey” in communism is presumably over and done with; if there are “shoots of rebellion” amidst its ruins, these are, it seems, of noncommunist species. Second, the American writer’s attraction to communism is best articulated through the vocabularies of religious conversion and apostasy on the one hand and organic growth and decay on the other; history is merely the backdrop against which archetypal cycles play themselves out. Finally, the writer’s embrace of revolution becomes a playing out of filial rebellion against a benign parental authority that receives the chastened rebel (who never really hated Dad after all) back into the fold. The revolutionary cultural movement of the 1930s—in actuality part of a class war against a ruling elite, not a phase in an intrafamilial squabble—is safely assimilated into a patriarchal narrative paradigm simultaneously invoking Freud, the Bible, and Father Knows Best.
As we look at the narrative of which Aaron's own narrative is a part, however, a different popular paradigm comes to mind. For, despite his tone of condescending tolerance, Aaron was himself participating in a witch-hunt in the realm of culture when he wrote *Writers on the Left* (1961). While the most enduring images of this shameful episode are of Langston Hughes and Lillian Hellman summoned before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or of the Hollywood Eleven variously blacklisted and sent to prison, all of 1930s literary radicalism was, in the 1950s, subjected to an ideological inquisition in the arenas of literary criticism and literary history—repeatedly burned, skewered, hanged, drowned. Or, to alter the metaphor only slightly, literary radicalism was treated like a vampire—warned off with garlic, mirrors, and crosses, then killed by both a silver bullet and a stake through its heart. By the early years of the Cold War, literary proletarianism and its offshoots had been subjected to a narrative overkill of which Aaron's parable is only a minor epitome.

My essay addresses three principal components of the process by which literary proletarianism was relegated to the dustbin of cultural history: (1) the reassessment of the achievements and intentions of individual writers that was undertaken in the 1940s and 1950s, (2) the demonization of the Communist Party and systematic distortion of its relation to literary radicalism, and (3) the overall recasting of literary value and literary history in such a way as to marginalize the left-wing literature and criticism of the 1930s. All three strategies, while separable for purposes of analysis, work simultaneously; their interrelations tell us a good deal about the procedures of ideology. The assault upon 1930s literary radicalism was at once concerted, even conspiratorial, and at the same time highly mediated and relatively autonomous. After all, while a conscious agent drives the stake through the villain's heart, there has to be a crowd of torch-wielding townspeople who see the extirpation of the witch—or vampire—as essential to the continued survival of the body politic.

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One strategy of assault upon 1930s literary radicalism was to deny that it had existed at all (this could be called the "holding-up-the-mirror-to-see-nothing" strategy). In his 1948 study *The Age of the Great Depression 1929–1941* (part of Arthur Schlesinger's History of American Life series), cultural historian Dixon Wecter devoted only two pages to proletarian writers in a quite lengthy chapter on Depression-era literature. This practice was to be followed in a number of the anthologies of 1930s literature that began to appear in the 1960s. For example, Louis Filler's *The Anxious Years*, published in 1963, contained only writings by authors who had
either had no connection to communism or had safely distanced themselves from it; proletarianism, as a movement, simply became invisible.

Closely linked to the invisibility strategy was the strategy of separating out certain writers worth salvaging by claiming that they had never been left-wingers. (Alan Wald refers to this process as “the liberal effort to construct an ‘acceptable,’ de-clawed and defanged . . . version of the 1930s” [287]). Alfred Kazin, in his 1942 study *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, saved John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell from the fire. Wocler, too, exempted several from the flames—Dos Passos and Farrell, as well as Leane Zugsmith, Thomas Bell, Richard Wright, Erskine Caldwell, and Robert Cantwell—by claiming that they had never really absorbed Marxist doctrine or possessed Left allegiances. (Wocler was apparently unworried by the sympathetic portraits of Communists in Zugsmith’s *A Time to Remember* [1936], Bell’s *All Brides are Beautiful* [1936], and Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children* [1940], as well as Cantwell’s open claim that he had written *The Land of Plenty* [1934] as “propaganda” for the Left [27]).) Perhaps the classic instance of such backpeddling was Whittaker Chamber’s contention, in his McCarthyite autobiography *Witness* (1952), that the short stories about Communists he had published in the *New Masses*—stories which, ironically, International Union of Revolutionary Writers (IURW) critic Anne Elistratova had praised for their forthright depiction of Communists (107–14)—were about the “spirit of man”; revolutionary politics had simply furnished a “context” for the exploration of this theme (Chambers, 261–64). This strategy of depoliticizing the political was to become increasingly common in commentaries on the 1930s. For example, Richard Pells, in his 1973 *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, read *The Land of Plenty* and Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* as explorations of “the classic theme of the solitary hero who responds to a crisis on the basis of his own inner strength and conviction” (205). Scholars of the radical 1930s increasingly found a metaphysical and existential core in the texts they wished to preserve for posterity.

Such denials of the radicalism of supposedly “good” writers were accompanied by broadside judgments about the inevitably terrible writing produced by writers with irretrievably left-wing commitments. Kazin complained that radical writers “had little interest in literature and were even a little contemptuous of it”; they wrote “conversion epics which always ended with the hero raising his fist amidst a sea of red flags” (380); Aaron charged that proletarian novels “violated almost every literary canon and . . . positively reeked of the Depression” (169); Lionel Trilling mused that proletarian literature reflected the “dreary limitation that overtook the imagination of what life is or might be” (1979, 21); Irving Howe and Lewis Coser concluded that proletarian literature manifested “a vast and programmatic oversimplification of the nature of human experience and a contempt for those aspects of life that could not be contained by a narrow political utilitarianism” (305); Murray Kempton
generalized that the proletarian novel was a left-wing variant on the Horatio Alger formula: "Boy sees vision of exploitation, boy goes on strike, boy finds vision of freedom" (136). Interestingly, none of these critics—and I could list others—felt any obligation to engage in textual criticism, or indeed even cite titles, to justify claims apparently requiring no proof.

Such cavalier dismissal, it bears noting, contrasts with the practice of the mainstream reviewers who initially assessed proletarian novels on a nondogmatic and case-by-case basis. For example, Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!* (1934), said by one Cold War–era 1940s critic to be "a caricature of a novel" (Filler, 15), was hailed by *Saturday Review of Literature* editor Henry Seidel Canby as "not a tract" but a "humanitarian" representation of "a workers' world seething about a revolutionary idea" (12). *Saturday Review* critic Elmer Davis, in his negative review of Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart* (1932), noted that his antipathy to the novel's "propaganda" elements—its topicality, its articulation of various points of party doctrine—reflected his own "bourgeois standards of taste" (662). While reviewers for middle-of-the-road publications hardly exhibited unanimous approval of the emerging genre of the proletarian novel, they tended to approach individual texts without assuming that their authors' left-wing political commitments in some way disqualified them from writing literature worthy of note.

Proletarian literature's Cold War–era critics could proceed as if their dismissive judgments required no argument or evidence largely because of the success of the second major component of the cultural witch-hunt: namely, the demonization of the Communist Party (CP) and the distortion of its role in fostering literary proletarianism. The relation of the CPUSA to literary proletarianism is complex, and I have written on it at considerable length (Foley). For purposes of this discussion, a few summary comments are in order. The most influential figure in setting the agenda for subsequent attacks on the CP was *Partisan Review* editor Philip Rahv, who was briefly a Party member in the early 1930s, gravitated toward Trotskyism in the latter part of the decade and emerged as an apostle of anticommunist liberalism and high modernism in the 1950s. In a series of important essays written in the late 1930s, Rahv legitimately upbraided the CP for its abandonment of proletarianism in the Popular Front, but then went on to mount a series of internally contradictory charges against the CP which amounted to the proposition that it had been both too radical and not radical enough. In its Stalinist attempts to control the left-wing literary movement, Rahv concluded, the CP had wasted the talents of a generation of young writers who had entered its orbit. It had cared more about writers than writing and—in an oft-to-be-repeated phrase—had "substituted the literature of a party for the literature of a class" (1939a, 623; see also Rahv 1939b and 1940).

While Rahv's characterizations and conclusions were in my view unfair and erroneous, at least he had been for some time deeply engaged in the
criticism and promotion of left-wing literature; he had paid his dues. To quite a remarkable extent, however, critics who followed in his path felt no obligation to do more than repeat his litany about the literature of a party and the literature of a class. As Cary Nelson had pointed out, in most discussions of proletarian literature "to recognize the party's influence is to recognize that nothing more need be said" (164). The key buzzword became, increasingly, "Stalinist" - a term that attained (and still largely possesses) well-nigh un-deconstrucatable status. Kazin felt no need to support his charge about the "cheap tendentiousness" of proletarian literature largely because he could claim that "in the Stalinist cosmogony writers, like people, were notoriously cheap" (376). Howe and Coser, who elaborated the first full-fledged description of "Stalinism" in the cultural sphere, quoted Rahv about the literature of a party substituting for the literature of a class and proclaimed - without evidence or discussion - that 1930s literary radicals, in embracing "the politics of the counterfeit collective," had engaged in an act of "political masochism" (507, 290). Arthur Schlesinger, formulating his "vital center" Cold War liberalism, argued that communism offered an easy "totalitarian certitude" in the place of anguished existential "freedom." Literary proletarianism, he averred, had been merely a "cult" by which the Stalinists had attempted to "establish firm control over the literary scene" (56-57, 122). Trilling, castigating liberal intellectuals for their residual loyalty to the USSR (this was in the wake of the 1949 Waldorf Conference), intoned that "the dogged tendency of our time is to ideologize all things into grayness" (1951, 302). Even Walter Rideout, whose 1956 The Radical Novel in the United States is - especially considering its context - remarkably free from reductionist characterizations of the Communist movement, reached the conclusion, largely unsupported by much of Rideout's quite nuanced preceding discussion, that left-wing writers had worked in a regime of "intellectual terrorism" (291).

My own investigation of the available archive renders quite a different portrait of the party's relations with the writers in its orbit. The Left's debates over even the definition of proletarian literature were, as Jack Conroy once complained, unending and inconclusive (Thompson, 159); the Party certainly had no "line" about proletarian literature that it was trying to shove down the writers' throats (Calmer, "Draft Plan"; Browder). The American radicals are frequently charged with taking their orders from the USSR: the fact is, however, that both Soviet and IURW recommendations and models, while taken seriously, were hardly viewed as directives. The American writers never espoused socialist realism; they interpreted key concepts of literary radicalism in their own terms; they largely followed their own needs and their own timetable in implementing the recommendations of the important 1930 Kharkov Conference, which had offered various criticisms of the Communist-led cultural work in the United States. Moreover - and discovering this was one of the big surprises in my research - the U.S. literary radicals, while engaging
in a certain amount of sloganeering about art being a weapon, were in fact quite uncomfortable with the view of literature as propaganda. Communist reviewers rarely complained that writers had not adequately featured, or had misrepresented, Communist heroes; it was Knopf editor Bernard Smith, and not any New Masses critic, who commented adversely on John Steinbeck’s anti-Communist representation of the red organizers in In Dubious Battle (6). Moreover, in most proletarian novels, radical heroes were usually not identified as Communists; the parodic plot summaries offered by Kazin and Kempton actually have quite limited applicability. Finally, while both Marxist critics and left-wing writers would, in my view, have benefited from a serious discussion of the particular rhetorical and political challenges facing writers attempting to instill revolutionary class consciousness in their readers, the major Party literary theorists, to a man (they were, unfortunately, all men), espoused a cognitivist and reflectionist—that is, an anti-hortatory and anti-instrumentalist—view of the function of literature. The maverick critic Kenneth Burke was practically alone in his call for a self-consciously propagandistic conception of the tasks of proletarian literature ("Copy," 1936, 134–47; 1935, 87–94). Using the term "leftism" as a catchall that took in political sectarianism on the one hand and intrusive didacticism on the other, the Communist critics (both the Stalinists and the Trotskyists-to-be) were in fact largely united in their antipathy to the left-wing literature that wore its politics too openly on its sleeve. Indeed, they chastised such literature for exhibiting "lumpy ideology" (Brooks, 23), "revolutionary hysteria" (Dennen, 50), and "the revolutionary equivalent of the Cinderella formula" (Calmer 1935, 17). The commonly accepted notion that a "Stalinist" party imposed an ultradidactic regime upon radical writers and pressured them to write propaganda for the party line is simply not borne out by the historical record.

Finally—and perhaps most important of all—the anti-Communist critics of the 1940s and 1950s drove the stake through the heart of the 1930s literary radicalism by reframing the very terms in which 20th-Century literary history would be narrated and literary texts evaluated. One aspect of this reframing was the definition of modernism as high modernism that emerged in the 1950s. When the 1930s literary radicals undertook their critiques of Eliot, Joyce, and Proust (or, aiming a bit lower, Thornton Wilder), they usually characterized such writers as decadent, subjectivist, elitist, or dedicated to art for art’s sake. Never, however, did they use the label “modernist” to describe this cluster of writers. Indeed, while some of the literary proletarians evinced a fondness for traditional narrative and poetic schemes, as a group they clearly felt themselves to be engaged in an experimental movement. New Masses and Daily Worker critics expressed admiration for such experimental novels as William Rollins’s The Shadow Before (Adler 1934, 7) and Dos Passos’s The Forty-Second Parallel (1930, Hicks 1934, 292). “Proletarian realism,” as defined by Mike Gold (who is usually treated as a proponent
of a simpleminded and banal realism) was an "effect, not a form," and could in fact arise from a wide range of representational strategies (5). As a number of critics have recently pointed out, the proletarians were in fact very much part of an alternative modernism, one articulating a transindividual conception of selfhood, as opposed to the worship of great individuals accompanying the inherited view of the high modernist artist (Nelson, Kalaidjian, Bloom). Only the Cold War—era definition of the significant modernists as the elite avant-garde—an avant-garde that, in Rakh's 1952 formulation, "ma[de] a virtue of its separateness from the mass" (309—10) —has permitted the exclusion of the proletarians from the widespread cultural movement dedicated to what Ezra Pound called "making it new." As various scholars have demonstrated, the restriction of modernism to high modernism was the brainchild of the New York Intellectuals—led by the group around the now-sanitized Partisan Review—and the New Critics, who had put under wraps the more explicitly reactionary politics that had guided them some twenty years before (G. Murphy; Karanikas). (A subtitle originally considered for the 1930 Agrarian manifesto _I'll Take My Stand_ had been "A Tract Against Communism" [Karanikas, 17]). While these new cultural arbiters of the 1950s proposed their definition of modernism as a purely apolitical phenomenon, based upon the unbiased judgment that a movement ought to be identified with its "best" practitioners, it was clearly a territorial—indeed, an imperialist—move designed to elevate conservative writers to canonical status and relegate radical and progressive writers to the margins. The battles of the books being fought every day in English departments around the country in the 1990s are in no small degree further sorties and defensive maneuvers in a war of longer duration than many of us are aware.

As James Murphy has exhaustively demonstrated, there is also a key subnarrative in the modernism renarrative regarding the battle supposedly fought within the Left between pro-modernism, pro-experiment, pro-art anti-Stalinists against Stalinist philistinism. While this version of events is widely accepted, the sides did not align so simply. Rakh and William Phillips (the latter writing as Wallace Phelps) undertook scathing critiques of modernists in the early and mid-1930s. Phillips faulted Joyce for "detach[ing] his characters from significant social patterns" and adjudged Joyce's method useless in "present[ing] social conflict... against a background of class struggle" (26). Rakh determined that Eliot had "fallen into the swamp of mysticism and scholasticism" and must be "discounted as a positive force in literature" (1932, 19). Conversely, _New Masses_ literary editor Granville Hicks, often treated as a Stalinist hatchet man, praised Froust for his "extraordinarily full and detailed portrait" of bourgeois decadence (1974, 13). Leading party theorist Joseph Freeman opined that _Ulysses_ offered a "marvellous mirror of the decay of capitalist civilization"; Joyce, he declared, was a "genius" (636). Accompanying the New York Intellectuals' retelling of the trajectory of literary history, in other
words, is a somewhat self-serving retelling of their own role in this retelling (J. Murphy, passim).

Perhaps it goes without saying that his kind of literary-historical revision could go on only because the now-reigning New York Intellectuals and New Critics—whom Maxwell Geismar ironically termed an "interlocking directorate" (407)—had managed to redefine literary value itself in such a way as to relegate to second- (or third- or fourth-) class status the kinds of texts that had been produced under the aegis of literary proletarianism. A 1930s conservative critic like Elmer Davis, we will recall, had been quite aware that, in stipulating that all great literature is timeless and universal, he was making a "bourgeois" critical judgment. Davis's successors in the 1940s and 1950s were a good deal less methodologically self-conscious. As former fellow-traveler Malcolm Cowley began in the early 1940s the odyssey that would put considerable distance between himself and his 1930s commitments, he declared that the period of "social fiction" had come to an end and that now literature had returned to its source, to "a rebirth of faith in the old values, in love, in friendship, in heroism, in man himself, and a hatred of every social institution that perverts them" (quoted in Schwartz, 105). Among the key phrases here is "every social institution," implying as it does that the significant dualism in human experience is not between competing moral orders, with their differential meanings for the quality of life and consciousness, but between the essence of humanity—alas, a solitary essence—and social institutions as such.

The emerging valorization of qualities such as myth, irony, and alienation as the markers of great literature and art cannot be fully understood apart from the 1950s cultural establishment's disaffiliation from, and disparagement of, the socially committed representations of the 1930s. As Tobin Siebers has noted, the repudiation of the so-called "affective fallacy" by the influential New Critics William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley was couched in language suffused with fear of "emotional chaos, mob psychology, soul cultivation, mass hallucination, and charismatic leadership"; their discovery of "salve in epistemological skepticism and relativism" made a "virtue of cold war paranoia" (45, 38, 34). Serge Guilbault points out that postwar artists' and intellectuals' newfound interest in myths—which abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko dubbed "eternal symbols upon which we must fall back to express basic psychological ideas"—constituted "a way to move beyond the aesthetics of the Popular Front." Alienation, once taken as a signal of decadence, became "a privilege . . . a token of liberty" (112, 110, 159). Great art and literature, according to the newly codified criteria for evaluation, courageously face the existential void and accept uncertainty as the human condition, refraining from postulating the "easy" or "shallow" solution that social reorganization could in some way remedy the inherent solitariness of humanity and the chaotic flux of experience. High modernist canons of aesthetic value, "vital center" liberalism, and plain old anti-Communism are inextricably interwoven in the critical discourse of the early Cold War era.
Clearly it would be reductionist (and, God forbid, “vulgar Marxist”!) to posit that the elevation of irony and paradox as the defining qualities of literary value was all part of a ruling-class conspiracy. Cowley, for one, clearly felt “burned” by his experiences with the 1930s Left. Like many other writers (though, as Ellen Schrecker has shown, not as many as is often supposed [54]), Cowley felt betrayed by the Hitler–Stalin pact and reacted by rejecting politics qua politics. While, according to Lawrence Schwartz, Cowley had a good deal to gain in the 1940s by establishing himself as an appreciator and promoter of the newly discovered “greatness” of William Faulkner, there is no reason to question that he embraced his new values and standards in all sincerity (100–103). To an extent, then, the literary articulation of the Cold War that I am discussing here was a relatively autonomous phenomenon, only loosely linked with the Communist movement’s increasing loss of prestige among former adherents who increasingly devalued socially engaged literature and criticism and searched for aesthetic standards presumably “beyond” history.

To a considerable extent, however, the U.S. ruling class (a red flag term to many, I know, but one that I use advisedly) did play a conscious and concerted role in promoting the abistorical and formalist cultural paradigms embraced by the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics. Schwartz notes that even before the end of the war the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Division began to meet with a core of prominent anti-Communist critics – R. P. Blackmur, Trilling, and Cowley were the inner circle – to plan the expansion of the humanities in the postwar period. While the Foundation did not lay out a political line as such, they made it clear that they wanted to support journals and graduate programs that would foster “cultural rehabilitation” (their phrase) and enable the United States to assume on the cultural front the leadership it was planning to seize on the economic front through the Marshall Plan. Participants in Foundation-sponsored activities were chosen by this inner circle and discreetly screened by the government: Partisan Review had to give a full and self-critical account of its left-wing past. Among the nineteen critics chosen to aid Trilling, Cowley, and Blackmur in their deliberations about disbursing some half-million dollars in funds, some, like William Carlos Williams, had once been affiliated with the Left, but none intimately so. Most had kept their distance from the Left throughout the 1930s; a number in the early 1950s had joined the anti-Communist Congress for Cultural Freedom. Out of the activities of the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Division emerged, among other things, the establishment of Partisan Review, Sewanee Review, and Kenyon Review as the leading critical journals, as well as the positioning of Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Study as the prime site for university-level training in literary criticism (Schwartz, 113–41).

That at least one literary figure was aware of the political implications of his participation in organized anti-Communist activity is signaled by Allen Tate’s comments in a letter written from the 1952 Congress-sponsored International Exposition of the Arts in Paris:
The American branch of the Congress was founded to oppose and discredit the infamous Waldorf Conference in 1949. It is the only "organization" I've ever joined, because it is the only international group opposed to Communism that means business. It will amuse you to know that Red [Robert Penn Warren] was invited to go, but Yale wouldn't give him leave! The others... are Faulkner, Farrell (reformed Marxist), Glenway Wescott, Katherine Anne Porter, and Auden. The curious thing about this list is my old friend Archie MacLeish is not on it... A change has come over the spirit of these "Conferences." Think of an old reactionary like me being there. (quoted in Schwartz, 74)

Referring to the Exposition's difference from the Communist-sponsored League of American Writers conferences of the 1930s and early 1940s, Tate could barely contain his glee at the turning of the historical tables.

Like other modern-day Marxists, I have been reared amidst multiple cautions against mechanistic determinism and conspiratorial conceptions of ideology. What this account of the conjoined activities of the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Division and the Congress for Cultural Freedom reveals, however, is that the ruling class does at times operate quite consciously and purposively in its class interests. The emergence of the Cold War--era cultural consensus was not merely a relatively autonomous phenomenon. As Guibault wryly notes of the conversion of postwar artistic individualism into "an excellent weapon with which to combat Soviet authoritarianism," the "depoliticization of the avant-garde was necessary before it could be put to political use" (143).

If cultural consensuses are the product of determinate historical activity, however, they can also be dislodged and dismantled through determinate historical activity. Much of the revisionary work on 20th-Century literary radicalism that is going on these days—and in particular the retelling of the retelling of the narrative of the 1930s—indicates that not just the texts of this movement, but its larger animating principles, continue to be of interest and, above all, relevance to our world. Maybe the silver bullets and stakes have not done the job after all; maybe we are in for a sequel.

NOTES

1. Aaron's metaphor of wreckage is drawn from the title of Murray Kempton's memoir. For accounts of antiracist organizing stressing the roots of 1950s and 1960s civil rights activity in 1930s radicalism, see Kelley and Horne.
WORKS CITED


