

## INTRODUCTION

The complexity of the nineteen-thirties can be seen through the written manifestations of a large number of writers, journalists, politicians, sociologists, critics and organizers of literary anthologies. It is difficult—perhaps unfair—to try to summarize some of these descriptions in only a few words. Yet, unable, for theoretical and practical reasons, to offer our reader the “whole cake,” I was faced with the choice of offering him either no “cake” at all or a little slice of it. I chose the latter, hoping that at least a taste of the slice may suggest what the “cake” as a whole must have been like.

In 1960, John Steinbeck wrote an article—“Remembering the Thirties”—in which he referred to the period as a “troubled, terrible, and triumphant” decade. “I can’t think,” he argues, “of any decade in history when so much happened in so many directions... Looking back, the decade seems to have been as carefully designed as a play. It had a beginning, middle, and end, even a prologue—1929 gave contrast and tragic stature to the ensuing ten years.”

Edmund Wilson describes the Thirties as the time of “the American earthquake,” in a book which chronicles the follies of the Twenties, the social and economic earthquake of 1930 and 1931 and

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the dawn of the New Deal. "Between 1929 and 1933," argues Wilson, "the whole structure of American society seemed actually to be going to pieces."

Robert Bendiner, in a book entitled *Just Around the Corner* (1967) insists that the Thirties, despite the hardships and the suffering of so many, was the time when "America came closer to knowing its aims and its real worth than at any time before or since." It is Bendiner's understanding that the "wintry despair" has generally gained too much attention while the "springtime of hopefulness" has been underplayed.

This is also Harvey Swados's understanding in his book *The American Writer and the Great Depression* (1966). Swados justifies his organizing an anthology of writers of the decade, among other things, on his "keen desire that a new generation of Americans will [...] come to share his feeling that the depression was in truth not just a tragic era but in many ways a triumphant one for American literary artists, one which...may be an inspiration to those who are yet to create, with their hands and their spirits, a greater society" (xxxv). Swados's anthology is an excellent cross section of the literary production of the thirties. His anthology is organized thematically, and it is through the themes that he reveals to us the large number of authors who artistified the major concerns of the decade. Swados's book makes it clear that no student of the literature of the thirties can get away without some degree of acquaintance with the

problems of miners, factory workers, farmers, sharecroppers, tenants, migrants, women and men on the breadlines, jobhunting, bumming, labor leaders, capitalists, fascists, communists, negroes, the C.I.O., the A.F. of L., the T. V. A., the C.C.C., the W. P. A., and a whole world of New Deal Acts. The themes are so varied that the authors have to be many and also very different. His anthology includes well-known writers such as John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Edmund Wilson, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, Nathanael West, Thomas Wolfe, James Agee, but also some writers who are less known to the Brazilian public: Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, Josephine Herbst, Jack Conroy, Robert Cantwell, Tom Kromer, Michael Gold, and many others. All put together, these authors provide us with wonderful texts which help us understand the social and intellectual activity which went on in the Nineteen Thirties.

Jack Salzman published in 1966 a book called *Years of Protest*, which is the other major anthology "devoted to representing the literature of the recent past in the light of the conditions under which it was produced [attempting] to "capture a sense of the times through that literature" (vii). Working upon the belief that the thirties were a time of "intense, exciting, and significant ferment," Salzman's anthology intends to show that, contrary to widespread misunderstanding, the decade produced writers (proletarian or not) of great talent. Salzman's anthology enriches the portrait painted by

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Swados's, not only because of its different selections from the same authors, but also because it manages to portray some of the major critical controversies and intellectual disputes that went on between outstanding minds like those of Michael Gold, Archibald MacLeish, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters, Wallace Stevens, V. F. Calverton, John Crowe Ransom, James T. Farrell, Isidor Schneider, Granville Hicks, Malcolm Cowley and others. All major events of the decade—national and international—are present through texts produced by various writers: Hemingway writes about the Spanish Civil War, Ezra Pound writes about Mussolini, Thomas Wolfe writes about the fears under Nazism, Michael Gold writes about Thornton Wilder's escapist novels, Sherwood Anderson writes about Union meetings, Edmund Wilson writes about Communists and Cops, and James Agee writes passionately about the life of sharecroppers in excerpts from his *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Salzman's anthology is a text all libraries should have.

The decade, as we can see from these introductory words, is crowded with events that literature recreated and rendered in the most different ways. John Dos Passos, by far the most experimental writer of the time, for the first time created a novel in which a nation and not a character is seen as the central agent. Mixing newspaper headlines, highly personal observations and evaluations, biographies of national myths, and traditional narratives on common men and women, Dos Passos managed to bring to life, like no other writer,

the complexity of the times. Generally refusing to synthesize, Dos Passos, nonetheless, structures his text on the major conflict of the decade, namely, that of labor and capital and all that it entails. In **Big Money**, the third book of his USA trilogy, Dos Passos narrates, in *The Camera Eye* (50), referring to the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, the division that is destroying America in the late twenties and early thirties

*they have clubbed us off the streets they are stronger  
they are rich they hire and fire the politicians the  
newspapereditors the old judges the small men with  
reputations the collegepresidents the wardheelers ...  
they hire the men with guns the uniforms the police-  
cars the patrolwagons all right you have won you kill  
the brave men our friends tonight*

*... they have built the electricchair and hired the  
executioner to throw the switch all right we are two  
nations*

*... we stand defeated America*

This division which Dos Passos points to can be easily translated into a division between the Left and the Capitalists. Yet, the Stalinist trials, the Spanish Civil War, Roosevelt's reformist policies, and finally Stalin and Hitler's pact at the end of the decade—all these events also contributed to the serious conflicts which sharpened the ideological distinctions among the Leftists.

Some of these conflicts are addressed in this issue. Townsend Ludington, one of the greatest authorities on Dos Passos, discusses,

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for example, the trajectory of John Dos Passos during the thirties, showing how his once friendly association with the Left developed into an intense and angry conflict by the end of the decade. Marcia Salazar argues that Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* dramatizes not only the exploitation of labor by big farm owners but also the Communist Party's dubious methods used to achieve their goals. Similarly, Constance Coiner's article discusses the relation of female activists like Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur with the Communist Party. Coiner argues that "one of the salient features of the 1930s was the failure of any leftist organization to develop women's militance into a self-conscious feminism." Finally, Josef Raab, in his analysis of *Literary Criticism in the Thirties* points to areas of conflicts within the Left. The major motivation of his article, however, is to re-establish historical truth, namely to correct Russell Reising's suggestion that Marxist criticism is a product of the nineteen-eighties. In so doing, Josef Raab discusses, among others, the works of Granville Hicks, V. F. Calverton, Bernard Smith, and other "Leftist Liberators." Raab's final conclusion is that "the Leftist Liberators of the thirties certainly provide a 'usable past' whose influence continues to be felt" and should not be neglected.

The present issue of *Ilha do Desterro* also includes a number of book reviews, with suggestions of possible lines of research, some short informative background texts, as is the case of Steinbeck's "Dubious Battle in California" and Alfred Hayes' poem "In a Coffee

**Pot," and a bibliography which we hope will be helpful for those who wish to study the literature of the thirties as it relates to the major social, economic, political and cultural trends of the decade.**

**The editor**



Breadline, New York, 1930. (UPI)