



WRITERS *on the left*

EPISODES IN AMERICAN
LITERARY COMMUNISM

DANIEL AARON

WITH A NEW PREFACE BY ALAN WALD

WRITERS ON THE LEFT:

EPISODES IN AMERICAN
LITERARY COMMUNISM

Daniel Aaron

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Many people find their way to the general through the personal. In that sense biographies have their right. And, that being so, better they should be written without great distortions (small ones are quite unavoidable).

LEON TROTSKY

. . . at the beginning of a revolution, the vividness of emotions always exceeds the importance of events, as at their close the very opposite is sadly true.

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE

It is not the business of writers to accuse or prosecute, but to take the part even of guilty men once they have been condemned and are undergoing punishment. You will say: what about politics? what about the interests of the State? But great writers and artists must engage in politics only as far as it is necessary to defend oneself against it. There are plenty of accusers, prosecutors and gendarmes without them; and, anyway, the role of Paul suits them better than that of Saul.

ANTON CHEKHOV

Forbearance—good word.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

INTRODUCTION TO THE MORNINGSIDE BOOKS EDITION

By Alan M. Wald

IF A WORK of cultural history can be seen as analogous to the scientific works that establish what Thomas H. Kuhn calls “paradigms” in the sciences,¹ Daniel Aaron’s pathbreaking *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961) is a leading contender among literary historical works published during the post-World War II era. Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), appearing just one year after Aaron’s book, may suggest several possible reasons for the endurance of Aaron’s achievement. Anticipating the scientific paradigm theorized by Kuhn, *Writers on the Left* rethinks first principles as a consequence of the accumulation of challenges to older perceptions. Yet Aaron also offers a sufficiently open-ended argument to stimulate subsequent scholars to pursue additional literary problems within its broad framework.²

Thirty years later, there is no doubt that Aaron’s 460-page volume

¹ The term has various meanings, but generally denotes constellations of beliefs establishing a consensus about means and ends, including exemplary “puzzle-solutions.” See Thomas S. Kuhn, “Postscript—1969,” *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Second Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970), pp. 174–210.

² In what is still likely the most provocative consideration of Kuhn, “T.S. Kuhn’s Theory of Science and Its Implications for History,” *American Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (April 1973), David A. Hollinger argues against the facile conflation of the “paradigms” of scientific communities with the somewhat looser programs for research that characterize other professional communities, but suggests that certain works of humanistic scholarship do serve to authorize and structure such programs. On pp. 382 and 384, Hollinger cites as examples C. Van Woodward’s *Origins of the New South* and Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind*, and cavils against the unproblematic representation of history as a Kuhnian scientific community. See also the discussion of literary paradigms in Anthony Easthope’s *Literary and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 3–12.

was *the* pivotal text establishing U.S. “literary radicalism” as a distinctive field in academic as well as popular scholarship. The classic, venerable status of this text can be easily demonstrated by the hundreds of references to it as an authoritative source in virtually all scholarship about U.S. radical writers published since the 1960s in the United States, Britain, and France.³ While many scholars, including myself, have tried to augment Aaron’s work, there has never been another book seriously rivaling his achievement in overall scope, accuracy and insight into the phenomenon of writers in the United States drawn to the far left—first to left-wing socialism, then to the Communist movement—during the first five decades of this century.⁴ This Morningside Books edition pays tribute to the stature of *Writers on the Left* as a historic treasure in twentieth century U.S. literary history that needs to remain permanently available to students, scholars, and general readers.

At the present, teaching and scholarship about politically-committed writers is of greater interest than ever before, despite conservative trends in the U.S. national political climate since the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. However, the field of “committed literature” looks rather different now than it did when Aaron was writing due to the recent emphasis on women writers, writers of color, mass culture, and the rise of a contemporary cultural theory (called “Cultural Studies”) involving a Marxism infinitely more complex, various and recondite than the one discussed in Aaron’s book.⁵ Nevertheless, it would be a mistake for

³ While these are the main countries where I follow the scholarship on United States literary radicalism, I have seen references to *Writers on the Left* in work from Germany and Italy, and there are no doubt many references in the scholarship of other countries as well.

⁴ Between 1987 and the present I have been researching a new kind of history of U.S. writers and Communism (focusing on noncanonical figures and decades; mass culture; women and Gay/Lesbian writers; and Latino, Asian American, Native American and African American aspects), and I have re-interviewed a number of the people with whom Aaron spoke, as well as some new ones who weren’t talking in earlier decades. I have also re-examined many of the papers Aaron saw, plus reviewed many new deposits of archival material. I can testify that, on a factual level, there is very little to be contested in his remarkable book. In fact, I am amazed at how much he got right, considering the political climate when he undertook his research and the fact that much crucial scholarship had not yet been done. In the three decades since the publication of *Writers on the Left*, many dissertations, books and essays have gone over similar terrain without displacing the centrality of Aaron’s book.

⁵ A competent survey of this new methodology can be found in Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe’s Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

students and younger scholars to see *Writers on the Left* as bound by the context in which it was produced, thereby reducing it to a foil that serves only to exemplify the "old," pre-enlightened mode of discussing culture and politics. It is crucial to recognize that Aaron accurately recreated the left cultural movement in the United States as its major surviving participants themselves experienced it, and that by doing so he, in some important ways, transgressed the bounds of the conventional scholarship of his day. The task of a new generation of scholars is not to freeze his study but enlarge upon it by invoking new areas of knowledge and fresher evaluative categories. Toward this end, Aaron's work will no doubt be the source of some meanings different from those he originally produced, but the book will always be foundational in the historiography of studies of committed writers.

GENESIS

Writers on the Left was not the first significant work on its subject. Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900–1954*, a chronicle and typology of fictional texts and related debates, appeared in 1956, while Irving Howe and Lewis Coser's *The American Communist Party: A Critical History*, with biting chapters on Communist literary foibles, was published in 1957. Hitherto, there had been published a series of anticommunist tracts and Cold War prompted confessions relating to the subject of Marxism and literary intellectuals. One was Eugene Lyons' 1941 journalistic survey, *The Red Decade*, whose introduction was candidly titled, "In Defense of Red-Baiting." Another was Richard Crossman's 1950 anthology, *The God That Failed*, that featured two U.S. writers among its six contributors.

Despite these and a few other writings about the U.S. literary left, it was Aaron's study that inaugurated the field as we know it today, with its characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Based on massive research, it is exceptionally readable and replete with reliable summaries. Aaron comprehensively reviews the knottiest debates in a lively, polished manner. His scholarly apparatus is substantial, yet it never retards the pace of the book. The tone is mature and balanced. Most important, Aaron's central thesis remains the basis of the bulk of the most productive scholarship in the field that has ensued. He argues convincingly that

the Depression and the Communist Party did not *create* literary radicalism; it *focused* and *canalized* an indigenous tradition that had, and still has, its own roots and *raison d'être*.⁶ Aaron's fascinating chapters on the first three decades of this century notwithstanding, *Writers on the Left* is ultimately about the unhappy marriage of Communism and the U.S. cultural left.⁷ With the unravelling of the marriage in serious ways after 1939, the narrative begins to lose steam.

Aaron wrote the book while teaching English at Smith College, a position he had assumed in 1939. In 1971, he left Smith to join the Harvard English Department, serving also for a time as chair of Harvard's Committee on American Civilization. He initially came to his subject from a unique position, having more than merely arm-chair knowledge. Born in 1912 in Chicago, he graduated from the University of Michigan in 1933. In the late 1930s, as a graduate student at Harvard, he observed first-hand the pro-Communist intelligentsia active in the Harvard Teacher's Union. Some of these raised funds for the Republican cause in Spain, and a few met in a discussion group at his apartment where Communist Party intellectual Granville Hicks expostulated on the *Handbook of Marxism* (1935). According to a memoir published in the 50th anniversary issue of *Partisan Review*, Aaron's friend Hicks, then a "counsellor" at Harvard, invited him to join the party but, although he considered himself decidedly to the left of the New Deal, the organization had no attraction for him because of its church-like qualities.⁸ Twenty years later, partly because he had never been a party member, Aaron was invited to write a book on the impact of Communism on writers for a series sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Although previously he had had no inclination to engage in such a study, he was nonetheless in an enviable situation to make use of personal contacts from his Harvard days—not only Hicks, but also Robert Gorham Davis, who had been in the party while at Harvard and later came to teach at

⁶ This argument is stated in the beginning of the Preface to the first edition of *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), pp. ix–xii.

⁷ On the cover of the first edition is the following description: "The impact of the idea of Communism on American Writers of the past fifty years, both on those who accepted it and on those who did not."

⁸ Daniel Aaron, "Cambridge 1936–39," *Partisan Review* 50 (Double Anniversary issue, 1984–85): 833–37.

Smith; and Newton Arvin, a party enthusiast during the 1930s who also taught at Smith. Aaron additionally developed a close association with Joseph Freeman, the fallen *New Masses* editor who served as Aaron's "Virgil" in his journey through the left-wing cultural world on both coasts.⁹ No doubt Aaron's awareness that these participants in the events to be depicted in the book would be eventually reading it, if they were not already looking over his shoulder as he wrote, encouraged the "negotiated" character of the work that emerged.

More specifically, responsiveness to the perspectives of such diverse acquaintances such as Mike Gold and Max Eastman, probably accounts for the peculiarly non-partisan character of the paradigm Aaron established. On the one hand, *Writers on the Left* was praised by some reviewers, including the novelist Philip Bonosky writing in the Communist theoretical organ, for lacking the stridency one might expect in light of the controversiality of the subject. On the other hand, there were literary critics, including the one-time Trotskyist sympathizer William Phillips, who felt that Aaron's personal assessments were too weak, a view to which Aaron himself came to subscribe.¹⁰

⁹ Letter from Aaron to Wald, July 25, 1989. Aaron later came to consider this a mixed blessing since Freeman, hoping to gain some degree of rehabilitation in intellectual life through Aaron's book, was understandably selective about the information he made available and the directions in which he pointed the young scholar.

¹⁰ The major reviews include: Anonymous, "The Fellows Who Traveled," *Time*, Feb. 2, 1962, p. 64, 66; Philip Bonosky, "On Writers on the Left," *Political Affairs* (September 1962): 41-47; Robert Gorham Davis, "Social Chronicle of Literary Communism," *New Leader*, Dec. 11, 1961, pp. 27-30; Whitaker T. Deininger, "Literary Rebels," *Christian Century* 79 (March 7, 1962): 294-5; David Dempsey, "Ideological Hay Ride," *Saturday Review*, Dec. 9, 1961, pp. 21-22; Merle Fainsod, "Their Beacon Light Was Red," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, Nov. 12, 1961, p. 10; Harry Hansen, "When Authors Turn Left and Write," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, Dec. 10, 1961, Part 4, p. 9; Irving Howe, "High Hopes That Led to Disillusion," *New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 12, 1961, pp. 1, 26; Bernard Kreissman, *Library Journal*, Vol. 86: 4185, Dec. 1, 1961, p. 4185; Perry Miller, "Literary Communism," *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 22, 1961, p. 11; William Phillips, "What Happened in the 30s," reprinted in *A Sense of the Present* (New York: Chilmark, 1967), pp. 12-29; Robert Wheeler, "Some Aspects of American Communism," *The Yale Review* 51 (March 1962): 463-467. In his "Preface to the Galaxy Book Edition," Aaron states that he "didn't suffuse sufficiently enough or critically enough his own point of view into the book as a whole" (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. xii.

IMPACT

Partly because of such broad sympathies on the part of its author, *Writers on the Left* became a pioneering study that effectively brought to life in its pages a number of the leading men (and I say "men" deliberately, because no women were featured) who initiated and guided the radical literary movement over five decades: Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, John Reed, Randolph Bourne, Joseph Freeman, John Dos Passos, Michael Gold, V. F. Calverton, Granville Hicks, and Malcolm Cowley. Aaron employed a complicated but lively structure inspired by John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy that enabled him to shuttle among group narratives, representative figures, and inter-chapters. He combined biography and cultural history to present a general chronology of the rise and fall of the literary left.

In 1968, James B. Gilbert, a historian once associated with the journal *Studies on the Left*, found it necessary to trace some of the same ground as *Writers on the Left* in order to present the context of *Partisan Review* in his *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America*. Gilbert used a similar historico-cultural narrative over several decades to establish the first cogent perspective on the evolution of the pro-modernist, anti-Stalinist communists who gathered around *Partisan Review* after it broke with the official Communist Party in 1936–37.¹¹

The more specialized studies that followed Gilbert's book aimed to fill many other gaps that remained in the field; more recently there have been efforts to advance the serviceable but comparatively atheoretical methodology of Aaron and Gilbert. Starting in the 1980s, there also have been significant steps forward in the recovery of women's literary radicalism through the "rediscovery" of Josephine Herbst, and the growing recognition of the importance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le

¹¹ Numerous scholars have subsequently made important contributions to this area, including Thomas Bender, Alexander Bloom, Terry A. Cooney, Serge Guibaut, Neil Jumonville, S. A. Longstaff, Mark Schechner, Harvey Teres, and Stephen Whitfield.

¹² A few examples: Constance Coiner, "Literature of Resistance: The Intersection of Feminism and the Communist Left in Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen," in Lennard Davis and M. Bella Mirabella, eds., *Left Politics and the Literary Profession* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 16–185), and "'Pessimism of the Mind, Optimism of the Will': Literature of Resistance," Ph.D. Dissertation, UCLA, 1987; Elinor Langer,

Sueur.¹² These last two writers are especially significant because, still active in politics and literature today, they openly embrace their roots in the Communist experience of the 1930s; hence are living exemplars of the relevance and vitality of certain aspects of the Communist literary tradition as a usable past. Publishing projects by the Feminist Press, Monthly Review, and West End Press have brought back into circulation novels by Fielding Burke, Josephine Herbst, Myra Page, Josephine Johnson, and Tess Slesinger, and volumes of short fiction and reportage by Le Sueur and Mary Heaton Vorse. In 1987, a vibrant collection edited by Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz, *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930–1940*, returned to print the work of fifty additional authors. There have been similar developments involving the publication of biographies of writers of color such as Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes, but the task remains of reconstructing and assessing how a significant component of the African-American left-wing intelligentsia was shaped partly through an encounter with Communism.¹³ In recent decades there have been new studies of Marxist writers outside of New York City—for example, in Hollywood and the mid-West—but work done in other regions (such as the South, the Southwest, and the San Francisco Bay Area) remains largely unexplored.¹⁴

Josephine Herbst: The Story She Could Never Tell (Boston: Atlantic, 1984); Candida Ann Lacey, "Engendering Conflict: American Women and the Making of Proletarian Fiction," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Sussex, 1986; Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Deborah Rosenfelt, "From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition," *Feminist Studies* (Fall 1981): 7: 370–406; Joan Wood Samuelson, "Patterns of Survival: Four American Women Writers and the Proletarian Novel," Ph. D. Diss., Ohio State University, 1982.

¹³ The major study of the African-American Cultural left is Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967), a powerful polemic that makes no claim to providing a balanced treatment of its targets, such as John O. Killens, Julian Mayfield, Lorraine Hansberry, and Paul Robeson. A number of provocative ideas can be found in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London: Zed, 1983). Among the biographies of African American writers are: Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow, 1973); Arnold Rampersand, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, Two Volumes (New York: Oxford, 1986 and 1988); Wayne Cooper, *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); and Manning Marable, *W. E. B. DuBois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1986).

¹⁴ The major study of the Hollywood Left is Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The*

Aaron's book also succeeded in establishing the field as a meaningful and lively area of research at a politically significant moment—the early 1960s. The critical distance that allowed the author to stand above political partisanship, while rendering the main actors he portrayed sympathetic, could hardly have been more effective than at the inauguration of a new era of radicalization. Indeed, I myself was handed the book by a hard-bitten, cynical, older reporter at the *Washington Post*, where I was employed as a copy boy during the summer of 1965. She was dismayed at the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and anti-war buttons that I wore at work, and wanted to show me that this sort of radicalization had happened before, inevitably leading to a bad end. Instead, the book allowed me to see a role for myself as an aspiring writer in relation to the movements for social change then unfolding around me.

The widespread, favorable reception of the book was an indication that McCarthyism was in retreat as an intellectual force, and that a new mood of political tolerance was in birth. *Writers on the Left* was followed by reissues of anthologies of writings by Randolph Bourne and Malcolm Cowley;¹⁵ memoirs by Edward Dahlberg, Max Eastman, Granville Hicks, Matthew Josephson, and Alfred Kazin;¹⁶ selected

Inquisition in Hollywood (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980). See also Nancy Lynn Schwartz, *The Hollywood Writers' Wars* (New York: Knopf, 1982), Victor Navasky's *Naming Names* (New York: Viking, 1982), and Bernard F. Dick, *Radical Innocence: A Critical Study of the Hollywood Ten* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Kentucky Press, 1989). Douglass Wixson has published many essays on the mid-West radical writers movement, and his forthcoming biography of Jack Conroy will be a major contribution to U.S. cultural history. Robbie Lieberman's "My Song Is My Weapon": *People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), is an insightful and well-researched study that also covers fresh terrain. Moreover, there are quite a few recent biographies of individual writers that cover neglected areas in considerable detail. Among the most thorough are Townsend Luddington, *John Dos Passos: A Twentieth Century Odyssey* (New York: Dutton, 1980) and Janice R. MacKinnon and Stephen R. MacKinnon, *Agnes Smedley: The Life and Times of an American Radical* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986).

¹⁵ *The World of Randolph Bourne*, edited by Lillian Schlissel (New York: Dutton, 1965); Malcolm Cowley, *Think Back on Us: The Literary Record* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972) and *Think Back on Us: The Social Record* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

¹⁶ Edward Dahlberg, *The Confessions of Edward Dahlberg* (New York: Braziller, 1971); Max Eastman, *Love and Revolution: My Journey Through an Epoch* (New York: Random House, 1964); Granville Hicks, *Part of the Truth* (New York: Harcourt, 1965); Matthew Josephson, *Infidel in the Temple* (New York: Knopf, 1967); Alfred Kazin, *Starting Out in the Thirties* (New York: Atlantic, 1965).

writings from the *Masses*, *New Masses*, and *Anvil*; ¹⁷ and anthologies of writing during the Depression edited by Aaron and Robert Bendiner, Louis Filler, Jack Salzman, and Harvey Swados.¹⁸ Reprints of radical novels by Jack Conroy, Edward Dahlberg, Daniel Fuchs, Michael Gold, Robert Cantwell, Tillie Olsen, Henry Roth, Tess Slesinger, Dalton Trumbo, Nathanael West, Richard Wright, Chester Himes and others were published in years following the appearance of *Writers on the Left*.

Aaron's book had just the right tone to transmit the legacy of the literary left as a usable past to the new generation at the beginning of the 1960s, although he was equally concerned with explaining it to veterans of the struggles of the 1930s. Aaron's book was one of the Fund for the Republic's series on "Communism in American Life," whose main purpose was to counteract the McCarthyite myth that Communism in the United States was a conspiracy by demonstrating, instead, that its attractiveness for intellectuals was due their collective lapse in judgment. Aaron nonetheless had a genuine affection for many of the individuals discussed. If he consented to the mood of the late 1950s in judging those who considered themselves revolutionaries to be thoroughly misguided, he also drew back from Howe and Coser's conclusion that the Communist experience had to be assessed mainly in the negative, as having "exerted a profoundly destructive and corrupting influence upon American radicalism," resulting in "an enormous waste of potentially valuable human beings. . . ." ¹⁹

Aaron also refused to endorse withdrawal and disenchantment as acceptable responses to the problems facing disillusioned left-wing literary intellectuals. The concluding paragraph of *Writers on the Left* admits no easy answer to the problems posed by the Communist experi-

¹⁷ Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson, eds., *Writers in Revolt: The Anvil Anthology, 1933-1940* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1973); Joseph North, ed., *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties* (New York: International, 1969); William L. O'Neill, ed., *Echoes of Revolt: The Masses, 1911-1917* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966).

¹⁸ Daniel Aaron and Robert Bendiner, eds., *The Strenuous Decade: A Social and Intellectual Record of the 1930s* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Louis Filler, ed., *The Anxious Years: America in the 1930s* (New York: Capricorn, 1963); Jack Salzman with Barry Wallenstein, *Years of Protest: A Collection of American Writings in the 1930s* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); Harvey Swados, ed., *The American Writer and the Great Depression* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

¹⁹ See the concluding chapter, "Toward a Theory of Stalinism," in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Praeger, 1957), pp. 500-554.

ence: "We who precariously survive in the sixties can regret their inadequacies and failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their self-righteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and ineffective, to change the world."²⁰ The phrase "change the world," drawn from Marx's Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, was also the title of Michael Gold's column in the *Daily Worker* and of a collection of his columns published by International Publishers in 1936. Aaron profoundly disagreed with Gold, but did not despise or caricature his efforts or those of his comrades.

Writers on the Left, in fact, is riven by a deep ambivalence. It was unquestionably anti-Soviet (in the sense that it opposed the policies and practices of the regime of the USSR), but this understandable anti-Stalinism was not marked by the shrill, smug self-righteousness of mainstream Cold War liberalism, honed to an art form by Sidney Hook. Aaron's anti-Stalinism, while anti-Leninist as well, was not anti-Marxist. Aaron saw the Communist Party as an intolerable straight jacket on writers; but he did not advocate anti-Communism as a more important concern for U.S. intellectuals than anticapitalism, or conclude that writers and leftwing politics are inherently a disastrous mix.

Through his consideration of the relatively independent behavior of Joseph Freeman, Aaron tended to deflate the myth that Communist Party members were nothing but mindless "soldiers of Stalin." Simultaneously, through his discussion of Granville Hicks, who seems to have been painfully gutted by the Communist experience, Aaron made a convincing case that excessive Soviet influence on U.S. radicals was among the primary causes of the failure of the leftwing literary movement.

In the main, *Writers on the Left* developed what would become a more prominent genre in United States scholarship, the social and political history of intellectuals. Yet also, perhaps in an inconsistent and intuitive way, Aaron's polyphonic approach pointed toward certain features of what we now call the "new" social history. Instead of restricting himself to quoting and discussing the most prominent writers or official pronouncements, Aaron presented opinions from a wide range of individuals (not just the "head-boys," as Josephine Herbst later

²⁰ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Oxford, 1977), p. 396.

complained, although they certainly were all men).²¹ He drew from personal interviews, private letters, obscure publications, and political documents, as well as essays, fiction, and memoirs. Today, of course, it is easy to fault Aaron for his failure to pursue the categories of class, gender, race and ethnicity; it would be harder to fault him for errors of fact, which are few.

As a result of Aaron's influence, the paradigm of U.S. radical literary studies came to have three general features. First, the field has at its center the complex interaction between the indigenous traditions of U.S. writers and Communism—both Communism as an ideal, and the narrower promulgation of "Stalinism" by the institutions of the Communist Party USA.²² This is a valid approach because the Communist experience of the 1930s was in many respects the zenith of writers on the left until the 1960s, at least from the perspective of numbers of left writers and their production of critical and creative writings. A case has also been made by James B. Gilbert, myself, and several others, for the importance of Trotskyist-influenced communism as an additionally fruitful arena of inquiry in quest of writers responsive to modernism and contemporary Marxist aesthetics—not to mention those searching for more democratic forms of communism. No one, however, has as yet been successful in making the argument for a substantial achievement in fiction, poetry or literary criticism on the part of social democrats and anarchists, or other types of radicals in the 1930s or thereafter.²³

A second feature of the paradigm is that the central literary form for left writers is the novel—especially the "proletarian" novel.²⁴ In the U.S. the proletarian novel was the Communist Party's favored term for

²¹ "[Aaron's] heroes were the entrepreneurs of writing, the head-boys who have also been responsible for the rehashes." Herbst quoted by David Madden in his "Introduction" to a collection of scholarly essays on *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. xxi.

²² See Aaron, *Writers on the Left*, *ibid.*, xvii.

²³ Of course, there have been major studies of individual intellectuals such as Daniel Bell, John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others. Among the most remarkable are Howard Brick, *Daniel Bell and the Decline of Intellectual Radicalism: Social Theory and Political Reconciliation in the 1940s* (1986) and Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (1991).

²⁴ For the introduction of the category of "proletarian literature" into U.S. writing, see Eric Homberger's fine chapter, "Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs," in *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900–1939: Equivocal Commitments* (New York: St. Martins, 1986), pp. 119–140.

the radical novel in the early Depression, although a tradition of radical literature dealing with working-class activities lasted well beyond the 1930s. The proletarian novel has been the subject of more than ten dissertations, with several others in progress.²⁵ Studies of Marxist criticism, reportage and drama in the United States are significantly fewer, although hardly negligible.²⁶ The most serious absence has been the failure of scholars to devote appropriate attention to leftwing poetry, especially that written by such poets as Stanley Burnshaw, Joy Davidman, Sol Funaroff, Carlos Bulosan, Frank Marshall Davis, Aaron Kramer, Horace Gregory, Robert Hayden, Norman Macleod, Don Gordon, Isidor Schneider, and Genevieve Taggard.²⁷

A third feature of the paradigm is that the field was for a long time isolated from the development of contemporary Marxist theory; conven-

²⁵ John Scott Bowman, "The Proletarian Novel in America" (Pennsylvania State U., 1939); Cheryl Sue Davis, "A Rhetorical Study of Selected Proletarian Novels of the 1930s: Vehicles for Protest and Engines for Change" (U. of Utah, 1976); William R. Day, "The Politics of Art: A Reading of Selected Proletarian Novels" (Drew University, 1983); Adam J. Fischer, "Formula for Utopia: The American Proletarian Novel, 1930-1959" (U. of Massachusetts, 1974); Robert William Glenn, "Rhetoric and Poetics: The Case of Leftist Fiction and Criticism During the 1930s" (Northwestern U., 1971); Robert Haugh, "Sentimentalism in the American Proletarian Novel" (U. of Michigan, 1948); Calvin Harris, "Twentieth Century American Political Fiction: An Analysis of Proletarian Fiction" (U. of Oregon, 1979); Kenneth Lee Ledbetter, "The Idea of a Proletarian Novel in America, 1927-29" (U. of Illinois, 1963); John A. Penrod, "American Literature and the Great Depression" (U. of Pennsylvania, 1954); John C. Suggs, "The Influence of Marxist Aesthetics on American Fiction" (U. of Kansas, 1978); Joel Dudley Wingard, "Toward a Worker's America: The Theory and Practice of the American Proletarian Novel" (LSU, 1979).

²⁶ A few of the major works are: Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford, 1974); David P. Peller, *Hope Among Us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Marxism and Culture: The CPUSA and Aesthetics in the 1930s* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980); William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford, 1973).

²⁷ Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) may augur the beginning of a major revision of this neglected tradition. Jack Salzman and Leo Zanderer's *Social Poetry of the 1930s: A Selection* (New York: Burt Franklin and Co., 1978), remains a major source of key poems. One of the few long-time radical poets to receive significant attention is Thomas McGrath, although most of it came close to the time of his death. See Frederick C. Stern, ed., *The Revolutionary Poet in the United States: The Poetry of Thomas McGrath* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1988).

tional literary judgments prevailed, forming a consensus that the literary contributions by leftists were significant but modest, having sociological rather than “literary” value. With the exception of an occasional essay on Kenneth Burke by Fredric Jameson or Frank Lentricchia, commentary on Carlos Bulosan by E. San Juan, Jr., or Marxist-feminist insights by Deborah Rosenfelt and Elaine Hedges, a substantial encounter of contemporary Marxist aesthetics with U.S. literary radicalism did not occur during the 1970s or early 1980s.²⁸ However, a dramatic new phase of reconsideration is under way, heralded by Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery*, Paula Rabinowitz’s *Labor and Desire*, and James Bloom’s *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), as well as books-in-progress by Constance Coiner, Barbara Foley, and Douglass Wixson.²⁹

ASSESSMENT

Among the most striking features of *Writers on the Left* is the way that Aaron roots the leftist literary tradition in indigenous trends in U.S.

²⁸ See Fredric Jameson, “The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis,” *Critical Inquiry* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 507–23; Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); E. San Juan, Jr., *Carlos Bulosan and the Imagination of the Class Struggle* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1972); Rosenfelt, *op cit.*; Elaine Hedges, “Introduction,” *Ripening: Selected Work of Meridel Le Sueur, 1927–1980* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982). A fine book-length extension of the humane, liberal approach to judgments about the 1930s is Marcus Klein’s *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature, 1900–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²⁹ One explanation for this bifurcation between the advance of Marxism in literary theory and, frankly, its tortoise-like progress in the study of U.S. literary radicalism, may lie partly in the European sources of contemporary theory. That is, the U.S. specialists in Marxist aesthetics—spearheaded, of course, by Fredric Jameson—have drawn upon Lukács, the Frankfurt School, Althusser, and Eagleton, each of whom has a European frame of reference. As a consequence, the U.S. disciples have until recently tended to discuss figures such as Balzac and Conrad, with the exception of a few recent books outside the 1930s, such as Carolyn Porter’s *Seeing and Being: The Plight of the Participant Observer in Emerson, James, Adams, and Faulkner* (1981) and June Howard’s *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985). On the other hand, those engaged in U.S. literary radicalism as their primary area of research, have until the 1980s (when veterans of the 1960s movements achieved tenure) suffered in part from the relative absence of senior Marxist literary theorists in the field of U.S. literature to guide dissertations and encourage work.