
Konstantinos Blatanis

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REFERENCES


1 Alan Wald completes his trilogy on the history of the American literary Left during the middle decades of the twentieth century with a careful and original study of the period ranging from the mid-1940s to the late 1950s. Following the first part, Exiles from a Future Time (2002), in which attention is primarily given to the early years of the Great Depression, and the second Trinity of Passion (2007), centered around responses in life and art developed through the course of World War II, this third volume is devoted to authors whose commitment—whether unconditional or not—to Communism was tested against identified, adversary socio-cultural and political parameters as well as major historical events which marked the postwar period and signaled the onset of the Cold War Era. The work recognizes as a point of departure the fact that this was a moment when American writers on the Left found themselves suspended between a state of disillusionment with the Soviet project—intensified by historical occasions such as Nikita Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalinist practices or the violent suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising—, and a condition of multileveled marginalization and plain, crude prosecution as McCarthyism and loyalty to consumerism moved center stage on home ground.

2 Faced with the arduous task of an extensive and in-depth historical account of the lives and literary production of the American Left at this juncture of intense and consequential precariousness, Wald responds by charting inventively an intricate web of life-courses and artistic trajectories which ran close and parallel to each other and often met and intersected in significant and formative ways. The critic offers a type of historical
investigation in which biography and literary analysis are the two main spheres of interest. However, in this study, productively enough, biographical insights are not recognized as indispensable prerequisites to a thorough evaluation of the literary works themselves. Rather, what the effort guarantees is that the reader gains sufficient understanding of how these writers positioned themselves in relation to the Communist worldview in general and the legacy of the 1930s in particular. For this reason, Wald deliberately hunts down first and foremost “structures of feeling” (xiii). The critic’s valid assessment of this scene of productivity constitutes also an equally captivating narrative in which what is valued as the most redeeming feature of the voices heeded is the fact that they do “enter spaces of contradiction and deep disturbance” (xiv) and allow readers to become aware of the implications “of the fate of the lost opportunity of the vision of the 1930s” (xvi).

In terms of theoretical methodology, Wald informs his work by drawing a fruitful analogy between the tactics employed by the writers he studies and the highly seminal and multisided reservoir of Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics, as elaborated in works such *Minima Moralia* (1951). Interestingly enough, Wald’s own modes of interrogation and analysis draw upon Adorno’s valuable lesson, as he sets out to reveal the inconsistencies and failings but also the strength and exceptionality of the targeted material. Furthermore, as a cultural and literary historian Wald manages to adequately foreground the factors which ignited and sustained the evolution of corresponding trends of inquiry in literature and theory in this given period. The reasons that necessitate such a dialectical approach are sufficiently highlighted for the reader already in the book’s preface and introduction. In both sections, occasions of severe disorientation spawned by the phenomenon the critic recognizes as “late antifascism” are considered, since postwar writers often assumed a stance of which “the greatest disservice [...] was to make the new anti-Nazism dependent on misguided pro-Sovietism” (xviii). It is specifically and convincingly contended that the term “antifascism” itself as a “blanket phrase [...] can cover over conflicts as unfathomable as twentieth-century political life itself” (16).

Wald sets out to elucidate and explain precisely a number of such pivotal and crucial conflicts, and thus, in the first chapter, he focuses on Kenneth Fearing’s novel *The Big Clock* (1946) as a case study which on the one hand epitomizes the idiosyncrasies of the historical moment, while on the other serves to introduce amply the critical attitude of the entire volume. In an effort to adequately assess Fearing’s literary reaction to the emerging new social structure in postwar America, Wald borrows the term “Consumers’ Republic” from Lizabeth Cohen, as configured in her work *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003). The inspection of Fearing’s itinerary ever since the Great Depression and his prominent presence as the era’s leading poet of the Left, the comparative and contrastive evaluation of his career course with those of other outstanding literary figures such as Saul Bellow, but most of all the profound reading of his 1946 novel allow the critic to comment insightfully on this new American “civilization [which] redefined citizenship as being an integral part of consumerism and recast the function of trade unions from being a vanguard of social justice into a competing interest group” (26). Wald specifically notes that in his endeavor to “document the realities of the new social order, Fearing takes advantage of the noir techniques; he creates the look, the mood, the feel of the mid-1940s in the United States and especially its moral and emotional life—indeed, its very dream-life” (39). It is also carefully underlined that the novelist handles aptly instances of “bitter mockery of human self-
delusion,” yet without ever allowing room for “caricatures of the Left” (45). It is important to stress that in this case the analogies between the response of the discussed author and the literary historian’s own stance cannot be easily missed. Like Fearing, Wald himself is never reticent about the repercussions of self-delusion for the lives and careers of these writers. Furthermore, the critic presents in theoretical terms but also values in practice the imperative need of addressing “the emotional as well as the moral, social, and psychological aspects of pro-Communist writers—the inner life of people too often treated as if they had none” (48). Thus, relying on this type of interrogation he manages to offer a distinctive contribution to the field. In precise terms, Wald is motivated by no intention to sanctify works and venerate writers or to correct the official canon and suggest an alternative one. Instead, in this thoroughly researched and manifold historical account he meticulously and accurately examines the place the object of study holds within the cultural spectrum of the era. To this end, he considers carefully the complexity of the Communist identity and the ensuing confusion around it due to which “a force that altered the course of U.S. literature remains strangely obscure” (47).

Aiming to identify the major qualities of this effort what needs to be first noted is the fact that the historian draws attention to sharp contrasts but also subtle differences, as becomes easily detectable in the second chapter where two types of Communist literary criticism are compared. Early on, Wald purposefully underlines the significance of “the uneven talent and sometimes capricious personalities” of a group of mainly Jewish American men in charge of the Party’s publications, who in the “war against injustice [...] voluntarily looked to the Soviet Union for direction” (60). In the process, he discusses Samuel Sillen as a representative of Zhdanovism—the doctrine bearing the name of Andrei Zhdanov, the rigid cultural spokesman known for implementing strict laws of obedience to the decrees of the Soviet government in the 1940s—, and finds the chance to expose fully the consequences of blind adherence to the political needs of the Party. And yet, time is also offered to the argument that this is a type of corruption that cannot be conflated with “bribery induced by money” (70), and thus the reader is adequately warned against the mistake of schematically viewing figures such as Sillen either as “power-hungry neurotics” or “tender idealists” (70). In pointed distinction to Sillen, Charles Humboldt is approached as a critic who “[a]lthough always assuming the posture of an orthodox political Communist [...] had the skill of a Georg Lukács in giving plausibility and sophistication to a potentially crude set of propositions” (78), and whose “Marxist sense of modernity had become so expansive that he fully understood, without a shred of condemnation, Fearing’s elegant asperities and mordant antipathies” (83).

Furthermore, throughout the volume the historian aspires to account for all exceptional features and particular nuances of the perspectives that postwar American writers on the Left were led to adopt. Thus, in the third chapter Wald traces the routes of a number of novelists who were not aware that their output constituted “already part of the formation of a countertext to the newly evolving Cold War reconstrual of the past” (85). Taking carefully into account “the increasing distance, mostly unacknowledged, between the Communist rhetoric that once swayed these writers and the reality that they lived” (97), he turns to novelists Alexander Saxton, Josephine Herbst, Vera Caspary and evaluates their struggle to “develop new imaginative structures to fit the content of disintegrating visions” (115). Similarly, in the fourth chapter as Wald focuses on African American, gay, and lesbian authors, such as academic, essayist and poet Rebecca Pitts, writer and activist James Baldwin, literary academic Harry Dana, fiction-writer Bill
Rollins, and novelist, playwright, and screenwriter Henry Myers, what is primarily highlighted is the fact that “Left writers were multifaceted personalities alert to the instability of any identity [...] and often attuned to the complexity of their own simultaneous embeddedness in class, sexual, ethnic, and racial associations” (120). It is thus effectively argued that these “outsiders” provided constructive and irreplaceable insights into the thorough changes the American socio-cultural and political landscape underwent at the moment. On the whole, the intellectual work of the Left is valued here for advantageously foregrounding the often inevitable but also fruitful connections between political and sexual non-conformity.

The third major quality of the work which deserves to be highlighted is the fact that its lens remains receptive and sensitive on all occasions, while its focus is thoroughly expansive and intensely inclusive. Indicatively, in chapter five, Wald directs his attention to Richard Wright and considers the way in which the author viewed displaced African Americans as “a perilous prototype of the emerging condition of urbanized mass society on a world scale” (156 & 158). The interest centers mainly on Wright’s novel *The Outsider* and the discussion addresses, among other areas, the highly questionable results the writer achieves through “a sequence of expressionist noir episodes shaped by existentialist emotions” (156). More importantly, what is adequately elucidated is the author’s utter disillusionment with the Party and the Soviet Union, and thus a valuable insight is offered into how Wright himself came to understand that his earlier “embrace of an idealized party and a far-off country had not been a choice but a necessity” (176). According to Wald, complicated fights, such as the one in which Wright was engaged, are exquisitely handled in Ann Petry’s *The Narrows*. Read as an “antipode” (155) of *The Outsider*, Petry’s novel is reviewed as a modernist work which examines “subjects rendered disoriented, silenced, evasive, and unnarratable amid the wreckage of so many lost passions and vacated promises as those that were suffered by the African American Left” (197). Equally penetrating views and indispensable conclusions are offered in the seventh chapter in which Wald focuses on the ideological itineraries followed by Jewish American novelists such as Katya and Bert Gilden, Abraham Polonsky, Jo Sinclair. The historical significance and cultural polyvalence of this scene of productivity are convincingly supported when the critic articulates efficiently arguments concerning parameters such as the fact that these writers worked with “a knowledge that their generation had failed, yet they believed that when radicalism came again—and there were signs of a resurgence as they wrote—their failure would have nonetheless contributed encouragingly to the new impetus” (238). Similarly, in the eighth chapter the historian chronicles the Communist presence in postwar American poetry and considers the career courses of mainly four poets, Aaron Kramer, Thomas McGrath, Walter Lowenfels, Robert Friend, as instances which invite instructive questioning and reviewing of issues such as the possible interconnections of “conventional literary forms, sexual repression, and Communist orthodoxy” (286). At the same moment, this is an opportunity for the critic to look carefully into the ever-lurking danger of “instrumentaliz[ing] verse” (291), which in the 1940s and 1950s loomed rather fierce under the pressure of “late antifascism.”

It is important to observe that in this broad historical and critical review it is not just inevitable but also logical that not all works and authors receive equal time and attention; for example, few cases compete with those of Ann Petry’s *The Narrows*, Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*, or Kenneth Fearing’s *The Big Clock*. The targeted area is undeniably such an
abundant source that ever new names and titles appear till the very last pages of the volume. The critic is thoroughly justified in arguing that “a complete accounting [...] would require an encyclopedia, not a narrative” (xv). However, what is important is the fact that Wald offers a solid and engaging account which definitely invites further research in the field. Indeed, this is a study in which questions and conclusions are handled with the same care. Thus, for example, it is clearly and precisely explained why “outsiders” of different types attract here particular attention: “[t]he presence of Jews and other outsiders in the Communist Party was an effect, not a cause; the Party offered outsiders a vision and an opportunity” (297). In this theoretical vein and practical mode, the critic manages to voice amply and influentially his evaluation of Communist literary modernism not as “a development within modernism, a ‘late modernism’ but an evolution of the social realism already in commerce with a modernism that emerges into a third tradition through a strategy of psychological intensities” (303). Thus, he significantly identifies as one of the most central messages of Communist literary modernism the realization that “psychic mechanisms that function for us in political crises are hardly disconnected from those that regulate our behavior in private situations” (303).

In conclusion, Wald inspects carefully and productively major aspects of the historical moment when “the idealism of the radical movement in the United States entered into lethal encounters with world events” (294) through a meticulous study of the era’s literary production on the Left. Thus, he admirably succeeds in influentially highlighting the enduring value of identified “perspectives of individuals who are viewed as flawed, admirable, talented, or merely human in recognizable ways” (294). In this way, what is thoroughly accentuated is the pertinence of these responses and stances for the early twenty-first century reader, precisely because one does “not have the option to be unentangled in this lost time” (xiii). Emphasizing instances of frustration and disorientation, of betrayal and abandonment does not in any way diminish the most important parameter of the paths these writers paved. This valid account appropriately and specifically foregrounds the very fact that these cultural workers did struggle to realize the potential of their own visions and equally courageously tested their faith to the Communist worldview. It is imperative to stress that this is a particularly valuable lesson for the present moment when the only notions and beliefs, convictions and commitments which in general are not deemed immediately suspicious or are not met with cynicism and utter disrespect are those programmed in full accordance with the doctrines of globalized late capitalism and the dictates of the force field of neoliberalism.

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