

PROLETARIAN LITERATURE, AN UNIDENTIFIED LITERARY OBJECT

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Introduction

1. After Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* came out in 1934¹, *New Masses* published a review of the novel which ended by saying: "It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make no better use of their working-class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels."² Although some left-wing critics (such as Edwin Seaver) and other Communist publications (like the *Daily Worker*) reviewed the book favorably, the *New Masses* article, coupled with the poor sales of the novel and the bankruptcy of its publisher, affected Roth and contributed to his long novelistic silence. Why reject a novel written by an "authentic" working class author, who lived in the Lower East side slums and whose parents were poor Jewish immigrants? Would not such a work be intrinsically "proletarian"?

2. The definition and status of proletarian literature in the United States gave rise to numerous debates; in many ways, proletarian literature was created by criticism, and buried by criticism. Spurred by the Comintern's "third period" (1928-1935), it was defined and encouraged by the Communist party of the United States (CPUSA) and its cultural organs. But critics and writers ceaselessly debated its nature: should proletarian literature be written exclusively by writers who belonged to the proletariat? Should it deal only with subjects pertaining to the life of the working class? Should it have a specific style? With the Stalin trials, the German Soviet pact and the onset of the Cold War, most critics, agreeing with what Philip Rahv had written in 1939, dismissed proletarian literature as "the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class"³, and labeled the works it had given birth to as mere propaganda. The object itself therefore remains undefined, or rather too diversely defined. Proletarian literature was a genre, characterized by its focus on working conditions and on the necessity to change the existing capitalist system; it was also a social formation, a gathering of people and ideas which enabled some established writers to express their political involvement more vehemently, to experience, also, in a more radical fashion, and gave beginners and outsiders possibilities to express themselves and to publish. Lastly, and this cannot be denied, it was a political strategy, on the part of the Comintern and of the American Communist Party; a strategy that was abandoned in the mid-thirties. The range covered by proletarian literature varies, according to who defines it, and to the period one considers. As we shall see, many writers who in the thirties were associated with the Communist party and the debates on proletarian literature later refused to be labeled "proletarian" writers, for personal or political reasons, feeling the term was too restrictive, and imprisoned their work within a specific period and ideology.

1 Henry Roth. *Call it Sleep* (1934). New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

2 Review of *Call it Sleep* by Henry Roth, *New Masses*, 12 Feb 1935, 27.

3 Philip Rahv. « Proletarian Literature: An Autopsy », *Southern Review*, 4:3 (Winter, 1939), 620.

3. American proletarian literature, for these reasons, is often puzzling to literary critics as well as to historians. One might ask, somewhat provocatively: Is it American? Is it proletarian? Is it literature? None of the answers are easy to give, and it might be that the most interesting thing about this literature is that it forces critics to revise their own models and categories of analysis.

I – Is it American?

4. Proletarian literature in the United States was promoted by the Comintern, which, during its “third period⁴,” encouraged Communist parties all over the world to support a culture that would be created by the workers, for the workers, following in the steps of writers like Gorki and organizations such as the 1920s’ Soviet *Proletkult*. The spurring of proletarian literature thus corresponded to the “hardest” phase of Communist parties worldwide; in the United States, the CPUSA opposed the Democrats⁵ and was also in conflict with the Socialist Party. This conflict was epitomized by a demonstration in February 1934, organized by the Socialist Party, and in which the Communists participated. A fight ensued, each side blaming the other for having started it. After the demonstration, a number of intellectuals (including John Dos Passos, James Rorty, and Lionel Trilling) wrote an open letter to the Communist Party, denouncing its political strategy, which according to them led to a division of the left, and undermined the workers’ struggle⁶. The 1930 Kharkov conference was the cultural counterpart to this political hardline: it stressed the importance of proletarian culture as a weapon in the class struggle, and posited in a resolution that “every proletarian artist must be a dialectical materialist.” The Kharkov resolutions led to the development of the activities of the John Reed Clubs and of *New Masses*, and largely participated in the marginalization of proletarian literature within American culture: derived from a Soviet directive, inspired by a foreign political theory, it was considered un-American long before the creation of HUAC.
5. But while they saw themselves as wholeheartedly opposed to capitalism and to the United States as an imperialist and capitalist power, Communists and fellow travellers held more conflicting views of America as a nation and as an ideal. The question of the relationship between communism – or Marxism – and Americanism was the topic of heated debate among cultural journals on the left: articles, symposiums and questionnaires raised the issue, whether in a broad political context or in discussions about the definition of proletarian literature. Many writers felt it necessary to reconcile Marxist principles with the ideal of America, which they

4 The Comintern’s “Third Period”, from 1928 to 1935 (sometimes called “proletarian” period) is a reference to the various stages of capitalism, as analyzed by the Third International: the “third period”, starting at the end of the 1920s, was to witness the economic collapse of the capitalist system and the radicalization of workers worldwide.

5 In 1932, several writers and intellectuals (including John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser and Langston Hughes) signed the pamphlet *Culture and the Crisis*, supporting the Communist candidates to the presidency and criticizing both Republicans and Democrats for their support of capitalism: “The United States under capitalism is like a house that is rotting away; the roof leaks, the sills and rafters are crumbling. The Democrats want to paint it pink. The Republicans don’t want to paint it; instead they want to raise the rent.” Quoted in Albert Fried (ed.). *Communism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 168-169.

6 *New Masses* reprinted the letter in its March 6, 1934 issue, and published an editorial, entitled “To John Dos Passos”, condemning its authors: “Most of the signatures belong to individuals who cannot be recognized as ever having been comrades in the workers’ struggle. We cannot remember ever having seen them on the revolutionary front.” (*New Masses*, 10: 10, Mar 6, 1934, 9).

saw as having been perverted by the rise of capitalism. In a 1936 symposium entitled “What is Americanism? A Symposium on Marxism and the American Tradition,” *Partisan Review and Anvil* asked writers and intellectuals to analyze the relationship between Marxism and Americanism: most of them saw no contradiction between the two, and considered Marxist revolution as the logical outcome of the American promise. Joseph Freeman wrote: “Long before I heard of Lenin, long before the October Revolution, I absorbed from American sources those ideas which, followed to their logical conclusions, were bound to lead to communism.” To Josephine Herbst, the author of the *Trexler trilogy*, “America (...) is a country that has never fulfilled itself: it will only do so through the process of revolution.”⁷ Such pronouncements were in line with the “Popular Front” policy adopted by the Comintern in 1935, and with Earl Browder’s 1936 slogan, “Communism is 20th century Americanism.” But the desire to root Marxist culture in American soil long predated the CPUSA’s doctrinal changes.

6. The wish to “Americanize” the ideas that came from the Soviet Union was particularly salient in the theorization of proletarian literature. Not necessarily because its proponents felt the need to make a foreign ideology look native in the eyes of their audience, but on the contrary because they did not perceive this ideology as alien. They saw it as a continuation, a true enactment of America's founding principles and of its radical thinkers' ideas. In 1921, Michael Gold, later editor of *New Masses*, wrote an article in *The Liberator* entitled “Towards Proletarian Art⁸,” in which he called for the emergence of a new kind of literature, born from the masses, while praising Walt Whitman as having been the first example of “those huge-hewn poets, those striding, outdoor philosophers and horny-handed creators” who should embody proletarian literature. The terms he uses to describe these future writers bring up the image of the pioneer rather than that of the Bolshevik revolutionary, an image which is taken up in a 1929 *New Masses* editorial entitled “Go Left, Young Writers!”⁹ Literary critics who tried to analyze the history of proletarian literature also did it within an American context, seldom making references to Russian writers or theoreticians; this is true of the Trotskyist V.F. Calverton, who published *The Liberation of American Literature* in 1932¹⁰ as well as of the leading literary critic of the Communist Party, Granville Hicks, whose *Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* (1935) praised the American literary tradition and saw revolutionary literature as its logical fulfillment: “This is the great tradition of American literature. Ours has been a critical literature, critical of greed, cowardice, and meanness. It has been a hopeful literature, touched again and again with a passion for brotherhood, justice, and intellectual honesty. That the writers of the past could not have conceived of the revolutionary literature of today and would, perhaps, repudiate it if they were alive, makes no difference. We see that the fulfillment of their ideals involves far more than they realized”¹¹.

7. The desire to inscribe communism within a native branch of radicalism, to merge Marxism and Americanism, is visible in the condemnation of cosmopolitanism which characterizes Michael Gold’s approach to literature: in “Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ”, Gold criticizes Thornton Wilder’s “uprooted” vision of literature, and asks: “Is Mr. Wilder a Swede or a Greek, or is he an American? No stranger would know from

7 *Partisan Review and Anvil*, 3: 3 (Apr 1936), 4-14.

8 Irwin Granich. « Towards Proletarian Art ». *Liberator* 4: 2 (Feb 1921): 20-24. From the beginning of the 1920s, Irwin Granich starts publishing most of his articles under the pseudonym “Mike Gold”, a tribute to a veteran from Civil War.

9 Michael Gold. “Go Left, Young Writers!” *New Masses* 4: 8 (Jan 1929): 1-2.

10 V. F. Calverton. *The Liberation of American Literature*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932.

11 Granville Hicks. *The Great Tradition. An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War*. New York: Macmillan, 1935, 329.

these books he has written¹².” In proletarian novels themselves, direct references to the communist international struggle are rare, as are stories taking place outside of the United States. The association between communism and Soviet Russia is often made by characters who represent the conservative establishment, and are opposed to radicalism in all its forms, or by characters who simply do not know what communism is. In Dos Passos’s *The Big Money*, Mary French is asked by her editor, Ted Healy, to write about a strike; he wants to know more about the leaders of the movement, “what part of Russia they were born in, how they got into the country in the first place¹³,” thus making a direct link between political consciousness, communism and Russia. When Mary French returns with her own version of the facts, claiming that the strike’s leaders are all American, she is fired. In the same way, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Bigger asks his friend Jack, “What’s a Communist?, and the latter answers: “Damn if I know. It’s a race of people who live in Russia, ain’t it?¹⁴”

8. In fact, internationalism in proletarian literature is mostly seen within the United States themselves: it is the diversity of the country that is highlighted rather than the reference to an outside model. Hans, the activist who contributes to Larry Donovan’s political awakening, is German in Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited*. In Robert Cantwell’s *The Land of Plenty*, Winters is half Native American, some of the workers have Scandinavian origins, and the foreman, Carl, often complains about the “foreigners” who work in the factory, since he cannot understand their English. The presence of ethnic Americanism is obviously even more important in what Michael Denning calls the “ghetto pastorals¹⁵,” such as Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money*¹⁶ or Henry Roth’s *Call it Sleep*, which describe the lives of minorities – here, Jews – in the limited space allotted them within American society.

9. Americanism and American identity are often important subjects in proletarian novels; the protagonists find themselves opposing the United States in their quest for a new America. The dilemmas of identification (to America/to communism) can also be found in the treatment of class in proletarian literature and its theorization. From the start, the very idea of a “proletarian” literature was rendered problematic by the ingrained belief that the United States was a classless society; and the question of whether proletarian literature could be written by middle-class authors created many conflicts within the ranks of the cultural left.

II – Is it Proletarian?

10. The very idea of an “American proletariat” is problematic. And it was so even during the Great Depression, when the fact that there was a pauperized class that could not sell its labor at the proper price could not be disputed. The American proletariat had no unity (the American working class was divided by trade, ethnicity, geography...) and no political reality. The CPUSA, while its membership grew from 7,500 in 1930 to

12 Michael Gold. « Thornton Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ ». *New Republic* Oct 22, 1930, reprinted in *The Mike Gold Reader; from the writings of Michael Gold*. New York: International Publishers, 1954, 47-50, 49.

13 John Dos Passos. *The Big Money*, in *U.S.A. : The 42nd Parallel, 1919, The Big Money*. New York: Library of America, 1996, 878-879.

14 Richard Wright. *Native Son*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993, 32-33.

15 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front; The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Verso, 1998.

16 Michael Gold. *Jews Without Money* (1930). New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996.

30,000 in 1938, remained marginal, though its influence went far beyond the number of its members¹⁷. The question of the political existence of the proletariat (*Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?* Werner Sombart had already asked in 1906) was redoubled by that of the political necessity of a proletarian literature. For many Marxists, not only *could* it not be done, it *should* not be done. Trotsky, in *Literature and Revolution*, published in English in 1925, wrote that bourgeois art should not be replaced by proletarian art, since the proletarian regime born of the Bolshevik revolution was, in its essence, transitory. Revolution must lay the foundations of a universal culture, not a class culture, and leave the artists free to express their creativity¹⁸. Many literary critics, among which V.F. Calverton in his *Liberation of American Literature*¹⁹, espoused this position; to them, the bourgeois' monopoly over cultural production in the United States made it impossible for a proletarian literature to develop.

11. But even among those, like Michael Gold or Granville Hicks, who were convinced that proletarian literature needed to be encouraged, the question of what proletarian literature was, and of who should write it, was heatedly debated. *New Masses*, even before the Kharkov resolutions, called American workers to take up the pen and tell the people of their plight. In his 1928 editorial, "Write for us!", Mike Gold, as he would do two years later in his article on Thornton Wilder, criticized the "sophistication" of professional writers and called for a literature that told the truth about the conditions of the working class: "Yes, every other magazine is written by professional writers. Every other magazine is always hunting for 'big names'. But we want the working men, women and children of America to do most of the writing in the *New Masses*. The product may be crude, but it will be truth."²⁰ Four years later, the Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs was even harsher on the fellow travellers who threw in their lot with that of the working class: "Such allies from the disillusioned middle class intelligentsia are to be welcomed. But of primary importance at this stage is the development of the revolutionary culture of the working class itself."²¹ Fellow travellers nevertheless defended their position as supporters of the class struggle in spite of their own class origins, the authenticity of their political commitment, and criticized this narrow definition of proletarian literature. At the First American Writers' Congress in 1935, after which the proletarian line was abandoned in favor of the Popular Front, some writers argued that the proletarian nature of a text had nothing to do with the class origin of its author, but with its subjects. Others, like Edwin Seaver, went even further, stating that a book was proletarian not because of its author or of its subject but because of the perspective it adopted, of the way it was written²².

12. The debates over the definition of proletarian literature reflect what Lawrence Hanley calls its "impossible location"²³: middle class writers were attacked for their lack of conviction²⁴ and writers coming from the working

17 Daniel Guérin, in his history of the American labor movement, claims that the CPUSA controlled at least 40% of CIO unions. Michael Denning, in a less political perspective, also shows the importance of the Left's influence on American culture in the 1930s. See Daniel Guérin. *Le mouvement ouvrier aux Etats-Unis; 1867-1967*. Paris: Maspéro, 1968, and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front, op. cit.*

18 Leon Trotsky. *Littérature et Révolution* [1924]. Paris: Les éditions de la passion, 2000. See esp. the introduction, p.28-30.

19 Philip Rahv adopted a similar position around 1935, when he broke with the CPUSA.

20 Michael Gold. "Write for Us!" *New Masses* 4: 2 (Jul 1928), 2.

21 "Draft Manifesto of the John Reed Clubs", *New Masses* 7: 11 (Jun 1932), 3.

22 See Henry Hart, ed. *American Writers' Congress*. New York: International Publishers, 1935, 100.

23 Lawrence Hanley. « 'Smashing Cantatas' and 'Looking-Glass Pitchers'; The Impossible Location of Proletarian Literature » in Janet Galligani Casey (ed), *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-era Fiction*. Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2004.

24 See the heated exchange that took place between Michael Gold and John Howard Lawson in the columns of

class sometimes had trouble defining, and defending, their new identity. How could they write as workers while their becoming writers had enabled them to get out of the working class? But the indeterminacy of American proletarian literature, which was much less framed and controlled than socialist realism in the Soviet Union, can also be seen in a positive light: it enabled writers not to feel too constricted by party guidelines, and to pin the adjective “proletarian” on a variety of works of fiction, poetry and reportage, as shown by the anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, published in 1935, in which texts by “established” writers (John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst, Langston Hughes, Malcolm Cowley) were side by side with the productions of authors who emerged through the proletarian movement (Jack Conroy, Tillie Olsen, Meridel Le Sueur, Williams Rollins Jr., Grace Lumpkin,...).

13. Upon publication, the anthology was praised beyond the leftist press; for in the end, the main audience for proletarian literature was... the middle class. The critics and authors themselves were conscious of this fact, and Joseph Freeman, in his preface to the anthology, criticized the excessively narrow definition of proletarian literature that had been adopted by the CPUSA in the early 1930s, thus indicating the shift that was to take place after 1935 with the Popular Front policy. Moreover, Louis Adamic had published in 1934 the results of a study of the reading habits of the working class, which showed that the workers, who were supposed to be the main producers and consumers of proletarian fiction, read mostly pulp fiction, rather than books that told them about their own life²⁵.

14. While the Communists and those sympathetic with their cause debated the proletarian nature of proletarian literature, many critics in the 1930s and afterwards questioned its literariness. The importance of authenticity, the criticism of sophistication, the conception of literature as a weapon in the class struggle imprisoned proletarian novels in an ideological framework that excluded them from literary analysis for decades; they were branded as propaganda or mere testimonials of a time, deprived of any value as works of fiction in their own right.

III – Is It Literature ?

15. Philip’s Rahv “autopsy” of proletarian literature, which led him to define it as “the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class²⁶,” was adopted by critics in later years. The context of McCarthyism and the Cold War made a dispassionate reappraisal of the novels, poems, plays and reportage, published by the “proletarians” between 1928 and 1935, impossible, and turned the literary thirties into an “unusable past.”²⁷ During the 1940s and 1950s, proletarian literature, in books which dealt with literary history was – when it was not ignored – seen as an “impossible literature,” an imposition of political dogma on creativity, which thwarted writers who might have achieved something, had they not fallen victims to the Communist ideology. In his

New Masses in 1934, starting with Gold’s article, “A Bourgeois Hamlet of Our Time”, published in the April 10, 1934 issue.

25 Louis Adamic. “What the Proletariat Reads: Conclusions Based on a Year’s Study Among Hundreds of Workers in the United States” *Saturday Review of Literature* 11 (Dec 1, 1934), 321-322.

26 Philip Rahv, “Proletarian Literature : An Autopsy,” *op. cit.*

27 Alan Wald. *Writing from the Left. New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics*. New York: Verso, 1994.

classic work on American literature, *On Native Grounds*, Alfred Kazin speaks of a “hysterical prose,²⁸” of a literature that was too urgent, too violent, espousing the flaws of its time. Irwing Howe and Lewis Coser, in their critical history of the CPUSA, attributed the responsibility of the failure of proletarian literature to the Communists, and exonerated the writers, which they saw seen as naïve, incapable of thinking for themselves: “had the proletarian novelists of the thirties been left to themselves, (...) it is quite possible that something valuable might have come from their efforts; some of them were genuinely talented men.²⁹”

16. At the end of the 1950s, however, some critics attempted to bring back radical literature into the realm of criticism. Walter Rideout, in *The Radical Novel in the United States: 1900-1954* (1956) and Daniel Aaron, who published *Writers on the Left. Episodes in American Literary Communism* in 1961, asserted their political neutrality and wanted to make an objective assessment of the qualities and flaws of the radical culture of the 1930s; these books were the foundation of “radical studies”, a topic taken up by later critics in the wake of the liberation movements of the 1960s-1970s and of the “culture wars” of the 1980s. Alan Wald, Barbara Foley, Paula Rabinowitz, Michael Denning, Paul and Mari Jo Buhle, far from adopting their predecessors’ political neutrality, often deliberately displayed their Marxism, stressing the important part played by minorities, whether ethnic, sexual or social, in the elaboration of a “leftist culture” in the thirties and after, and underlining the continuity between Old and New Left in the realm of culture. The aim of their criticism was to revoke the vision of an objective scholar, as well as to disturb the American literary canon. Their works had a major impact on the evolution of syllabi in courses on American literature, and more generally in the radical transformation of academic outlook on issues of race, gender, class and ethnicity. Within those books, however, few see it as their role to consider proletarian novels as literary texts, and to explore what Barbara Foley calls the “politics of form.”³⁰

17. This paradox – literary works studied as non-literary objects – derives from the political nature of most proletarian novels, but also from their style. Recurrent adjectives used to describe proletarian literature include “worldly” and “pedestrian,” as though these works were somehow too earthly, too close to reality to deserve the lofty adjective “literary.” However, such an opposition, derived in part from the stress laid by New Critics on the importance of the text in itself, divested from any social or historical context, and of language as a set of self-referential devices, plunged dozens of literary works into critical oblivion, and led to elaborating strict categories which did not make room for the variety of literary forms coexisting within one single period.

18. Proletarian literature, far from being an “anti-modernism,” was often inspired by the formal experimentations of American modernists, as well as by their European or Russian counterparts. Although one of the characteristics of the radical literature of the 1930s is what Kenneth Burke calls “addressedness,” this does not necessarily mean that they are all ideological novels or *romans à thèse*, or that their style is characterized by a bland naturalism. When reading, for instance, the anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* (1935), one is struck by the relative thematic uniformity of the various extracts (strikes, the harshness of workers’ lives,

28 Alfred Kazin. *On Native Grounds, an Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*. New York: Overseas Editions, 1942, xi.

29 Lewis Coser, Irwing Howe. *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957, 305.

30 See Barbara Foley. *Radical Representations. Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993. Michael Denning, in his *Cultural Front*, also develops issues of genre and literariness.

individual struggles and collective awareness,...), but also by their formal diversity. The realism of Robert Cantwell's description of a power failure in a plywood factory contrasts with John Dos Passos's use of montage. Erskine Caldwell's hypnotic prose has nothing in common with William Rollins Jr.'s attempts at creating a collective voice. One should also mention the variety in genres, for the anthology associates works of fiction and poetry with reportage, a blurring of fiction and non-fiction that characterized many proletarian texts.

19. Despite being sometimes naively romantic or frankly ideological, the proletarian fiction of the 1930s is characterized by its laboring of language, a desire to go against certain forms of discourse, whether cultural, political or economic, and to give a voice to those who had previously been confined to stereotyped representations in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The writers themselves could be women, Jews, Blacks, middle-class writers, estranged from their own background, and were therefore bound to have an oblique perspective on American society. Much of the literature of the time, through social criticism, but also sometimes through straightforward acceptance of propaganda as being one of the functions of art, aimed at showing the impossibility of neutral discourse. It is nevertheless important to reclaim proletarian fiction *as* literature, to analyze how proletarian novels tried, for instance, to elaborate collective voices instead of relying on an individual protagonist, how many of them, through the depiction of manual work, of strikes and factories, pointed to realities that would then enter mainstream representations through the works of Popular Front writers and photographers. One could think of Grace Lumpkin's novel *To Make My Bread* (1932); it is the story of the McClure family, poor farmers from the hills of North Carolina who go to work in a textile mill in the hope of bettering their condition, finding themselves in a situation of exploitation and dire poverty. The progressive radicalization of John and Bonnie McClure, their participation in a strike (directly drawn from Lumpkin's reporting on the 1929 Gastonia strike), the centrality of the family in the novel and the importance of women characters all point to subsequent Popular Front works, the most famous obviously being Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939). More generally, writings by farmers and workers and reporting on strikes and conditions in town and country, omnipresent in magazines like *New Masses* or the *Daily Workers*, can also be seen as a subterranean current later leading – albeit not directly – to the flourishing of documentary writing and photography.

20. There is, therefore, a form of unconscious posterity of the proletarian novel in works of the late 1930s (one could also mention those writers who went to Hollywood to work in the film industry and were later the object of HUAC's investigations). There is also an impossible posterity to those specific productions (which cannot be subsumed under the more general heading of “radical” fiction), linked with the ambiguous definition of proletarian literature, outlined in the introduction to this article. As we have seen, some critics saw proletarian literature as propaganda rather than art, and as a literature exclusively related to the Communist Party and its political goals. Such a perception, in the postwar years, extended to those who had participated in the movement; a lot of writers, for personal, political and aesthetic reasons, refused to be associated with the very idea of “proletarian” literature. In the 1960s, when David Madden was working on *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, he received a letter from Josephine Herbst in which she explained why she refused to contribute to the book:

The poor aren't proletariat and we have about as many poor now as we did in the thirties, but they are all mixed up, unclassified [...]. I think the better of the books of the thirties could be classified as vehicles for protest and engines for change. Some of them were more sharply

focused than others as to the kind of change the era seemed to imply.³¹

Accepting to be presented as a “proletarian” writer was, for Herbst and others, being trapped in the narrow definition of the term given by the Communist party. The fact that proletarian literature was so short-lived prevented it from acquiring a meaning independent from that political slogan, even though, as Barbara Foley and others have shown, the works that composed it went far beyond what the Communists expected and wished for.

Conclusion

21. Proletarian literature’s birth and demise were caused by criticism. Hailed by Communist Marxists as a tool for revolution, it was then buried by the Popular front policy of Communist parties, and banned from literary criticism by formalism. However, the relationship between thought, literature and politics in the 1930s also gave birth to radical studies, and proletarian novels and authors were revalued in the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the development of cultural studies, gender studies, African-American studies... But one might also see this piling up of theory as damageable to literary works, which might become illustrative of one trend or another; over the past fifteen years, scholars have taken up proletarian literature *as* literature. While taking into account the very specific context of its production, as well as the complex relationship between American writers and intellectuals and the CPUSA and of the CPUSA with its Soviet counterparts, Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, and, more recently, Robert Shulman, Janet Galligani Casey, Seth Moglen and others have tried to recast proletarian works within a literary context, to create genres and subgenres (Michael Gold and Henry Roth’s “ghetto pastoral” for instance), to analyze formal experimentations and modernist legacies, and to study the capillarity between fiction and documentary. The rise of studies in literary journalism, and more generally in the hybrid genres between fiction and non-fiction, can be the pathway to a renewed interest in proletarian writings³².
22. For it is precisely proletarian literature’s “impossible location”, its existence as a paradoxical form of fiction, a novel against the novel, that is interesting in a critical and theoretical perspective. It forces scholars and critics to tackle ideology, sometimes brutally or crudely present, and to analyze the context in which works which sometimes saw themselves as “mere” propaganda were written and published. In the end, it forces us to question our own critical categories, in order to make room for fiction.

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31 Quoted in David Madden (ed.). *Proletarian Writers from the Thirties*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968, xix.

32 See for instance William Dow's *Narrating Class in American Fiction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

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