

Introduction

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“In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o’clock in the morning, day after day,” wrote F. Scott Fitzgerald in his country’s darkest hour.¹ It was February 1936. At that juncture, in the last year of Franklin Roosevelt’s first term, the clock must have looked eternally stuck at three in the morning to countless Americans, especially those of Fitzgerald’s generation. Around midnight, the most expensive orgy of all generations – the high jinks and careless laughs and reckless speculations, both emotional and financial, of the 1920s – had reached its vertiginously lofty acme. Then, crash! It was the sound of the postwar boom falling apart. Immediately, all the panicked guests fled the party. That was a while ago, and now the time is three in the morning, sharp. Hugging their naked souls, they are alone in the dark. The first light, the glimmer of economic recovery and political stability, will be several dark and solitary hours in coming. Will it really come, ever? They are not so sure any more. Down and out but still wide awake, they find themselves suspended in an unaccustomed zone of transition. It’s neither night nor day. A buzz from too much champagne is giving way to the onset of a hangover, the piercing headache. They have tumbled down to the bottom of the worst depression in the nation’s history, the worst depression of their lives, but they want to believe that the dawn is just around the corner.

I commissioned the following chapters specially for this book with a view to capturing the decade with all of its transitional contradictions, all of its darkest nights and its bravest days. The “test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” This is another famous maxim taken from Fitzgerald’s essay “The Crack-Up.” I thought this test was pertinent to this volume. To be first-rate, it must hold a multitude of oppositions and contradictions. To be first-rate, this book must offer a coherent account of an incoherency: how the nation despaired and hoped all at once at three in the morning. This book’s syncretic contents

and its elastic framework are the devices I consciously chose to achieve this goal.

It presents no surprise that nocturnal themes dominate many of the subsequent chapters. “Hunger makes thief of any man.” “As God is my witness, I’ll never be hungry again.” “To hell with the truth! As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything.” “With *usura* hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall.” “Christ is a nigger, beaten and black.” “Why do you hate the South?” “Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn’t a game for knights.” “God Bless America,” sung not in a jingoistic growl but in a scared croak.² Hunger, confusion, hate, isolation, cynicism, and fear motivated these memorable locutions. The general emotional tone of this volume is grave.

And yet the ensemble that my contributors play in concert is never monotonous. You will find in the following chapters literary expressions of sunny sentiments, sung, declaimed, or muttered in an unterrified cadence. “Good-morning, Revolution.” “Everything that is is holy.” “After all, tomorrow is another day.” “For whom the bell tolls.” “This land is your land.” “Night and day, you are the one.” “Love is lak de sea.” “There ain’t no sin and there ain’t no virtue. There’s just stuff people do.” “Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” And Tonto’s endearing “Ke-mo sah-bee.”³ These utterances, as intimately enmeshed with our idea of the 1930s as their despairing opposites, came from another place in American culture, a seemingly impregnable bastion of hope, camaraderie, elegance, and wonderment that survived the most trying of circumstances. Throughout, my goal has been to let this book register the crush of all these contradictory melodies and sentiments that found expression in the era’s literature.

To design a volume of essays that meets Fitzgerald’s first requirement – holding a multitude of opposed ideas – was, then, my first goal. The second consisted in giving a book of such internal tension “the ability to function.” This is where the concept of “transition,” central not only to this volume but to the Cambridge series as a whole, came in handy. As you can see, the table of contents relies on a rather conventional way of organizing multifarious topics. It divides the materials into “Themes,” “Formats,” and “Institutions,” and under these headings, diverse chapters address themselves to diverse but clearly defined problems. Such a system makes these problems assignable to specific contributors equipped with specific expertise, showcases the rich variety of the contents, and easily accommodates additions and substitutions. Underneath this conventional surface, however, lies another, simpler, and more organic principle – a dialogue

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between problems of literary representation that arose out of the social conditions of the time and those that might have been made acute by historical circumstances of the 1930s but were not created by the major political, social, and technological developments of that era.

Since even in the most turbulent of epochs there seldom emerges a wholly original literary problem, an argument could be made that many of the topics examined by the contributors in what follows were actually preexisting creative issues endemic to the act of representation as such. In other words, contemporary writers discovered new solutions to old problems. Take for example the radical writers' relationship with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), the subject of Chapter 21. Even this topic, as uniquely characteristic of the historical situation in the 1930s as any other, can be argued to be an iteration of an enduring literary theme. Didn't Henry James, a half century before, already dissect the morality of political violence and the perils of the individual's total assimilation into a radical and quasi-religious organization in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886)? Didn't William Shakespeare explore the same dangerous territory of subversive conspiracy in *Julius Caesar* (1599)? Although it may not be always easy sharply to distinguish problems of literary representation unique to the 1930s from those that are not so, I remain convinced that this distinction can be seen as seminal for a larger insight that is at the heart of this volume. The insight consists in this: the best way to model a literary history is by treating it as a bundle of themes, formats, and institutions always *in transition* at divergent paces. If you apply this model to the distinction between literary problems that are context-bound and literary problems that are relatively autonomous, then you will be able to see this distinction not as a given line but as a changeable value that reflects a particular quantity of turbulence generated at a particular moment of transition. On this account, literary problems popularly associated with the 1930s, such as seemingly *sui generis* events as the political radicalization of literary culture, government funding of arts, and the rise of documentary journalism, are revealed as especially stormy manifestations of traditional literary concerns at a time of transition. Likewise, literary pursuits that kept the pressures of the immediate context at arm's length, such as the novelistic exploration of women's changing roles in the family and at work, can be understood as relatively quiescent phases of long-standing concerns enduring through the 1930s. Needless to say, these two kinds of literary problems stand at the extremes of an elastic spectrum that can accommodate a number of intermediate cases. For example, the problem

of national identity and literature's responsibility for evolving a series of its definitions, the subjects of Chapters 9, 10, and 11, were intermediate issues that were neither completely context-bound nor autonomous.

My aim in the remainder of this introduction is to unpack the contents housed discretely in "Chapters" and "Parts" and reassemble them in accordance with the logic of variable transition. An image of a sparser but deeper structure emerges from this re-assemblage, and affords a glimpse into the blueprint of this volume that underlies its table of contents.

Let's begin with the literary themes whose transitional processes were particularly turbulent in the decade, those problems to which the historical moment appeared to writers to demand immediate and radical solutions. One of the most memorable of these, the one probably most intimately associated with the 1930s in our collective memory, is what Joseph Entin calls in Chapter 3 the "precarity" of the working class. Americans had always been working people. On farms, in towns, and increasingly since the Civil War on factory floors, an overwhelming majority of the nation toiled daily to produce and subsist. Precisely because of its accustomed presence at the center of American life, however, labor was never truly among the topics fit for literary endeavors until its precarious character was exposed to the working men and women and to the "intellectual workers" of the 1930s. A proximate cause that forced the nation to reflect on the life of the "proletariat" (originally a Roman term meaning "those who produce the offspring," applied in the Roman Republic to citizens possessing only children and no property, revived by Marx in the nineteenth century and imported into the American lexicon around the turn of the century) was mass unemployment. When jobs evaporated overnight in staggering numbers and when much national anxiety was attached to the problem of relief and job creation, writers and readers became curious about what these jobs – cannery work, fruit packing, welding, mining, tobacco farming, logging, and so on – actually entailed. It was the frightful dearth of jobs that, defamiliarizing them, made them a worthy object of aesthetic interest and social passion for writers and artists. Forensic and worshipful descriptions of the logistics of cotton farming in James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), a Zola-esque delineation of Virginia miners in Muriel Rukeyser's *U.S.1* (1938), or at once allegorical and action-packed descriptions of bricklayers in Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) spoke to this emergent interest in the physics of laboring.

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The national office of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) caught onto this trend very late in the decade, but when it did, as Jerrold Hirsch discusses in Chapter 18, it brought its full institutional resources to bear on their new project, titled *Men at Work*, which documented a diversity of jobs done by ordinary workers.⁴

These writers recorded labor itself in vivid detail. Harold Rosenberg, editor of *Men at Work*, even stipulated that writers contributing to the anthology see the jobs firsthand or preferably perform these jobs themselves. Meanwhile, other writers, the majority of those responding to the precarious life of the working class, chose to focus on the class's experiences outside of work. Such a choice was logical for a number of reasons. To begin with, an overwhelming majority of writers were after all college-educated intellectuals with little or no experience of backbreaking manual labor. Di Donato, who left school at the seventh grade to work as a construction worker, was a rare exception; James Agee, a graduate of Phillips Exeter and Harvard, was the norm. Another reason for the relative absence of actual labor in 1930s literature was the fact that what heightened the sense of working-class insecurity was the threat or the reality of joblessness. Structurally, the proletariat's vulnerable position as a class without property that only produced offspring was bound up less with hazardous working conditions than with the ever-imminent possibility of unemployment. At the lowest circle of the hell that was Depression-era America, writers found not men at work but men who were either out of work or facing the imminent risk of falling out of work. The most famous Depression-era fictional characters, the Joads of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), travel in their jalopy 1,500 miles from Oklahoma to California, in search of work and cause anxious rejection in the communities through which they pass.

The ambit of the writers' interest in the working class extended beyond the economic challenge of breadwinning; their attitude took an anthropological turn. Alive to this development, Agee wrote in 1935 to Father Flye, his high school mentor in Tennessee, "that in most present writing that is any good there is a strong consciousness of 'anthropological' correctness, i.e. the writer takes great care, in writing of millhands, that they speak an exact Pittsburgh instead of Gary dialect."⁵ Although works of fiction about the working class introduced a variety of ethnic groups, regions, and occupations to the readers, many of them couldn't have been written in the first place if their authors hadn't been driven by a certain shared vision about the life-world of workers. Stylistically, authors like Mike Gold, Henry Roth, James T. Farrell, Carlos Bulosan, Dalton

Trumbo, and Richard Wright experimented with miscellaneous techniques. Yet, notwithstanding the resulting diversity in terms of aesthetic effect, these authors all wrote on the assumption that the working class had developed a unique way of life. This new “way of life” has been interpreted from differing points of view since its discovery in the 1930s. You could, for example, place it in the liberal narrative of progress. Then, you would be able to see how the working-class status came to be recognized as a cultural identity in the 1930s thanks to the rise of unions and their contributions to popular culture.⁶ Or, alternatively, you could adopt a Marxist viewpoint. Then, you might realize that the idea that to labor in America is to practice a way of life patterned by unique rituals and symbols could gain acceptance precisely because the working class was losing its edge, its intractable outsider-ness. Dissolving the “contradiction” between labor and capital that radicals pointed to as the engine behind history’s inexorable progression toward social revolution, the new working-class culture saved capitalism from itself.

Whatever your evaluation of the social implications of the discovery of the working-class culture, what you find in these books exploring the proletarian way of life is an attention fastened on the minutiae of individual daily existence. These books collected particular scenes and confused but honest emotions that were meaningful enough to sustain the interest of the main story, meaningful enough to dispense with a didactic author editorializing about their political usefulness. Certainly, this does not mean that the authors did not handle these concrete and particular materials with an eye toward exposing their injustice. Speeches connecting working-class life as it actually was to a theoretically spectated destination in history often obtruded themselves at the very end of these usually autobiographical stories. But as far as the all-informing literary sensibility was concerned, these authors of working-class fiction were more naïvely experiential than theoretically rigorous. Gold, Roth, Farrell, Bulosan, and Trumbo were committed socialists and several of them were card-carrying members of the CPUSA at some point during the 1930s. The irony is rich. Whatever dire prophecies they made about the inevitability of a working-class uprising, whatever yearnings for a classless society they gave voice to through their political actions, the stories they actually told painted a surprisingly claustrophobic picture of working life.⁷ Like it or not, and they often seem quite attached to it, the workers in these stories appear to be trapped in a culture that does what all cultures do so well – prevent its members from historicizing their conditions.

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If class interest could be rewritten as cultural experience, it is not so surprising that many 1930s writers, readers, and publishers reduced, *ad absurdum*, the problem of class to the problem of style. The 1930s were “an age of the present tense, the stevedore style,” Dawn Powell writes in *Turn, Magic Wheel* (1936), a scream of a satire on literary celebrities and the Manhattan publishing industry. The “stevedore style” is on display in a piece of pulp fiction that draws the attention of young, ineffectually ambitious editor Johnson, always on the lookout for new talents in order to one-up his competitors:

The freight slows up just outside the yards. As she jerks around the bend by the tower Spud gives Butch a kinda push and out they rolls outa the side door onto the gravel. Wot the hell, sez Butch, take it easy, take it easy. Ya wanna kill us?

“To achieve this virile, crude effect,” Powell’s bemused voice glosses, “authors were tearing up second, third, and tenth revised drafts to publish their simple unaffected notes, plain, untouched, with all the warts and freckles of infancy. The older writers who had taken twenty years to learn their craft were in a bewildering predicament, learning, alas, too late, that Pater, Proust, and Flaubert had betrayed them, they would have learned better modern prose by economizing on Western Union messages.”⁸ In fairness to all the literary performers of proletarian virility, let me repeat that Powell’s pastiche is an absurd reduction. But, besides being funny, her ridiculous reduction inadvertently serves to make the political point: by figuring the worker as a speaker with a distinctive voice, instead of a rational actor with an economic interest, the author risks translating economic disagreement into terms of expressive difference.

In 1930s culture, the interest in the marginalized class was connected with the interest in marginalized geographical regions, as Chapters 4, 6, and 7 explain. If the class protagonists of the literary culture of the previous decade were elites, that is to say, the at least imaginatively free souls whose resources of consciousness were more than equal to the troubling consequences of war, urbanization, and commercialism, the class protagonists of the 1930s were decidedly the plebeians whose consciousness struggled to digest the world around them. In parallel with this shift, the regional focus of literary culture also moved from New York City, the playground of sophisticates and snobs, to the rest of the nation. Under conditions of economic depression, populism and regionalism were on the rise in tandem. Because during the Jazz Age he had wagered, with more romantic abandon than anyone else, all of his phenomenal ability to feel on the

promise of the city, F. Scott Fitzgerald was ready to dramatize the Depression-era rediscovery of the hinterland, the vast country that was not New York, with more piquancy than anyone else. In July 1932, Fitzgerald revisited his Babylon – Manhattan – for the last time. What struck him was how the economic crisis actually normalized American life. Customs agents were curiously polite. His barber was back at work in his shop. The head waiters at his old haunts again bowed people to their tables. And from

the ruins, lonely and inexplicable as the sphinx, rose the Empire State Building and, just as it had been a tradition of mine to climb to the Plaza Roof to take leave of the beautiful city, extending as far as eyes could reach, so now I went to the roof of the last and most magnificent of towers. Then I understood – everything was explained: I had discovered the crowning error of the city, its Pandora's box. Full of vaunting pride the New Yorker had climbed here and seen with dismay what he had never suspected, that the city was not the endless succession of canyons that he had supposed but that *it had limits* – from the tallest structure he saw for the first time that it faded out into the country on all sides, into an expanse of green and blue that alone was limitless. And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his imagination came crashing to the ground.⁹

Then as nowadays, typical writers were cosmopolitan *flâneurs*, and so it was not as though the Great Depression precipitated among writers a mass hegira to small towns and the countryside. But as a place to live and work, cities in general became impractical for writers, many of whom took to the road for significant portions of the decade. Probably the most dramatic case in point was Langston Hughes. Leaving a cabinet of his files, suitcases, and a few books in his friends' homes in Carmel, CA and New Jersey, he crisscrossed the nation in his new Model A Ford sedan for much of the decade, relying on the proceedings from his public readings for his livelihood. Moral and creative reasons also compelled writers to hit the road, because the most urgent topic of the era, legions of forgotten men and women, resided in rural America. Their travels down many unfamiliar ways and byways of their own country resulted in a host of road narratives and on-the-ground accounts of the plights of ordinary people. Field reports filed by journalists on Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) assignments, including Martha Gellhorn, belong to this genre. These officially sponsored writings were joined by a wealth of reportage produced by progressive writers at once driven by anger at the inequitable social system and tempted by the chance to gather new materials for their artistic

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endeavors. Works belonging to this genre include Edmund Wilson's *The American Jitters* (1932), Sherwood Anderson's *Puzzled America* (1935), James Rorty's *Where Life Is Better* (1936), and Nathan Asch's *The Road: In Search of America* (1937). Another group of authors, who, often literally, had lived as hobos themselves, overlaid their works of fiction with the conventions of travel narrative. Edward Anderson's *Hungry Men* (1933) follows a hobo-musician, narrated in the third person, in a desolate dead-pan voice. Tom Kroner's only novel, *Waiting for Nothing* (1935), also relates the life of a hobo, in a similarly dry and hard-boiled prose. African American writer William Attaway's first novel, *Let Me Breathe Thunder* (1939), the story of two white hobos with a Mexican boy they take under their wing on a whim, promotes vagabondage as a counter-value to the bourgeois obsession with productivity and domesticity. Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* (1946) paints a determinedly upbeat picture of the precarious and violent world of Asian migrant workers who follow the crops along the West Coast. John Steinbeck's two most popular works, *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), also drew on the format of the road narrative.

As New York City was marginalized, the events of the 1930s thrust two regions on the nation's margin, California and the South, to the center of attention. The prominence of the West Coast in Depression literature owes much to the entrenched tradition of labor radicalism there (though the political class leaned strongly Republican), to Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California (EPIC) campaign in 1934, and to Steinbeck's commercial and critical success. David Wrobel covers these issues and much more in Chapter 7. Chapter 6 is about the South. As Michael Kreyling convincingly shows, the South was the nation's Other: the depository of all the anachronisms that Americans had sloughed off as they modernized and liberalized themselves. The *American Mercury* survey Kreyling discusses paints a familiar picture of a region woefully deficient in all the requisite attainments of modern civilization: wealth, education, public health, and public order. As much a fact as a fascinating myth, such a picture influenced literary representations of the poor whites there in works such as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932; turned into a Broadway hit in short order and adapted to screen by John Ford in 1941), and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). The images of the South created by these works evoke conflicting emotions that range from disgust to empathy and reverence, as John Marsh explains in Chapter 4, but all these divergent emotional reactions somehow end up confirming the South's irredeemable

backwardness. The economic, political, and social setbacks combined to expose whatever advances the South had made toward reconstruction and regeneration up to that point as an inept sham. Even the incidence of lynching increased after a steady decline. If anything, the South now seemed more barbarous than it did when the Menckonian condescension peaked during the Scopes trial in the previous decade.

Was the Great Depression, then, an unrelieved nightmare for the South? Not necessarily, at least in the realm of cultural politics, for the decade-long pause in modernization complicated the meaning of the South's foreignness. The collapse of the economy called into question progress, modernity, and liberalism: in short, everything that had given the North license to think of itself as the nation's destiny. Restated from the Dixie side, the 1930s represented a brief interlude in history, a moment of confusion when there was a chance, however illusory, to appeal history's final verdict on its eternal guilt. Perhaps it should not surprise anyone that, in reaction to capitalism's failure to self-adjust, white and Jewish writers romanticized the Southern way of life. The Heyward/Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* (1934) portrayed Catfish Row as the kind of warm and organic neighborhood no longer to be found in the harsh industrialized North, a romantic characterization that the pimp from Harlem, Sportin' Life, who is upgraded to a major character in the opera, sharpens through his Northern sophistication and slickness.¹⁰ Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* came out in 1934 to become the bestseller of the decade. David O. Selznick's film version premiered in Atlanta five years later, to win ten Oscars and to become the highest-grossing film of the century. In their depictions of war and slavery, both versions were friendly to the Lost Cause, but this alone cannot explain its phenomenal popularity north of the Mason-Dixon line. David Welky persuasively argues in Chapter 12 that what actually added to its resonance was Scarlett O'Hara's life trajectory that culminates in her rejection of the ethic of capitalism, symbolized by Richmond, and her return to Tara, which stands for the promise of escape from modernity.

African-American writers never mistook the crisis in industrial capitalism for a vindication of the Lost Cause. Some of the most sensational events that galvanized black communities across the country took place in the South, such as the trial of nine black boys falsely accused of the rape of a white woman in Alabama and the trial of Angelo Herndon, a black labor organizer arrested and convicted for insurrection in Atlanta. Clear-eyed, black writers found the popularity of a book like *Gone with the Wind* nothing but ominous. At the NAACP, Walter White even got into an