

**LEFTIST LIBERATORS:
AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM
IN THE THIRTIES**

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In *Unusable Past* (1986) Russell Reising has recently offered his establishment of a canon of critics.¹ The book argues for an understanding of American Literature as “a reflection of American society” and for a literary criticism that is “striving for a more social or cultural appreciation of American literature” by taking “a rigorous social approach” (Reising 218). Reising tries to make his readers believe that social and Marxist criticism is a product of the nineteenthies and shows himself largely uninformed of the origins of the kind of criticism from the Left that he advocates: while he does give two brief mentions to Granville Hicks, names like V. F. Calverton and Michael Gold do not appear in his account. Failing to grasp the importance of Leftist critics in the thirties, Reising concludes that, with the rise of the Agrarians and New Critics, “During the thirties, ... even in the midst of proletarian art and socially based literary criticism, a recoil from the social study of literature took place” (Reising 15). This view is certainly correct to a degree, but

it will become apparent in my discussion that Leftist critics in the nineteen-thirties, especially V. F. Calverton and Granville Hicks, were far more influential than Reising assumes and that their literary histories, their critical essays, and their anthologies have continued to influence the study of American literature. Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (1969) is only one example of the continuing impact of social and Marxist criticism of the thirties. Reising advocates the study of prose texts (not poetry or drama) with social concerns and opposes dichotomies like "literary" and "subliterary" or "major" and "minor" writers. He does not mention, however, that such dichotomies had long been overcome by critics of the thirties, as for example in Bernard Smith's anthology of American literature, *The Democratic Spirit* (1941). Unlike Reising's short lists of "minor" authors that should receive more attention (many of whom, like Frederick Douglass, are actually in the canon), Smith's anthology contains almost exclusively works with social concerns that are not commonly studied in American literature classes today.

The importance of Leftist critics has been adequately emphasized by Kermit Vanderbilt in *American Literature and the Academy* (1986).² But Vanderbilt does not forget to complement his chapter on Marxian critics with a chapter on "More Advocacy in the Thirties: Humanists, Agrarians, Freudians, and Nationalists." It seems less necessary here to discuss the latter group of critics, important though they were, because, as Reising has shown, they

are being overrated already. We seem to have a stronger need for a discussion of the “red” criticism produced by the Red Thirties.

Marxist consciousness first informed literary criticism in John Macy’s history of **The Spirit of American Literature** (1908). Macy contends that American literature has not yet come of age because of “the American habit of writing about everything except American life” and that American literature is therefore little more than English literature written in America (Macy 13). His call for social consciousness and for a concern with America’s material reality makes one of its reappearances in Bliss Perry’s **The American Spirit in Literature** (1921). Perry sees literature as a reflection of society and holds that it should be typical of the average citizen. Vernon Louis Parrington’s seminal three-volume account of **Main Currents in American Thought** (1927ff) further invigorated the attack on *belle lettres* criticism— although aesthetic concerns are important to him. Parrington had considerable influence in shaping ideological criticism and many Leftist critics of the thirties are deeply indebted to him.

Books like Veblen’s **The Theory of the Leisure Class** (1899), Upton Sinclair’s **The Industrial Republic** (1907), and V. F. Calverton’s **The Newer Spirit** (1925) also prepared the way for the thirties to approach literature from a socialist perspective. These efforts were joined and supported in the thirties by literary histories, anthologies of writing with social concerns, and an enor-

mous number of articles in journals like the *New Masses*, Calverton's *Modern Quarterly* (later retitled *Modern Monthly*, the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, the *Daily Worker* and other publications. Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1934) described the conversion of an American expatriate, who had gone to live in Paris during the years of the "lost generation," to social and economic realities; Joseph Freeman wrote a typical record of political conversion entitled *American Testament* (1936); Waldo Frank saw *The Re-Discovery of America* (1929) as a re-discovery of the economic basis of optimism; and a series of American Writer's Congresses were held in New York under the Marxist League of American Writers in 1935, 1937, and 1939.

Early in the decade, Russell Blankenship argued in *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (1931) for the inseparable union of literature and the social environment. Vanderbilt calls his book "the early symptom of a new wave of socially oriented studies of American literature in the 1930s inspired by Parrington's example—and the Crash of 1929" (Vanderbilt 335). Blankenship considers geography and race the causal forces in the historical development of the American mind, of which he takes geography to be the more powerful influence. He sees geographic and racial diversity as the bases from which had arisen a genuinely American literature. Blankenship dismisses aesthetic principles for the evaluation of literature and instead judges literary texts according

to the degree to which they express the changing American mind.

A year after Blankenship's history had come out, Victor Francis Calverton (actually called George Goetz) published **The Liberation of American Literature** (1932), his own version of Parrington's **Main Currents in American Thought** from an avowedly Marxist point of view. Marxist theory gave Calverton's literary history and advocacy and a focus that Blankenship had lacked. Calverton, a John Hopkins graduate (1921) and then journalist, founder and editor of the New York, Marxist-oriented **Modern Quarterly**, published widely in various fields and remained outside of the academy. An independent, heterodox Marxist, Calverton was one of the most influential non-communist spokesmen for the American literary Left in the nineteen-twenties and thirties.³

Several of his publications, in which he tried out important ideas of **The Liberation of American Literature**, had prepared the way for his literary and social history. In his early book of sociological literary criticism, **The New Spirit** (1925), Calverton already investigated "the seldom recognized but determining factors in society that create and shape artistic tendencies and expression" (*Spirit* vii). This collection of essays opens with "Sociological Criticism of Literature," Calverton's theoretical basis, in which he argues for the interconnectedness of art and society, of literary and social developments. A revolution in aesthetics, he argues, can only come as a consequence of a revolution in material conditions and in the

social structure. The other essays in this book trace historical social changes and then examine how these changes affected literature. Calverton's study of *Sex Expression in Literature* (1926) is also concerned with the social developments, which it uses to explain the portrayal of sex in literature from Elizabethan England to contemporary America. The preface states that, unlike other critics, Calverton does not want to isolate the issue of sex expression in literature but to treat it instead in its larger social framework: "Our task is to relate sex expression in literature to its social origins." (*Sex* vii). Instead of individuals, he studies groups, classes and economic conditions that determine the attitude of individuals.

In 1935, Calverton edited his *Anthology of American Negro Literature*. He declares that this collection is "representative above everything else" and that "in a number of instances it has been necessary to include material because of its representative value, although it is without fine, literary distinction" (*Negro* vii). In this statement, one can clearly hear Calverton's aesthetic concerns, which he combines throughout his criticism with social concerns. The anthology includes fiction, drama, poetry, spirituals, blues songs, labor songs, essays, historical writing, sociological tracts, and autobiographical pieces. In his introduction, Calverton traces the long tradition of African literature and culture and opposes the patronizing attitude that praises recent literature by blacks because it has been written by a black and not because of its artistic merit. He

resents the power exercised on black writers by a privileged class. Calverton holds that black contributions "to American art and literature are far more free of white influence than American culture is of English..... In fact, they constitute America's chief claim to originality in its cultural history" (Negro 3). Since most Indian culture has been lost, there is no challenge to the primary role of black contributions to genuinely American art. Calverton admires blacks for having produced "folklore springing spontaneously from the simple everyday life of an oppressed people" (Negro 7). He believes that black literature of the twenties is going in a new direction: its authors have finally discarded Booker T. Washington's doctrine of intellectual acquiescence (of imitating genteel white authors) and supplanted it by a doctrine of resistance; their literature "has developed in favor of the vigorous instead of the exquisite" (Negro 12).

The following two years, Calverton wrote two small volumes for the University of Washington Chapbooks series. *The New Ground of Criticism* (1930) and *American Literature at the Crossroads* (1931). In the first of these books, he argues that literary criticism must take the internationalization and unification of culture into account (although one may well argue that such a unification never actually occurred); criticism must reconsider what gives it life and "in its search for origins and new standards of evaluation it must utilize the sociological and psychological approach" because

one can appreciate a work of art only if one knows its origin and purpose (Ground 17). In *Crossroads*, Calverton concentrates on recent protest literature in the United States and concludes that with the exception of Upton Sinclair, such protest has only been directed at the surface and not at the ideological underpinnings. He sees the United States at the turn of the decade in search of a new tradition that will replace the bourgeois and individualist philosophy of the nineteenth century. Calverton traces the social origins of changes in American literary history (especially the importance of the frontier, which is also a main part of his argument in *The Liberation of American Literature*) in order to conclude that such changes both influence and are influenced by art. Literary craftsmanship alone is therefore not enough; it "must be utilized to create objects of revolutionary meaning" and art "must be conceived of a part of social life, a living part of it and not an embroidered excrescence" (*Crossroads* 50).

Such ideas found their full expression the following year in Calverton's *The Liberation of American Literature*. In his discussion of this literary history, Vanderbilt calls Calverton an "outsider" to American literature and terms his book "nonprofessional" (Vanderbilt 340, 341). In Vanderbilt's view, Calverton's "seven chapters of American literary history are of minimal value as a study of our literary periods, genres, and modes in their historical and aesthetic evolution" (Vanderbilt 339). Oddly enough, Vanderbilt still

calls *The Liberation of American Literature* “required reading into the 1980s” (Vanderbilt 341) and grants that Calverton provided a historical context for the proletarian ideology that was emerging in America. But Vanderbilt disagrees with Calverton’s classification of many writers who had previously been considered rebels in the cause of an indigenous democratic literature as advocates of an American petty-bourgeois individualism. Vanderbilt further rejects Calverton’s assertion that black writers, with the exception only of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, are also expressing a bourgeois ideology.

Calverton states that the purpose of his detailed literary and social history is a clarification of the “class forces active in the creation of American literature—and American culture” and an examination of how the country’s social structure is reflected in its literature (*Liberation* xiii). He reiterates his conviction that

social life and literature... are both part of the same phenomenon, and interact upon each other in the process of change. The literary artist is not, therefore, as many people think, a hopeless victim of his environment, but is a creative part of it, able to help shape and rebuild it. Although he derives his ideas and direction from the social environment, he in turn, by virtue of those same ideas and direction, is able to assist in the transformation of that environment (Liberation 468).

Calverton maintains that “It is only by an appreciation of

the class psychologies dominant at the time, as Marx has shown, that we can understand the nature of a culture or the direction and trend of a literature" (Liberation xi). Once again, Calverton does not reject aesthetic criticism but believes "that aesthetic criticism is fundamentally social in character and can only be significant when derived from a sound social philosophy" (Liberation xii).

The overall thesis of the book is that it was only after the decline of the bourgeoisie and the rise of the frontier society and the proletariat that there existed conditions which allowed the creation of a genuinely American literature. Calverton argues that from its beginning through much of the nineteenth century, American literature suffered from a "colonial complex—that is an inferiority complex of a social order—which clings to the culture long after its original causation has disappeared" (Liberation 15). He believes that American literature took so long to mature into a tradition of its own because it tried at the same time to imitate English literature and to revolt against it. The culture of colonial New England and of the South, Calverton writes, was controlled by a "petty bourgeois conception of life" whose English heritage was hostile to art (Liberation 53). With the Revolution, more wealth came to America, Puritanism declined, and an "upper bourgeoisie" replaced the petty bourgeois (Liberation 150). But the demand of political and economic separation from England did not entail a cultural revolution so that well into the nineteenth century American Literature took

a "romanticized and sentimentalized form which prevented [it] from pursuing the path of reality and truth" (*Liberation* 223-4). This judgment is certainly harsh.

"It was the frontier force which created a new America," Calverton claims, because only in the West did American writers try to write in the language spoken by Americans instead of imitating English literary models (*Liberation* 225). But it was not before the close of the nineteenth century, when America moved "from sectionalism to nationalism," that this force could swing back East (*Liberation* 356). What Calverton calls the climax of America's nationalistic coming-of-age occurred with the emergence of the United States as the leading world power after First World War and with Sinclair Lewis, whom Calverton calls "the most American of American writers," being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1930 (*Liberation* 39).

In "Liberation," the last chapter of his literary history, Calverton presents his hopes for the future of American literature. He is encouraged by the increasing number of writers who express social concerns. With the end of the long "middle-class rule," which had "corrupted" the American mind for so long, and the "rise of the American proletariat," Calverton believes that American literature has finally overcome its colonial complex and petty bourgeois censorship, although too many writers of the twenties and thirties are too pessimistic. The decay of bourgeois ideology, Calverton argues,

has robbed them of their faith in life because

the petty bourgeois principles they had believed in were sacrificed to the industrial machine; individualism began to lose its pertinence in the new scene; democracy faded as a political panacea; and equality lost its meaning as industry began to divide the nation off into more and more widely separated classes (Liberation 471).

For Calverton, this change explains the spirit of despair in the works of Dreiser, Anderson, Lewis, O'Neill, Hemingway, and Robinson Jeffers. These writers, Calverton argues, have lost their faith in social reality, and hence their optimism, and have turned inward, towards themselves, thus becoming more detached from the group instead of finding strength in society. They need to ally themselves "with the growing proletarian tradition" (Liberation 478). Calverton claims that the only American writers of his time who have not surrendered to pessimism are those who have a proletarian outlook: John dos Passos, Michael Gold, and Charles Yale Harrison. These authors, Calverton writes, are being joined by other writers like Theodore Dreiser. This new generation realizes the collapse of the middle class and can look through "its hypocrisies and deception, justifying slavery as an aid to Christian conversion and defending democracy as a means of mass coercion" (Liberation 475). And similarly can writers of Calverton's time increasingly deconstruct the aristocracy's stratification of classes.

Calverton is confident that the American mind will be nurtured by the social consciousness of the thirties through Marxist writers, theorists, and practitioners as well as through open-minded education, economy, and politics. With the abolition of middle-class and aristocratic deceptions, literature will also be able to do more than merely reflect these deceptions, as it had done in the nineteenth century. Calverton recognizes a new generation of American writers who

insist upon seeing America as it really is and not as they were taught to believe it is. Certainly no one could call 120 Million, Jews Without Money, Homeward Angel, Daughter of Earth or Lumber patriotic novels—and yet they are, all of them, American to the core. They have sprung out of the American environment as expressions of our life in its raw and naked form. The problems that these writers have to confront are problems connected with the class structure of our society, the economic set-up of our life; problems which spring out of the need to interpret a country which has never been interpreted genuinely and truthfully in the past. It is to the fulfillment of that end that the work of John dos Passos, Michael Gold, Thomas Wolfe, Edwin Seaver, Charles Yale Harrison, Lester Cohen, Agnes Smedley, Louis Colman, Horace Gregory, and a score of younger writers is already dedicated (Liberation 40).

The increasing number of writers expressing social concerns is paralleled by an increasing number of Marxist critics

who are beginning to dig away at those materials, unearthing significant parts of them that hitherto have been obscured or neglected, and revaluating those that already have been unearthed. Within a few years, we should have enough materials at hand to begin a more extensive and exhaustive re-interpretation and revaluation of American literature and culture (Liberation xiii).

Calverton sees *The Liberation of American Literature* as doing some of the groundwork necessary for the development and spread of Marxist criticism. Among the Marxist critics he mentions are Edmund Wilson, Newton Arvin, Waldo Frank, Sam Ornitz, Lester Cohen, and Granville Hicks. Calverton believes that these critics and writers have what all Americans need, "a renewed faith in the masses. American literature has to find something of that faith in the potentialities of the proletariat which Emerson and Whitman possessed in the nineteenth century" (*Liberation* 479). A belief in the common man as a proletarian collectivist will entail "the ultimate liberation of American literature—and American life" (*Liberation* 480).

The critical reception of Calverton's literary and social history by the academy was a free and vituperative debate, perhaps because Parrington had eased the way for Leftist advocacy in literary history. Granville Hicks found Calverton's style repetitious, academic, and dull, but granted that no other historian of American literature, Parrington included, had shown so clearly why American culture had developed as it had. Hicks advised Calverton's successors to avoid

Calverton's separation of content and craftsmanship and to give closer attention to the aesthetic values of particular writers. And this is what Hicks tried to supply in his own literary history the next year. Only F. O. Matthiessen's review rejected Calverton as someone not worthy of being taken seriously.

Other books by Calverton that deserve to be mentioned here include *The Bankruptcy of Marriage* (no date) and an anthology of social thought, *The Making of Society* (1937). In the former, Calverton argues that the struggle in the nineteen-twenties and thirties "against the sexual ethics of the older generations is but a part of a larger struggle against the older ways of life" (*Bankruptcy* 15); in the latter, he presents an anthology of social thought which attempts "to include the social thought of our day" (*Making* vii). Calverton gives sociology an international scope and devotes "a disproportionately large section of the volume to contemporary sociology...because it is with the social thought of today that we should be most concerned if sociology is to serve as a science of prediction and control as well as one of analysis" (*Making* viii). This emphasis on sociological theories of the thirties parallels the attention Calverton gives to contemporary authors in *The Liberation of American Literature*.

In his social history of America until 1750 (the first volume of a projected but unfinished study), *The Awakening of America* (1939), Calverton tries "to reread American history in different

terms—in terms of the ruled instead of the rulers, the underdogs instead of the top dogs. It aims to give voice to the oppressed, to the anonymous and inarticulate millions” (*Awakening* vii). Calverton is also the author of *The Passing of the Gods* (1934), a study of the social dimensions and origins of religion; *Where Angels Dared to Tread* (1941), an account of socialist and communist utopian colonies in the United States; and of two novels. Furthermore, he edited *The Making of Man: An Outline of Anthropology* (1931) and co-edited (together with Samuel D. Schmalhausen) *Sex in Civilization* (1929), *The New Generation* (1930), and *Woman’s Coming of Age* (1931), a collection of early feminist writing. All of these books reflect the kind of wide social concerns that Calverton demands in literature.

Calverton’s *Liberation* was followed in the next year by Granville Hicks’ own version of Parrington’s *Main Currents*. Thanks to Calverton’s groundwork, Hicks could allow himself to be more casual in his Leftist approach in *The Great Tradition* (1933, rev. ed. 1935). Hicks acknowledged that he was partly indebted to Calverton, but suspected that *The Liberation of American Literature* would be “superseded by subtler and sounder studies” (Hicks 307). Kermit Vanderbilt calls Hicks “subtler, for he went beyond Calverton’s repetitious, limited jargon of Marxism and spoke more variedly of economic forces and social inequities.... Hicks was also sounder than Calverton as a literary critic and tried, like Par-

rington, to wed his socialistic analyses to considerations of literary art" (Vanderbilt 343). This is a fair appraisal of a work whose author was a Harvard graduate, an activist, and a member of the Communist Party. Like Calverton's analysis, however, Hicks' lacked refinement due to its selective Marxist formula, but the book brought to its subject a unifying vision that the reader could grasp, weigh, and dispute.

Hicks goes along with Calverton in his view that American literature was conditioned by American life and he also shares Calverton's optimism about the new generation of writers of the thirties. The only vital tradition in American literature, he argues, emerged after the Civil War, the most powerful literary response being shaped by the impact of the machine on nineteenth-century society. In his opening chapter, "Heritage," Hicks summarizes the efforts of prewar writers, who were unable to envision a humanizing faith in an industrial civilization. Although Whitman could not yet free himself from the doctrine of individualism and embrace a socialist vision of the collective good, he was, in Hicks' view, the founder of the new American literature of the industrial era. In subsequent chapters, Hicks traces a dominant contrast between the pioneering, though ineffectual, authors who entered the economic and political struggle—Twain, Warner, Hay, Howells, Boyeson, and Bellamy—and those who exiled themselves from the industrial present—Jewett, James, Lanier, Adams, Garland, Crane, and the aesthetes of the 1890s.

Hicks lets the century end in the muckraking "Years of Hope," but laments that Norris, Herrick, Sinclair, and London lacked a binding hypothesis of socialist change and could therefore only attack the surface. While Hicks recognizes "an American renaissance" from 1912 to 1925, he cannot discover until the end of that period a single author propagating the new order that must supplant the failing petty-bourgeois ideology. Dreiser, Wharton, Lewis, Cather, Anderson, and others are all too pessimistic but they have a heightened sense of obligation to address social issues.

While Calverton had explained the late maturation of American literature through a "colonial complex," Hicks argued that American literature had so many difficulties finding its own tradition because too many American writers avoided the social, economic, and political actualities, preferring to escape into irrelevant religious mysticism or genteel aestheticism. And those writers who criticized civilization for lacking social solidarity had not grasped Marx's explanation of economics and class revolution. Hicks superseded Calverton by demonstrating how the Marxist approach to American life in literature can be combined with aesthetic judgments of literary imagination, how the literary historian and the literary critic can become one, and how Marxist content achieved successful literary form in several American authors.

Although Hicks' approach is more aesthetic than Calverton's, he is too critical of writers like Whitman, Twain, and Howells and

also of the muckrakers, among whom he takes only Norris' *The Octopus*, perhaps Sinclair's *The Jungle*, and, oddly enough, Jack London's *Call of the Wild* as the kind of socially relevant literature that should flourish. In the period from 1925 to 1929, Hicks sees a variety of inchoate rebellions and feeble commitments. Only John Dos Passos, emerged as an author with clear powers of observation and understanding. It is in his works that Hicks discovers the full literary possibilities emanating from the "great tradition" of anti-individualist social brotherhood. Hicks hopes that Dos Passos and other writers of the years following the Crash (Edmund Wilson, Dreiser, Anderson, young black authors, and the proletarian Provincetown Players) would "belong to an intermediary stage" and that "their work will be superseded in time by a genuine proletarian literature and, eventually, by the literature of a classless society" (Hicks 300).

In 1935, when he saw his optimism for the future of American literature justified, Hicks added a chapter to the second edition of *The Great Tradition* that celebrates, among others, the works of Herbst, Farrell, Halper, Cantwell, Conroy, Schneider, Newhouse, Fearing, Gregory, and especially Michael Gold, whom he calls "an amateur with something close to genius" with deep "roots in the working class (Hicks 297). These "revolutionary writers" seemed to Hicks to have aesthetically enriched revolutionary literature and to be the only ones who had achieved anything significant in the

two years since the first edition of Hicks' book had been published because they had "affirmed values that were not being realized under capitalism" (Hicks 294). In Hicks' view, the revolutionary writer "wants the same spirit, the same knowledge, the same impulses to inform all his work. He must sternly avoid slogan-making and oversimplification, and at the same time bear in mind that he is a poet for the masses" (Hicks 327).

Hicks has great hopes for the future of proletarian literature, which, like Calverton, he sees based on the visions of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and on their confidence in the common man. He maintains that "the great tradition of American literature" has started with these writers because, although they used the individualist language of their times, they "caught a glimpse of the collective society" (Hicks 329). The tradition that these writers started, Hicks argues, has been growing steadily because

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.... We see that the fulfillment of [our past writers'] ideals involves far more than they realized. It involves not merely fulfilling but also transcending their vision. It involves not merely criticism but destruction of capitalism and its whole way of life (Hicks 329).

The critical reception of *The Great Tradition* was mostly

positive, although Hicks was criticized for evaluating twentieth-century works primarily according to their effectiveness as instruments of revolution. Lewis Mumford, F. O. Matthiessen, Stanley Williams, and Robert Spiller all reviewed the book rather positively, while R. P. Blackmur found it reductive and intolerant. Hicks' other achievements in the thirties include his co-editorship of **Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology** (1935), his biography of John Reed, and his co-editorship of and numerous contributions to **New Masses**.

A third major figure in the line of Calverton and Hicks is the Marxist critic Bernard Smith. In **Forces of American Criticism: A Study in the History of American Literary Thought** (1939), Smith, a long time editor for Alfred A. Knopf and contributor to Calverton's **Modern Monthly**, wrote the first history of American literary criticism in the spirit of the new social history. The general historical contours of Smith's study, which is organized along the lines of Marxian analysis, follow the scheme of Parrington, Calverton and Hicks. Smith is especially interesting in his last three chapters, where he tests the adequacy of modern critical schools (critical impressionists, socialists, Marxists, liberals, New Humanists, aesthetes, and classicists) against the social, political, and moral values of his Marxist thesis. While he does not mention the spirit of reinterpretation in the nineteen-twenties, Smith talks very favorably of Marxist criticism of the thirties, praising in particular the work of Michael

Gold and of his revived *New Masses*, V. F. Calverton, Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, and Edmund Wilson. Smith strongly opposes New Humanist critics like T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Yvor Winters, the Freudian Ludwig Lewisohn, and the formerly liberal Van Wyck Brooks. His indebtedness to Parrington is obvious and he does not try to obscure it.

In his essay "Huneker and the Tribe," which was included by Hicks in the 1935 *Proletarian Literature* collection as the culminating essay, Smith had presented James Huneker, the founder of impressionist criticism, J. E. Spingarn, the founder of expressionist criticism, and Van Wyck Brooks, the founder of liberal socialist criticism, as the most important critics since the 1890s. While the followers of Spingarn are, in Smith's view, too narrowly concerned with aesthetic value, the criticism of Brooks and Huneker, he still argued here, has "some vitality, although now, perhaps, it is the vitality of desperation" (*Proletarian Literature* 374).

In 1941, Smith edited (assisted by Malcolm Cowley) *The Democratic Spirit*, his anthology of American literature. He explains in his preface that the anthology comes out of developments in world history at the time: in the face of fascism in Europe, he sees Americans as "one of the few peoples that can still cherish democracy" (Smith xxvii). He intends for his anthology to teach the American reading public what democracy is and thus to perpetuate the democratic spirit. There is a need for such instruction, writes Smith,

because in America there have been "some rather weird distortions of the democratic idea" (xxv). Smith puts much faith in the influence exercised by writers; he holds that they have an inspirational role, not merely expressing the people's will but formulating it. Although Smith realizes that there is, in American literature, also "an aristocratic literary tradition," he calls that tradition "minor" (Smith xxvii). Among the writers excluded from the anthology because they are part of this "aristocratic tradition" are Hawthorne and James. *The Democratic Spirit* emphasizes the literature of the 1930s, which, in Smith's words, is pervaded by "critical idealism" (Smith xxxiii). Thus he shows himself sharing the esteem and hopes that Calverton and Hicks had shown for recent literature.

Literary histories and anthologies like the ones discussed above are only one voice that Marxist criticism found in the thirties. An equally important voice were innumerable articles in journals of the Left, which would deserve a study of their own. Frequent contributors were Malcolm Cowley and the poet Michael Gold. In the four essays collected under the title *The Hollow Men* (1941), which had been previously published in the *Daily Worker*, Michael Gold argues that in the nineteen-thirties, "at last, American literature came to grips with its own enormous and wonderful continent" and attacks those critics who "repudiate a decade of people's progress and social discovery" (Gold 9, 10). Gold would therefore certainly have agreed with the emphasis that Smith's *The Democratic Spirit* put on

the literature of the thirties. While Gold recognizes the importance of aesthetic aspects, he calls for literary and critical works that take the social material reality into account.

Another prolific contributor to Leftist journals was Malcolm Cowley, who also edited *After the Genteel Tradition* (1936). In this book, Cowley states that the times of genteel writers and aesthetic critics are over and that this development was officially recognized by awarding Sinclair Lewis the Nobel Prize in 1930. Like Calverton and Hicks, Cowley considers John Dos Passos the best representative of the new orientation of American literature. In an essay in the same volume, Cowley praises Dos Passos for being at the same time an aesthete and "a hard-minded realist, a collectivist, a radical historian of the class struggle" and for incorporating both these tendencies in all his works (Cowley 134).

But the American critical Left was far from unified in the thirties. The Trotskyite James T. Farrell, for example, was stimulated by Hicks' book on *The Great Tradition* and the simplified proposition on the interdependence of literature and economic law to write his *Note on Literary Criticism* (1936). In it, he shows lapses in the valid argument of Leftist critics, criticizes dogmatism, and outlines corrections needed for Marxist literary criticism in order to preserve its values and methods.

While in the ranks of the critics V. F. Calverton was instrumental in trying to reduce such sectarianism within the Left, writ-

ers too tried to overcome their differences through three American Writers' Congresses. Waldo Frank, then chairman of the League of American Writers, explains in his foreword to the collected papers given at the first congress in 1935 that American writers "are held together by common devotion to the need of building a new world from which the evils endangering mankind will have been uprooted, and in which the foundations will live for the creating of a universal human culture" (Hart 5). This unifying spirit also implies that to achieve such a "new world," there must be "an alliance of writers and artists with the working classes" (Hart 5).

When the decade came to its end, the social concerns of these writers and Marxist critics did not stop exerting an influence on the critical community. Russell Reising's term of an "unusable past" is therefore erroneous. Ludwig Lewisohn's *The Story of American Literature* (1939), for example, has one of its sources in the Marxist critics of the thirties. Lewisohn views art as an expression of the collectivity and judges its usefulness for the masses. But apart from Marxism, he is also very strongly influenced by Freudian psychoanalytic theory. G. Harrison Orians' *A Short History of American Literature* (1940) also recognizes the importance of social developments for literature. His theory is that the study of American literature should be a scholarly analysis of historical, social, and political forces that helped shape this literature.

Some opposition to critics on the Left, however, is apparent

in Alfred Kazin's work of the late thirties and early forties. Vanderbilt calls Kazin "never more than a bleachers intellectual-radical, a routine and detached socialist" (Vanderbilt 481). In his study of recent American literature, *On Native Grounds* (1942), Kazin undertakes a re-evaluation of literature and criticism of the thirties that comes out of his conviction "that a kind of historic complacency had settled upon our studies of that literature, and that while the usual explanation of it as a revolt against gentility and repression had the root of the matter in it, it did not tell us enough, and that it had even become a litany" (Kazin vii). Kazin opposes "the twin fanaticisms that have sought to dominate criticism in America since 1930—the purely sociological and the purely textual 'esthetic' approach" (Kazin x-xi). He believes that the social and aesthetic dimensions of literature must not be separated: "We are all bound up in society, but can never forget that literature is not produced by 'society,' but by a succession of individuals and out of individual sensibility and knowledge and craft" (Kazin xi). In this way, his book certainly showed the way for later criticism and illustrated a more complete combination of social and aesthetic approaches to literature.

Opposition to Leftist criticism also came as a consequence of Bernard Smith's *Forces in American Criticism* (1939). Smith's assessment of the whole American critical tradition in expressly Marxist terms had provided an occasion for other critics to dispute

the value of economic or political force as a criterion of criticism. And Stalin's pact with Hitler in the summer of 1939 climaxed a decade of Marxist controversy in American criticism. Numerous Marxist critics, Granville Hicks among them, took this act as a betrayal of faith and speedily resigned from the Communist Party or denounced the Marxist cause. Certain sympathizers whose criticism had been strongly influenced by the socio-political issues—Edmund Wilson and Kenneth Burke among them—remained flexible and continued to adapt Marxist analysis to their methods of formal analysis or social interpretation. These and later generations of critics demonstrate that the Leftist liberators of the thirties certainly provide a "usable past" whose influence continues to be felt.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Jay Martin, Leo S. Bing Professor of Literature at the University of Southern California, for drawing my attention to Reising's book and its shortcomings and for all the valuable guidance he has given me in shaping this article.
- ² Professor Vanderbilt offers an extremely detailed and comprehensive historical account of the profession of American literature from the beginnings until 1945. His insightful groundwork in this field has informed much of my own discussion and will provide the reader with broader connections of Leftist criticism in the thirties.
- ³ In his unpublished dissertation *V.F. Calverton: A Critical Biography* (University of California, Irvine, 1977), Leonard Wilcox describes Calverton's career as a "one-man history" of the American Left during two decades because Calverton personally experienced a series of paradigmatic intellectual and emotional responses to the dominant radical movement during those years—an interest in socialism, an intellectual alliance with communism, and an estrangement from Stalinism. Calverton's responses to developments on the Left were distinctively American. His radicalism was individualistic, eclectic, undogmatic, pragmatic, and egalitarian in spirit. His eclecticism led him in search of a "complete" socialist perspective that would bridge the gaps between sex and politics, economics and culture, self and society and that

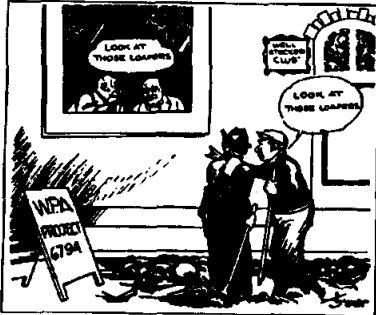
would end the sectarianism which divided and demoralized the Left. **The Literary History of the United States** (1946), edited by Robert Spiller et al., mentions Calverton as having attempted, together with Mumford, "the reconstruction of our 'usable past' that [Van Wyck] Brooks had called for" (Spiller 1154).

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Fifty-Fifty



Thomas, Detroit News, Dec., 1935



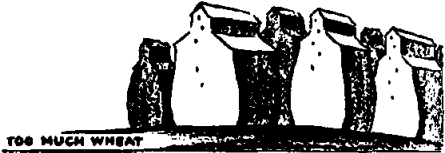
Batchelor, Sunday News, Oct. 11, 1936

What Do You Make of It, Watson?

Woman's Work Is Never Done



Hungerford, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Feb., 1937



Fitzpatrick, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Jan. 11, 1931