

**WRITERS
ON THE
LEFT**

DANIEL AARON

WRITERS ON THE LEFT

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

PREFACE TO THE GALAXY BOOK EDITION

LET'S ASSUME from the outset that it is presumptuous for an author—especially an academic author—to undertake a post-mortem of his book even if he does so for the purposes of scholarly discussion. On such occasions he is likely to become self-conscious or self-defensive or overly apologetic. But if he submits himself to such an exercise, what is the safest approach he can take? Perhaps to view the writing and reception of his book as a discrete historical 'event' and to offer his reconsiderations almost as if he were *amicus curiae* rather than party to an action.

Writers on the Left was commissioned. It had never occurred to the author to write a book on Communism and American writers until he was invited in 1955 to contribute to a series of studies of Communist influence in American life sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Some of his friends warned him that it was premature to write such a book, that he was opening up a can of worms, and the first public response to the Foundation announcement seemed to bear out these apprehensions. J.B. Matthews, "garrulous and unstable" (according to Arthur Schlesinger) and ideological aide for Senator Joseph McCarthy, roasted the Ford scholars in the *American Mercury* as crypto-Reds or at best as biased and incompetent and predicted the Ford project would

Paper delivered before the American Literature Section of the Modern Language Association in December 1972, at the invitation of the program chairman, Professor Michael Millgate. Each participant was asked to review one of his own books and indicate what further work in the same general area seemed most interesting. First published in the *Indian Journal of American Studies*, III (June 1973).

be "the largest pile of mis-educational printed matter on Communism ever to roll from the presses in this country." Most of the writers involved conducted their researches in what might be called a 'below-board' way—sneaking interviews, submitting to inspections by their suspicious subjects, taking measures to protect their informants.

The author never really finished his book. He just stopped writing, knowing how much he had left undone. Probably every author discerns a good many weaknesses in his book before he submits it to the publisher. He secretly hopes that the flaws so apparent to him will not be as obvious to his readers. This feeling may be less intense, though not altogether absent, if his subject is unprovocative; but if he is breaking new ground, if his scope is large, if the topics introduced are the kind that arouse intense feelings and highly partisan responses—then his uneasiness is likely to be great. This is especially so when he is trying to justify an excursion into the 'visitable past,' when he knows that many of the persons who figure in the book (as well as their friends and enemies) will be around to read it.

Writers on the Left got a friendly and, at the same time, a critical reception, partly owing to its subject matter and partly to the timing of its publication. After two decades, the 30's—the memories of which had been forgotten, or, more likely, suppressed in intellectual and cultural circles—were about to be activated. By 1961 the fears and animosities engendered by Senator McCarthy and his inquisitors had largely if not entirely diminished. The timid 50's had come to a close. All the same, many of the men and women once active in radical affairs hardly relished the prospect of seeing their pasts dredged up—even in the interest of social history. A number of them had become prominent in academic life, in publishing, films. Some held government office. Some were writers, art dealers, labor officials, businessmen.

But what fears they may have had proved groundless. Neither his book (nor any other book in the Ford series) 'named names' or touched off any investigations. The book was widely reviewed; it inspired a considerable amount of unpublished commentary as well—some of it in the form of crank mail but more of it from people who had lived through the period covered in the book and who knew at

first hand the episodes and people discussed. In addition to communications from strangers, the author had the criticisms of friends and the supplementary reflections of informants to ponder.

Now after more than a decade, he is pondering this book again. The blemishes immediately spotted by both friendly and unfriendly critics in 1961 stand out more plainly than ever. The spate of monographs, biographies, memoirs, letters, and articles about the 1930's—if they don't invalidate the facts and interpretations of *Writers on the Left*—certainly complement them, amplify them, show them in different contexts. This was bound to happen given the quickened interest in the decade and the fact that many of the writers mentioned in the book—Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Edward Dahlberg, Mike Gold, Max Eastman, Josephine Herbst, Jack Conroy and others—had reached that stage in their lives when they wanted to set the record straight in their own terms. In some instances the author was directly responsible for these revelations. He urged Mike Gold to return to the days of *Jews Without Money* and to re-see these times in a less tendentious way. Gold strongly resisted the idea at first but then began a series of reminiscences in the *Peoples' World*—a sort of un-lugubrious sequel to his best known work. He also encouraged Max Eastman to complete the second volume of his autobiography and served as an unofficial literary agent for its publication.

In short, apart from its intrinsic merits and defects, *Writers on the Left* helped to loosen the social and political constraints that for twenty years had inhibited the writing of a frank and objective history of what the book not very precisely called literary communism. Of course it was not his book alone that opened up the subject to candid examination, but with few exceptions, most previous studies (Eugène Lyons, *The Red Decade*, is only one example) might be described as historical diatribes. His own book (he makes this claim on the basis of the letters he received after the book came out) made it possible for a good many people to turn their hitherto averted eyes and thoughts to the forbidden past. Many of his correspondents (some of whom had participated in the events he described) seemed eager to pass on their own recollections, to correct as well as to criticize. If nothing else,

Writers on the Left had a therapeutic value. It dissolved feelings of shame and guilt, mitigated anxieties, and started people remembering.

So much for one of its happier consequences. When one turns to the book itself, its sins of omission and commission are clearer than they were a decade ago. It does not seem too important today that the author was accused of being 'sentimental' and 'soft' in his treatment of political nincompoops and bad writers and of suffering knaves and fools too gladly; that the picture of the 30's he presented was less gaudy, ferocious, and melodramatic than the reality. But one can't pass over criticisms about imperfect structure, misplaced emphases, and curious lacunae.

In devising the form of *Writers on the Left*, the author took a few cues from John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*—a collective novel that covered approximately the same period he was attempting to encompass. From Dos Passos he borrowed the trick of passing back and forth from what might be called 'group narratives' (that is to say, narratives about organizations, magazines, coteries and the like) to stories of 'representative men' and to inter-chapters of literary history that might be likened in a very loose sort of way to Dos Passos's "News Reels." What he failed to do (it was Henry Nash Smith who first called this failure to his attention—only too late for him to do anything about it) was to introduce a counterpart to *U.S.A.*'s "Camera Eye." He didn't suffuse sufficiently enough or critically enough his own point of view into the book as a whole.

The author's excuse seemed more valid to him in 1961 than it does now. His assignment, he decided then, required him to write a chronicle, a book of annals. Since others had judged and condemned before the evidence had been gathered, he thought his responsibility was to narrate and describe without trying to play the role of Rhadamanthus. However (as he knew they would), biases, preconceptions, creep willy-nilly into the strictest reports. What the literary historian elects to write about, what he considers of major or lesser importance, the reliance he places on certain kinds of information and his rejection (whether deliberate or unconscious) of other sources—all conspire against objectivity.

In this instance, the author paid a penalty for his close association with a man without whom he would have been unable to see the Communist literary movement from the inside and without whom he would never have obtained an introduction into closed circles. He was a good man and a brilliant man; he became the author's close friend and mentor while assisting and 'educating' him—but he was far from being an unprejudiced informant. Any historian whose subject is the recent past must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of working with the principal actors in the events he is relating—people who have their own axes to grind; and this is especially true when the activities in which these actors participated have more than a passing historical interest—when his readers may include not only scholars but government investigators with the power of subpoena. The advantages are obvious, the disadvantages perhaps less apparent. It may turn out that what the historian interprets as cooperation may inadvertently be metamorphosed into collaboration.

Several of the author's reviewers entertained such a possibility or at least implied that he had lent his ear too readily and too uncritically to certain voices. Floyd Dell gently said as much in a letter filled with reminiscences; James T. Farrell made the charge more bluntly in a series of letters, and the same implication is carried in William Phillips's thoughtful and trenchant essay, "What Happened in the 30's," in which he addressed himself, along with other matters, to *Writers on the Left*. The essay is worth mentioning not only because Phillips discussed the book at considerable length, but also because he himself served in some of the literary campaigns of the Depression decade and was sensitive to its incongruities and contradictions.

Phillips found *Writers on the Left* freer of the more egregious faults than in his opinion disfigured most of the 30's scholarship—especially that spurious objectivity which is an outgrowth of ignorance, the kind that "means an inability to make discriminating judgments," but he criticized the book for reliving rather than re-examining or re-thinking the period. It supplied the facts; it was balanced and fair; it served "as an antidote to the notion of Communism as nothing but a 'conspiracy' bandied about by reactionaries and obsessive anti-Communists—a

notion which absolves people from thinking about history." But the author's "scholarly neutrality," he went on to say, made it difficult for him "to separate independent ideas from orthodoxies or from free-lance nonsense that was officially tolerated."

The charge is over-stated. The author had no trouble in separating the ideas of talented artists and independent thinkers from those of partisan idiots, but Phillips is by no means off the mark. The author might have drawn sharper distinctions between the statements and opinions of original minds and those of the rank-and-file practitioners of Left rhetoric. His failure to do so can be attributed partly to his expository method, his trick of paraphrasing the views of his subjects, major and minor, as if he had entered into their minds and was speaking in their behalf. Hence ideological and literary fatuities were set down most of the time without explicit authorial comment.

Again (another failure of commission) it was not enough for the author simply to record the struggle between the Party people and the anti-Stalin dissidents over the control of the *Partisan Review*; the literary implications of that fight needed to be spelled out. Phillips's comment—that he and his friends who took over the magazine stood for "purity in politics and impurity in literature" would certainly have been disputed at the time—and not only by the Stalinist hacks. It was the 'impurity' of their Trotskyist politics that made editors of the new *Partisan Review* persona non grata with the CP leadership—not their admiration for Eliot and Kafka and Yeats. He is right, however, in underscoring the anti-intellectual biases that pervaded the radical literary movement in the 30's and in linking these biases with the "free-wheeling grass roots tradition." *Writers on the Left* did not ignore what Phillips calls "the conflict between a free floating radical spirit and a historical force that both channeled it and throttled it," but the book did less than justice to the influence and literary importance of such anti-Stalinists as Sidney Hook, Meyer Schapiro, James T. Farrell, Edmund Wilson, Dwight Macdonald, and Mary McCarthy. It stopped short of tracing the literary implications of Trotsky's dismissal of proletarian art and his concessions to Bohemia. It passed over too cavalierly those writers-on-the-left who were never Communist, per-

haps not even socialist, but who considered themselves on the left side of the political spectrum.

It could be argued, in fact, that some of the political nomenclature used in the book is inexact even while conceding that radical terminology in the 30's was never very precise. Take the key word—Communist—that meant and still means different things to different people. An accurate history of the literary left, as Joseph Freeman cautioned the author, ought to define 'Communism' at every "crucial *point of change* in at least three ways. It should show what Moscow meant by 'communism,' what the Party meant by it and what various WRITERS meant by it." The same is true for the word 'left' or the word 'revolutionist.'

Floyd Dell considered himself a revolutionist even after he had repudiated the Communist Party. "I was always interested in movements (feminist, educational, Freudian) which had revolutionary implications," he wrote to the author; "and these were none the less truly revolutionary if Communist politicians were unable to understand the value of them. . . . The question can be raised of how truly revolutionary any professional (or practical) revolutionist can be." To extend Dell's point, the clash between radical politics and radical avant-garde art was discernible in the United States, as Meyer Schapiro has shown, at least as early as the Armory Show. For Phillips, the most portentous consequence of the radical movement in the 1930's was the fact that it "broke the radical spirit of literature by lowering its sights and making it more palatable for popular consumption." The process by which the Party seized upon this audience and the reasons for doing so can be found in *Writers on the Left*, but it is not evaluated.

Some of the objections to the merely descriptive treatment of this literary chronicle might have been obviated had the author devoted more space to the description and analysis of literary examples. Inter-chapters placed at strategic intervals and recording the changes in literary fashions would have swelled an already lengthy book. But the discussion of key works of fiction or poems or plays or critical articles—representative books of both the radical establishment *and* its opposition—would have dramatized, made concrete, sharpened some of the

generalizations and *implied* judgments that fill *Writers on the Left*. Such moments would have provided the author with an occasion to speak out more boldly than he did and declare explicitly his own point of view.

As it stands, *Writers on the Left* is a useful book, a book to cite, still readable and informative but incomplete. While writing it, the author had its sequel in mind, a book that would describe the writing of the original, the bizarre adventures and embarrassments experienced while researching it, the stories told to him off the record. The sequel would have enabled him to prepare a candid and opinionated conclusion in which his antipathies and prejudices and unacknowledged convictions would be given full vent. He also thought of writing a purely literary review of 30's literature to complement the social and political record of the literary left.

He did neither partly because the first would have been a betrayal of confidences and the second an ordeal he wasn't ready at the time to undergo.

Hence he can understand the animadversions of his friends and well-wishers and his less amiable critics. *Writers on the Left* turned out to be a scenario—pretty detailed, full of hints, stocked with literary lore, sometimes amusing—but a scenario. The full-fledged exploration of the 30's is now more than ever a collective enterprise.

D. A.

PREFACE

This book is a social chronicle of the Left Wing writer from 1912 to the early 1940's. More specifically, it describes the response of a selected group of American writers to the idea of communism and deals with particular issues and events during the first forty years of this century which helped to shape their opinions. I have paid only the slightest attention to the literary Left after 1940; by this time it was already separated from the main currents of American intellectual life and had acquired a sociological rather than a literary interest.

A very small fraction of the Left Wing writers were once members of the Communist Party. A considerably larger number might better be designated "fellow travelers." I apply this slippery and inexact phrase to those who were in the "movement," who sympathized with the objectives of the party, wrote for the party press, or knowingly affiliated with associations sponsored by the party. Without including the fellow travelers or liberals or nonparty radicals, the story of literary communism would be very thin indeed, for the Communist Party had far less influence on writers than the *idea* of communism or the image of Soviet Russia.

It is of less importance now to know who was in the movement than to understand why so many writers were once affected by the current radicalisms and were angrily opposed to what they felt to be the cruelty and stupidity of the standing order. What caused the alienation of artists and intellectuals? Why did so many well-intentioned, sensitive, and gifted men and women turn to communism or

support Communist-inspired causes? Why did most of them remain in the movement for such a short time? And why did they finally break away?

In order to provide some answers to these questions, I have tried to place the story of the literary radicals in the context of our cultural history. I have consulted the participants whenever possible—right, left, and center—and have written their experiences as a series of episodes, each of which reveals something significant about the movement and about the men and women who were active in it. Although most of the writers who had anything to do with what I call literary communism are at least mentioned, the book focuses on a relatively small number of people who represented, in my opinion, the prevailing attitudes among a cross section of the literary Left Wing.

My account is necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless, I hope it will serve a threefold purpose: first, to help the younger reader, for whom the events described here are as remote as the Peloponnesian War, to learn why it was that so many writers and intellectuals were once willing to embrace a revolutionary cause; second, to explain the writers to those who lived through the radical decades without ever coming into contact with the literary Left Wing; and third, to remind the veterans who actually participated in a few literary skirmishes what they may have forgotten or never have known about the campaign as a whole. To the world, and perhaps to them, the story of their political and literary adventures between two world wars may seem unimportant, certainly not worth retelling in any great detail, "yet unto us," as Cotton Mather said of some skirmishes in his own day, "it hath been considerable enough to make an history."

It was to discover more about the impact of communism on American life that the Fund for the Republic set up a project under the direction of Professor Clinton Rossiter and generously provided me with funds to write this book. During the course of my research, I consulted many of the writers mentioned in the following pages. Almost without exception, they were candid and friendly in their response, and I have come to know and admire them as people even when I have disagreed with their past or present convictions. Almost

all have revised wholly or in part the political and economic opinions they once embraced, but I have not written this book either to castigate them for their former beliefs or to "clear" them. My evaluation of the meaning of their collective experience can be found in my concluding chapter.

I am especially indebted to Michael Blankfort, Malcolm Cowley, Jack Conroy, Leon Dennen, Theodore Draper, Max Eastman, Joseph Freeman, Michael Gold, Josephine Herbst, Granville Hicks, Joshua Kunitz, Albert Maltz, Nina Melville, William Phillips, George Sklar, Herbert Solow, Tiba Wilner, and Edmund Wilson.

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I have profited from my discussions with my colleagues in this series: Daniel Bell, Donald Egbert, Moshe Decter, Theodore Draper, Nathan Glazer, Robert Iversen, William Goldsmith, David Shannon, Ralph Roy, and Clinton Rossiter.

The first draft of the book was written at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. I wish to thank the officers of the Center and Ralph Tyler, the director, for enabling me to spend a year of research and writing at Stanford, California.

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Preface

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