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Introduction

In Thomas Wolfe's posthumously published novel *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940), his autobiographical protagonist, George Weber, reflects on the emotional devastation the recent economic catastrophe in the country has caused. To the character (as well as the novelist), the traumatic effect of the abrupt closing in 1930 of the Citizens Trust Company, a bank in Libya Hill – an imaginary version of the author's North Carolina hometown – and subsequent suicide of the town's mayor dealt a blow that destroyed all sense of happiness within the community. And in this regard it presaged a national calamity. The widespread despair of those who "had lost their life savings," and who now felt "that all hope was gone," constituted "a tragic spectacle the like of which had probably never before been seen in America. But it was a spectacle that was to be repeated over and over again, with local variations, in many another town and city within the next few years."¹ That the boom years during which the townspeople had become intoxicated with the promise of prosperity through "speculation and real estate" were over was indisputable. In the 1920s the "prospect of quick and easy money" had been thrilling, "the possibilities of wealth, luxury, and economic power hitherto undreamed of" seemingly "just lying around waiting for anyone bold enough to seize them." So confident at this time were people "of a golden future" that "no one gave a second thought to the reckless increase in public borrowing. Bond issues involving staggering sums were being constantly 'floated' until the credit structure of the town was built up into a teetering inverted pyramid." Indeed, the sudden end "of this complicated web of frenzied finance" left them "saddled with debts that they could never pay." "Yesterday they could count their paper riches by ten thousands and by millions; today they owned nothing and their wealth had vanished" (346). But for Wolfe the ruin was as much spiritual or existential as it was monetary:

What happened ... has been described in the learned tomes of the overnight economists as a breakdown of 'the system, the capitalist system.' Yes, it was

William Solomon

that. But it was also . . . the total disintegration of what, in so many different ways, the lives of all these people had come to be. It went much deeper than the mere obliteration of bank accounts, the extinction of paper profits, and the loss of property. It was the ruin of men who found out, as soon as these symbols of their outward success had been destroyed, that they had nothing left – no inner equivalent from which they might now draw new strength. It was the ruin of men who, discovering not only that their values were false but that they had never had any substance whatsoever, now saw at last the emptiness and hollowness of their lives. (348)

Wolfe's fictive account of the onset of the Great Depression is notable in the emphasis it places on subjective responses to the socioeconomic crisis. Here the impact of the defining event of the era is to negate the convictions to which individuals had previously held. Like the risky financial schemes in which they had overenthusiastically invested, the belief of the town's inhabitants in the meaningfulness of their existence now stands revealed as baseless. Consequently, the task of the writer became to help the nation renew its sense of purpose, to begin again.

Indeed, creative artists and critical intellectuals accepted throughout the 1930s that one of their primary tasks was henceforth to participate in if not guide the ideological recovery of the nation. For many progressively oriented writers and thinkers this led to an active involvement during the first half of the decade in the rise of a proletarian literature. The eccentric stance Kenneth Burke staked out in "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," a paper he delivered at the first American Writers' Congress in 1935, is a related but distinctive case in point. In arguing for a rhetorical shift in radical discourse from the figure of the "worker" to that of the "people," he presciently recognized the power of industrialized entertainment and the mass media to sway their audiences by supplying them with images of what they wanted: a more luxurious lifestyle.² Filmmakers in particular know how "to create a maximum desire for commodities consumed under expensive conditions – and Hollywood appeals to the worker mainly by picturing the qualities of life in which this commercially stimulated desire is gratified" (314). To counteract this demand and win adherents to left-wing enterprises would require a degree of psychological insight that had heretofore not been sufficiently integrated into political "propaganda."

A comparable concern with the susceptibility of the masses to emotional manipulation by reactionary forces can be discerned in Richard Wright's work throughout the second half of the Depression era. For instance, in one of the opening scenes of "Cesspool," Jake Jackson, a black postal worker, sits down to breakfast and proceeds to express what we are clearly intended to take as a set of misguided and contradictory allegiances.³ After reading in

Introduction

the daily newspaper a headline referring to Roosevelt's ambition to eliminate corruption in the financial sector, Jackson claims in opposition that "these old Democrats" are "crazy troublemakers" who simply envy rich and famous "robber barons": "who's going to tell old man Morgan and old man Rockefeller and old man Ford what to do?"⁴ But worse than his idealization of such tycoons are the fictive entity's xenophobia and correlative respect for fascist dictators. Upon reading the following headline—"HITLER CALLS ON WORLD TO SMASH JEWS"—the book's confused protagonist reflects on the domestic situation: "That's what's wrong with this country, too many Jews, Dagos, Hunkies, and Mexicans. We colored people would be much better off if they had kept them rascals out" (32). That Wright hopes his readers will overcome such attitudes once they see them in print is obvious. Moreover, despite his inability to secure a publisher for this significantly experimental text, one that drew heavily on the formal innovations of modernist predecessors such as James Joyce and John Dos Passos, Wright maintained his critical focus on the affectively charged state of mind of poorly educated and disenfranchised minorities. Thus in "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), Wright's retrospective account of the genesis of his groundbreaking novel *Native Son* published earlier that year, he explained that the problem he wished to investigate was as much a psychological as a sociological topic. A "dispossessed and disinherited man," the character carries "within him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism"; consequently, "in looking and feeling for a way out" of his predicament he might just as easily "follow some gaudy, hysterical leader who'll promise rashly to fill the void in him" as he might "come to an understanding with the millions of his kindred fellow workers under trade union or revolutionary guidance."⁵ Only "the drift of events in America" will decide the fate of this type of individual, but given "the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action," it is certain that he will not become a "supporter of the *status quo*" (447).⁶

The American writer's commitment in the 1930s to registering widespread distress and dissatisfaction with contemporary conditions of existence was frequently presented as a cry coming directly from those in despair. A striking example is William Saroyan's use in the short story "Aspirin is a Member of the N.R.A." of the first person to express powerfully his dismay at the anguish he both personally endures and perceives around him in those struggling like him to survive in the aftermath of the stock market crash. "Everybody was in pain. I was studying the subway and I could see the pain in the faces of everybody." Yet the speaker remains resilient, voicing his determination to "laugh about" the fact that "all of us are riding to death," that "a low fire" "burning" in the soul "is eating its substance slowly."⁷

William Solomon

He then unexpectedly identifies aspirin as “the hero of the story” to the degree that it serves as a viable means of, if not curing, than at least dulling one’s awareness of one’s mortality: “all of us six million people in New York, swallowing it, day after day. All of us in pain, needing it. Aspirin is an evasion. But so is life. The way we live it. You take aspirin to keep going. It deadens pain. . . . It stifles remembrance, silences weeping” (137). Even more surprisingly, the speaker then seizes ironically upon a radio announcer’s assertion that “Aspirin is a member of the N.R.A.” For the speaker this is an unintentionally metaphorical formulation of a “truth” about contemporaneous methods of trying to alleviate collective suffering: the pharmaceutical product and the New Deal agency are alike in that both are half measures that do not address the underlying problem (presumably the contradiction of capitalist modes of production). They “make a pretty slick team” but all they do is help “everyone to evade fundamentals . . . to keep people going to work.” Aspirin is analogous to (and a near palindrome of) the N.R.A. in that both are designed to send “millions of half-dead people to their jobs.” They may be “doing a great deal to keep the spirit of the nation from disintegrating”; yet neither is “preventing anything.” All they accomplish is the “deadening [of] pain” (138). The shortcomings of the government’s strategic intervention, figured as an effort to treat the symptoms rather than the cause of mass sickness, will soon become apparent. Thus, the speaker predicts that when the medicinal remedy stops working, violent uprisings will ensue. “That is when you begin to be mad about the way things are going in this country. . . . That is when, weak as you are, something old and savage and defiant in you comes up bitterly out of your illness and starts to smash things . . . destroying cities” (139). Revolutionary rage will result in acts of destructive dissent once the State’s method of pain management ceases to be effective.

The impulse to serve as a conduit for the emotive speech of socio-politically disenfranchised persons informed a considerable portion of the literature produced in the 1930s. The respective titles of Benjamin Appel’s *The People Talk: Voices from the Great Depression* (1940) and Richard Wright’s *12 Million Black Voices Can’t Be Wrong* (1941) indicate the degree to which an appeal to the intimate immediacy of oral discourse structured much of the non-fictional reportage carried out toward the end of the era. Earlier precedents for this approach can be found both in Whittaker Chamber’s short story “You Can Make Out their Voices” – published in the March 1931 issue of *The New Masses* – as well as the Hallie Flanagan play based on the story, *You Have Heard Their Voices*, which opened later that same year. Equally telling is the prologue John Dos Passos composed in 1937 for a revised edition of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930) and subsequently

Introduction

attached to the U.S.A. trilogy as a whole. In this piece the author remarks that “it was speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood” and that ultimately the nation “is the speech of the people.”⁸ Even more striking is the abrupt shift from third to first person that takes place in “A Country Letter,” a section of James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1942). Here the author unexpectedly abandons his finely wrought descriptive prose and proceeds to ventriloquize the female members of the tenant farmer family with whom he has been staying in Alabama. It is as a plural (and then a singular) woman that he now tries to convey the confusion and agony of the impoverished subjects of his journalistic inquiry. “In what way were we trapped? where, our mistake? What, where, how, when, what way, might all these things have been different, if only we had done otherwise? If only we might have known.”⁹ Conversely, Tillie Olsen selected, as the epigraph to the Depression-era novel she was unable to complete at the time, lines from a Walt Whitman poem that in effect convey her sense of sorrow at not being heard. “A muffled sonorous sound, a wailing word is borne through the air for a moment, / Then blank and gone and still, and utterly lost.”¹⁰ Appropriately, the only piece of the original manuscript to appear in print in the 1930s did so in the form of a short story about a mining accident titled “The Iron Throat” (1934).¹¹

Much has been written about the visually based cognitive imperatives of the vast number of documentary undertakings launched in the second half of the decade, due in large part to the Works Progress Administration’s support of the Federal Writers Project. Indeed, at the end of *On Native Ground* (1942), after a chapter dealing with the achievement of William Faulkner and Wolfe, Alfred Kazin reproached what he called this “literature of empiricism” on the grounds that it marked “the failure of so many to discriminate between the pen and camera.”¹² For him, books such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), a collaboration between Erskine Caldwell and the photographer Margaret Bourke-White, were naive due to their attempt to model their verbal component on the representational accuracy or “objective realism” of the mechanical device (387). Yet despite the epistemological limitations he discerned in such enterprises, they indicated to the young literary historian a morally admirable desire on the part of American writers “to assess what could be known and to establish a needed security in the American inheritance,” in the hope of serving “the people” and thus coming “to grips with the subject that lay closest at hand – the country” (381). Moreover, from our present vantage point, it is evident that Kazin’s canonical survey of the nation’s literary past, completed at the end of the Depression era and written with great rhetorical panache, itself stands as one of the most distinguished realizations of the general aspiration on which

William Solomon

he was remarking. The essays that make up this Cambridge Companion volume seek to live up to such previous examples of rigorous, thought-provoking critical scholarship. In so doing, they offer us an image of the 1930s as a period during which political and literary ambition combined to produce an enduringly meaningful set of cultural artifacts.

Alan M. Wald's opening chapter on the relevance of the decade for contemporary radicalism challenges us to comprehend it as a rich and variegated archive worth researching in depth. Consequently, he contests earlier interpretive approaches that sought to simplify the object of investigation, and in the process tended to minimize the creative contribution of those who affiliated themselves in heterogeneous ways with left-wing undertakings in the era. For him, attempts to reclaim the period as one that speaks to twenty-first-century concerns must recognize this earlier generation's lucid commitment to struggling in diverse manners against – at home and abroad – economic exploitation, racialized violence, fascist aggression, and colonial domination. The sense of ethical responsibility individuals felt in involving themselves in collective forms of protest should be studied in depth through historical research rather than caricatured as a passing fashion. He thus singles out participation in the Sacco-Vanzetti defense and the signing of the Culture and Crisis manifesto in 1932 as progressive actions that prefigured a sustained series of decisive efforts on the part of artists and intellectuals to intervene in world events. Of particular importance to Wald is the way in which otherwise impressively synthetic accounts of the period tend to overlook or distort the significance of Marxist literary debate at the time. Morris Dickstein's *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (2009) is a case in point in that, despite its salutary move away from older approaches that emphasized “the melodrama of disaster and unresolved angry revolt,” the recent study embraces a nostalgic tenor that in effect mutes academic inquiry into the contemporaneous pertinence of Depression-era militancy. Correlatively, in an assessment of Michael Denning's magisterial *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997), Wald cautions against the writer's relatively indiscriminate utilization of the concept of “social democracy,” for such a procedure homogenizes, and in so doing obscures, the disparate and often conflicting positions adopted in the era toward the USSR, toward Stalinism, as well as toward communism.

Matthew Stratton's essay situates theoretical reflection in the 1930s on the relation of aesthetics and politics against a philosophical background that reaches back to antiquity. Beginning with Plato's meditations on the danger of art as mimesis to the state and society, Stratton moves swiftly from Kant's emphasis on disinterest as a precondition for appreciating beauty through

Introduction

Pater's aestheticism and the subsequent flowering of art for art's sake to fascist appropriations of the spectacle as a means of generating sensorially pleasing images of self destruction. The historical significance of reflection on this topic in the Depression era is a consequence of various critics' determination to elucidate the non-oppositional aspects of the aesthetics/politics nexus. Stratton maps out three areas of thought on this matter. First, conservatively-oriented thinkers such as Paul Elmer More, a leading figure in the rise of the New Humanists, sought to defend a classical aesthetic and traditional values as a bulwark against present-day confusion. Taking the poetry and criticism of T. S. Eliot as a touchstone, Southern Agrarians such as Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom expressed comparable sentiments in their respective formulations of a reactionary modernism. In sharp contrast, on the Left, figures such as Joseph Freeman, James T. Farrell, and Michael Gold voiced powerful affirmations of the purposefulness of literature, declaring that the time had come for art to embrace its social functionality. In the middle was the liberal aesthetic endorsed by the various New Deal programs and epitomized by John Dewey's pragmatism. In retrospect, the latter's ideas on the embodiment of intellectual labor, his assertion of the need for educational reform through perceptual reorientation, and his valorization of aesthetic experience as representative of experience in general, offer a solid conceptual frame for comprehending the decade-long aspiration to reconcile art and life.

Recent critical scholarship on the 1930s has decisively moved beyond the stereotypical notion that the dominant aesthetic of the period was a "return to realism" and thus a "reaction against the modernist impulse."¹³ Indeed, the rise to prominence in literary history of the category of late modernism has illuminated the ongoing investment in formal innovation throughout the interwar years. One of the most significant aspects of this sustained concern with creative originality (or the "new") was a turn within artistic endeavors away from the conventions of narrative fiction toward factual discourse and loose, episodic structures. In effect a rehabilitation of previously minor genres such as autobiography, travel writing, and documentary, this shift in method extended the remarkable achievement of a filmmaker such as Dziga Vertov into the 1930s, whose *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) demonstrated the feasibility of correlating aesthetic experimentation with left-wing aspiration. Henry Miller's anarchic political inclinations were much different than the Soviet director's revolutionary enthusiasm, yet the 1934 publication (in Paris) of the American writer's *Tropic of Cancer*, and its successor, *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), showed in striking fashion the value artistically inclined authors were in the process of discovering in a prose that approached everyday life without the mediation of standard novelistic devices

William Solomon

such as character and plot. (Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is another example and several chapters below address aspects of his enduringly important accomplishment.) Thomas Wolfe's impulses were in this same autobiographical direction, and it was only Maxwell Perkins's immense editorial labors on Wolfe's massive and disorderly manuscripts that enabled the emerging writer to attain commercial success and critical recognition as a proper novelist.¹⁴ Also relevant in this context are the works of young Jewish-American writers such as Edward Dahlberg (*Bottom Dogs* [1929] and *From Flushing to Calvary* [1932]) and Daniel Fuchs (*Williamsburg Trilogy* [1934–37]). *Summer in Williamsburg*, the first installment of the latter's trilogy, is especially telling, for it is simultaneously a sincere attempt to recreate the lived experience of being a member of a minority community at the time and an epistemologically reflexive meditation on the impossibility of completing this representational task. Instructed by his mentor to "make a laboratory out of" the neighborhood, and told that in order to "discover the reason for people's actions" he would have to "pick Williamsburg to pieces until you have them all spread out before you on your table, a dictionary" through which he must then "[p]ick and discard," "[c]ollect and analyze," the protagonist realizes in the end that the book he had hoped to complete would inevitably "be unfaithful to the whole" (376). "Literature was not reality. That was all there was to it. Writers who said otherwise were fakers, claiming more than they could do. A book was an artificial synthesis."¹⁵

It is from the perspective of all this that the genealogical link between Depression-era literary undertakings and the postwar intervention of the Beats comes sharply into focus, for the most salient feature of Jack Kerouac's overall output was his commitment to taking his actual experiences as raw material for his often ambitiously stylized prose. (The posthumously published *Visions of Cody* [1972] is a much better reference than *On the Road* [1957] for understanding the experimental energies informing Kerouac's still underappreciated late modernist accomplishment.) A poem such as Allen Ginsberg's "Manhattan Thirties Flash," from the collection *The Fall of America* (1972), helps confirm the memorable status of the decade in the imagination of the generation of American writers who grew up in the period. But E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, published in the preceding year, is even more revealing. Structured in part around the research of a young graduate student composing a dissertation on the trial and execution of his parents in the 1950s for treason, the novel also details the difficult struggle of the increasingly politicized protagonist to come to terms amidst the rise of the counterculture in the 1960s with the legacy of the Depression era. Most importantly, the novel has become a canonical touchstone for the ways in which radical aspiration, the desire to engage in sociopolitical

Introduction

protest, may manifest itself at the practical level of rhetorical technique. The next three chapters of this volume examine the pursuit in the 1930s of this kind of complementarity between progressive political aims and literary inventiveness.

In her essay, Catherine Morley attends to the complexity of the tensions structuring the literary field during the Depression era, exploring the degree to which a concern with formal innovation coexisted with a reliance on traditional narrative strategies in well-known and obscure works from the period. She begins her inquiry with a reassessment of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), acknowledging its sentimental strains without rejecting the novel as past commentators have on the grounds that it sacrificed aesthetic invention to political immediacy. After isolating the subtly experimental dimensions of Steinbeck's text, Morley shifts her discussion to one of the major proponents in the United States of proletarian realism: Mike Gold. His critical repudiation of avant-garde techniques and melodramatic depiction in *Jews Without Money* (1930) of his early life and eventual conversion to Communism serves as a foil to Pietro di Donato's more aesthetically ambitious handling of similar material in *Christ in Concrete* (1937). Although there is a shared religiosity in the two writers, who also had an immigrant background in common, di Donato's surrealist method of describing events such as a ghastly workplace accident at a construction site distinguish the novel as an expressively forceful instance of modernist artistry. Morley then examines the capacity of a canonical modernist like William Faulkner to assimilate the priorities of late-nineteenth-century regionalists or local colorists into a modernist enterprise. Thus, in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Absalom! Absalom!* (1936) a preoccupation with the specific temporality of Southern history occurs in conjunction with the use of multiple perspectives, nonlinear narration, and reflexive analyses of the limitations of language as a medium of communication. Lastly, Morley turns to Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy, which she deems a successful reconciliation of the opposition between modernism and radicalism due to the author's conviction that, as she phrases it, "experimental form is political . . . experiment is protest."

Similarly, Ruth Jennison argues in her account of avant-garde poetry in the 1930s that literary invention and progressive politics converged throughout the decade. Her initial focus is on the Objectivists, a loosely coordinated movement predicated on among other things the artists' shared antipathy to the commodity form. In reading portions of Louis Zukofsky's long poem "A" and George Oppen's *Discrete Series* (1934), Jennison examines the way in which the poets deployed paratactic compositional methods to detail the specificity of contemporary existence in urban environments without ignoring the materiality of language. Lorine Niedecker's *Progression* (1933) then

William Solomon

serves as a means of showing how the core principles of Objectivism laid the basis for a feminist intervention aimed at disrupting the reproduction of normative subjectivities. Correlatively, Charles Reznikoff's 1934 prose poem *Testimony* rearranges portions of the juridical record both to register the violently coercive forces that have been required to maintain oppressive regimes in this country and to clear a space for the voices, especially of working-class African Americans, to be heard. Although not officially aligned with the Objectivists, Muriel Rukeyser and Kay Boyle also incorporated documentary artifacts into their anticapitalist and antiracist literary undertakings. In "The Book of the Dead" (1938) and "A Communication to Nancy Cunard" (1937), respectively, the two poets extracted citations taken from legal archives to preserve the speech of victimized miners in West Virginia and the defendants in the "Scottsboro boys" case. Jennison concludes her inquiry with a discussion of Kenneth Fearing's communist inspired yet melancholic turn toward popular culture and Langston Hughes's reliance on African-American vernacular traditions to forge a collective voice. Whereas the former sought via the ironic juxtaposition of contradictory utterances to put readers on guard against the persuasive thrust of the manufactured verbiage swirling around them, the latter, in "Wait," drew on the format of the newspaper to encourage a reading process in which the intersecting determinations of seemingly disparate events could be comprehended.

As Paula Rabinowitz demonstrates, aesthetic experimentation also played a vital role in the plethora of documentary enterprises to which American artists committed themselves in the 1930s. Throughout the period, the impulse to show as powerfully as possible the effects of extreme poverty, and to locate its causes in the greed of the more fortunate, spread across the entire cultural field. It manifested itself in the murals of Diego Rivera, the songs of Woody Guthrie, the poetry of Archibald MacLeish and Muriel Rukeyser, gangster films and Busby Berkeley musicals, as well as plays such as Arthur Arent's *Ethopia* put on by the Living Newspaper of the Federal Theatre Project. Notably, in many such instances, avant-garde tactics of collage and montage served as a means of blurring "the boundaries of form, genre, and media." Still and moving images were particularly crucial in enterprises aimed at depicting the ravages of economic inequality. Rabinowitz surveys several of these, paying close attention to the interaction between writers and filmmakers or photographers in the Depression era. While the importance of the collaboration between James Agee and Walker Evans that produced *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is common knowledge, the comparable desire on the part of John Steinbeck to learn as much as he could from Pare Lorentz's cinematic ventures (like *The Fight for Life*) is a less well-established area of inquiry. Thus Rabinowitz traces the impact