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AN ANALYSIS OF PROLETARIAN FICTION.

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TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POLITICAL FICTION:
AN ANALYSIS OF PROLETARIAN FICTION

by

CALVIN EVERETT HARRIS

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Political Science and the Graduate School
of the University of Oregon
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of the requirements for the degree of
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I INTRODUCTION	1
A. The Parameters of Political Fiction	1
B. Historical Overview	2
C. Ideology and Point of View	20
II THE POLITICS OF ALIENATION	28
A. Essays on Political Fiction	28
1. Richard Wright, <u>How Bigger Was Born</u>	29
2. James T. Farrell, <u>A Note On Literary Criticism</u>	39
3. Gaylord Leroy and Ursula Beiz, <u>Current Directions</u>	48
B. Alienation as a Multi-Dimensional Theme	49
C. An Analysis of Recurring Themes	55
III A SELECTIVE ANALYSIS	65
A. John Dos Passos, <u>The 42nd Parallel</u>	65
B. John Steinbeck, <u>In Dubious Battle</u>	72
C. Jack Conroy, <u>The Disinherited</u>	80
D. Grace Lumpkin, <u>A Sign For Cain</u>	89
E. Josephine Herbst, <u>Pity Is Not Enough</u>	97
F. Robert Cantwell, <u>The Land Of Plenty</u>	102
IV SOME COMMENTS ON LITERARY HISTORY: A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE	111
A. The Genteel Tradition	111
B. The Naturalist Tradition	114
V PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES	127
A. Theories of Alienation	127
B. Marxist Humanism	132
C. Continuing Issues in Marxist Analysis of Literature and Politics	136
BIBLIOGRAPHY	139

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. The Parameters of Political Fiction

"Political" novels have several features which set them apart from other serious works. First, they tend, as Blotner,¹ Milne,² and Howe³ suggest, to focus on governmental institutions and the people involved with or directly affected by them. Second, they are concerned with political ideas expressed explicitly in the story or lying just under the surface. Third, the political novel usually examines various social issues, for example, the populism of the 1880's and 90's; corruption in public life; race relations; ethnic group conflict and its political/social consequences for our society; women's suffrage, or in the context of the mid-twentieth century, women's liberation. These are the major components of political fiction, fiction in the sense of welding together "fact" and illusion into a story.

In addition, political fiction may also express the ideas of politically prominent people, although the author's perceptions may introduce some distortion. Two novels may serve as examples in this instance, The Last Hurrah (1956) by Edwin O'Connor and Robert Penn Warren's All The Kings Men (1946). Finally, some novelists attempt to interpret certain historical events from a particular point of view or ideology. Three works, about which I shall say more later, can be cited as examples in this case: W. E. B. DuBois' Black Flame Trilogy (1957,

1959, 1961), Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind (1936), and Frank Yerby's The Foxes of Harrow (1946). Not all novels are necessarily "political." However, the authors of the works just mentioned do express a clearly stated point of view about a specific historical event.

In a broader context, American political novels generally fall into three separate and sometimes overlapping categories. First, there are novels which extol the virtues of American society while at the same time down-playing its faults. In the second broad category are the "protest" novels which usually accept the basic structure of society while criticizing the workings of certain institutions. Politically these might be called "reform" novels. The third category of novels are the proletarian works. The "proletarian" novel was for the most part Marxist oriented and reflected the commitment of a movement dedicated to changing our society in a fundamental sense. Most of the proletarian fiction to be discussed in later chapters was published during the 1930's. While this dissertation will not ignore "reform" novels altogether, it will give primary attention to this last group of novels. As a necessary background for examining the proletarian novel, I will discuss briefly some of the historical events surrounding the rise of proletarian fiction in relation to the far-reaching political issues raised in this literature.

B. Historical Overview

At the center of the debate on the role and function of proletarian fiction in this country and in Europe were the contending interpretations of certain events and their meaning, for example: the great

depression, the rise of fascism, the revolution in Russia, and its future direction. The fiction of this period, especially proletarian novels, focused on the differing explanations concerning the significance of these events. The particular novels which I shall analyze in Chapter Three are a representative sample of proletarian fiction of the period. There are, it should be noted at the outset, some important distinctions to be made within the category of proletarian fiction which are both political and ideological in nature. That is to say, not all proletarian novels embraced the Marxian framework.

There were two meetings held during the early 1930's which highlighted much of the controversy taking place within the ranks of the "left" intelligentsia here and in the Soviet Union. The first was the meeting of the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers held in 1934. The second was the meeting of the American Writers Congress in the next year, on April 26, 1935 in New York City. The following discussion will look at the two meetings in reverse order.

Many of the novelists, journalists, and poets who attended the American Congress were from differing backgrounds and represented varying shadings on the political left. They were invited to attend on the basis of having achieved some standing in their respective fields and having clearly demonstrated their sympathy with the revolutionary cause.⁴ They were the kind of writers who did not need to be convinced that capitalism was a rapidly decaying system and that revolution was an inevitable process.

The debate centered on what direction the revolution should take, given the specific characteristics of American historical traditions.

Among the signers of the call for the meeting were: John Dos Passos, Richard Wright, James T. Farrell, Theodore Dreiser, Robert Cantwell, Jack Conroy, and Josephine Herbst. Two hundred and sixteen writers from twenty-six states attended, along with one hundred and fifty writers who came as observers.

Edwin Seaver's discussion of the proletarian novel set forth what was to become a general consensus in defining its principal characteristics:

. . . its concern with political orientation, with economic interpretation, with a certain historical perspective, with the materialist dialectic that is the basic distinction of the proletarian novel.⁵

In the case of the bourgeois novel, the political content can also be pronounced at times, and in this respect the bourgeois and the proletarian novels can serve a propaganda as well as literary purpose. The crucial distinction, then, relates to the political content. Seaver spoke to this point in the following way:

. . . it seems to me that by making the political factor the main distinction between the proletarian and the bourgeois novel we eliminate a whole cadre of dogmas whose effect is to slow the creative process. We eliminate the sorry confusion that has prevailed and still does prevail in so many discussions about proletarian literature. Such confusion, for instance, as that which assumes that a proletarian novel must be written by a worker, or must be about workers, or must be written especially for workers. The novelist will naturally turn to the milieu with which he is best acquainted for his material and if, as is the case in the United States, most of our writers come from the middle class, their novels are going to be primarily about that class.⁶

In other words, the proletarian novelist could write about the middle class, since in all likelihood he will have come from that class, but

he will do so from a Marxist perspective.

Seaver concluded this phase of his comments by noting the tendency of some to oversimplify the Marxist approach to proletarian fiction:

Bad novels are paved with good intentions, proletarian as well as bourgeois, and no one is less fooled than the workers when they find one of our writers trying to write about that which he knows little or next to nothing, or trying to do the working class a service by writing in words - usually cuss words of one syllable.⁷

The problems inherent in political writing are two-fold. On the one hand, the writer should not talk down to his reading public. On the other hand, he cannot afford to make too many assumptions about the reader's knowledge. The political novelist must maintain a delicate but necessary balance. Although this problem faces every serious writer, in the case of the political novelist the problem assumes a different dimension because of the kind of material dealt with.

The Communist Party's position on proletarian literature was enunciated by the then General Secretary Earl Browder who spoke at the Congress on its opening day:

Our party claims to give guidance directly to its members, in all fields of work, including the arts. How strong such leadership can be exerted upon non-party people depends entirely upon the quality of the work of our members. If this quality is high, the party influence will grow - if the quality falls down, nothing in the world besides this can give the party any leading role. That means that the first demand of the party upon its writer members is that they be good writers.⁸

I quote this passage because the role of the party at the Congress has been misrepresented by certain chroniclers of this period, in particular Eugene Lyons and later on Granville Hicks. Among the many charges leveled against the party was that it was part of a monolithic conspiracy

and attempted to dominate the Congress.

While Browder's general comments represented essentially the party's attitude on such matters, other portions of his remarks caused controversy within its ranks which has continued over the years. The controversy centered around what some considered as the ambiguity of some of his statements, ambiguity in terms of ideological flabbiness. For example, he stated:

We believe that the overwhelming bulk of the fine writing also has political significance. We would like to see all writers conscience of this, therefore able to control and direct the political results of their work.

The following statement in particular led to many questions within the party:

By no means do we think this can be achieved by imposing any preconceived patterns upon the writer.⁹

The questions raised most often within party ranks was what constitutes a "preconceived pattern" and who is to determine this? Should the artist be free to decide this for himself? If so, what are the likely political consequences for society? How can a struggle against the most reactionary features of bourgeois ideology be waged unless some of these "pre-conceived patterns" are seen in terms of their ideological antecedents?

Ideological struggle within any movement, given particular historical circumstances, can be affected by external factors. The rise of fascism was to have its impact on the debate taking place inside the Marxist camp. Events in the Soviet Union, which I shall discuss shortly, were also to have their effect. These particular conflicts, that is

events inside the Soviet Union as well as the threat of fascism, were felt everywhere especially in the arts and particularly in literature.

Although Seaver's comments expressed a consensus on the general characteristics of the proletarian novel, there were more substantive questions for which there was not a consensus. Furthermore, there was not a consensus within the party in this country or in Communist Parties around the globe. Waldo Frank's comments point to one of the more difficult areas of the debate -- if not in fact, at the crux:

The life of man is at issue; and with man the alternatives are present, at all times, of life, or death. They are present now. This makes clear that the cause of the socialist society is not a political, economic problem: it is a cultural problem, it is the human problem.¹⁰

Frank's comments were those of a non-party observer of the times but the issues he raised caused debate within the party as well as within the larger left community. He raises a related issue, namely, what is to be the role of the revolutionary writer? Is the writer to be "autonomous," and if so, how is this to be defined given the context of revolutionary political activity? Frank posed the issue in these terms:

I propose to show the specific value, in this crisis, of the literary work of art - not as a chorus of revolutionary politics, not as an echo to action - but as an autonomous kind of action. I propose to show that above all in America today, owing to our peculiar cultural conditions, the revolutionary writer must not be a "fellow traveler"; that his art must be coordinate with, not subordinate to, the political-economic aspects of the recreation of mankind.¹¹

Farrell spoke at some length on a related point in his essay A Note On Literary Criticism. He discussed a core of assumptions present in the Marxist framework. One of these is "that the objects and the ends

of our activities and the problems of life and society exert controlling and directive influences over the thoughts and actions of men."¹² Often these controls are subtle, not always readily apparent.

Another basic assumption in the Marxist framework, also noted by Farrell, is that "the development between end products in a society (like art, thought, and literature) from the basic material and economic relationships is not even and regular." In part, this speaks to the problem of the variations in cultural development in different societies which Marxism takes into account.* Farrell, in accord with Marxist theory, concluded that:

The relationship between economics and ideology cannot be graphed as a straight line between two points, nor expressed in a simple equation showing direct relationships, one leading head on into the other.¹³

Certain facets of economic development take place independently of ideology, a point acknowledged in Marxist theory. However, at some stage there will be a complex inter-connection between the two processes, and this will vary according to a range of cultural variables. The proletarian novelist tries to capture some of these subtleties. This goes beyond the question of thematic development into the area of ideology. In this sense, the proletarian writer must be, at the same time, a part of the revolutionary process in terms of helping to define it, and detached from it. This can create personal turmoil for the writer who attempts to function as artist and political activist. I will discuss some criticisms of Farrell's analysis in Chapter Two.

In an anthology on proletarian literature, published the same year as the American Writers Congress, Joseph Freeman discussed the relation

between art and society by making this observation:

The problem is: What, in the class society today, is the relation between art and society, art and science, art and action? It is true that the specific province of art, as distinguished from action or science, is the grasp and transmission of human experience. But is any human experience changeless and universal? Are the humans of the twelfth century the same in their specific experience as the humans of the twentieth?¹⁴

In addition Freeman added:

There is a general assumption, however, that certain "biologic" experiences transcend class factors. Love, anger, hatred, fear, the desire to please, to pose, to mystify, even vanity and self-love, may be universal motives; but the form they take, and above all the factors which arouse them, are conditioned, even determined, by class culture.¹⁵

Implicit in Freeman's comments, and explicit in the Marxist framework, is a rejection of the bourgeois notion that human nature never changes, or that it changes in only slight and insignificant ways. This rejection is also important in most proletarian fiction as well as non-fiction, especially where the Marxist critique is dominant. "The class basis of art," Freeman observed, "is most obvious when a poem, play, or novel deals with a political theme."¹⁶ Such a theme may be explicit or it can be under the surface, seemingly peripheral to the main plot. That a political theme may be secondary to the main story line does not necessarily make it less important in terms of the kinds of messages directed at the reader. Conversely, the reader often seeks reinforcement for his or her personal frame of reference, and this can have social consequences.

At the turn of the century, when Thomas Dixon's The Clansmen (1902)

was published and spanning three decades when Gone With The Wind (1936) came out, the social climate was largely anti-black, and these two novels reinforced this sentiment. I will discuss Gone With The Wind in more detail in Chapter Four. The political system, through its unwillingness to stop the daily lynchings of Black Americans in the South, gave tacit approval to anti-black attitudes. Dixon's work was for the most part explicit in terms of its political content. With Gone With The Wind the political content was no less pronounced, as far as anti-black sentiment was concerned. These two novels are illustrative of the links between socio-political attitudes and the novel as an expression of specific social policy. That is to say, the United States government never officially sanctioned the actions of terrorist groups like the Klan, portrayed as heroes in Dixon's work, but its policies did give unofficial approval through inaction or half-hearted, largely ineffective negative sanctions. There is no intent in this discussion to down play the importance of opposing sentiments present in American society at the same time, sentiments which were humanist rather than anti-black. They were expressed in much of the protest fiction published after 1900, for example, Charles Chesnutt's The Marrow of Tradition (1901), W. E. B. DuBois' Dark Princess (1928), and John L. Spivak's Georgia Nigger (1932). Nevertheless, Dixon's and Mitchell's works did reflect powerful political currents of the period.

Events inside the Soviet Union, especially between 1928 and 1932, had their impact on the development of the proletarian novel in the United States. The sometimes faulty and superficial interpretation of these events helped contribute to the decline of the proletarian novel

at the end of the 1930's. It is one thing to argue, as some did, that the Russian revolution had been betrayed, or to attack the revolution in favor of going back to the way things were pre-February, 1917 as others did; and it is quite a different matter to imply that the millennium had been reached after the October Revolution, which was the tendency in some cases. It is also a different matter to see the October Revolution as an historic break through creating the potential to solve many problems while facing new ones.

Of the possible perspectives mentioned above, it is difficult to tell from which stance Edward J. Brown's study of The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature - 1928 to 1932, takes off.¹⁷ He does, however, discuss some of the flavor of the ideological struggle taking place in the Soviet Union during the early days of the new socialist society coming into being. A major part of the conflict in terms of the role of artists, and especially writers, centered around an organization called the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, often referred to as RAPP. It should be noted that two papers presented to the American Writers Congress also deal with this period, 1928 to 1934. They are: "The Role of the Writer in the Soviet Union" by Matthew Josephson, and "First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers" by Moissaye J. Olgin.¹⁸

According to Brown, and this is corroborated by discussion at the American Writers Congress, there was widespread concern in the Soviet Union all through the 1920's that the cultural revolution was not keeping pace with the push for industrialization and that, unless it did, the revolutionary process would be endangered.

The works of Averbakh and the official statements of the leadership of RAPP make frequent reference to the necessity for a cultural revolution. The political revolution and the reorganization of industry and agriculture will be meaningless, they indicate, unless these developments are accompanied by a rise in the cultural level of the working class.¹⁹

What lay behind this debate was a growing awareness by the leaders of the October Revolution that in order for the socialist reconstruction of society to proceed on all fronts (that is, the consolidation of political power and the transformation of the economy to the industrial stage), an all out attack on some of the traditional attitudes from the previous society would have to be made. One of the principal areas for the attack was in the field of literature, a major component of "mass culture." While the first problem faced was one of widespread illiteracy, the long range problem was, and still is to an extent, to deal with the content of so-called "mass culture."

Averbakh was a leader of RAPP and a well known writer of the period. Concerning the cultural revolution, Averbakh states in one of his editorials in the official journal of RAPP:

The cultural revolution is a lengthy epoch during which human material will be transformed, the toiling masses themselves will be re-educated, and a new type of man produced. In this work a great and serious task falls to the lot of art, with its specific means of influencing the whole human psyche.²⁰

Much of the discussion in the Soviet Union on proletarian literature parallels that taking place in the United States. In fact, the main problem facing the delegates to the American Writers Congress was to apply Marxist analysis in an imaginative and creative sense to this country's cultural heritage.

The comments of Frank and Averbakh served to emphasize some of the differences that were present in the two meetings. For example, where Frank talked about revolutionary art being "coordinate with, not subordinate to the political-economic aspects," Averbakh saw the issue in very different terms:

Is it possible to give the writer a "task?" This is a question widely discussed at the moment. The class position of the writer dictates immediately²¹ to him the choice of themes and their treatment.

Averbakh distinguishes, as do most Marxists, between the class position of the writer and his class origin. The class position refers to the writer's political orientation, whereas class origin is simply the social status into which the author was born. On this point there is, and always has been, general agreement. Averbakh raises, however, an additional point in the same discussion around which there is still some debate:

Yet the writer is conditionally free in his choice of themes and in his treatment of them. But we must insist that this very freedom is conditioned. The fact that the writer is conditioned in his free choice of themes is in large part the real content of the term "social demand." I have been obliged to dispute rather frequently with those who maintain that the "social demand" is simply an order to the writer to "write on such and such a theme."²²

The issue raised by Averbakh and others derives in large part from a Marxist position which suggests that social conditions determine consciousness, and in turn, political movements continually strive to manipulate the environment to reflect class interests. The writer, and this is especially true if he is committed to the revolutionary movement, must be a detached observer and a committed revolutionary, must

be able to recognize the similarities and the differences between the role of a strike leader and a writer trying to describe the social processes out of which political movements develop.

In this sense, Brown oversimplified the debate taking place in RAPP when he described it in the following manner:

The basic cleavage was between those who believed that literature and art were special provinces immune to the direct influence of the party, and those, on the other hand, who regarded them as instruments of propaganda or education to be used by the party in the interests of the class.²³

Although Brown oversimplified the issues, the above positions did in effect reflect fundamental ideological differences within RAPP. It was not just a question of literature being "the instrument of propaganda" but, more importantly, what kind of propaganda? In a column in the Daily Worker, April 17, 1940, Mike Gold, a well known Marxist writer, talked about one aspect of what is meant by propaganda:

It is a fallacy to demand of proletarian fiction that the characters shall only represent the finest and most militant elements of the working class. This, it seems to me, is a mistake in the categories of art. The Soviet writers make a distinction between agitational and propaganda writing. One is meant for immediate occasion - the other long range. What we have come to understand in proletarian literature is that no worker's story can ever be the story of all of them - not if they are living characters.

What prompted Gold's column was an earlier review of Richard Wright's Native Son, which appeared three days earlier in the same journal written by Ben Davis. Davis was a leading black communist. The main thrust of his review, although generally laudatory, criticized the character portrayal of Bigger Thomas as being nonrepresentative of the total black

community. The point Gold seemed to be making was that Bigger and millions like him were the product of complex forces, including a vast social/political environment. In this sense, Bigger is representative. It was the failure to make these proper distinctions that played a part in the dissolution of RAPP.

Literature which is totally agitational often tends to obscure the complexity of issues while feeding illusions about easy solutions. The opposite tendency of ignoring immediate problems, can contribute to forestalling the active search for solutions. On a broader plain, Freeman commented on the role of art by stating a basic Marxist proposition:

Whatever role art may have played in epoch proceeding ours, whatever may be its function in the classless society of the future, social war today has made it the subject of partisan polemic. The form of the polemic varies with the social class for which the critic speaks as well as with his personal intelligence, integrity, and courage. The Communist says frankly: art, as an instrument in the class struggle, must be developed by the proletariat as one of its weapons. The fascist, with equal frankness, says: art must serve the aims of the capitalist state. The liberal, speaking for the middle class which vacillates between monopoly capital and the proletariat, between fascism and communism, poses as the "impartial" arbiter in this, as in all other social disputes.²⁴

In this respect, Freeman re-stated the assessment of Averbakh and others. As a general principle this analysis was, and still is, as true for the United States as it was for Russia. Still, the historical traditions of each country tend to dictate the tenor of the conflict. Freeman's comments were written just a few years after the dissolution of RAPP and at the point when fascism was rapidly reaching its peak. Viewed in today's

setting, these general principles still have validity, but in a totally different historical context.

For the most part I do not agree with Leon Trotsky's analysis of the Russian revolution nor with most of his interpretations of Marxist theory;* however, his discussion of the struggles within the Russian intellectual community during the early phases of the October revolution does raise some important points.

The October revolution, as he observed, was not just a political overturn but rather the beginning of a social and cultural transformation as well. He then went on to describe the period in these terms:

Non-revolutionary or non-October literature, is now in reality a past stage. At first, the writers placed themselves in active opposition to October, denying all-artistic recognition to everything connected with the Revolution, just as the teachers refused to teach the children of revolutionary Russia. The non-October character of literature, therefore, not only expressed the deep alienation that lay between the two worlds, but it became also a tool for active politics, the sabotage of the artist.²⁵

Marxist theory makes a distinction between revolutionary epochs in terms of class alignments. The revolutionary process in Russia, at least, on the surface, moved rapidly from a bourgeois-led uprising in February 1917 to a struggle led by the proletariat and its vanguard organizations in October of the same year. The consolidation of political power (that is, smashing all internal opposition, pushing back external attacks from foreign sources, and taking over the state apparatus) was a drawn out process. The social, cultural transformation of the revolution is still going on. In discussing "Proletarian Culture and Proletarian Art" in general, Trotsky observed:

Every ruling class creates its own culture, and consequently, its own art. History has known the slave-owning culture of the East and classic antiquity, the feudal culture of medieval Europe and the bourgeois culture which now rules the world. It would follow from this, the proletariat has also to create its own.²⁶

The proletarian period itself is seen in Marxist theory as a transitional phase moving toward a genuinely classless society.

Matthew Josephson, a participant in the American Writers Congress, spoke about some of his observations of the Russian literary scene. He visited Russia in 1934 shortly after the dissolution of RAPP. His comments dealt with the historical novel and its place in the revolutionary process. The Russians were contemplating adopting some of the format of Sir Walter Scott's works, but with significant changes:

Briefly described, the historical novel usually pictured obscure characters against the setting of recognizable events in history, battles, revolutions, and such - like; the historical material, carefully documented, was usually introduced into the text to play a part complementary but subsidiary to the intrigue or plot which was the chief concern of the author. But lately the experiment has been made of taking the events of almost the night before last, usually regarded as material for newspaper editorials, and making of them the subject of historical novels.²⁷

Moissaye Olgin's comments on the Russian literary arena are also interesting. In describing the "First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers," Olgin placed some emphasis on the composition of the delegates attending the congress, and this served as an indication of the attempt to broaden the base of support for socialist reconstruction among all segments of Russian society.

Keeping in mind that he was talking about the mid-nineteen thirties,

the following breakdown is significant because it highlights the efforts being made, the successes, and the scope of the problems facing Russian society some twenty years after the first phase of the revolution. There were 597 delegates in attendance, of these 377 were full participants; male delegates made up 96.3%, women delegates 3.7%. The problem of male supremacy, a hang over from the old regime, was still very much present and would call for an all out ideological attack. It was and is a key facet of the cultural revolution which is still going on. For the first time workers played a significant part in a meeting normally dominated by intellectuals. They represented 27.3% of the congress participants, with peasants representing the largest block, 42.6%. Working intelligentsia were 12.9%, and the nobility constituted the smallest group of congress participants, 1.7%. Olgin described the period leading up to the congress as free-wheeling with lots of debate and discussion. The scope of the pre-congress discussion reached every sector of Russian society, or as he observed:

For months preceding the Congress, the problems of literature became the prime concern at the broadest strata of the working population. Discussion of literature in factories and mines, villages and barracks, universities and machine-tractor stations, tracts on literature in all papers and magazines, personal appearances of authors at worker's gatherings and of workers delegations at author's gatherings constituted part of the preparations.²⁸

Olgin went on to describe the Congress as "the culmination of a process of reconciliation between the writers, at least many of them, and the revolutionary struggle led by the Communist Party."²⁹

The main thesis of the Congress was that literature was a social function. Furthermore, the Congress went on to define the concept of

literary realism:

It differs from the realism used by bourgeois writers in that it is supposed not only to reflect "objective reality" but to represent it in its revolutionary development, which is a development toward socialism.³⁰

In the Marxist framework this is defined as "socialist realism." It is not enough to know "reality" but it is also important to learn how to shape it.

During the period from October 1917 to 1924, three individuals symbolized the tenor of the ideological conflict taking place in the Soviet Union. They were V. I. Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Joseph Stalin. The extent of Stalin's role before and during the October uprising is a matter of some controversy.* There is no doubt that he played a dominant role after 1924, the year of Lenin's death. As Olgin points out in his report, Stalin played a key role in bringing that meeting about. It was by Stalin's initiative that RAPP, which had begun to develop narrow sectarian tendencies, was abolished; and it was his influence along with that of people like Maxim Gorky that helped set the ideological framework of the Congress:

Far from repudiating the cultural inheritance of the past order, the Congress laid particular stress upon the urgency of acquiring the best that was inherited from the literary traditions of the preceding epochs.³¹

A large part of the debate taking place then, as now, was directed toward deciding what is "best" in the old literary traditions.

This was the crux of the dialogue at the American Writers Congress. Olgin concluded his report on the Russian writers conference by noting the following:

The Congress was not "Russian." It was a congress of all the literature of the nationalities constituting the Soviet Union. The Congress revealed a growth of national literature no less remarkable than the growth of the Russian literature. The Congress helped establish closer relationships between the various national literatures; and the organ of the Union of Soviet Writers. The Congress was not free from struggles of tendencies. It conducted its fights against the right and against the "left."³²

C. Questions of Ideology and Point of View

In a series of articles dealing with "Revolution and The Novel," Granville Hicks discussed the issues of "authenticity" and "relevance" in a work of fiction. These are crucial issues for political fiction. Hicks saw authenticity and relevance as important but separate components:

The two essential qualities in a novel of the past are authenticity and relevance. Authenticity we may define for the moment as correspondence to both the known fact about the period in question and the best possible interpretations of those facts. Relevance is relevance to the fundamental interests of the author and his reader.³³

The selection and interpretation of "facts" are more often than not influenced by ideological perspective. Margaret Mitchell's work and W. E. B. DuBois' Black Flame Trilogy are historical novels, each presenting an underlying bias on the part of the author, each selecting certain events for analysis. The author's ideological bias enters at the initial stage where the selection of material takes place. The reader may or may not be aware of it, but it occurs nevertheless.

Hicks goes on to discuss the issue of relevance as "relevance to the contemporary situation and interests of the reader." The matter of emphasis becomes very important in terms of presenting a theme. Whether

the subject matter is contemporary or not is not necessarily important if the theme tends to transcend the historical time frame or if the issues being examined within the story help to place current events into an historical context. Finally, in dealing with the question of "authenticity," Hicks observed:

Authenticity is not secured by the introduction of masses of material gleaned from the history books, nor does it depend on the inclusion of real persons and events. Every character and every incident in a book might be fictitious, and yet the book could have absolute authenticity. Authenticity depends, obviously, on knowledge and understanding, and, if these are great enough, the essential character of the period can be recreated wholly in the realm of fiction.³⁴

What the author decides as "relevant" or important in a story may be a reflection of ideological orientation. If the particular story hints at or is explicit about a solution, especially where the theme has political implications, the author's point of view could be important beyond the author's own feelings on the subject. This will depend largely on the impact of the novel and the writer's ability to inflame the reader. In this discussion author's "point of view" is used synonymously with ideology.

For the purposes of this discussion, philosophy and ideology are terms which will be used interchangeably. One definition of ideology, put forth by David Apter, is adaptable to a Marxist framework:

. . . a generic term applied to general ideas potent in specific situations of conduct; for example, not any ideas, only political ones; not any values, only those specifying a given set of performances; not any beliefs, only those governing particular modes of thought. Because it is the link between action and fundamental belief, ideology helps to make more explicit the moral basis for action.³⁵

Philip Converse talks about ideology as "a configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence."³⁶ This differs from some other approaches which tend to limit ideology solely to the political realm as narrowly defined, thus separating human behavior into different compartments rather than interrelated components.³⁷ I am not suggesting that all behavior is "political" by definition. I am implying that some forms of behavior subtly influence behavior in the political arena. Protest movements of one kind or another represent the most obvious example of this interrelationship. The question of ideological clarity is a crucial one in defining the role of the writer, especially the proletarian novelist. The debate, during the 1930's, reflected the varying levels of sophistication within the political left in general as well as inside the Party itself. It also pointed to some of the complexities in Marxist literary criticism overlooked by some. Farrell's essay, A Note On Literary Criticism, (1936), raised other issues touching on the role of the proletarian writer, to which I will offer additional observations in Chapter Two. When he wrote this essay he still considered himself a part of the Marxist movement. One point he touches on seems to bear on Gold's comments referred to earlier in this chapter:

The social scene, particularly in unstable times like the present, is too changing, to permit literature frequently to act toward the immediate solutions of social problems. By the time a writer can assimilate material essential for a novel about social problems, think through the potentialities of his material, arrange and write it, check his sources, rewrite it, finish it for publication, and correct the proofs - by that time one, two, or three years may have elapsed. After this, more time is needed for the distribution of the novel, and for its assimilation

by its readers, and, as likely as not, by that time the social and class relationships will have shifted and altered. For the process of assimilating a novel sometimes takes years.³⁸

Earlier in the essay Farrell referred to another issue in the debate within the American Marxist movement:

There seems to be here a mixing-up of the tactics required for the roles of agitator, strike leader, political leader, marxian theoretician, and novelist. One may be all of those, serve more than one of these functions, but when he does, he must, if he is to succeed, perform these various functions according to their internal logic and necessities.³⁹

Weiman's discussion of point of view in fiction raises additional issues which I will dwell on to some extent in Chapters Two and Three, since they speak to the question of author "intent." In the context of my discussion it is relevant because of its direct relation to the all-inclusive concept of ideological perspective as it might appear in a theme. Weiman's remarks, it seems, raise a germane point in this regard:

The author's point of view, when transmitted into a work of art, cannot be deduced from his private or political opinions or from anything less than the writer's total amount of created Weltanschauung or sensibility. The artist's opinions, whether expressed privately or publicly, are relevant mainly in so far as they reflect or inspire his sensibility or his all-round apprehension and comprehension of things.⁴⁰

Besides expressing the author's "world view," in other words, the philosophical-ideological frame of reference, there is, of course, the matter of theme. One of the principal motifs for all serious literature is the problem of alienation. In political fiction the major focus is on what might be described as social alienation, that is, alienation

which has its roots not only in the personal make up of the individual but in the surrounding environment as well. How the author handles such a theme, what inferences are made, and the conclusions drawn, constitute important elements in the author's "point of view." I will explore some of these matters further in the coming chapters.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER I

¹Joseph Blotner, The Modern American Political Novel, (Univ. of Texas, 1966).

²Gordon Milne, The American Political Novel, (Univ. of Oklahoma, 1966).

³Irving Howe, Politics and The Novel, (New York: Horizon Press Book, 1957).

⁴Henry Hart, American Writers Congress, (New York: International Pub., 1935).

⁵Edwin Seaver, "The Proletarian Novel," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 100.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Earl Browder, "Communism and Literature," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 68.

⁹Earl Browder, "Communism and Literature," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 69.

*See Eugene Lyons' The Red Decade (1941) also Granville Hicks' Where We Came Out (1954).

¹⁰Waldo Frank, "Values of the Revolutionary Writer," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 71. (Emphasis mine)

*See Engels' correspondence with Joseph Bloch in Marx and Engels Selected Correspondence, in the Reader In Marxist Philosophy, ed. by Howard Selsam & Harry Martel, (New York: International Pub., 1963) pp. 204-206.

¹¹Waldo Frank, "Values of the Revolutionary Writer," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 71.

¹²James T. Farrell, A Note On Literary Criticism, (Constable & Co., Ltd., 1936).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Joseph Freeman, Proletarian Literature, ed. by Granville Hicks, (New York: International Pub., 1935), p. 10.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 13.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷Edward J. Brown, The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature - 1928 to 1932, (New York: Columbia University, 1963). It may also be of some interest to note that Brown does not cite the proceedings of the American Writers Congress anywhere in his footnotes or his bibliography in relation to the Olgin paper especially, a curious oversight since the proceedings of the Congress deal with the same subject matter.

¹⁸Hart, American Writers Congress, pp. 38-45, 45-50.

¹⁹Brown, The Proletarian Episode, p. 60.

²⁰Ibid., p. 61.

²¹Ibid., p. 65.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 97.

²⁴Freeman, Proletarian Literature, p. 9.

²⁵Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, (New York: International Pub., 1925), p. 56.

*See the three volume works of Leon Trotsky's The History of the Russian Revolution, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1967).

²⁶Ibid., p. 184.

²⁷Matthew Josephson, "The Role of the Writer in the Soviet Union" in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 43.

²⁸Moissaye Olgin, "First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers," in Henry Hart's American Writers Congress, p. 45.

²⁹Ibid., p. 46.

³⁰Ibid., p. 47.

*See the following works: The Russian Provisional Government - 1917, by Alexander Kerensky and Robert P. Browder, The Russian Revolution - 1917, N. N. Sukhanov (memoirs), Leon Trotsky's The History of the Russian Revolution, especially Vol. 3, The Works of Joseph Stalin - Vol. 3.

³¹Olgin, "First All Union Congress," p. 48.

³²Ibid., p. 50.

³³Granville Hicks, "Revolution and The Novel," in New Masses, Part One, (April 3, 1934), p. 29.

³⁴Ibid., p. 30.

³⁵David Apter, Ideology and Discontent, (New York: Free Press, 1964), p. 17.

³⁶Philip Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Politics," in Apter Ideology and Discontent, pp. 206-262.

³⁷Giovanni Satori, "Politics, Ideology and Belief Systems," in American Political Science Review, (June, 1969), pp. 398-411.

³⁸James T. Farrell, A Note On Literary Criticism, (London: Constable & Co., Ltd., 1936), p. 148.

³⁹Ibid., p. 147.

⁴⁰Robert Weiman, "Point of View in Fiction," in Preserve and Create - Essays in Marxist Literary Criticism, ed. Gaylord C. Leroy and Ursula Beitz, (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), p. 69.

CHAPTER TWO

THE POLITICS OF ALIENATION

A. Essays on Political Fiction

In the previous chapter I examined the question of what constitutes "political" fiction. This chapter will probe three essays which investigate the approach of protest and proletarian fiction to the theme of alienation as well as other recurring themes. One of the major propositions advanced in this dissertation is that both protest fiction and proletarian fiction deal with the theme of alienation but from distinctive ideological perspectives. The essays are: Richard Wright's "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), James T. Farrell's A Note On Literary Criticism (1936), and Gaylord Leroy's and Ursula Beitz's "Current Directions" (1973). This last selection deals with some of the current discussions now taking place in Marxist literary circles.

One of my principal concerns in this chapter is to look at the theme of Native Son (1940) as perceived by Wright himself. I also want to continue to examine some of the controversy during and immediately following the American Writers Congress. As far as the kind of novels discussed here, whether the writers perceive themselves as "political" novelists or their works fit the narrow label of political fiction is not really important. What is important is that their works raise issues of social import which go beyond the particular stories. The essays of fiction writers often serve to highlight their attitudes, values, and

political or ideological inclinations especially if the particular essay dwells on themes developed in their novels.

Mailer's Advertisement For Myself (1959) is a case in point. He spent some time in this series of essays analyzing two of his early novels, The Naked And The Dead (1948) and Barbary Shore (1951). Both works focus on the alienation theme. Another example of an essayist/novelist whose works fall within the scope of this discussion to some extent is James Baldwin. Baldwin's two anthologies, a group of essays written during the 1950's, namely, Notes Of A Native Son (1959) and Nobody Knows My Name (1962), discuss themes dealt with in his novels as was the case in Another Country (1962), Giovanni's Room (1956) and his autobiographical work Go Tell It On The Mountain (1953). Like Dos Passos, Mailer has at times been a political activist using his writing talents to comment on current issues in the political arena. A number of the proletarian writers to be examined later on were essayist/novelists. Three of them, Dos Passos, Conroy, and Cantwell, were also political activists.

Richard Wright's discussion of what led him to write Native Son is in many respects relevant to an analysis of proletarian themes as well as the theme of alienation. First, proletarian fiction, like "reform" fiction, deals with the alienation theme. How they each approach it represents an important difference between the two categories. In many cases, it is a difference based on ideological orientation. Second, like Lumpkin's A Sign For Cain (1935), Wright's novel also deals with the class struggle theme in the context of race relations, although it is much more pronounced in her novel. With Native Son the class struggle

is a secondary theme which comes through in the trial scene. Third, Wright was an active participant in the controversy surrounding the emergence of proletarian literature in this country, having participated in the John Reed Club and as one of the initiators of the American Writers Congress. Fourth, Wright was still a member of the Communist Party when Native Son came out. Fifth, his own background, highlighted in his autobiographical work Black Boy (1945), tends to show the clash between the environment and his own personality, a point dealt with in all serious literature but expressed in terms of its social impact in political fiction.

Part two of his autobiography titled American Hunger (1977), which consists of hitherto unpublished manuscripts, covers the period from 1927 to 1936. The first segment which appeared in Black Boy covers his early childhood up to the time he left the South in 1927 and went to Chicago. He openly broke with the Party, according to most accounts, in 1942.* He began his writing career contributing articles to such journals as New Masses, Left Front, and Anvil. The latter periodicals were edited by Jack Conroy, one of the six novelists to be examined in Chapter Three. A number of black writers, including Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, came in contact with radical journals during the 1930's.

In some ways, Native Son is semi-autobiographical, since one of the main characters in the novel, Jan Erlone, is drawn from a man whom Wright knew during the days of the John Reed Club. According to Webb's account:

Jan Wittenber is portrayed in Native Son as Jan Erlone. Wright jokingly used "Erlone" to signify his affection toward Wittenber. He said that he alone during that period, although a cultural whip

for the Party, was a man of humanity capable of depth of understanding not found in many white comrades. Wittenber was a painter - also a member of the John Reed Club.⁴¹

Wittenber was a Canadian Jew. Most accounts say that Wright joined the John Reed Club in January, 1932 and became a party member in March of the same year. He worked for the Daily Worker from about 1937 to 1939. Apparently he worked under the tutelage of Mike Gold during the early thirties, and there is some evidence of a personality clash between the two men which later took on political overtones.*

In looking at the interplay between environment and personality, Wright made the following observations about the main character in Native Son, Bigger Thomas:

During this period the shadings and nuances which were filling in Bigger's picture came, not so much from Negro life, as from the lives of whites I met and grew to know. I began to sense that they had their own kind of Bigger Thomas behavioristic pattern which grew out of a more subtle and broader frustration. I began to feel with my mind the inner tensions of the people I met. I don't mean to say that I think that environment makes consciousness . . . but I do say that I felt and still feel that the environment supplies the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself, and if that environment is warped or tranquil, the mode and manner of behavior will be effected toward deadlocking tensions or orderly fulfillment and satisfaction.⁴² (emphasis mine)

Wright added a further dimension in his analysis of Bigger as a person and as a symbol in an attempt to place him within an historical setting:

I felt that Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried within him the potentialities of either Communism or Fascism. I don't mean to say that the Negro boy I depicted in Native Son is either a Communist or a Fascist. He is not either. But he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all

of this, and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking for a way out.⁴³

The proletarian theme was perceived by Wright after he left Memphis and entered the broader social arena where class and racial struggles tend to merge. This merging is alluded to in Native Son by Boris Max in the trial scene. It also appears in the exchanges between Boris and Bigger. A portion of Boris' speech to the court, however, moved outside of a proletarian framework, and it was this segment that received criticism within party ranks because of its existentialist overtones:

Of all things, men do not like to feel that they are guilty of wrong, and if you make them feel guilt, they will try desparately to justify it on any grounds; but failing that, and seeing no immediate solution that will set things right without too much cost to their lives and property, they will kill that which evoked in them the condemning sense of guilt. And this is true of all men, whether they be white or black; it is a peculiar and powerful, but common need. We are dealing here not with how man acts toward man, but with how man acts when he feels that he must defend himself against, or adapt himself to, the total natural world.⁴⁴

As contrasted to this portion, the proletarian theme of class struggle enters through Boris' cross examination of Henry Dalton who is a major real estate developer, a slum landlord, and father of Mary Dalton, the murdered girl. The slum apartment, vividly portrayed in the opening segment of the novel, is owned by Dalton's firm and is "home" to Bigger and his family. Some critics think that Wright spoke through Boris Max, and much of what he says in his own analysis of his novel would tend to support this contention. The juxtaposition of an existentialist element with a proletarian theme caused much controversy in party ranks. An examination of the Daily Worker from April 14 to the 29th, 1940 will

show the extent of the controversy, inasmuch as many Marxist critics saw this portion of Boris Max's dialogue as an expression of "universal" guilt, a concept alien to Marxist analysis.

At an earlier point in Wright's analysis of his novel, he ties in some of his own life experiences with his writing of Native Son:

It was not until I went to live in Chicago that I first thought seriously of writing of Bigger Thomas. Two items of my experience combined to make me aware of Bigger as a meaningful and prophetic symbol. First, being free of the daily pressures of the Dixie environment, I was able to come into possession of my own feelings. Second, my contact with the labor movement and its ideology made me see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant. I made the discovery that Bigger Thomas was not black all the time; he was white, too, and there were literally millions of him everywhere.⁴⁵

Trade union struggles began to take on a deeper meaning to him, according to Wright, and yet this is not reflected in Native Son. It should be noted, in this connection, that this is the period toward the end of his involvement with the Party. What is being described in his essay is a relatively brief interval in his political life, eight years - 1932 to 1940. "How Bigger Was Born" was therefore a reflection backward in time. A significant part of Boris' speech to the court, previously cited, depicted the author's point of view in 1940. Since the manuscript for Native Son went through several drafts before it reached its final stage, Wright must have been going through changes in his thinking during the American Writers Congress, because this is the period when the manuscripts for Native Son were being written. By the time of The Outsider (1953) and The Long Dream (1958), Wright had completely dropped the class struggle, proletarian theme. This is not to suggest

that Wright ceased being politically committed after he left the Party in 1942. Even a cursory examination of his essays written during the 1950's, Black Power (1954), White Man Listen (1957), or The Color Curtain (1956) would show a continued commitment, although greatly altered ideologically.

What was perhaps the central point in his analysis of his novel, Wright sets forth a mixture of a Marxian and an existentialist critique of 20th century society:

But more than anything else, as a writer, I was fascinated by the similarity of the emotional tensions of Bigger in America and Bigger in Nazi Germany and Bigger in old Russia. All Bigger Thomases, white and black, felt tense, afraid, nervous, hysterical, and restless. From far away Nazi Germany and old Russia had come to me items of knowledge that told me that certain modern experiences were creating types of personalities whose existence ignored racial and national lines of demarcation, that these personalities carried with them a more universal drama-element than anything I'd ever encountered before; that these personalities were mainly imposed upon men and women living in a world whose fundamental assumptions could no longer be taken for granted; a world ridden with national and class strife; a world whose metaphysical meanings had vanished; a world in which God no longer existed as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men could no longer retain their faith in an ultimate hereafter.⁴⁶ (emphasis mine)

To imply as Wright does that the answers to solving man's problems calls for a return to the "metaphysical meanings" takes him outside the Marxist framework into idealism rather than into dialectical materialism. That the development of personality types is usually a function of social conditions fits into an orientation compatible with Marxism.

To what extent Wright actually embraced the existentialist school

is a matter for debate. From an examination of some of his early writings, for example, "The Man Who Lived Underground," (1940) or "The Man Who Killed A Shadow" (1947), it appears that he was influenced to some extent by writers such as Joyce, Dos Passos, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and Camus. He met the latter two in Paris. By "influence" I am referring to an apparent ideological impact as well as shared thematic concerns. He read Joyce and Dostoevsky. I have not come across any information on whether he knew Dos Passos personally, although he certainly read his works.

As a political activist, novelist, and essayist, Wright's "growth" or "development" (depending on one's point of view) can be traced in three general stages after his arrival in Chicago in 1927. The first stage is his joining the John Reed Club, followed by his becoming a member of the Communist Party. The left journals Anvil and Left Front, according to Wright's account in American Hunger,⁴⁷ were created because of a split in the John Reed Club between the painters who were for the most part Party members, and the writers, many of whom were non-party. Wright attempted to mediate the dispute which centered around an alleged demand by the Party that New Masses and the Daily Worker be put on sale at John Reed Club meetings. Non-party people said that they felt this would inhibit other people from joining the club thus narrowing its potential base for building membership.

Not discussed in Wright's account, however, was whether the Party's demand was directed at limiting sales to the literature of the Party only, or whether some of the non-party club members really wanted party material present at all, a crucial point it would seem to me.⁴⁸ If the

John Reed Club wished to "broaden" its appeal the question to face would be how broad? This particular concern was to carry over into the American Writers Congress three years later.

The second stage in his development took place with his break from the Party. According to Webb, Wright broke with the Party about the end of February, 1942,⁴⁹ over its failure to take a firm stand supporting anti-lynching legislation. A check of back issues of the Daily Worker, official organ of the Party for the year 1942, will, however, show heavy coverage of civil rights related questions. The editorial column of the Worker, besides calling for the defense of the Soviet Union and the defeat of Hitler, also pushed for strong civil rights legislation including support for anti-lynching legislation. In any case, Webb's chronicle strongly suggests that Wright left the Party precisely because of its lack of sufficient concern over these kinds of issues, especially during the war years. There is an inference, sometimes explicitly stated in Webb's account, that the Party lost interest in domestic issues after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in 1941. But the columns of the Daily Worker between 1941 and 1945 show otherwise. Furthermore, as a close observer, I can personally attest to party involvement in many domestic issues during the war years. Nonetheless, this factor is mentioned as one of the main reasons for Wright's leaving the Party.

Most of the major essays of Richard Wright appeared during the third stage of his political development, 1946 to 1960, and perhaps his high water mark is his series of essays White Man Listen (1957). In this series he advances a thesis which predates Nathan Hare's Black Anglo Saxon (1965). Wright talked about the tendency of many within

the black middle class to "ape" the values of twentieth century white society:

Middle class Negro writers were condemned by America to stand before a Chinese wall and wail that they were like other men, that they felt as others felt. It is this relatively static stance of emotion that I call the narcissistic level.⁵⁰

Hare made a similar observation when he wrote the following:

Black Anglo Saxons are chiefly distinguishable in that, in their struggle to throw off the smothering blanket of social inferiority, they disown their own history and morals in order to assume those of the biological descendants of the white anglo saxon. White society is to most of them a looking glass for taking stock of their personal conduct.⁵¹

Wright extended Hare's analogy to a critique of black artists including writers. One can clearly contrast the difference in political orientation between these remarks and those appearing nearly two decades earlier in "How Bigger Was Born." The same theme, that is, the necessity for people of color to break away from European cultural influence, appears in his earlier essays Black Power (1954) and in The Color Curtain (1956). Significantly, the White Man Listen theme is not a major issue (it's not brought in at all in one case) in two of his novels of the 1950's The Outsider (1953) and The Long Dream (1958). The alienation theme, about which I will say more later on in this chapter, is a major focus of The Outsider, and is brought in through the main character Cross Damon.

He is in many respects an older, perhaps more sophisticated, Bigger Thomas. Where Bigger does not understand his impulses until very late in the story, Cross Damon is well aware of them. In one sense, Cross and Bigger are "failures" stemming from their personal make-up as well

as from the social environment which produced them. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright talked about the environment supplying "the instrumentalities through which the organism expresses itself." The degree of control and the kind of control exercised by the individual over the social environment can be an intensely political question.

In The Long Dream, Tyree Tucker is a relatively "successful" black businessman, although he pays a high price for his success in a southern community. Though not a major theme, the White Man Listen message does appear as the following dialogue reveals:

A Nigger is a black man who don't know who he is.
When you know you a nigger, then you ain't no
nigger no more. A nigger's something white folks
make a black man believe he is.⁵²

These lines are not spoken by Tyree Tucker but by a boy named Sam to Tyree's son. Another boy, Zeke, tells Sam, "Your papa's done stuffed you with crazy ideas." "Your old man's got Africa on the brain and he's made you a copycat."

Sam's father feels that blacks should not participate in World War Two, the time period for this story. It's a white man's war, he says. This theme appears only in Part One. When the story ends sometime in the late forties, Tyree's son leaves Clintonville, Mississippi and moves to Paris. Insofar as the alienation theme is present in Native Son, The Outsider, and The Long Dream there is some evidence of Wright's interest in existentialism as a philosophy. Each of these novels appears to represent his thinking at different periods, but there is an overlapping of the three stages discussed above in terms of thematic development; perhaps there were ideological inclinations in this

direction during the time of his membership in the Party. As for his essays published during the same time interval, this philosophical outlook is less pronounced though it seems to be present in some of the lectures and essays published in White Man Listen. For most Marxists, particularly communists, Marxism and existentialism are incompatible. Significantly, I think, it is this incongruity that played a major part in Wright's break with the Party.

Wright and James T. Farrell were contrasting individuals. Born February 27, 1904, Farrell came from an Irish Catholic background in a Chicago suburb. Richard Wright, born September 4, 1908 in Natchez, Mississippi, came from an Afro-American background. Wright eventually became a member of the Communist Party until 1942. Farrell, on the other hand, was an independent, non-affiliated socialist at the time of the Congress. Farrell's parents were exceedingly poor, but his grandmother and uncle rescued him from poverty, according to biographical sources.* His writing career began in 1929 when he went to work for the Chicago Herald. He began working on the manuscript for Studs Lonigan in June, 1929. Part One, "Young Lonigan," came out in 1932, followed by "The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan" in 1934, and, in 1935, "Judgment Day" concluded the trilogy.

For purposes of this discussion, his essay A Note On Literary Criticism is directly relevant. Later on, I will offer some comments on his trilogy as it relates to the alienation theme.

His essay is directly pertinent because of its focus on issues raised at the Congress. The principal thrust of the article is on the role of the writer as political activist. In this respect, one cannot

make direct linkages between Farrell's non-fiction and fiction except in terms of his interpretation of Marxism as a tool in literary criticism. In discussing the relationship between literature and political action, Farrell also dealt at some length with the question of how a novelist and a political activist perform different but interrelated roles:

Politics is obviously concerned with government and with the solution of social problems. It must find answers that are embodied in actions. Literature, by contrast, is not so directly concerned with finding answers to social problems that will be immediately embodied in action; and generally speaking, novelists and poets are not equipped to serve as political leaders.⁵³

Political novelists have little or no direct influence over the flow of events, and, in some cases, are overshadowed by political leaders. This is not to say that the novelist's input into the dialogue on social issues is without impact. Writers are responsible for the quality, insight, and care put into their analysis. Implicit in this assumption is the proposition that writers are not totally free agents, or should be, especially when entering the arena of social commentary. But neither are political leaders, inasmuch as they are subject to counter pressures whether it be in Western style democracies or in a socialist society. The nature of the pressures will be very different, but there will be pressures nonetheless.

Given this assumption, the question then becomes not whether there are constraints, but what kind, and placed by whom? Every society has some type of subtle or overt constraint on writers. In this sense, Farrell's distinction between literature and politics seems overly drawn. Writers cannot limit their concerns solely to literature, nor limit

their analysis to long range goals, without an examination of the impact of immediate problems on the probable long range solutions. The solution of immediate problems can have, and often does, an impact on long range goals.

In this connection Farrell talked about the functions of literature:

I think that literature must be viewed both as a branch of the fine arts and as an instrument of social influence. It is this duality, intrinsic to literature, that produces unresolved problems of literary criticism.⁵⁴

It is as an "instrument of social influence" that the novel performs a connotative as well as an overt political role. In Marxian terms, at least, there is a thin line between literature seen as a "branch of the fine arts" and as an "instrument of social influence." Recognition of this fact is not, however, limited to the Marxists since many observers from varying ideological camps are beginning to be aware of the thin line between "art" and "politics." Farrell's discussion of literature and propaganda is also relevant:

The application of propaganda to the solution of social problems is absolutely essential. Propaganda has its definite place, its methods, its values, its necessities.⁵⁵

In non-fiction, the analyst may be restricted by time and circumstance in the attempt to comment on social policy developed by governmental or quasi-governmental institutions. The political novelist, on the other hand, is less restricted. He is "free" to probe below the surface for the ramifications of policy decisions. That is, "free" in the sense of examining through the medium of fiction the long range consequences of a particular set of decisions as well as placing them in an historical

framework.

The Marxist writer must continually examine social policy in light of ideological commitment, not from the standpoint that theory is something immutable but from the perspective of under what circumstances should theory be adjusted to meet the demands of the "real" world with is itself subject to change. Entering into this kind of social commentary is often hazardous for the author, but if he/she is genuinely committed to a Marxist orientation it is a necessary risk.

The political novelist also has the option of playing with or manipulating the "facts" in order to examine their full implications in an hypothetical situation. This will largely be dependent on the author's insight and grasp of the political processes. Approaching the matter of social policy in this way is, of course, fraught with peril, but it can also afford the opportunity for avoiding mistakes by projecting ahead. This whole process, it seems to me, involves the attempt to extrapolate from "reality" in order to more fully understand its dynamics. Farrell's comments on literature and propaganda contained this additional observation which bears on the relationship between art and politics:

It is, for instance, characteristic of a great leader that the slogans he formulates present a progressive answer to the needs of an objective situation; also that they are part of the program of a long-run policy that is progressive in the Marxian sense; and finally that his slogans contain the potentialities for elaborating policies and methods that will serve as the outline for answering the needs of the objective situation to which they are referred, and of solving, in a progressive Marxian sense, the problems which these needs bring forth.⁵⁶

How problems are resolved becomes, in this regard, as important as the

actual process itself. In many cases, it is critical since how they are resolved is directly tied to whether, in fact, they can be, that is, the question of "can" is only meaningful after the processes of "how" have been dealt with.

Some facets of Farrell's discussion caused controversy on the political left in general and especially among communists. Even in Party ranks, however, it included those who wished to follow a literal interpretation of Marxian theory and those who agreed to some extent with Farrell's analysis. The debate between Farrell, on the one hand, and Schneider and Seaver, on the other, was a carry over from the American Writers Congress. Although Seaver wrote an article appearing in the Daily Worker on May 31, 1936, which was critical of Farrell, Schneider's comments were more definitive. Schneider and Seaver took issue with Farrell not so much on the points he raised but in the manner in which he presented them. Schneider commented on the substance of Farrell's essay:

It performs some valuable services by making a detailed and documented analysis of vitiating and constricting elements in our Marxist literary criticism. It is true that his is not the first voice raised against them, that some of the very critics whom he attacks have anticipated him. Farrell's book, however, is the first fully elaborated critical attack.⁵⁷

The essence of Schneider's criticism of Farrell appears in the following passage:

He picks Marxist criticism out of its historical setting, out of its social context; he examines it in a virtual vacuum where its life processes are suspended. He does not understand, or gives no evidence that he understands why at any particular time, Marxist criticism was extreme.⁵⁸

Schneider's criticism was particularly directed at Farrell's discussion of "Left Wing Dualism" or what was referred to in the Farrell essay as "revolutionary sentimentalism." Farrell described it in these terms:

Anti-rational to the core, it usually fights criticism with epithets, and struggles against ideas as "petty bourgeois abstractions." It demands a literature of simplicity to the point of obviousness, and even of downright banality. Crying for songs of "stench and sweat," it tends to idealize the "workers" and the "worker writers," producing over drawn pictures of both.⁵⁹

While Schneider and other Marxists have noted this tendency and have criticized it, it has always been within an historical context, attempting to understand the forces giving rise to such tendencies. This, Schneider felt, Farrell failed to do. Continuing on in the same vein Farrell added:

The second tendency is that of a mechanically deterministic "Marxism." It usually assumes implicitly, if not explicitly, that literature follows economics obediently and directly. It approaches literature from the outside with a narrow set of absolutes and abstractions.⁶⁰

A characteristic of this type of literature, including some of the proletarian novels of the thirties, is the tendency to follow an economic determinist model which often ignores other facets of human behavior beyond their purely material relationships. Marx and Engels referred to this kind of materialism as "mechanistic materialism," since it places all human experiences on a totally one dimensional plane. This was a general criticism of much of the proletarian fiction of the period, and on this general point Schneider and Seaver agreed with Farrell. Clifford Odet's Waiting For Lefty is usually cited as a classic example of "revolutionary sentimentality," especially in terms of its melodrama.

Finally, Schneider concluded his criticism of some of Farrell's analysis by noting the following:

. . . Marxist criticism arose to fill a historical need; its functions changed through the changes Marxist criticism itself set in motion. What was useful at one point became obstructive at another; what was faith later became fanaticism; what was a powerful principle at one stage became sectarianism in the next. It is the task of the critic to show when and why a certain approach becomes invalid, where its character changes.⁶¹

Part of the problem behind the exchange between Farrell, Schneider, and others is that the controversy, as Schneider himself implied, did not take place in isolation from events occurring at that time. The period between 1935 and 1938 was tumultuous throughout the world, including inside the Soviet Union, which had its own impact on the political left around the world.

The gap between political theory and "reality" will often show up during periods of turmoil. Two key events of the time were the Spanish Civil War and the Moscow trials. The Moscow trials took place as a reaction to external and internal events, aside from the personal egomania of Stalin. The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was a prelude to World War Two. The war in Spain was over by April of 1939, and World War Two began in September.

Farrell's move away from Marxism is revealed in his short stories of the period, for example, "Tom Carroll," "Comrade Stanley," "The Dialectic," or, "The Philosopher."^{*} Of this selection, "Tom Carroll" best illustrates Farrell's disillusionment. The time period for the story is around 1936-37. It revolves around Tom Carroll, a retired professor of history, and his son, Bill. Tom is portrayed as a tired

radical who opposed U. S. involvement in World War One. The apparent disillusionment of Farrell enters in the dialogue between Tom and Bill. Their discussion includes the Civil War in Spain and the Moscow trials. Bill is a writer and supports the loyalists. Tom, who is probably Farrell, is troubled by the trials in Russia during the mid-thirties, as well as the dramatic confrontations between communist and anarchist in Spain.* There is also discussion between Tom and Bill on proletarian literature, and Bill's reaction is in accord with his father's on this point, namely that some of it is overly simplistic.

These particular short stories appeared shortly after A Note On Literary Criticism and thus represent Farrell's post-Marxist stage of development. None of his early works, however, deals with the class struggle theme except in a very peripheral sense, certainly not in Studs Lonigan (1935), or Gas House McGinty (1933), or The Short Stories of James T. Farrell (1937).

Apparently Farrell's allegiance to the Marxian framework did not go beyond the Writers Congress and A Note On Literary Criticism.

His organizational tie to the Marxist movement was non-existent. He did present a paper to the American Writers Congress on "The Short Story" which covered similar ground to that dealt with in A Note On Literary Criticism:

I believe that revolutionary criticism has been particularly negligent in the field of the short story, and not without cause. For the short story does not lend itself readily to that species of overpoliticized and ideologically schematized criticism which has been too dishearteningly frequent in the literary sections of revolutionary journals.⁶²

A major problem in a short story is in the lack of space for the development of complex political ideas. There is little doubt that short stories probably lend themselves to polemics, which is not necessarily a bad thing so long as one recognizes the limitations of polemics in analysis. What is "overpoliticized" and "ideologically schematized" will largely depend on the situation and one's interpretation of events. Farrell discussed the central point in his Studs Lonigan trilogy in terms of the problem of "spiritual poverty," an important part of the alienation theme:

Studs Lonigan was conceived as a normal American boy of Irish-Catholic extraction. The social milieu in which he lived and was educated was one of spiritual poverty. It was not, contrary to some misconceptions, a slum neighborhood. Had I written Studs Lonigan as a story of the slums, it would then have been easy for the reader falsely to place the motivation and causation of the story directly in immediate economic roots. Such a placing of motivation would have obscured one of the most important meanings which I wanted to inculcate into my story: my desire to reveal the concrete effects of spiritual poverty. It is readily known that poverty and slums cause spiritual poverty in many lives. One of the important meanings which I perceived in this story was that here was a neighborhood several steps removed from the slums and dire economic want, and here was manifested a pervasive spiritual poverty.*

As can be seen from the autobiographical work Jews Without Money (1930, by Mike Gold, the Marxist framework can also focus on a "spiritual poverty" theme.

How the writer, or in the case of this discussion the political novelist, views "reality" is an important part of the examination of what causes "spiritual poverty." I will look at this question later in this chapter. It should be noted here that this is one of the issues

implicit in Leroy and Beitz's comments:

The most significant difference between bourgeois and Marxist criticism has to do with the relationship between literature and reality. For Marxist criticism this is a matter of importance. It plays a much smaller role in bourgeois criticism.⁶³

If the focus of a novel is totally on the bleak side, failing to give sufficient attention either to the struggles in progress or to social ferment under the surface, then literature and reality are not being brought together. This is one of the criticisms of Studs Lonigan and Native Son. They were not deficient for what they said but for what they did not say.

In looking at another dimension of the same problem, namely how the writer focuses on "reality," Leroy and Beitz talked about the question of what is "typical." Engels made reference to this problem in his review of Harkness' novel:

The typical does not mean the familiar, since it may well imply discovery. The writer . . . may be the first to disclose the typical or representative character of a certain kind of person or situation. It is not simply a matter of giving us a new insight into what is already understood. It is not a matter of giving us illustrations of generalizations that we believe by extra-literary means. It is - or may be - an act of discovery that cannot be achieved by any other means at all. As a form of discovery, the typical may be related not only to past and present but also to the future.⁶⁴

This approach involves, it seems to me, looking at "reality" on three levels, two of which are relatively easy, and the third much more difficult, i.e., reality as it was in the past, as it is in the present, and what it could be depending on the movement of historical events.

A particular writer's non-fiction, in this case essays, may tie

directly or indirectly into themes developed in fiction. Sometimes comparisons between a series of essays and novels written by the same author during the same time period can depict shifts in orientation or elements of uncertainty on the part of the author. If such shifts occur they may be more or less the result of historical events. This is especially true for writers who dwell on topical themes or attempt to chronicle broad scale socio-political movements. In this regard, Leroy and Beitz's further observation is important because it re-states one of the basic premises of Marxist literary criticism:

Because of the concern with the reality criterion, Marxist criticism gives a good deal more stress to the element of historical concreteness than is customary in bourgeois literary study.⁶⁵

Historical concreteness, of course, implies an interpretation of events from a specific ideological frame of reference. It also includes a careful assessment of the relationship of social forces at a given point in time, that is, their strengths and weaknesses as well as their internal dynamics. In short, what changes, if any, are taking place within a movement. This is essentially what is meant by "historical concreteness" in the Marxist sense.

B. Alienation As A Multi-Dimensional Theme

Most political fiction deals with alienation in terms of "powerlessness," or what can be described as the apparent inability of non-elites to influence governmental and quasi-governmental institutions. The term "influence" is used here to denote a dialogue between non-elites and specific institutional structures which results in those institutions meeting the needs of non-elites. That non-elites are always capable of

determining their "needs" is not seen as a truism in this dissertation, inasmuch as needs exist on various levels of consciousness.

There are two general facets of the Marxist framework which bear directly on the question of alienation. One is the issue of what determines "consciousness" and the other is its materialist approach to historical analysis. On the matter of consciousness, Lenin wrote:

Things exist independently of our consciousness,
independently of our perceptions, outside of
us⁶⁶

As I interpret the Marxist perspective, this is not meant to imply that what goes on inside a person's head is unimportant or "unreal," at least to that individual, but more often than not its generating source lies somewhere in the social environment. In his earlier writings, Marx talked about alienation as the separation of the individual from the product of his labor, that is, how it takes shape and its end product:

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his essential being; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but un-happy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced, it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.⁶⁷

For the writer who must publish for a "market," Marx's observation takes on an important relevance in more ways than one. In a similar vein to Lenin's comment on the question of consciousness, Marx wrote the following:

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society - the real foundation on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determine their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.⁶⁸

Art is certainly an important part of the productive processes of any society, and what happens within the rest of the social structure directly and indirectly affects it. The various components of art, in turn, influence much of what takes place within a given society, in terms of its mores, attitudes, behavior, sometimes its political behavior.

Unlike the purely determinist models, the Marxist framework does not imply that the individual has little or no control over his environment. What it does suggest, essentially, are two key elements: first, that the masses, and not the individual or "great men," determine the course of history; second, that social change does not take place randomly but within objective laws which can be ascertained at each stage of history. Herbst and Lumpkin attempted, with some success, to build in this kind of framework into their stories.

To say that the masses determine the course of history is to suggest a more complex process than many assume. There is no intent in the Marxist framework to "glorify" the masses, and where some proletarian fiction has tended to do this it has oversimplified Marxist analysis. The masses often determine an historical trend through their inaction as

well as through specific activities in which spontaneity plays an important role in history. Where the question of leadership enters in, class relationships assume a major influence in determining the direction of mass movements. There is often a dynamic interchange between leadership and the masses. A social class, for example the bourgeois or the working class, develops elites who in turn formulate the ideology of the class.

In discussing the question of the spontaneity of the masses Lenin commented in "What Is To Done":

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e., the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation.⁶⁹

This is seen in Marxist theory as one level of mass consciousness in terms of spontaneous as well as organized mass activity. There is, however, another level of political consciousness:

The theory, of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia. In the very same way, in Russia, the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose altogether independently of the spontaneous growth of the working class movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of the development of thought among revolutionary intelligentsia.⁷⁰

Such elites play an important role in helping to develop ideological perspective. Lenin went on to say:

This does not mean, of course, that the workers have no part in creating such an ideology. They take

part, however, not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians, as Proudhons and Weitlings; in other words, they take part only when they are able, and to the extent that they are able, more or less, to acquire the knowledge of their age and develop that knowledge.⁷¹

This, then, is one of the key elements in Marxist theory as it has developed over the years. It is a key ingredient in some of the proletarian fiction in terms of theme and ideological orientation. That is to say, there is an attempt made by the author to show this kind of dynamic in action.

To say that alienation has its primary roots within the socio-political system is not meant to exclude altogether its internal dimensions, namely, those factors lying solely within the individual, or his/her psychological make up. Proletarian literature, fiction as well as autobiographical material, attempts to examine this as a part of the plot development. Gold's autobiography Jews Without Money, Conroy's The Disinherited, DuBois' Dark Princess (1928), or Dos Passos' USA trilogy are examples. Native Son also explores the psychological make up of its principal characters, Bigger Thomas, Bessie Mears, Mary Dalton, and all too briefly, the character of Jan Erlone. There is no attempt by Wright to underplay the impact of the harsh environment Bigger lived in, but rather he shows the effects of that environment on Bigger and those he comes in contact with. At this point, Richard Wright was still more or less in the Marxist camp.

Farrell did the same with his main characters in Studs Lonigan. The first two segments of the trilogy focus on the provincialism of the principals in the story as well as the conflict between ethnic

communities, which can be seen as an outgrowth of provincial attitudes. Part Three deals with the depression and its impact on the Lonigan family. The tendency toward provincialism is a key element in spiritual poverty. It is shown by the inclination of some to see the world from a narrow frame of reference, or solely in relation to one's own life. An illustration of this tendency is the exchange between Patrick Lonigan, Studs' father, and his friend, Mort. It takes place in Part Three when the family business is on the verge of bankruptcy due to the depression and Lonigan has just laid off most of his workers:

I don't understand why its got to be me, Mort. I've worked like an honest man all my life, and I pulled myself up by my own bootstraps. I earned every penny I ever made. It isn't right, Mort, and it isn't fair. Why do I have to be a goat? I'll tell you what it is Mort, its the Jew international bankers. They did it. They're squeezing every penny out of America and Americans. And it isn't right.¹²

Provincialism also reflects an attitude which exemplifies a kind of conceit. This came through in one of Farrell's later novels, What Time Collects (1964), and is shown through the two main characters, Tom Daniels and his son, Zeke. Both father and son own and operate a fairly successful insurance business. There is one passage which clearly demonstrates the prevailing community attitude and Tom and Zeke accept this sentiment as their own:

They expected to be well-liked, and to be held in high regard, in their belief that they, their likes, their kind formed the solid human foundation which made the edifice of the United States of America the very greatest in the world; the very greatest in the entire history of the world. Their religion, which drilled fear of their instincts into the basis and bottom of their being, also hammered into them a self-righteous pride, a conceited assurance of moral

superiority, and a hardened pride that the world, final and unchangeable, had been given unto their kind.⁷³

Here, then, is the soil in which spiritual poverty grows. The social environment produces a particular personality type.

C. An Analysis Of Recurring Themes

The constant struggle of the individual against an impersonal bureaucracy represents one of the major themes in the fiction published during the 1930's and since. It is an important theme in most of the fiction written by John Dos Passos from the 1920's to the end of the thirties, for example, One Man's Initiation (1920), Three Soldiers (1921), Manhattan Transfer (1925), and the USA Trilogy (1938). His last major work, Mid Century (1961), is an extension of USA in many respects, that is, in style, format, theme, and characterizations. Except for one novel which came out in 1951, under the title Chosen Country, this same theme, with different political overtones, is carried forward in some of his published works during the mid-fifties: Most Likely To Succeed (1954), and Great Days (1958), are two examples. Since USA is one of the six novels to be examined in the next chapter I will return to it later.

Non-Marxist protest fiction and proletarian novels each examine the question of "powerlessness" although from different perspectives. Most of the non-Marxist protest literature of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's saw this problem principally as a manifestation of the weakness in human nature. In general, proletarian fiction rejects this notion, placing the source of the problem directly on the capitalist system. For non-proletarian fiction the major focus was on the theme that man is his

own worst enemy.

Not all non-Marxist protest fiction projected this kind of theme, at least not in its extreme form. The adoption of a crude determinist model by Theodore Dreiser during his early years represents one prominent example. Thus, works such as Sister Carrie (1900), The Financier (1912), The Titan (1914), and American Tragedy (1926), each present a determinist model within the main theme. Two of the works, Sister Carrie and American Tragedy, show the main characters' struggles against the system, however feeble and inept their efforts may be. With Caroline Meeber, i.e., "Sister Carrie," there is some success in her struggle against late nineteenth century morality, even though there is no indication of rising political consciousness on the part of Sister Carrie. Clyde Griffiths, on the other hand, can by no stretch of the imagination be described as a conscious political activist. In many respects, he is much like Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, impulsive and with little real awareness. He does not wage an effective struggle against the system. It's more a stumbling, bumbling attempt which ends in tragedy. As in Native Son, the full force of the system finally crushes Griffiths in the end, and his own ineptness makes the task relatively easy. Unlike Bigger at the end, Clyde Griffiths never learns from his experience.

In general, then, the theme of powerlessness appears in a significant portion of the protest fiction published between 1930 and 1940. Implicit in some of the works mentioned so far is the tendency to lean heavily on spontaneity as the main source for all political action. This is certainly the case in the works of Dos Passos. It is a tendency which seems to reject organized political action in favor of spontaneous

individual action. All bureaucracies are seen as inherently evil. In this connection, I will discuss the political profile of John Dos Passos in the next chapter because it is at the heart of the controversy on the political left.

When looking at a representative cross section of novelists from the 1930's to the 1940's, Howe's analysis is relevant because his is a critique of political fiction as it developed in our country:

Most American novels that have dealt with politics have been unable to sustain the theme. It is a characteristic rhythm of such novels that they begin promisingly, even brilliantly in the portrayal of some areas of American political life and then, about midway, withdraw from or collapse under the burden of the subject. The idea of politics can seldom seem as "natural" a subject to American novelists as to European; our writers tend to think of it as a special problem; with all the awkwardness and self-consciousness that entails.⁷⁴

An important aspect of looking at "political" fiction, on which I have already offered some comments, has to do with how one chooses to define the parameters of "politics," either narrowly or as feeding into many related facets of our lives. On another plain, any novelist, and especially the political novelist, must face the question of how much "reality" literature can reflect at any one time. Furthermore, what kinds of tools are necessary for the novelist to be able to describe and interpret events adequately? The most obvious, of course, is the ability to write effectively.

Beyond this it becomes a question of the author's knowledge, historical insights, conscious ideological orientation, and relationship to political movements in terms of active or passive identification with them. These attributes do not, in all cases, follow writing ability,

any more than does active involvement necessarily lead to the ability to clearly describe events. Nor does active involvement by itself necessarily lead to ideological clarity on the part of the author. These matters are much more complex in their dimensions. Joseph Blotner spoke to a similar set of concerns in this manner:

One can try to distinguish between politics and other kinds of human experience as material for the novelist's shaping art. One can try to differentiate the methods of the social scientist and the artist in prose fiction when each turns his skills upon political experience.⁷⁵

With the proletarian novelists, however, there is the added task of bringing to bear the full range of Marxist analysis on all facets of human experience. Where I tend to differ from Blotner, and I think most Marxists would tend to differ, is in his efforts to limit the political novel only to explicit themes. He sets forth this criteria in his introductory remarks:

This study focuses on 138 novels . . . These novels deal with the overt, institutionalized politics of the officeholder, the candidate, the party official, or the individual who performs political acts as they are conventionally understood. This definition excludes novels which do not deal primarily with political processes and actions, but concentrate instead on the conditions out of which political action may eventually arise.⁷⁶ (emphasis mine)

It is this last facet that is the meat and marrow of proletarian fiction, especially that published in the early thirties. Apparently Blotner follows the pattern set down by Morris Speare in prescribing the parameters of political fiction:

. . . a work of prose fiction which leans rather to "ideas" than emotions; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the

writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government.*

With the narrow limitations set by Blotner and Speare, novels like Gone With The Wind, or DuBois' Black Flame Trilogy, and most of the proletarian fiction would be excluded as political fiction. Given this kind of narrow reference point, many novels by black authors would be seen simply in terms of race relations themes despite the broad range social issues raised in such novels as Native Son, or Baldwin's Another Country. It is equally likely that no novel by a black author would come up for discussion, as is indeed the case in Blotner and Milne's studies.

Most of the novels reviewed by Blotner and Milne do not, for the most part, attack the basic institutional structures within American society, except in terms of reforming them, nor do they question its basic ideological tenets. I have called these works, in my introductory chapter, "reform" novels. Most of the studies of political fiction, besides adopting a narrow framework, virtually ignore the proletarian novel.

Widely diverse critics such as Irving Howe and Richard Hofstadter, in his American Political Tradition (1948), talk about the American experience as being relatively free from ideological conflict. This is true, they suggest, if one compares our political traditions with those of the European setting. There is the tendency by some to accept the view that American politics since the 1860's, at least, has operated within the framework of a genuine consensus.

To accept this view one would have to interpret such events as the

rise of the American labor movement, the Civil War, and events flowing from it, as the establishing of a genuine "consensus" in our country's political system, a highly debatable contention to say the least.

At the heart of this narrow interpretation of what constitutes "political" fiction is the implicit, sometimes spoken, set of assumptions about the American political processes. Howe describes it as follows:

Except during the Civil War, the one occasion when this country tasted the blood and terror that appear in the kinds of historical movements that give rise to ideology, there has always seemed a way out for Americans. The uniqueness of our history, the freshness of our land, the plentitude of our resources - all these have made possible, and rendered plausible, a style of political improvisation and intellectual free wheeling.⁷⁷

Besides ignoring the economic, political, and social turmoil which nurtured the soil for the Civil War, Howe's description fails to take into account the political stagnation that settled in afterwards with the defeat of the efforts at reconstruction and large scale bloody labor struggles of the 1870's and 80's. Even the rise of the "reform" movements of the 1890's and the early 1900's were a reflection of ideological struggles strikingly similar to those taking place in Europe during the same period.

Others who appear to accept the Speare, Blotner, and Milne definition of what constitutes political fiction also seem to accept the historical interpretations of historians like Hofstadter. Yet, even he, in his later writings examines the undercurrents of ideology in American society,* and it is these undercurrents that some protest literature, and in particular, proletarian fiction look at. In contrast, H. A. L.

Fisher confines himself to saying "that political fiction concerns itself with men and women engaged in contemporary political life and the discussion of contemporary political ideas." William B. Dickens, also cited in Milne, accepts the same definition by merely dropping the "contemporary" which broadens it a little.* To argue that the definitions of political fiction advanced by Speare, Blotner, and Milne are restrictive is not to imply that the novels reviewed by them are unimportant. My concern is with the novels that are excluded. Novels that attempt to focus on the conditions out of which political action may arise occupy too rich an area to be left out of the realm of political fiction.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER TWO

*See the following biographical sources on Richard Wright: Constance Webb's Richard Wright - A Biography (1968), David Ray and Robert Farnsworth's Richard Wright (1973), Kenneth Kinnamon's The Emergence of Richard Wright (1972), and Edward Margolies' The Art of Richard Wright (1969).

⁴¹Constance Webb, Richard Wright - A Biography, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968).

*Harold Cruse's The Crises of the Negro Intellectual (1967) mentions some problems, some of which have a ring of truth, although I do not agree with his overall interpretations.

⁴²Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," in the paperback ed. of Native Son, (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), introduction, pp. vvi-xxxiv.

⁴³Ibid., p. xx.

⁴⁴Wright, Native Son, pp. 360-364.

⁴⁵Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," pp. xiv, xv.

⁴⁶Ibid., Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. xix.

⁴⁷Richard Wright, American Hunger, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), Ch. 4.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Webb, Richard Wright - A Biography, pp. 409-410.

⁵⁰Richard Wright, White Man Listen, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1957), p. 134.

⁵¹Nathan Hare, Black Anglo Saxon, (New York: Marzanni & Mansell Publishing, Inc., 1965).

⁵²Richard Wright, The Long Dream, (New York: Doubleday, 1958), p. 32.

*See the introduction to the 1938 edition of Studs Lonigan - "A Note On the Author;" also, John W. Aldridge's "The Education of James T. Farrell, in In Search of Heresy: American Literature in an Age of Conformity, (1956); Fred B. Millett's Contemporary American Authors, (1940), pp. 345-46; and, Leonard Unger's American Writers, Vol. 2, pp. 25-53.

⁵³Farrell, A Note On Literary Criticism, p. 148.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. II.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 144-45.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Isidor Schneider, "Sectarianism On The Right," New Masses, (June 23, 1936), p. 23.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Farrell, A Note On Literary Criticism, p. 29.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 31.

⁶¹Op. cit., Isidor Schneider, "Sectarianism On The Right," p. 23.

*See the following anthologies by Farrell, The Life Adventurous, (1947), and the Judith anthology, (1973).

*For a discussion of these events from different perspectives see George Orwell's Homage To Catalonia, (1938), and Joseph North's No Men Are Strangers (1958), especially Chapters 11 to 14.

⁶²James T. Farrell, "The Short Story," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 103.

*See the Introduction to the 1938 edition of Studs Lonigan, p. xi.

⁶³Gaylord Leroy and Ursula Beitz, "Current Directions," in Preserve and Create: Essays in Marxist Literary Criticism, (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), p. 1.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 6-7.

⁶⁶V. I. Lenin, Materialist Empirico Criticism, in Reader In Marxist Philosophy, ed. Howard Selsam and Harry Martel (1963), p. 140.

⁶⁷Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in Selsam and Martel, pp. 296-303.

⁶⁸Karl Marx, "Critique of Political Economy," in Selsam and Martel, p. 186.

⁶⁹V. I. Lenin, Selected Works - Vol. 1, (New York: International Pub., 1967), p. 122.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid., V. I. Lenin, Selected Works - Vol. 1, p. 130.

⁷²James T. Farrell, Studs Lonigan, (New York: Vanguard Press, 1935), part 3, Ch. 18.

⁷³James T. Farrell, What Time Collects, (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1964), p. 190.

⁷⁴Irving Howe, Politics And The Novel, (New York: Horizon, 1957), Ch. 7.

⁷⁵Blotner, The Modern American Political Novel, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 8.

*Morris Speare, The Political Novel, Its Development in England and America, (Published, 1924).

⁷⁷Howe, Politics And The Novel, p. 160.

*See the following works by Richard Hofstadter - The American Political Tradition (1948), Anti-Intellectualism in American Society (1963), and The Paranoid Style in American Politics (1965).

*Cited in Gordon Milne's The American Political Novel, p. 4.

CHAPTER THREE

A SELECTIVE ANALYSIS

A. John Dos Passos

John Roderigo Dos Passos was born on January 14, 1896 in Chicago.* His father, John Randolph Dos Passos, was a successful lawyer. Dos Passos served as an ambulance driver in France during World War One, and this experience acted as the basis for two of his early novels, One Man's Initiation (1920), and Three Soldiers, published a year later. One Man's Initiation was re-issued in 1945 under a new title, First Encounter. In the introduction to the latter edition, Dos Passos sets down, in hindsight so to speak, his reactions to World Wars One and Two:

For one thing I think the brutalities of war and oppression came as less of a shock to people who grew up in the thirties than they did to Americans of my generation, raised as we were during the quiet afterglow of the nineteenth century, among comfortably situated people who were confident that industrial progress meant an improved civilization, more of the good things of life all around.⁷⁸

This view reveals Dos Passos' upper middle class origin which became a limiting factor, although by no means the only one, in his political development over the years. As Brantley stated:

The truth of this observation cannot be denied, but it is not the whole of the explanation for Martin Howe's tantrum. In the first place, the majority of Americans of Dos Passos' generation did not grow up in any sort of "afterglow" or among "comfortably situated people."⁷⁹

In many respects, Martin Howe, the main character in First Encounter, is

Dos Passos, since First Encounter and Three Soldiers are thinly veiled autobiographies. With the latter work the principal characters, or at least one of them, John Andrews, takes on many characteristics of Dos Passos himself. Howe is perhaps the more autobiographical.

Among the six authors to be examined in this chapter, Dos Passos was the most politically active during the early period of his professional career from 1920 through most of the 1930's. His writing career and his political involvement closely parallel one another during this time. Part One of his USA trilogy came out in 1930. During this same period, Dos Passos served as co-chairman of the National Committee to Aid Striking Miners in Harlan County, Kentucky. When Part Two came out in 1932, Dos Passos was covering the political turmoil in Central America for New Masses, among other journals. He was one of a number of prominent writers who signed an open letter supporting the Presidential ticket of the Communist Party in that same year. He also served on the National Committee to Defend Political Prisoners. By the time Part Three of the trilogy came out in 1936, he was an active supporter of the New Deal. However, by 1964, twenty-eight years later, Dos Passos voted for Barry Goldwater. What caused this apparent turn about? It is on this point that I want to briefly examine the substance of the USA trilogy in terms of theme as well as the underlying ideological content.

USA is Dos Passos' best known work. Essentially, it is an attack on American society during the first third of this century. The time period in the story is from about 1912 to the early twenties; from this standpoint it is an historical novel portraying the kind of "authenticity" described by Hicks.⁸⁰ Using a journalistic style, Dos Passos

leveled a scathing attack on the morals of middle class America. This is not a new theme, but he handled it in an innovative way.

One reviewer described Dos Passos' work as "a book of memories":

These memories, all relating to the United States during the first third of the twentieth century, are presented and developed contrapuntally in autobiography, history, biography, fiction. The form is that of the associational process of memory itself, by which perceptions are established in the mind and later recalled.⁸¹

In other words, as the plot in USA unfolds certain events were placed in context with other events. In some cases, there is a clear association between events, in other instances, the linkages between episodes is less apparent, and in others, there is no direct tie in. "Fact" and fiction are intermixed in segments which are called "newsreels." Dos Passos first used this pattern in his earlier novel, Manhattan Transfer (1925).

One of the principal characters in the story, and perhaps the hero, is a man by the name of Fainy McCreary. McCreary is the rugged individualist who is "free spirited." He becomes identified fairly early in the story with radical causes, although he is not a joiner in the sense of having organizational ties.

The principal characters in most of Dos Passos' early works are all high individualistic. In some respects, they appear in the particular stories as more important than the events which surround them, and as one critic noted this tendency did have its ideological orientation:

Dos Passos is a man with a simple lifelong political obsession, first made explicit in his neglected travel book of the early twenties, Rosinante to the Road Again, (1922). Here certain chapters introduce Dos Passos' "anarchism," the direct antecedent of his present day conservatism, and a viewpoint which appears to greater or lesser degree, in everything that he has written.⁸²

Dos Passos' participation in left of center political activity was, therefore, primarily on the basis of support for specific causes or on the foundation of an articulated ideology with strong anarchistic tendencies. Anarchism and Marxism, however, have little in common, and a close examination of his early writings will clearly show an anti-Marxist bias. Dos Passos' support of the communists in 1932 must be seen in terms of his special interest in particular issues at a given point rather than support based on ideological affinity. Such is the diversity of the American left.

What makes USA proletarian fiction is its focus, in large part, on trade union struggle which is an important facet of the class struggle theme. USA is also clearly anti-capitalist in its overtones, another feature of proletarian fiction. It may be that as a political commentary USA is more a critique of "bigness": big business, big labor, and big government, all major themes in conservatively oriented political literature. In Marxist literature it is not "bigness" as such that serves as the principal focus but which class is in effective control.

On the reportorial side of the trilogy, Dos Passos does deal sympathetically with the activity of people like Eugene Debs. Even here the emphasis is on the man Debs rather than on the movement of which he was a part, and as in Shaw's Major Barbara, the capitalist often comes across as all powerful, almost as omnipotent. The implicit assumption being that while the system is bad, there is little that one can do.

In terms of setting forth what might be described as an historical determinist model, USA depicts, selectively, the events that set the stage for the 1930's and 40's. There is reference in the novel to the

conclusion of World War One, the organizing of The League of Nations, and the early turmoil in Spain which laid the groundwork for the Spanish Civil War, and this event was in turn one of the sparks that set off World War Two. One could argue with some justification that this is an overly simplistic description of historical events, and that Dos Passos' selection and interpretation of events left a lot to be desired. Still, there's just enough truth in this descriptive narrative to make the trilogy an effective piece of literature.

The Spanish Civil War had as dramatic an impact on the lives of radical writers, as did events in the Soviet Union, in particular, the Moscow trials. Only one other event may have had a greater impact, namely, the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact of 1939, primarily because some felt the pact was a betrayal of the revolution. Others, however, saw the pact as an outgrowth of the duplicity of the Western powers who were trying to pit the Nazis against the Soviet Union, Winston Churchill being the principal architect of this strategy. Dos Passos spent about a year in Spain covering the war as a journalist and came back, so he claims, a changed man; due in large part to the internal bickering between socialists and communists, and between communists and anarchists, key elements in the Spanish loyalists fighting the right wing clerical forces led by Franco. It is my contention, however, that the "changes" in Dos Passos' political orientation had their origins more in his predispositions before he went to Spain rather than what happened after he got there. The cynicism that pervades some of his later works, Number One (1943), The Grand Design (1949), or his last major work, MidCentury (1961), is similar to the cynicism that comes through in his earlier

novels, except that by this time it is much heavier. The cynicism is often intermixed with a childlike idealism. Actually, the latter is usually followed by the former, that is to say, the childlike idealism crashes on the rocks of extreme cynicism because it is rudderless.

Through the sympathetic portrayal of labor struggles, USA takes on some of the characteristics of proletarian fiction. Fainy's rootlessness is shown through his relationship with Maisie, whom he marries later on. Their marital status is far from secure, since she is bitterly opposed to his political activity. They have a row, and he leaves home to travel around the country. A year or so before he first met Maisie, he was working for a labor newspaper in a place called Goldfield, Nevada.

McCreary is, if anything, more atune with the Wobblies than he is with the socialists. To the extent that McCreary is not a joiner, and has anarchistic tendencies, he is at one with Dos Passos. In many ways McCreary is juxtaposed to other principal characters in the story. There is Janey, the more or less typical middle class girl who grew to womanhood in the exclusive Georgetown neighborhood in Washington, D.C., and there is John W. Moorehouse, born in Wilmington, Delaware. Janey and Moorehouse are part of the establishment while McCreary is not. John and Janey both succeed, that is, become "successful" people, but it is within a stultifying social environment and neither appears to be aware of it. One example of this environment is exemplified through an exchange between Janey and her mother which takes place early in Janey's childhood:

Janey, I want to talk to you about something. That little colored girl you brought in this afternoon. Now, don't misunderstand me; I like and respect the

colored people; some of them are fine self-respecting people in their place . . . But you musn't bring that little colored girl in the house again. Treating colored people kindly and with respect is one of the signs of good breeding . . . You musn't forget that your mother's people were well born, every inch of them . . . Georgetown was very different in those days. We lived in a big house with most lovely lawns . . . but you must never associate with colored people on an equal basis. Living in this neighborhood, its all the more important to be careful about those things . . .⁸³

Janey and Moorehouse "succeed" in later life because they accept the status quo. Perhaps they accept it because they have "made it," and the way they have made it is of no small significance in the social context of this society. The above dialogue between Janey and her mother suggests the kinds of behavior either discouraged or encouraged, and clearly implies the kinds of reinforcement mechanisms used to encourage "desirable" behavior.

Moorehouse, later to become a successful public relations man, meets and marries his first wife, Annabella Marie Strang. That relationship ends a few years later in divorce. He goes to work for a newspaper writing stories about Italian weddings, local conventions of Elks, obscure death notices, murders and suicides among Lithuanians, Albanians, Croats, and Poles. This job lasted for about six months. His break comes when he goes to work as an advertising man and meets his second wife-to-be, Gertrude Staples. Gertrude is the daughter of Horace Staples, a major stock holder in Standard Oil Company. Through this developing relationship, Moorehouse, like Janey, "succeeds" but it too is within a barren social milieu.

Another member of the establishment is G. N. Barrow. Barrow is a

"labor leader" and a reformer. He and Moorehouse get together to mount a public relations campaign aimed at convincing American workers that their interests are the same as the capitalist. This campaign was conducted at a time when monopoly capital was growing, making huge profits and paying low wages, thus forcing labor to wage some of its bitterest strikes. Parts Two and Three of the trilogy depict each of these characters at later stages of their lives.

In reading USA one senses a basic futility in life surrounding all the major characters, McCreary as well. This futility comes through, it seems to me, in the episodes involving McCreary, Barrow, Janey, and Moorehouse. It is particularly heavy in the later segments of the trilogy. To the extent that this theme of futility runs throughout the work, it becomes more of an existentialist framework than Marxist.

B. John Steinbeck

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902 in Salinas, California, the locale for his best known work, The Grapes of Wrath (1939). He graduated from Salinas High School in 1919 and began intermittent attendance at Stanford University.* He left California in 1925 and went to New York where he worked for a time as a construction laborer. Like many of his contemporaries, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Farrell, he also worked as a journalist over the years. When he died in 1968, he had a nationally syndicated column.

One critic has drawn some interesting comparisons between the writing careers of Steinbeck and Hemingway which bear, to some extent, on the general topic of what is political fiction.** Like Dos Passos,

Hemingway also spent about a year covering the Spanish Civil War as a journalist. From this he produced such documentary works as The Spanish Earth (1937). Lisca points out the following similarities with Steinbeck:

In the Forgotten Village, (1941), Steinbeck turns to propaganda and documentary to help the Mexican villages come into the twentieth century. Within one year of each other were published The Grapes of Wrath and For Whom The Bell Tolls, (1940), both again devoted to social causes.⁸⁴

The focus on social protest is, of course, a key element in political fiction regardless of the ideological orientation of the author. A principal difference between the two men is the degree to which they are autobiographically present in their works. In Grapes of Wrath, Cannery Row (1945), and East of Eden (1952), Steinbeck remains generally aloof from his characters. In Hemingway's case, the opposite is true, for example, Jordan in For Whom The Bell Tolls (1940), or Henry in A Farewell To Arms (1930). Neither man is an exact characterization of Hemingway but he clearly uses them to express his point of view. Furthermore, For Whom The Bell Tolls focuses on the Spanish Civil War whereas the latter work is in a World War One setting.

A significant difference between them and Dos Passos is the nature of their political involvement. They functioned primarily as writers. Dos Passos, on the other hand, was a political activist and a writer. It is true that Hemingway spent some time writing about the Civil War in Spain, and that his sympathies were clearly on the side of the loyalists, but it constituted only a portion of his writing. In the case of Steinbeck, except for his In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath, his

writing reflects less involvement with politics. This is not to suggest that such works as Pastures of Heaven (1932), A God Unknown (1933), and Of Mice and Men (1937), are totally without ideological overtones. These works fall more in the category of general protest fiction rather than proletarian literature. In Dubious Battle, which I will examine momentarily, overlaps into proletarian fiction because of its central theme. There is no evidence that Steinbeck was ever close to the Party nor was he active in the American Writers Congress.

In terms of impact, the most important novel of Steinbeck's is probably The Grapes of Wrath. It first came out in April, 1939. Within one year it had sold over 450,000 copies and became a major motion picture production. The issue of the status of immigrant and migrant farm labor, popularized in The Grapes of Wrath, has been a political question over the years mushrooming to major proportions in the mid-sixties. Both In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath focus on farm labor problems. In the latter novel, the primary emphasis is on the Joad family, in the former it is on a farm labor strike and examines the social conditions of the farm laborer. The political ramifications are made more explicit than in Grapes of Wrath. Published in 1936, the plot of In Dubious Battle is a forerunner to The Grapes of Wrath. Jim Nolan, the son of an active trade unionist, and Mac, an organizer for the Communist Party, are the principal characters. As the story opens, Nolan is in the process of making application to join the Party. Harry Nilson, a Party leader and a minor character in this story, asked Jim why he wants to join:

Well, I could give you a lot of little reasons. Mainly, its this: my whole family has been ruined by this system. My old man, my father, was slugged so much in labor trouble that he went punch drunk.⁸⁵

Nolan's mother had died a month previous to this meeting. At the time she died, Jim was in jail on a charge of vagrancy. The following dialogue helps to explain the circumstances which served as further impetus for Jim's action. Jim tells Harry:

I worked in Tulman's Department Store. Head of the wrapping department. I was out to a picture show one night, and coming home I saw a crowd in Lincoln Square. I stopped to see what it was all about. There was a guy in the middle of the park talking. I climbed up on the pedestal of that statue of Senator Morgan so I could see better. And then I heard the sirens. I was watching the riot squad come in from the other side. Well, a squad came up from behind too. Cop slugged me from behind, right in the back of the neck. When I came to I was already booked for vagrancy. Well, I told 'em I wasn't a vagrant and had a job, and told 'em to call up Mr. Webb, he's manager at Tulman's. So they did, Webb asked where I was picked up, and the sergeant said "at a radical meeting", and then Webb said he never heard of me. So I got the rap.⁸⁶

While there is no definite time period specified in the novel, it could be during the early 1920's and the locale at this point is probably Los Angeles. Shortly after this exchange between Harry and Jim, Jim meets Mac for the first time. Jim's application for membership in the Party had been accepted. During a conversation with Mac, Jim's motivations are further explored. He relates his experience while serving time on the vagrancy charge:

When I got in Jail, there were five other men in the same cell, picked up at the same time - a Mexican, and a Negro and a Jew and a couple of plain mongrel Americans like me. Course they talked to me, but it wasn't that. I'd read more than they knew. All the

time at home we were fighting, fighting something - hunger mostly. My old man was fighting the bosses. I was fighting the school. But always we lost. And after a long time I guess it got to be part of our mond - stuff that we always would lose. My old man was fighting just like a cat in a corner with a pack of dogs around. Sooner or later a dog was sure to kill him; but he fought anyway.⁸⁷

By the time this story opens, Jim's father had been dead for three years and Jim had dropped out of high school during his second year. As the next passage shows, the elements of hope and hopelessness appear side by side in the same story. When the events finally run their course in this tale there is a note of uncertainty:

The house where we lived was always filled with anger. Anger hung in the house like smoke; that beaten, vicious anger against the boss, against the superintendent, against the groceryman when he cut off credit. It was an anger that made you sick to your stomach, but you couldn't help it . . . In that cell were five men all raised in about the same condition. Some of them worse, even. And while there was anger in them, it wasn't the same kind of anger. They didn't hate a boss or a butcher. They hated the whole system of bosses, but that was a different thing. It wasn't the same kind of anger. And there was something else - The hopelessness wasn't in them. They were quiet, and they were working; but in the back of every mind there was conviction that sooner or later they would win their way out of the system they hated.⁸⁸

Mac takes Jim on an organizing campaign, and at this point the main plot begins. The locale shifts to a place called Torgas Valley, probably the Salinas Valley, where many farm labor strikes were held during the same time period. As described in the story, Torgas is a valley made up mostly of apple orchards, the largest part of it owned by a few men. Fact and fiction merge within the story because Salinas was and still is a center for labor militancy.

A strike against the fruit growers association was brewing when Mac and Jim got there. Mac, fairly well known as a communist, offers to lend his organizing expertise to the strike committee and is accepted. The catalyst for the strike is a 71-year old man, who it turns out is an ex-wobbly named Dan. He broke his hip in the field falling off a rickety step ladder. This incident alone does not cause the strike, but it does serve as a critical spark. Wages and working conditions are among the central issues behind the strike. The Marxist framework, or at least a crude representation of it, is introduced through Mac. An existentialist theme is also brought into the story by another character, Don Burton. He is a medical doctor who works with Party in many of its campaigns. Though he supports the Party in general, his views on political struggle are expressed in the following dialogue with Jim:

There aren't any beginnings . . . nor any ends.
It seems to me that man has engaged in a blind
and fearful struggle out of a past he can't remember,
into a future he can't foresee nor understand.
And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every
enemy except one. He cannot win over himself.⁸⁹

At an earlier point in the story, in an exchange between Burton and Mac, Burton's comments are in the same vein, leading the reader to speculate whether Steinbeck was speaking through Burton especially by the end of the novel.

Mac asked Burton why he supported the Party believing as he does, and Burton responds:

Well, you say I don't believe in the cause. That's like not believing in the moon. There've been communes before, and there will be again. But you people have the idea that if you can establish the thing, the job'll be done. Nothing stops, Mac. If you were able to put an idea into effect tomorrow,

it would start changing right away. Establish a commune, and the same gradual flux will continue.⁹⁰
(emphasis mine)

Because nowhere in Marxist theory is such a take-it-for-granted attitude expressed either directly or indirectly, I would assume that Steinbeck was either unfamiliar with Marxism or he was merely setting up straw men. Certainly Mac's responses are somewhat short of the mark. It is true, and I can say this having been an active Party member for over twenty-five years, that some strains of bourgeois idealism do seep into Party ranks, and in this sense Mac is a true-to-life character. Even his ruthlessness which comes through at varying points in the story has an element of extreme idealism in it.

Further on in the same exchange, Mac introduces the issue of "social injustice" in what seems to be totally subjective terms, an approach not in keeping with Marxist analysis. Mac seems to be arguing as if everything can be described in totally black and white terms. Marxist analysis does not perceive "social change" in this simplistic fashion. Steinbeck seems to be creating a "cardboard" communist which has only a partial relation to a real communist. Mac asked Burton: "How about social injustice - the profit system? You have to say they're bad."

Burton responds:

Mac, look at the physiological injustice, the injustice of tetanus, the injustice of syphilis, the gangster methods of amoebic dysentery, that's my field.⁹¹

Burton is alluding to the "injustice" present in the universe in life and death, in the very human condition which seems to be a major concern of many existentialist writers.

As the story ends, there is little indication of how the strike ends in terms of improved working conditions. Jim Nolan is killed in an ambush at about the same time that a wage offer is made by the fruit growers, and there is some uncertainty as to who killed him or why, since it appears that Mac may have been the intended target. In any case, Mac survives. Other issues raised by the strike are apparently unresolved for the time being.

There are several points that can be made about In Dubious Battle, besides those already mentioned. First, Mac comes across at varying times as a cold, almost aloof personality. He is not, however, a man totally without warmth or human compassion, and in this regard Steinbeck attempts to paint a more or less favorable picture of a communist. If Steinbeck is not completely sympathetic to the Party, in fact, he becomes rabidly anti-communist several years later after the publication of In Dubious Battle, he at least brings into the story some sympathy to the situation being described.

Mac is tough, sometimes ruthless because the circumstances call for it. Second, some of the minor characters are portrayed with their individual strengths and weaknesses. This is the strongest feature of the novel. Most notable are Dakin, who starts out as one of the principal strike leaders but later cracks up under the emotional pressure of a highly volatile situation usually present in most labor struggles of this type; Mr. Andrews, who lets the strikers use his farm as strike headquarters even though his place is mortgaged by the Torgas Finance Company which is owned and operated by three of the largest growers in the Valley; and London, who eventually is selected to replace Dakin as

chairman of the strike committee. Third, like Dos Passos' USA, Steinbeck's work seems to mix proletarian fiction with a thin veneer of Marxism heavily seasoned with existentialist overtones. These are ideologies which seem more incompatible than compatible in most instances. Fourth, the control of the media, in particular the local newspaper, by the fruit growers depicts the class struggle theme sharply.

Thus, Steinbeck's two major novels, In Dubious Battle and The Grapes of Wrath, can be read as general protest fiction and as proletarian literature. Neither novel, however, falls firmly within the Marxist orbit of proletarian fiction. Marxist oriented fiction, while having an impact on the literature of the thirties, represented a trend within a trend, i.e., literature that focused on the class struggle theme. Within this trend, it was fiction that gave a Marxist interpretation of the class struggle as contrasted to a purely economic determinist model or one setting forth strong anarchistic tendencies. Marxism, in short, is not the only model that focuses on the class struggle theme within fiction.

C. Jack Conroy

Jack Conroy was born in 1899 in a coal mining county of northern Missouri. Living on the fringes of Moberly, one of a family of nine, he experienced many of the events he later set down in The Disinherited. During the late 1920's, Conroy contributed articles to New Masses, edited the Anvil, and Left Front, two journals mentioned earlier in this discussion. He came under the influence of H. L. Mencken when he submitted, and had published, articles in American Mercury. According to Aaron's account, "Mencken's conservative social views at this time did

not prevent him from publishing young revolutionary writers in his magazine.* For a young writer who had radical tendencies, it seems strange that he would seek to advance his writing career by publishing in journals with such diametrically opposed ideologies, and yet, this is what happened.

Conroy was not the only political novelist of this period who wrote for all sorts of publications, which raises some questions about political integrity. The American Mercury was a right wing journal with an extreme conservative bias brought in by its editor. It is unlikely that a committed socialist, communist, or radical in general would engage the readership of such a magazine in any meaningful dialogue. The New Masses, on the other hand, was a Marxist periodical. Furthermore, there were many so called "middle of the road" journals with a mass readership that might serve as a useful market place to engage in a political dialogue and still make money as a writer.* I will discuss the issue of political integrity and Conroy's ambition later in this chapter.

The Disinherited is semi-autobiographical. In this respect, one can contrast the differences in background between Conroy and the others discussed: Dos Passos, Wright, and Farrell. Each man moved to radicalism by a different path, but left for similar reasons related to their respective interpretations of events. First published in 1933, Conroy's novel focuses on the central character, Larry Donovan. While one should be wary about drawing too many parallels between fictional characters and the author, even in works which are clearly autobiographical, here it seems safe to assume that Donovan and Conroy are, for the most part, one in the same. This is in accord with all the background information

available concerning Conroy. What happens to Donovan during the course of the story can give some clues to Conroy's own growth and eventual demise as a writer. Larry's father, like Conroy's, originally came from Montreal, Canada and is described in the story as a self-educated man.

The following passage portrays the community where Larry grew up and also gives a brief portrait of his father, at least as he was perceived by others in the town:

Everybody wondered why father worked in the mines. Everybody agreed that he was a funny man. For one thing, his best friend was a Frenchman and a Catholic. There were not many Catholics in the neighborhood and less Frenchmen. The sons of these miners readily joined the Ku Klux Klan when the fiery cross was burned years later. People said that Frenchy Barbour ate cats and snakes, and prayed to the Virgin Mary to make his shots roll out another ton of coal.⁹³

From the above passage one gets a sense of the strong provincial attitudes present in the community as well as its potential political overtones.

The principal focus in Conroy's work is similar to that of In Dubious Battle, namely, it is centered around a strike, in this case, one involving coal miners. It also looks at several other labor struggles of the period. The class-struggle theme is introduced in stark and vivid terms:

The mine-owners depended upon the miner's starving into submission; the miners upon the owner's cupidity dictating that it was cheaper to capitulate than to maintain the luxury of armed guards and inefficient workers who would themselves eventually organize. But hunger was esteemed by the operators as an effective gentling influence, and the miners knew they had better tighten their belts.⁹³

The time period for the story is at the beginning of, or just before the

start of, World War One. The strikers won a partial victory but there is a second strike and the mine owners are determined on this occasion to break the union. During the period between the two strikes Larry's father and older brother, and this too is similar to Conroy's own life, are killed in the mines. Larry, now thirteen, goes to work in the railroad yards.

Another strike situation, occurring at the end of World War One, is described in Part Two. This time it is a railroad strike, sparked when the company tries to force a ten per cent pay cut. The company successfully recruits scabs to break the strike. It also brings pressure on state authorities to send in national guard units "to protect private property." This action proved to be disastrous. The national guard troops turn out to be highly unreliable, most of the men having grown up and lived in the town all their lives, that is in the area where the strike took place. Many of the strikers were the fathers, brothers, and relatives of the guardsmen. The strike is, in the end, finally broken by a combination of factors, including the recruitment of scabs and a corrupt union leadership that sells out. Larry is a passive observer of this particular strike.

After this, Larry goes to work in a steel mill. He meets a man named Lipkin, nicknamed Bolshevik. Lipkin is eventually fired by the company because he is the only man to protest the pay cut. During an argument with a company foreman he is attacked by company guards and beaten. Larry goes to his aid. As a result, both Lipkin and Larry were fired. The next significant event takes place when Larry goes to work as a bricklayer. There are also three black workers on the same job.

One of them is a man in his sixties who performs as a pace setter. Larry tries to tell Mose, the pace setter, to slow down before they run out of work. One day Mose plays out on the job. Larry and the rest of the crew refuse to work until the foreman gets Mose a doctor. This particular event can be contrasted with one that happens early in the story when Larry was still home. A black man, obviously beaten, comes to his home one night shortly after his father's funeral. He had been beaten by strikers because he was a scab. He had been recruited from Alabama by the mine owners who failed to tell him that a strike was in progress.

Larry's reactions to this incident is of some significance, since it ties in with the brick yard event, although Mose was not a strikebreaker. His reactions are summed up in the following passage:

I had always regarded a scab as a sub-human beast endowed with an inherent vileness. I had never before regarded a scab as a puppet manipulated by those who stood to gain the most . . .⁹⁴

Years later, commenting on his experience during the bricklayer occurrence, Larry was to say:

I no longer felt shame at being seen at such work as I would have been once, and I know that the only way for me to rise to something approximating the grandiose ambitions of my youth would be to rise with my class, with the disinherited.⁹⁵

The introduction of these two events, widely separated in time but similar in content, brings this novel into the framework of proletarian fiction, insofar as it unites the twin themes of race relations and the over-all class struggle. Like the two previous works discussed, Conroy's novel examines the class struggle in the context of World War One and postwar American society, but did not, as did Dos Passos and Steinbeck,

introduce an existentialist theme into the story. For a brief moment in his writing career, Conroy came close to working with the Marxist model in a creative sense. The novel does not end in despair but in continuing struggle. The workers portrayed are not glorified but are, to a large extent, depicted as living, breathing people. Conroy also produced one other novel during this period, A World To Win (1935). Its central focus was on the economic forces shaping the lives of Americans, as such, a somewhat more generalized plot than The Disinherited.

In some respects Conroy's background is important in assessing the political content of The Disinherited, since it shows a degree of sensitivity not present in the two previous works. It is true that Dos Passos and Steinbeck described events out of their personal lives, but the content of those experiences is not the same. Where Conroy came from a working class background, Dos Passos and Steinbeck came from middle class homes. As a migrant laborer, railroad worker, he saw the class struggle first hand. His father and older brother had been killed in a mine accident due primarily to the kind of conditions portrayed in Upton Sinclair's semi-documentary work, King Coal (1917). Thus, Conroy grew up in a class conscious environment which was reflected in his early works. This is not to suggest that one who has not directly experienced certain conditions cannot be sensitive to their impact. Background is, however, an important factor in any analysis of an author's political orientation. Other factors such as noting the impact of historical events on the novelist, the degree of commitment shown by the writer to a political movement, and his/her level of political sophistication, are all important considerations in addition to the author's background.

In a paper presented to the American Writers Congress, Conroy talked about some of the problems facing the worker writer. His discussion dovetails, so it seems, with the analysis presented by Seaver's paper on "The Proletarian Novel," in that it approaches or examines some of the same questions:

It is sometimes believed, and some revolutionary critics have helped to foster this belief, that proletarian writers, in addition to establishing new values in fiction, must also evolve some new and distinctive techniques - that the old words and images easily recognizable to workers must be discarded, that words must hum like a dynamo, rattle like a rivet hammer, echo the clang of steel. The effect of this desperate striving for novelty of phrase and imagery is often that of achieving a semi-private terminology almost unintelligible to the masses, and a lamentable dullness in the narrative . . .⁹⁵

Farrell's discussion, dealt with in my earlier chapters, talked about the tendency of some writers to engage in "revolutionary sentimentalities" by presenting idealized characters. These same writers will often use obscure imagery which detracts from their story.

Conroy also made reference to some of the problems faced by the "worker as writer," the proletarian writer who is not from a middle class background:

The troubles of a worker who is attempting to mirror the life about him are many and varied. In the first place, very few worker writers have ever graduated from college, and still fewer of them have been able to spend a year or so in the Paris Latin Quarter where it is possible to learn the writing or proletarian literature in the technical manner of Marcel Proust and James Joyce. Arduous physical toil wears the brain, familiarity often breeds contempt for and weariness with the particular job upon which the worker-writer may depend for a living. His facilities for learning about any other are practically non-existent.⁹⁶

Whether "familiarity often breeds contempt" is dependent, it seems to me, on the particular worker's situation plus his psychological characteristics. It is equally possible that "familiarity" could give a worker writer additional insights from which to base a story. In short, Conroy's use of the term "familiarity" seems overly limited.

It is important to keep clearly in mind the total historical context in which the Congress was held, and a significant aspect of this was the political diversity present in the deliberations of the American Writers Congress, as well as at the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow a year earlier. Many of the issues debated at the two meetings, as I've already indicated, went far beyond the realm of literary criticism in terms of their political ramifications. As a participant in the dialogue between writers and other artists who were attempting to grapple with political questions, Conroy's background affords some insights into many of his observations, in other words, the basis for his political ideas at that point in his life. His father, Thomas Edward Conroy, a former Catholic priest, did in fact migrate to the United States from Canada. Conroy, Sr. was also involved in organizing a miner's union.

Thus, The Disinherited is beyond question autobiographical. Young Conroy's journalistic career led him to working for such widely diverse publication as the Chicago Defender, 1946 to 1947, as a literary editor. He performed the same job at the Chicago Globe in 1949. In addition, he worked as a book reviewer for the Chicago Daily News and the Chicago Tribune. All of these publications had two factors in common: they were relatively affluent, and also had an extreme conservative bias. The lone

exception, and even here its a matter for some debate, is the Chicago Defender, a black owned and operated bi-weekly newspaper.

It would appear that Conroy's pursuit of his writing career led him into the murky waters of compromise in order to pursue his ambitions. This is particularly ironic when you recall Larry's comment in The Disinherited:

. . . I know that the only way for me to rise to something approximating the grandiose ambitions of my youth would be to rise with my class, with the disinherited.⁹⁷

The first drafts of his novel were apparently written during the late 1920's, possibly 1927-1929. It was at this point that he also started publishing articles in the American Mercury, the content of which carried little proletarian sentiment. When The Disinherited was finally published, according to one source, it sold only 2,700 copies.* Whether the low sales were due to a lack of literary merit or only a mild interest on the part of the publishers or the reading public is a matter for speculation. At any rate, by the time the decade ended, Conroy had lost interest in the proletarian theme.*

By comparison, Dos Passos' trilogy achieved far greater success. The first edition of 1919 sold over ten thousand copies, and the trilogy has gone through several reprints since 1938. The 42nd Parallel, most directly relevant to this discussion, sold over seven thousand copies of the first edition. It should be noted, in this connection, that Dos Passos was a far better known author than Conroy, having established himself with his earlier novel, Manhattan Transfer, in the mid-1920's.

Conroy's association with radical politics covered about ten years,

from the mid-1920's to around 1938. The peak of his activity occurred at the time of the American Writers Congress in which he was an active participant. Little is known of Conroy's personal life during this time period. It is, therefore, difficult to assess the impact of such events as the Moscow trials, the Spanish Civil War, or the Russo-German non-aggression pact of 1939. His public life is suggestive in terms of the shifts in his political attitudes. Contact with Mencken, a highly influential and a strong willed individual, must of had some impact on Conroy. His participation in the American Writers Congress, along with numerous associations with right-of-center publications, suggests sporadic commitment to radical politics at best. There is no evidence, so far as I know, that he was ever a member of any Marxist organization. He was, in this regard, much like Farrell, an independent non-affiliated left wing socialist. While there is some evidence, as touched on earlier in this discussion, that he and Richard Wright were acquaintances, there is little to suggest that they were close friends. The point here is that close personal relationships often have a significant impact on political behavior especially when coupled with traumatic events. The Disinherited represented an important contribution to proletarian fiction.

D. Grace Lumpkin

Grace Lumpkin was born in Milledgeville, Georgia and spent most of her life in the South. Her professional career included being an educator in the public schools in South Carolina as well as being a successful novelist. Her contribution to proletarian fiction includes two novels, A Sign For Cain (1935), and To Make My Bread (1932). This earlier work

won the Maxim Gorky award, and was later produced as a play under the title "Let Freedom Ring" in 1935, running for more than one hundred performances. She also contributed short stories to New Masses. In the Afterword to Lumpkin's novel, The Wedding, originally published in 1939 and reissued in 1976, Lillian Barnard Gilkes discussed Lumpkin's brief involvement with radical politics:

Like many writers here and abroad during the Depression years, Miss Lumpkin came momentarily under Communist influence. But it is questionable whether she ever really accepted Communist ideology, the whole kit and kaboodle, at the hands of the truly dreadful bunch of bigots and rigid dogmatists she fell in with; her outward submission to party discipline seems to have resulted in an emotional block which backfired, all the more intensely by reason of her earlier docility. According to Whittaker Chambers, whose friend she was, she testified at a hearing that she had never joined the party, though had written for it under pressure, and broke with Communism in 1941.⁹⁸

Lumpkin's southern background is somewhat similar to that of Mary Craig Sinclair, wife of Upton Sinclair.* Miss Lumpkin came from an upper middle class environment, actually of Virginian stock according to biographical sources.* Gilkes makes the point that Lumpkin returned to her religious heritage in the late 1930's. Thus, A Sign For Cain represents one brief phase of her life, although the title of the work is suggestive of her religious background.

In this particular work, Lumpkin set down a race relations theme within the context of class struggle. These two interrelated topics are linked together through two principal characters, Denis, a black, and Bill Duncan, a white editor of a local newspaper which takes the side of the small farmers, many of whom are black. The locale is a small southern town during the 1920's. "Gaulttown" is the black section named after

Colonel Gault. The status quo is represented in these principal characters: Colonel Gault, Reverend Shadrack Morton (a black minister who comes across in the story as an Uncle Tom), Jim Gault, the Colonel's youngest son, and Caroline Gault, daughter of the Colonel, who has been away up North. Before the story reaches its climax she is exposed by events as a "do gooder" with shallow convictions.

Among the more important elements in the story are three events, and their order of occurrence is significant because they give insights into the interplay between environmental influences and personality traits. The first centers around a ceremony of sorts, which takes place at the Gault plantation. The principals in this scene are Colonel Gault and Nancy, Denis's mother. Gault summons Nancy to the main house. Nancy lives in a cabin on the plantation much as her parents had before her. Essentially, the main purpose of the ceremony is to reaffirm a tradition or a way of life, as Colonel Gault's remarks clearly suggest:

When my father was twelve years old . . . his father sent word for all the slaves to assemble on the lawn in front of this house. It was Sunday morning. All the slaves were there dressed in their best, in the clothes which had been woven in the spinning house. My grandfather and his son, my father, stood on the front steps and my grandfather spoke to the slaves and said "Here is your young master". The slaves crowded up, bowing and scraping, congratulating my grandfather on such a fine son. Some of them had helped to raise my father. One of them, especially, had cared for him as he grew older, had taught him to ride and hunt. The name of that slave was Denis.

Denis, Sr., Nancy's father, had been a slave on the Gault plantation.

The Colonel went on to describe him in these terms:

Denis was only a few years older than my father. He could do anything well . . . He was the finest

slave on the place, six feet, eight inches tall and had muscles of steel. His voice could be heard for three miles on a still day. Most other plantations used horns with which to wake their slaves. But here a horn was not necessary. We had Denis. Each morning at daybreak he stood out there beyond the carriage house and called "Oh, yes. Time to get up." My father has told me many times how he would wake from a deep sleep in his bed upstairs hearing that voice. Then he would turn over and rest again knowing everything was well because Denis was there.⁹⁹

Nancy reacts automatically to the Colonel's remarks:

Yes, sir, please God. That's the truth, Nancy cried out. She said the words without at all being conscious that they had come from her mouth. Even when the others heard them and looked at her, startled, smiling, she continued to gaze at the Colonel as if she could never hear enough of what he was saying.¹⁰⁰

There is an element of nostalgia in Lumpkin's psychological profile, inasmuch as she comes from a background similar to that of the Gaults; and, as later events in her life revealed, she did not completely break away from this side of her heritage. While there is no evidence that this novel is in anyway autobiographical, certainly Lumpkin's heritage springs out of the Gault mold and she was unable or unwilling to break from it.

In an exchange that takes place earlier on the same day between Nancy and Ed Clarke, another black character in the story, the reader hears about another side to Denis, Sr., "faithful" slave. There is an obvious coolness between Ed and Nancy as he reminds her that her father was not a docile slave. On one occasion Denis, Sr. was ordered by an overseer to whip another slave. Denis refused and took to the swamps. Its almost as if Nancy resents being reminded of this side of her father's character, since this was definitely an act of rebellion, an

act seen as highly sinful in some phases of religious tradition. Her reaction to Ed is a marked contrast to her adulation of the Colonel.

At the end of the ceremony the Colonel gives Nancy an old family Bible as a reward for years of faithful service. She is also allowed to stay on in the cabin.

The second important event is the return of Denis, Jr. who has been away up North for several years working at various odd jobs. The contrast in attitudes between Denis and his mother is immediately apparent. True, Denis does return to work for the Gault family, but appearances are deceiving in this case. His feeling toward Colonel Gault is at first one of concealed hostility; later, it becomes overt. To the extent that one can inherit personality traits, it appears that Denis, Jr. takes after his father. There is no indication in the story why Denis left home in the first place. One gets the impression, however, that it was to find himself, which he does. His relationship with Bill Duncan is also an important part of the story. Despite the fact that Bill is a white southerner, born and reared in an upper middle class environment, he too has undergone changes in his attitudes as a result of leaving home for a period of time, attending college and returning home. As the story begins to take shape Duncan's socialist leanings become apparent. Bill's newspaper, the "Jefferson Record," openly advocates an alliance between poor whites and blacks as being in their own mutual interests. Denis, Jr. has come home with the intent of working to help organize whites and blacks, hence the linking of the two themes of race relations and class struggle.

The third event which ties the story together is the return of

Caroline Gault. She has become a successful writer and returns home primarily because of the Colonel's terminal illness. Caroline fancies herself as an "unreconstructed rebel against every form of rule, everything that limits my freedom against the domination of man," she says. Her use of the term "unreconstructed rebel" has a particular denotation in Southern politics, one which she seems to be totally insensitive toward. Its origins are conservative, if not reactionary, in Southern history.

Passing herself off as a feminist, she proves to be blind to the corrosive effects of whites attempting to dominate blacks. The following exchange between her and Bill clearly reveals the shallowness of Caroline's political philosophy:

I tell you again I am different. What have I to do with class struggle? The class I belong to is fixed, a class of cultured people all over the world. I am above struggle.¹⁰¹

In terms of the symbolic contrasts, the homecoming of Denis and Caroline is an important part of the overall story. On the surface, both are returning home to parents who are ill. In Nancy's case, she may bounce back. However, in Colonel Gault's situation, death is imminent. As the story unfolds, the symbolism enters because Caroline and Denis represent opposing traditions, one dying and one experiencing birth pangs. Caroline is a "do gooder" in the sense that she sees herself as a friend of the "colored people." In a display of paternalism she tells Selah, a young black woman, that her fiance is not good enough for her. Selah's hostility to this unsolicited advice is barely concealed by two factors. One is the constraints placed on unfettered communications between

blacks and whites in Southern society at this time. This charade takes place North as well as South in the 1920's, the difference being one of degree. The second factor relates to the uncertainty that exists in the relationship between Selah and her fiance.

The class struggle is also introduced when a laundry company decides to put machines in Gaulttown. The effect, as it turns out, is to drive a lot of the town's black population out of work. The machines are owned and operated by an outside concern whose only purpose is to expand its business regardless of the impact on the community. "Progress" in this situation takes on a peculiar form. Where the introduction of machines would normally be perceived as a means of abolishing drudgery, in this case they bring only misery.

The operators of the laundry machines have no interest in providing better services to Gaulttown similar to those offered to the rest of the city. They see it only as a fruitful market for exploitation. Ed Clarke, Bill Duncan, and Denis offer to help the local residents fight the intrusion.

During the course of this struggle two black men are lynched. The two men were brothers. They had managed to accumulate some savings and from this were able to open a garage and a filling station. One night they were attacked by a mob, their business burned down, and they were murdered. There were no arrests. Bill used his newspaper to draw nationwide attention to this series of events.

At the end of the story Denis is murdered. The circumstances leading up to his murder revolve around a particular incident which is not directly connected with his political activity. Jim Gault, who comes

across in the story as a worthless individual, waylays his aunt and robs her. In the process, he beats her to death with a rock. He needs the money to pay off gambling debts. Denis and another black man are arrested for the murder because they happen to be out on the night the crime is committed, are in the area where it takes place, and have no alibis. They are interrogated. At first the questioning has nothing to do with the murder, but rather with their involvement in the protest movement. The sheriff wanted to know the names of the other leaders in the movement. Denis refuses to tell. The questioning then switches to the murder itself. Both men are beaten severely by Sheriff Harrison and his deputies. Later, after numerous beatings, Denis' friend, whose name is Ficients, is forced to sign a confession implicating himself and Denis in Evelyn Gardner's murder. Jim admits to Caroline that he killed his aunt, but she fails to speak out because of family loyalty. Bill and another white man named Lee Foster attempt to bring in outside help to insure a fair trial.

Bill also uses his newspaper to publicize the case. The sheriff's men intimidate potential witnesses who might give favorable testimony for Denis and his friend. In the end, however, a trial is never held. One night, while the sheriff is conveniently away, Jim Gault enters the jail and shoots Denis and his friend. Bill Duncan, Lee Foster, and the residents of Gaulttown organize a public funeral for the two victims of Southern style justice. The funeral procession moved from the black section through the main part of the city to the black cemetery where they were buried. As the story ends the protest movement to stop the laundry from installing machines in Gaulttown had won some concessions

from the company.

Gilke's observations, mentioned earlier, suggests two factors in Lumpkin's career which seem important to note. One is that close interpersonal relationships can have an important impact on political behavior. The nature of the impact will vary with the individual. It will also be subject to the stresses originating from the society at large. These two factors are the principal focus of the political novelist. The author's background plays a complex role in influencing his/her political attitude over time. By background I am referring to the writer's family and local environment where he/she grew up. Background can also refer to those close personal ties developed by the writer over the years. What is important here is how they were developed and the content of the relationships, that is, are these relationships solely professional, personal and professional, and to what extent are the political beliefs of the writer affected by the association? I do not, as indicated earlier, suggest that a novelist's background is necessarily omnipotent, but it is an important factor to keep in mind when looking at a novel, especially one in which there is some political content.

E. Josephine Herbst

Herbst's trilogy, Pity Is Not Enough (1933), The Executioner Waits (1934), and Rope of Gold (1939), consists of three historical novels tied together by a central theme, which in part attacks middle class morality, and in a more fundamental sense, the capitalist system. The story begins in 1868 and ends in the 1930's. In the last segment, the class struggle theme is much more explicit. Its presence in the earlier

segments are more implicit but a major part of the plot nevertheless.

Walter Rideout discusses Herbst's political development and the influence it had on her writing career:

The author, Josephine Herbst, was born at Sioux City, Iowa, in 1897, her parents having come west from Pennsylvania in the late 1880's . . . After attending four different colleges she graduated from the University of California in 1919 - she held various writing jobs in New York, lived for three years in Europe, published her first story in The Smart Set, and, in 1925, married an expatriate named Jack Hermann. From that time on, she lived in the United States except for travel abroad as a correspondent. During the Depression, she visited the drought areas and was in Cuba at the time of the general strike in 1935, events which she later made use of in the last volume of her trilogy.¹⁰²

According to Rideout's account, Herbst was influenced to a great extent by the expatriates she met while traveling in Europe. This came through in her first two novels, Nothing Is Sacred (1923), and Money For Love (1929). Rideout's account continued:

When she subsequently turned to the tracing of her family's history, therefore, she was at first neatly adjusted to simply a saga of decline; but with the events of the depression she had been drawn to Marxism, and her attitude underwent a subtle reorientation. If the decay of a family were seen as a tiny part in a dialectical process of world history, a story of disintegration could affirm as well as deny; for indications of capitalism's decline might be matched by indications of a future collective society in the same way that her new interest in Marxism contrasted with the attitudes of the other members of her family. In a sense, her own mental development and the development of values in her trilogy show a one to one relationship.¹⁰³

In many ways the Trexler family, the principals in the story, are much like her own family. She talks about a phase of her development in this way:

I broke off work in February, 1937 to go to Flint at the time of the sitdown strike at General Motors and when I came back I had gone too far to stop. I left for Spain. In Spain I was mostly in Madrid and in little towns along the central front. The peasants were sowing crops and they were not at base much different from the farmers in Iowa or from the men who planted coffee and bananas in Realongo.*

As a writer Miss Herbst had been concerned with the breakdown of capitalist society and with what form the new collectivist society might take once established. She was interested in American history as well as in the economic struggles here and elsewhere. These kinds of concerns are not, of course, the sole property of proletarian writers but they are major ingredients in proletarian fiction.

Part One of the trilogy traces the lives of the Trexler family from 1868 to 1896. The three chief characters are linked together through three important socio-political currents of this time period. The older son, Joe, goes down to Georgia during the Reconstruction period and involves himself in the political manipulations of the Western & Atlanta Railroad. He becomes a scapegoat when the company is caught in an act of fraud. Joe flees to the West where he eventually goes insane after participating in the Black Hills gold rush. Anne Trexler marries Amos Wendell and goes with him to the farmlands of Iowa and to poverty, while David, the astute and self centered youngest son, begins his climb toward a robber baronetcy by profiteering in government flour. In order to add some depth to this family chronicle, Herbst establishes a double chronology by inserting from time to time brief selections showing the four daughters of Anne and Amos Wendell growing up, and, in the last inserted segment, defending and actively supporting the unions in the Seattle general strike. This covers the period up to 1919, the beginning of

Part Two of the trilogy.

Family heredity, then, had very little to do with what happened to each member of the Trexler clan. The overriding set of influences, it would seem, was a combination of social environmental factors as well as individual personality traits.

Where Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind paints a totally black picture of the Reconstruction era, Herbst's trilogy, like Yerby's novels and DuBois' trilogy, The Ordeal of Mansart, Mansart Builds A School, and, Worlds of Color, depicts a more balanced view. A passage in Part One of Herbst's novel illustrates her approach. The passage centers on an exchange between two relatively minor characters, Tom Ferris and Blake Fawcett, clerks at the Western & Atlanta Railroad office. In this dialogue Ferris does most of the talking about Governor Bullock:

I don't mince words. I'm an ordinary man, Blake, but I can see the flaw and still admire the diamond. I'm no saint. I let my left hand know what my right hand's doing. You fellows are too high and mighty. You forget you haven't got a bunch of niggers to boss anymore. I don't like this boss of Bullock's either, he's a New York man and ought to know better, why you'd think the fellow never got a wink of sleep for worrying about the poor black devils and their sorrows and how bad they'll feel if they ain't made free and equal with the vote. Now you and I, Blake, know that Bullock don't give a little finger for the black man, but he wants his vote and he's cute enough to see if he can get business going with Yankee money he'll keep his power.¹⁰⁴

Recognizing the diverse make up of the various Reconstruction governments during this period, and the shifting political alliances nationwide, is to be aware of the "flaw in the diamond." DuBois' Black Flame Trilogy does a better job in showing both the negative and positive features of the Reconstruction era as well as its aftermath. Herbst

attempts, with more limited success, to show this dialectical process.

The second part of the trilogy, The Executioner Waits, takes the Trexler offspring from 1902 to 1929. In this segment the major historical events are the rise and fall of the I.W.W. (the Industrial Workers of the World), World War One, and the era described as "getting back to normalcy." The action centers mainly around David Trexler and his two nieces, Rosamund and Victoria Wendell. For David, World War One was a blessing; while he made money before the day the European nations went to war, after that date, his money bred money. As far as an overriding ambition and the tendency toward ruthlessness is concerned, David was much like Caldwell's Ernest Barbour or Dreiser's Frank Cowperwood.*

Rope of Gold, the final segment in the trilogy, which covers the thirties up to the sitdown strikes of 1937, describes the later life of Victoria and introduces a new character, Jonathan, her husband. Jonathan, now a communist, tries to organize the farmers in the section of Pennsylvania where the couple lives. After their baby dies, Victoria has an affair with a German refugee communist, and she and her husband begin to drift apart. She travels through the drought areas of the Midwest writing articles on the agrarian unrest, goes to Cuba to cover the general strike, and finally splits with Jonathan over personal rather than political grounds. The other central character in this segment is Steve Carson, a farm boy from South Dakota, who takes a job in Detroit. Finally realizing that he must stand by his fellow auto workers, he joins the sitdown strike; and the trilogy ends with the class lines drawn behind barricades, strikers inside and national guard troops outside.

F. Robert Cantwell

The Land of Plenty is in many respects semi-autobiographical as were many of the novels published during the thirties. Cantwell was born on January 31, 1908 in Little Falls, Washington, a small lumbering community similar to that described in his novel.

In his early years, Cantwell worked as a common laborer in factories, restaurants, and in lumber mills. He also worked as a printer and an advertising salesman. His writing career began with the publication, in 1930, of his first story in the American Caravan, an anthology of new writers. This was followed by his first novel Laugh and Lie (1931). He also contributed articles to many different kinds of literary journals including New Masses.

Cantwell's writing career and his political development parallels Conroy's in many respects, and in some ways their course might have been predictable even at that time. The radical tradition of Anarcho-Syndicalism permeates three of the six novels under discussion: Dos Passos' USA, Conroy's The Disinherited, and Cantwell's Land of Plenty (1934). As a political philosophy, it has more in common with particular strains of conservatism than it has with Marxism. To the extent that these writers were unable or refused to break out of this mold, their future political orientation could be predicted with some degree of certainty. Lumpkin, on the other hand, represents a different case study, since A Sign For Cain did come close to embracing the Marxist framework. Her family background and personal friendships seem to have been the dominant factors in her political orientation as it later developed.

Cantwell's novel focuses on a spontaneous workers protest at a wood

veneer plant in Washington state. Rideout discusses the strains of Anarcho-Syndicalism present in the novel:

The overtones of I.W.W.ism in the book come to some extent out of the author's experiences . . . and his childhood was spent in towns that saw free-speech fights and Syndicalist-led struggles for industrial democracy. The Land of Plenty ably conveys that sense of dignity. The title is, of course, ironic, for the land Cantwell describes exemplifies that peculiarly unnerving capitalist contradiction, deprivation in the midst of potential wealth.¹⁰⁵

The book is organized into two parts: Part One is headed "Power and Light," followed by "The Education of A Worker." As the story opens, there is a power failure and the plant is left in complete darkness. Most of the first half of the novel unfolds at the plant during the blackout. Carl Belcher, the company's efficiency expert, unable to find his way about the mill in the dark, flounders helplessly, but the workers automatically shut off their switches so that the machines will not be injured when the current returns. Because of a long acquaintance with their place of work, they move about easily among the hazards. There is no suggestion in the story that the power failure was deliberately caused. In fact, there is evidence that the failure was caused by the company's abuse of the machines, that is, forcing the workers to run the machines beyond their and the men's endurance.

The reader soon understands that Cantwell is utilizing this failure of power and light not only to show how capable the workers are at handling the plant's operations without management (a worker eventually finds the source of the shortage), but also to suggest the failure of capitalism.

The cause, for what amounts to a spontaneous protest triggered in

part by the power failure, centers around issues such as long hours, the speed up, pay cuts, and generally poor working conditions, in short a whole series of grievances. There had been talk that the AF of L was considering organizing the mills. Some of the men viewed this union as totally corrupt. An informal, almost ad hoc, strike committee was formed consisting of Hagen, Winters, Soreson, and a man by the name of Vin Garl. Winters is half American Indian, a fact which plays little role in the story.

Anarcho-Syndicalists paid little attention to the nationality question as a part of the overall class struggle. For them, it did not, and even today does not, exist as a question closely interwoven with the class struggle. This is one of the principal differences between Marxists and Anarchists.

Few of the men except Vin Garl, an ex-Wobbly, have had experience in organizing a strike, yet when they go back to work the next day (they were sent home the night of the power failure) and find that twenty men from the night shift have been arbitrarily fired, both day and night shifts spontaneously walk out. Johnny, Hagen's son, feels the emotional pull of this act of defiance. As the strike continues, Johnny receives his education in trade union action. Earlier in the story the reader learns that Johnny went to work at the mill in order to earn money to attend college. His plans are thwarted by the successive pay cuts at the plant as well as his family's need for all the income they can get.

Johnny learns what being on a picketline is like; he learns about the misrepresentations made in the newspaper about the issues surrounding the strike; he also feels first hand the hardness of the police against

the strikers as well as the enmity of the town's people. All this leads Johnny toward developing a class consciousness, though not exactly in the Marxist mold. As the novel ends, it looks as though the strike might spread to other plants, and the spontaneity present earlier gives way to organization and planning.

There are other proletarian novels that I could have discussed. One in particular is Mike Gold's autobiography Jews Without Money (1930). Much of Gold's writing consisted of short stories and poetry with the exception of his newspaper column which appeared regularly in the Daily Worker. He was, however, known as a Marxist literary critic. He maintained ties with the Party throughout his professional career, in addition to writing for New Masses, and he took part in the American Writers Congress. Gold also participated as a founding member of the League of Revolutionary Writers.

Jews Without Money is an example of proletarian literature at its best, at least for that period. There are two other novels published outside the time period under review, but nevertheless, focusing on the 1920's and 30's, Philip Bonosky's Brother Bill McKie (1953), and John Killen's Youngblood (1954). Bonosky's work represents a communist's view of the 1930's told through the eyes of a communist. Killen's novel depicts a non-party, black author's approach to proletarian fiction. The point here is that consideration of an era like the 1930's does not end abruptly, if for no other reason than that the questions raised often need new answers for different situations, or many of the old debates are still unresolved. There is little doubt in my mind that the 1940's represents a period of transition to the fifties and sixties not only

chronologically but also in terms of new historical forces. A classic example of a new historical force was the rise of the African independence movements of the fifties and sixties; "new" in the sense of raising old as well as modern, up-to-date issues about the problems of self government in a rapidly shrinking world. Another example of a new historical force, related to the anti-colonial movements in the context of raising similar but not necessarily identical issues, is the civil rights movement in the United States during the period 1955 to the end of the 1960's. It was "new" in the sense that it exposed more dramatically than past reform movements some of the contradictions within our society. One of the principal contradictions is that our pluralistic society is finding it increasingly difficult to meet the conflicting demands of opposing interest groups.

The question quite naturally arises, why did so many promising writers eventually turn away from their early radical convictions? The reasons are varied and complex. In a few instances, ambition, pure and simple, was one motivating factor. The so-called era of "disillusionment" was often more rationalization than anything else. Toward the end of the 1930's, and especially during the war years, some authors' fame and fortune increased in direct proportion to their disillusionment. Others were simply overcome by events. Some had romantic notions about revolutionary process and what it entailed. They were good writers but mediocre historians.

Hicks raised an issue that many "protest" novelists as well as some proletarian writers were not able to answer. Or it may be that in certain instances they refused to examine the implications of the questions

raised in their works for one reason or another. In the end, Hicks found a way to avoid the kinds of questions he himself posed some two decades before his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a friendly witness.*

A series of questions were posed to the author of the middle generation, and, whether he was conscious of the question or not, his books were his answers. Should he or should he not use his new freedom in a more comprehensive portrayal of American life than had previously been possible? Should he allow his material well-being and that of his class to isolate him from the masses of American people, or should he use his newfound resources for a more cogent examination of the contemporary scene? Should he yield to his pessimism and seek some haven from his doubts, or should he resolutely probe the sources of discontent?¹⁰⁶

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER THREE

*See the following biographical sources on Dos Passos - John Brantley's The Fiction of John Dos Passos, (1968), and John Wrenn's John Dos Passos, (1961), and Allen Belkind's Dos Passos, The Critics and The Writer's Intent, (1971).

⁷⁸John Dos Passos, First Encounter, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1945), pp. 7-8.

⁷⁹John Brantley, The Fiction of John Dos Passos, (Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1968), p. 14.

⁸⁰Hicks, "Revolution and The Novel", p. 29.

⁸¹John Wrenn, John Dos Passos, (New York: Twayne Pub., Inc., 1961), p. 154.

⁸²David Sanders, "The Anarchism of John Dos Passos", in Allen Belkind's Dos Passos, The Critics and The Writer's Intent, p. 123.

⁸³John Dos Passos, The 42nd Parallel, (New York: New American Library - A Signet Classic, paperback ed., 1969), pp. 151-152.

*For biographical background on John Steinbeck, see Steinbeck's Literary Dimensions: A Guide to Comparative Studies, (1973), ed. Tetsuaro Hayashi, also A Casebook On The Grapes of Wrath, ed. Agnes McNeil, (1968).

**Ibid., Peter Lisca, "Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway", p. 48.

⁸⁴Peter Lisca, "Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway: Suggestions For A Comparative Study", in Steinbeck's Literary Dimensions, p. 46.

⁸⁵John Steinbeck, In Dubious Battle, (New York: Modern Library, Random House, 1936), Ch. I.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 9.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 24.

⁸⁸Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 253.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 143.

⁹¹Ibid., p. 144.

*See the discussion in the 1963 edition of The Disinherited, written by Daniel Aaron.

*There's a recent anthology edited by Conroy and Curt Johnson, Writers in Revolt, (1973), which dwells on some of the problems faced by radical writers in the thirties in terms of the conflict on the left, plus problems in getting their works published in general. It does not, however, explain his association with a journal like American Mercury. It is not unreasonable to assume that monetary advantages to be gained from a journal like American Mercury, and not present at radical periodicals, was an important factor.

⁹³Jack Conroy, The Disinherited, (New York: Hill & Wang, Inc., 1933), Part One, "The Monkey's Nest."

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 288.

⁹⁶Jack Conroy, "The Worker As Writer," in Hart, American Writers Congress, p. 83.

⁹⁷Conroy, The Disinherited, Part One, p. 286.

*See Contemporary Authors, Vols. 5 & 8, p. 244.

*For a revealing discussion on some of the problems of publishing radically oriented novels, read the introduction to Upton Sinclair's The Coal War, Part Three, written by John Graham, (published by E. Floyd Thompson, Centennial Fund, 1976).

⁹⁸Grace Lumpkin, The Wedding, (Southern Illinois Press, 1976), p. 318. (Chambers was a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early fifties.)

*See the autobiographical work, Southern Belle, (New York: Crown Pub., 1957), by Mary Craig Sinclair.

*Contemporary Authors: A Critical Survey of 212 Bio-Bibliographies, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949), ed. Fred B. Millet, pp. 458-59.

⁹⁹Grace Lumpkin, A Sign For Cain, (New York: Lee Furman, 1935), Part One, pp. 24-25.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰¹Ibid., Grace Lumpkin, A Sign For Cain, p. 178.

¹⁰²Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel In The United States: 1900 to 1954, (Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 190-91.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 191.

*Cited in Contemporary Authors, ed. Fred Millett, pp. 388-390.

¹⁰⁴Josephine Herbst, Pity Is Not Enough, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933), pp. 30-31.

*See Taylor Caldwell's Dynasty of Death, (1938), and Theodore Dreiser's The Financier, (1912).

¹⁰⁵Rideout, The Radical Novel In The United States, p. 174.

*See his later essay based on testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Where We Came Out, (1954), Ch. 3, p. 31.

¹⁰⁶Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935), p. 215.

CHAPTER FOUR

SOME COMMENTS ON LITERARY HISTORY:
A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

A. The Genteel Tradition

In the closing period of the last century, that is, during the 1880's and 90's, two literary traditions opposed each other. They also reflected broad political currents. The genteel tradition mirrored a passing era, while naturalism in literature provided the reader a view of the growing ideological conflict in our society. Two proponents of the genteel tradition in literature were Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Maurice Thompson, both connected with Atlantic Magazine during the 1880's. In literature, given the force of this tradition, the tendency was to stress the beautiful, the genteel life. However, what was projected as "beautiful" depended for the most part on Western European traditions of the 16th and 17th centuries. The class origin of genteelism was pre-capitalist coming from feudal society.

By the time of the industrial revolution many of the traditions of feudal society were being swept away by social forces. Foner described the political undercurrents of the "genteel" tradition when he observed

Realism was condemned as indecent; literature must be suited to maiden ears and eyes and there must be an end to the disposition which may well be called alarming, to trifle with the marriage relation. It was not art but contented itself with photographing the transitory surface of life.¹⁰⁷

Rapid change within the institution of marriage, especially during peri

of turmoil usually reflects changes throughout the entire social structure of society, or at least, the beginnings of fundamental change.

As Foner went on to point out in his discussion, trifling with the marriage relationship may have far reaching implications for society as a whole, and the impact may be positive or negative depending on which social currents, that is, political movements are dominant. He might have added the concept of what constitutes "trifling" is itself subject to definition by conflicting political forces. Foner was analyzing what was in effect the conservative position as expressed through the literature of the period. Men like Aldrich and Thompson were quite right, given their class position, to defend the marriage institution as it then existed. However, their interpretations clashed with the demands of the industrial revolution. The central issue, given the Marxist perspective, is whose interests are being served by the existing institutional structures? Which class is the chief beneficiary? It is in this area of analysis that Marxist and conservatives offer opposing interpretations.

The political bias of the genteel tradition was expressed by Thompson who said . . . "all this apostrophizing of poverty is not the spirit of Christ, it is the spirit of communism, socialism, and anarchy."¹⁰⁸ Literature, in short, became a battle ground for the expression of political ideas which encourage or discourage certain kinds of political behavior or behavior in general. In talking about the period at the end of the last century, Foner added:

Yet throughout this turbulent period there was a curious dichotomy between literature and life. Anyone dependent upon American letters to guide

him would have obtained the most confused and inaccurate conception of the life led by more than sixty millions of Americans and of the major problems confronting them. He would find that the American people were concerned solely with romantic love sometimes enacted in remote times by men and women in costumes who addressed each other as "thee" and "thou" or in imagined principalities of Europe.¹⁰⁹

Foner was referring to the then dominant trend in American literature. But, as he points out, other writers of the same period, Rebecca Harding Davis' "Life in the Iron Mills," published in Atlantic in 1861, or Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' The Silent Partner, challenged that one-sided, often distorted, picture of American life. What is generally projected as the "apolitical" approach to literature, the cornerstone of the genteel tradition, can be more appropriately described as political in terms of what it emphasized or tended to ignore in thematic development. There is no doubt that the underlying values stressed through this kind of literature, especially fiction works, had a definite ideological bent.

Gaining some perspectives on our earlier cultural history can offer further insight into the literature of the 1930's, the principal concern of this dissertation. Parrington's discussion in his third volume is particularly relevant inasmuch as his analysis deals with the period between 1860 and 1920, the era when the clash between genteelism and naturalism in literature reached its height.¹¹⁰ He laid down a framework in which he described the conquest of America by the middle class and its custodianship of bourgeois democracy. The philosophy of the middle class, was, in many ways, founded on the Puritan ethic, and this combined with the industrial revolution often clashed with the genteelism of the previous century. Another trend making itself felt at the

time was the advance of agrarian democracy, which found expression in much of the literature, especially protest fiction, of the mid-19th century. Politically, it found an outlet in the populism of the last two decades of the century. Early proletarian themes appeared in our literature at the turn of the century. The rise of the American labor movement during the last third of the 19th century provided material for the early proletarian and protest fiction of that era. Genteelism, in short, gave way to the onslaught of the industrial revolution with its political, economic, and social consequences.

B. Naturalism

The naturalist tradition in the United States was represented by such writers as Frank Norris, Jack London, and Theodore Dreiser. Norris' writing career was short lived, since he died in 1902 at the age of 32. London and Dreiser each came into his own after 1900, London, with Call of The Wild (1908), and Dreiser with Sister Carrie (1900). London's most controversial works in terms of political content were: The Iron Heel (1908), A Daughter of The Snows (1902), and Martin Eden (1909), regarded by many critics as an autobiography. The Octopus (1901), is Frank Norris' most controversial piece, although McTeague (1899), and Vandover and The Brute (1914), have come under discussion for the political philosophical issues raised. The later work is considered by some critics to be autobiographical.*

Actually, the main ideological struggle in literature occurred within the naturalist camp, since it contained within it three counter currents: the conservative-reactionary ideology of thinkers like Herbert

Spencer and William Graham Sumner, the liberal reform trend articulated by its then chief proponent Lester Frank Ward, and finally, the Marxist school. Parrington describes naturalism as a child of nineteenth century thought encompassed in Social Darwinism. In briefly examining some general characteristics of naturalism in literature, he mentioned four common tendencies.

First is objectivity, seeking the truth in the spirit of the scientist. Second is frankness, rejecting of Victorian reticence. The total man and woman must be studied along with the deeper instincts and the endless impulses. The three strongest instincts are fear, hunger, and sex. In the life of the ordinary person, the third instinct is seen as the most critical in the naturalist frame of reference. The third tendency is a detached attitude toward the material being presented. The naturalist is not a judge; he holds no brief for any ethical standard since "morality" is an ever shifting concept. He records what happens, presumably without editorial comment. Finally, there is the philosophy of determinism. Parrington tends to lump determinism into one analytical framework, and I will comment on this further on in this chapter.* These are the general principles to which all in the naturalist camp subscribe. However, each of the three general trends tends to define "objectivity" from very different ideological perspectives.

The influence of the naturalist approach, in terms of the ideological conflict that exists within, can be seen from an examination of four historical novels published later in this century. I have already referred to three of the four in earlier chapters. They are: Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind (1936); Frank Yerby's trilogy, The Foxes of

Harrow (1946), The Vixens (1947), and Pride's Castle (1949); W. E. B. DuBois' Black Flame Trilogy, The Ordeal of Mansart (1957), Mansart Builds A School (1961), and Worlds of Color (1961). The fourth novel, not previously mentioned, is Stark Young's So Red The Rose (1935).

Mitchell's and Young's work depict the struggle between the dying genteel tradition and the survival of the fittest doctrine, which wins out in the end in their frame of reference.

Yerby's trilogy is middle-of-the-road ideologically speaking, and DuBois moved into the Marxist camp. Marxism rejects the survival of the fittest doctrine on philosophical and political grounds. For purposes of this discussion, I will focus mainly on Mitchell and DuBois for summary analysis. Both novels deal with the period between 1876 and 1880. With Mitchell's work, the story begins in 1861 and ends around 1880. DuBois' story starts in 1876 and concludes in 1936. Here the similarities end. The distinct ideological divergence of the two authors can be shown in the characterizations of the principals, Mitchell's Scarlett O'Hara and DuBois' Manuel Mansart. As far as the authors are concerned, we can dispense with an obvious difference at the outset: Mitchell is white and DuBois is black; O'Hara is white and Mansart is black. Toughness, of a different kind and quality in the case of Mansart, is characteristic of both principals. A review of the backgrounds of Mitchell and DuBois will reveal the same characteristics.

As can be seen from many examples in the story, O'Hara is intellectually shallow and at the same time highly manipulative in her dealings with other people, a quality brought to the fore in the aftermath of war but not totally a product of it. Her marriage to Charles Hamilton, out

of spite and vengefulness rather than affection, shows a completely self-centered personality. Her "love" for Ashley Wilkes stems from their childhood and reflects more of a take-it-for-granted attitude on Scarlett's part rather than any deep affection. She uses every person she comes in contact with, except one, Rhett Butler. In short, Scarlett O'Hara is a totally amoral individual, the product of an immoral society.

The principal locale in Gone With The Wind is Atlanta, Georgia, and Mitchell's roots are in Atlanta where her family goes back to the revolutionary war. In an article written by her shortly after publication of her one and only novel, she described the central theme as "Why do some people survive and others don't?"* Her explicit answer assumes that there is only one response to this question, namely, that some survive because they are more "fit" than others.

Shortly after Gone With The Wind came out, she received a complimentary letter from Thomas Dixon, author of The Clansman (1905), the forerunner of Mitchell's epic work. It was a predecessor not only in time but also in theme. Dixon's work portrayed blacks as savage and Mitchell depicted them as docile. DuBois describes blacks in multi-dimensional terms, some were weak, others strong, and still others as in between. Even Manual Mansart had weaknesses and strengths like most of us. In Mitchell's story the dying genteel tradition is portrayed through the characters Ashley Wilkes and his wife, Melanie. It is the genteelity of unbelievable virtuousness, especially with Melanie. Rhett Butler is the soiled idealist turned cynic until the closing battles of the war when he joins up to fight in a losing cause. What was lost on the battlefield is regained through political chicanery, a case in point was

the Hayes-Tilden compromise of 1877, and outright terror and murder, exemplified in the birth of the Ku Klux Klan, rivaled only by the atrocities committed in Nazi Germany during the 1930's and 40's.

The black Mansarts were descended from Tom Mansart who was lynched in 1876 in Charleston, South Carolina for a crime he did not commit. Actually, there is reason to believe that the real motive behind his murder stems from his involvement as an organizer of poor whites and blacks into a coalition setting up a reconstruction government. Coalitions of this type were, as historians point out, successfully organized from 1868 to the mid-1870's.* His son, Manuel Mansart, the principal character in the trilogy, was born the night of his father's death.

Later he was educated at Atlanta University, a black college in Georgia, which serves as the starting point in Part Two. Part Three focuses on Manuel Mansart's trip around the world during the early summer of 1936. In this particular segment, DuBois links the proletarian and racial struggles together by showing some of their interrelationships through Mansart's travels in Europe as the fascist threat grows and in Asia with the growing threat of Japanese militarism.

William Edward Burghardt DuBois was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, of a black mother and a French father. He was born in the year 1868. His educational career led him to earning a doctorate in American History from Harvard in 1896. The literary career of Professor DuBois included fiction and non-fiction. During the 1920's the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, he published one of his earlier pieces of fiction, Dark Princess (1928). Among his non-fiction works were: The Soul of Black Folks (1903), an attack on the policies of Booker T.

Washington; Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 to 1880 (1935), a critique of the Reconstruction era; and Black Folk Then and Now (1939), an analysis of the civil rights struggles up to that point. He was the first editor of Crisis, official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and one of the founders of the organization in 1909. In the late fall of 1961 Dr. DuBois joined the Communist Party of the United States. He died in Accra, Ghana in 1963 while working on an edition of the Encyclopedia Africana.

It can be said then that Mitchell and DuBois united historical "fact" and fiction together in order to present a point of view. In this important respect they broadened the criteria of a naturalist novel described by Parrington in his discussion. Generally speaking, theirs was an interpretative process. This very process reflects the philosophical cleavages present in the naturalist camp, and glossed over for the most part by Parrington. He also failed to note the differences in the various schools of determinism.

Interpreting "fact" and "reality" or the significance of one set of events over another is the heart of historical analysis, whether it be in fiction or non-fiction writing. Parrington's discussion of determinism fails to distinguish between economic determinism, Marxist determinism, or Calvinism within the Christian framework which seems to suggest that the "evil" in man is unresolvable for the most part. These differences are important in any serious discussion of naturalism in literature. While Ellen Glasgow's novel The Descendants (1897), or London's The Iron Heel (1908), fall into the naturalist school of fiction, it is important to note the ideological bent of the two authors at the

time the respective works came out. London's Daughter of The Snows falls into the Nietzschean framework. Thus, in the space of six years (1902 to 1908) he moved toward the Marxist camp. His essays and short stories published during the period 1908 to 1915 show a definite move toward Marxism, for example, War of The Classes (1905), Revolution, a series of essays and short stories published between 1908 and 1915, and The Human Drift published a year after his death in 1917. He represents a classic example of an author moving between ideological camps within the naturalist school of literature.

I have already mentioned some of the discussions by various authors concerning the role of the writer in society. Ralph Fox, a British Marxist of the 1930's, described the crisis of the novel of the thirties as a "crisis of outlook":

The difficulties facing the serious writer today are profound ones . . . The novelist, therefore, has a special responsibility both to the present and the past of his country. What he inherits from the past is important, because it shows what are the sections of his country's cultural heritage which have meaning today. What he says of the present is important, because he is assumed to be expressing what is most vital in the spirit of his time. It may be objected that the novelist is not concerned with other people's attitudes toward his work. What he inherits, what he expresses, is strictly his own affair. Even if it is his affair alone, he cannot, however, cut himself off from the outside world's reaction to his work. In a world where nationalism has run mad in its most egotistic and destructive forms, the attitude of a serious and important writer toward nationalism is an important one.¹¹¹

In other words, the writer is not just a chronicler of events, he/she is also an interpreter. Fox made these observations in the context of European society during the thirties, and England in particular:

The crisis of outlook is concerned with philosophy, and therefore with form. Since the war the philosophical outlook of most English writers has been deeply influenced by that last of European liberals, Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalysis, as developed by Freud, is the apotheosis of the individual, the extreme of intellectual anarchy.¹¹²

The concept of the "individual before all else" has influenced the American novel as much as its English counterpart. The novels of Dos Passos are classic examples of this characteristic. The "Y" man in Dos Passos' Three Soldiers (1921) left very little for the individual to relate to. Steinbeck's Tom Joad, represented an attempt to bring the individual and the group into a state of relative harmony. The individual before all else is one aspect of the "irrationality" of twentieth century society where interdependence is also a fact of life. Focusing on man's irrationality is a major concern of one stream of fiction within the naturalist camp. It is an important theme in much of the existentialist literature of the last four decades.

Other protest fiction, and especially proletarian literature, reject the "irrational man" theme. In the irrational man theme there is the built in assumption that such behavior is a given not subject to change, or that such behavior originates solely from within the individual. When this proposition appears in fiction, the novel functions as one of the more important reinforcing agents, in that it popularizes this basic assumption about the nature of man. Thus, novels with heavy existentialist overtones tend to dwell on man's irrationality including behavior in the political arena.

In stating what is essentially a materialist proposition, or as he said, "Marxism is a materialist philosophy," Fox observed:

The novelist can't write his story of the individual fate unless he also has this steady vision of the whole. He must understand how his final result arises from the individual conflicts of his characters, he must in turn understand what are the manifold conditions of lives which have made each of those individuals what he or she is.¹¹³

Rideout's study cites a number of novels published during the forties which attempted, with varying degrees of success, to show diverse social forces working to bring about a more rational society. Some were historical works focusing on earlier periods of our history. I note a brief selection here for illustrative purposes:* Howard Fast's The Last Frontier (1940), also his Citizen Tom Paine (1943), Leane Zugsmith's The Summer Soldier (1938), Dalton Trumbo's Johnny Got His Gun (1939), and Philip Bonosky's Brother Bill McKie (1953), mentioned earlier. All of these novels have one ingredient in common: they offer a critique of American society centering on man's potential for rational behavior. Bonosky's novel and DuBois' trilogy can be cited as fairly comprehensive efforts to incorporate the Marxist framework in fiction. During the 1940's at least, Fast embraced this framework. This is particularly true with his two novels published in 1944 and 1946 respectively, Freedom Road and The American. He broke with the Party shortly after the Hungarian uprising in 1956.

Chester Eisinger repeats in many respects some of the points raised in Fox's discussion, although he is not a Marxist and his comments deal primarily with the American scene during the war years:

The cultural life which the writer found everywhere about him in the forties was marked by incoherence and uncertainty. He had to examine the possibilities of literature in a universe of fragmented beliefs where the multiplicity of values or none at all had

long ago replaced a unified world view. The fragmentation of belief did not take place in the forties, but the decade was heir to it, heir to the failures of world views or systems of beliefs by which men could live.¹¹⁴

This sums up the reactions of many writers of this period and in many ways could be extended to include the middle decades between the two wars. Many felt that Western philosophy, including the naturalist and existentialist schools of literature, were found wanting. World War Two had brought to the surface all the weaknesses present in Western society. From a Marxist perspective the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, Herbert Spencer, and twentieth century liberalism have one goal in common and that is simply the maintenance of capitalism. This is not meant to gloss over the differences that exist between these various trends but rather to emphasize this one commonality. Maintaining the "system" is a goal of all societies. Who benefits is, of course, the critical question.

Arnold Kettle, a prominent member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, examines the whole question of culture and social change in an article on "The Progressive Tradition in Bourgeois Culture." This analysis represents an ongoing dialogue within Marxist circles.

As I indicated in my previous chapters, Marxist and communist tradition does not call for the uncritical condemnation of all past tradition in Bourgeois society. His comments were directed at a reappraisal of bourgeois culture noting both its positive and negative impact on history. He advances two propositions for examination:

I want to take as my text two very pregnant sentences: 1) that statement of Lenin's "There is no Chinese wall between the bourgeois-democratic revolution and the socialist revolution," and, 2) a remark of Gorky's in his speech to the First Congress of the All-Union

Association of Soviet Writers: "There is every reason to hope that when Marxist will have written a history of culture, we shall see that the part played by the bourgeois in the creation of culture has been greatly overestimated."¹¹⁵

This is not to suggest, Kettle continued, that writers such as Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Heine, or Balzac have not made singular contributions to human thought. Nor is it intended to imply that other art forms cannot serve as foundations for a new socialist art. Gorky's comment, Kettle seems to be saying, is meant to call for a critical re-examination of bourgeois aesthetics and through it to gain a deeper insight into what Marxist aesthetics should encompass. Kettle added:

What Gorky is calling into question is the view that what gives the great art of the Bourgeois period its long-term value is some specifically bourgeois quality, a specifically bourgeois contribution; the view, for instance, that Milton is a great writer because he is a representative of the bourgeois. I think this question is important, for a number of reasons. It raises, in the first place, some interesting theoretical problems. It raises the question of exactly what we mean when we speak as Marxists of culture or art as a "reflection" of reality. Isn't "reflection" too passive a word to indicate satisfactorily the nature of art?¹¹⁶

Kettle went on to restate the Marxist view of what constitutes a "progressive class" at one point in time. "We speak of a class as being progressive" he suggests, "if it carries through a revolutionary change necessary for the development of human society."

The revolutionary process does not produce a sudden and dramatic change in every aspect of society, Kettle went on to suggest. Certain phases of the process such as capturing control of the political structures can take place over a relatively short period. However, for other facets of the cultural milieu, the process is much more complex. Kettle

concluded:

Perhaps the first consideration which will help us towards a greater clarity on this subject is to recall the nature of the Bourgeois revolution itself. It was not, in the common place sense, a sudden revolution. England was not a feudal country one year and a bourgeoisie one in the following year. If we take certain dates as decisive - 1649, 1668, 1832 - it is to indicate that at these revolutionary points the bourgeois (or sections of that class) became established as the dominant force within British society. But that does not mean that there were no other forces. The feudal landowners, for instance, remained a very important power after their defeat in the Civil War and their ideology remained a power too.¹¹⁷

One of the many-faceted questions implicit in Kettle's comments is what parts of the culture, speaking in general terms insofar as possible, are the most resistant to change, and how do these specific components of the cultural milieu interact with the political processes? Some work has already been done in this area by cultural anthropologists over the years but much remains unanswered. As I read the current Marxist theoretical literature, these are issues which are still subject to debate. Furthermore, there is a greater need for more dialogue between the various behavioral disciplines employing and developing better tools of analysis. In my opinion Marxism provides an adequate framework from which to proceed, since asking the "right" questions is an important first step.

Literary history, then, is one mirror to society in terms of the social, philosophical, and political currents in motion.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER FOUR

107 Philip Foner, Jack London: American Rebel, (New York: Citadel, 1947), pp. 3-129.

108 Ibid., pp. 3-129.

109 Ibid., pp. 3-129.

110 Vernon Louis Parrington, "The Beginning of Critical Realism in America - 1860 to 1920," in Main Currents In American Thought - Vol. 3, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930).

*See the following biographical sources - American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies - Vol. 3, ed., Leonard Unger, pp. 314-335, also Franklin Walker's Frank Norris: A Biography, (1932), and, the foreword to Vandover and The Brute, written by Charles Norris.

*See Book 2, Part 2, Chapter 3 of Vol. 3 in Parrington; Main Currents.

*See the Wilson Library Bulletin, Vols. 11 and 12, (1936), p. 12.

*See the following works dealing with this period: Rayford W. Logan's The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901, (1954), John Hope Franklin's From Slavery To Freedom, (1947), W. E. B. DuBois' Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880, (1935), or, Lerone Bennett's Black Power USA: The Human Side of Reconstruction - 1867-1877, (1967).

111 Ralph Fox, The Novel and The People, (New York: International Pub., 1945), Cha. 1.

112 Ibid., Ch. 1.

113 Ibid.

*See Walter Rideout's The Radical Novel In The United States: 1900 to 1954, cited elsewhere in this dissertation.

114 Chester Eisinger, Fiction of The Forties, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), Ch. 1.

115 Arnold Kettle, "The Progressive Tradition in Bourgeois Culture," in Lee Baxandall ed., Radical Perspectives In The Arts, (Pelican Books, Middlesex, England, 1972), pp. 159-174.

116 Ibid, p. 159.

117 Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

A. Theories of Alienation - An Overview

In examining the concept of alienation, I have drawn primarily from two theoretical sources, the first is Marx, the other is Emile Durkheim's Suicide. Both frameworks see "powerlessness" as one form of alienation. The focus of analysis for Marx and Durkheim was nineteenth century European society. "Suicide," like crime, was for Durkheim no indication of immorality per se. In fact, a number of suicides are to be expected in a given type of society.¹¹⁸ But where the rate increases rapidly, it is symptomatic of the breakdown of the collective conscience, and of a basic flaw in the social fabric. It is one of the products of the industrial revolution because many people were, and are, unable to adjust to a society experiencing rapid change in every sphere of human relationships. Although there are sharp ideological differences between a Marxian and a Durkheimian framework, both tend to focus on the society at large as the principal source of alienation. While Marx's approach is a class analysis of the origins of alienation, Durkheim plays down this factor, seeing it mostly as of secondary explanatory value. The term "suicide," as I interpret Durkheim, also relates to the total or partial subordination of individual identity to group goals, or his rejection of the "group," which could be a form of "psychological" suicide, assuming that man is a social animal.

In other words, a rejection of the "group" might lead to a form of

psychological suicide depending on the individual and the circumstances leading to the rejection. Thus, Durkheim talked about suicide in the physical sense citing actual statistics of suicides and interpreting them within a sociological context. He also looked at the psychological dimension. In this context, he talked about alienation in the sense of "the individual being structured into society, inadequately, in other circumstances, over adequately."¹¹⁹ He referred to these two forms of suicide as either "Egoistic" or "Altruistic" defined in terms of the ideology of the particular society. In one case, there is the total submergence of the individual to group goals or group identity, namely, "altruistic." Where the individual is in conflict with the basic social structure of a given society this could be defined under Durkheim's model as "egoistic" suicide.

It appears that Durkheim's model does not give much emphasis to the way these terms might be defined in different societies with differing ideologies. This would seem to be an important concern in applying these terms across cultures. While nineteenth century Marxist analysis also focused primarily on Europe, the question of ideology was an important concern. Furthermore, Marx did, in later years (around the 1850's and 60's) look beyond Europe to the new world to make some cross cultural analysis. Lenin, and latter day Marxists, have expanded the cross-cultural analysis in terms of looking at the problem of alienation as well as other aspects of capitalist society.

Durkheim described a third type of suicide which directly relates to some of the characters appearing in the novels under discussion.

"When the regulation of the individual is upset so that his horizon

is broadened beyond what he can endure, or contrariwise contracted unduly, conditions for "anomic" suicide come into play.¹²⁰

Melvin Seeman's description of alienation,¹²¹ which consists of the following components: Powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, and social isolation; fits both Durkheim's and Marx's analysis to some extent. Seeman talks about normlessness as a variant of the alienation theme which denotes a situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down. The character Cross Damon in Wright's 1953 novel The Outsider is illustrative of this variant of the alienation theme. Farrell's Studs Lonigan also fits, and so does Dos Passos' Fenian McCreary in The 42nd Parallel to a large extent. With The Outsider, however, all five components of Seeman's model are reflected in this one work. Seeman characterizes meaninglessness, this is an underlying theme in Wright's later works, The Long Dream (1958), and Lawd Today (1963), as the individual being unclear about what he ought to believe, or when his minimal standards for clarity in decision-making are not met. In Part Two of Studs Lonigan, Danny O'Neil confronts Father Shannon concerning his growing doubts about the relevance of the Church's teaching. Father Shannon refuses to talk to O'Neil and the youth is left to seek the answers for himself. The aspect of meaninglessness is a key feature in most of the existentialist novels of recent decades, for example, Mailer's The Naked And The Dead (1948) or his later work An American Dream (1965), Greenlee's The Spook Who Sat By The Door (1969), Baldwin's Another Country (1962), Ellison's Invisible Man (1947), Dos Passos' The Grand Design (1949) and perhaps Koestler's Darkness At Noon (1941), also fits this same category.

The problem of irrationality in human behavior seems to tie in with the theme of alienation in terms of how the individual chooses to deal with the surrounding environment. Actually, "choice" may have very little to do with what appears to be irrational behavior under some circumstances, if the individual is the victim or pawn of larger forces. Lack of individual choice is dealt with in certain of Dos Passos' early works, for example, Three Soldiers (1921), and Manhattan Transfer (1925). To what extent lack of individual choice is a part of the theme of Native Son is a matter of debate.

The main point of contention between Marxist and some non-Marxist observers is not whether irrationality exists, but what are its origins. In one respect, this is a definitional problem with many complex issues. Some non-Marxists, as I indicated in previous discussion, argue that irrational behavior is one of man's innate characteristics. Marxists see the environment in its various component parts as the principal source. One of the problems is in defining "rational" and "irrational" behavior. Marxists take issue with those rationalist thinkers who seem to believe that rationality is a fixed component not subject to historical redefinition. This is not to say that rational behavior can seldom be determined as some existentialists seem to imply. In purely sociological terms, the whole issue of defining "rationality" and "irrationality" is fraught with value judgments, and while this is not necessarily bad, it should be recognized as such.

In a general sense Gaylord Leroy spoke to this problem of defining alienation, and it appears germane to the question of what constitutes rationality because he speaks indirectly to the issue of cause and effect,

that is, alienation may stem from irrational or rational behavior depending on the individual or his social environment:

The difficulty with the concept of alienation is that it is too useful, it explains, in a way, too much. If it means that our human feelings and responses have been in some way estranged from us, alienated from us, then it does seem to apply to many typical maladies of our times. When for example we read of the thirty-eight people who looked on as a young woman was stabbed to death in three separate attacks and none of whom even called the police, the response that comes at once to mind is that these people were somehow alienated from themselves, they were not acting as you expect people to act, the normal human impulses appeared to have been inoperative.¹²²

The problem of describing alienation raises as many questions as it provides answers. A similar apparent enigma exists when attempting to analyze the varied dimensions of "rational" or "irrational" behavior. Fiction, especially political fiction, must be seen as one of a number of societal elements having the potential to influence behavior by reinforcing attitudes. This is not to suggest that specific attitudes necessarily lead to specific kinds of behavior. Particular social conditions, wars, revolutions, social unrest, play an important part in influencing those attitudes which can lead to action. The social protest novel can ignite passions if the writer has the necessary skill and if the socio-political climate is conducive to producing volatile reactions from the reader. The question should be asked, in this context, which human impulses tend to be reinforced by the writer, and equally important, how? In this connection Leroy went on to discuss the role of the proletarian writer in projecting a new image of man:

The most exciting area in which the new perspectives for human nature are being worked out is literature.

The great task of the writer in the socialist countries is to discover and portray a new image of man.¹²³

For the proletarian writer in a capitalist society, the task is to combat as effectively as possible those attitudes which tend to encourage irrational behavior, that is, behavior which pits people against each other, against nature, or the individual against his/herself. Developing a perspective on human nature, what it is and its potential, is the central concern of all serious literature including that fiction which focuses on more or less explicit political themes.

B. Marxist Humanism

Engels stated the Marxist position on determinism in correspondence written in 1890, and already cited elsewhere in this dissertation:

According to the materialist conception of history the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure - political forms of the class struggle, and its consequences, constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., - forms of law and then even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the combatants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious ideas . . . preponderate in determining their form.¹²⁴

In a similar vein Engels alluded to the complex nature of the "productive" and "reproductive" forces. He spoke in terms of "spiritual elements in production":

The production costs of a community consist, in the analysis of only two sides - the natural objective side, land; and the human, subjective side; labor, which includes capital and besides capital, a third factor, which the economist does not think about - I mean the spiritual element of invention of thought, alongside the physical element of sheer labor.¹²⁵

Marxist philosophy, therefore, consists of both an economic component and a humanistic approach as well, and they are seen as interconnected.

Lenin also spelled out Marxist materialism in this context:

Just as man's knowledge reflects nature (i.e., developing matter) which exists independently of him, so man's social knowledge (i.e., the various views and doctrines - philosophical, religious, political, and so forth) reflects the economic system of society.¹²⁶

Knowledge, in short, exists outside of us, but this is not to say that the acquisition and interpretation of knowledge are necessarily beyond man's control. This is where Marxism parts company with the purely economic determinist models which implies that they are.

Kettle's comments, touched on earlier, focusing on the question of defining culture, point to an ongoing dialogue among Marxists. In one sense gaining a deeper insight into the interactions between the over all culture and its various components is important in understanding the processes of social change. An integral part of this all-inclusive question is the issue of what constitutes the nature of art within a changing cultural milieu? In the Marxist perspective, the artist is not a "free" agent, nor should he be, in this quest for a redefinition of his role in society. Rasul Gamzatov, a Soviet writer, spoke to this issue in a recent article in World Marxist Review. He was talking primarily about poets but it is equally applicable to novelists as well:

It is his conscience that prompts the Soviet poet to express and uphold the ideas of the party. Those who denounce that as loss of creative freedom, as writing "under party dictation," fail to understand that without conscience, in its Leninist understanding, there is no Soviet poet, and no free flight of his creative fantasy, and no social responsibility for his work. In our age every great poet quickly wins world renown. His verse is part of the battle of ideas in his own

country and the world. This immensely increases his responsibility not only for every word that comes from his pen, but for his every action as a member of society.¹²⁷

It is not, then, just a question of the "right" of the author to engage in creative work, especially at this stage of history, but to be responsible for the direction in which such creativity takes him. He does not follow the "truth" wherever it may lead, but seeks to use his talents to change reality in an humanistic direction. How this translates for the particular artist will depend largely on the art form (writing, painting, acting, sculpture, dancing) as well as on the individual artist's skills, imagination, and temperament.

Martin Rusak's discussion of the novelist/journalist, Jack London, highlights the controversy taking place among some Marxists (as discussed in Chapters One and Two). The question is what are the proper subject areas for a Marxist novel? His approach is directly contrary to that taken by Seaver and others. Yet no where does Seaver say that the proletarian writer cannot write about workers, and he certainly does not say that workers cannot become good writers. According to Rusak:

A real proletarian writer must not only write about the working class he must be read by the working class. A real proletarian writer must not only use his proletarian life as material; his writing must burn with the spirit of revolt. Jack London was a real proletarian writer, the first and so far the only proletarian writer of genius in America. Workers who read, read Jack London. He is the one author they have all read, he is one literary experience they all have in common. Factory workers, farm hands, seamen, newsboys read him and read him again. He is the most popular writer of the American working class.¹²⁸

Two points need to be made about Rusak's comments. The first is that they were written in 1929, six years before the American Writers

Congress, although they reflect the controversy present at that gathering. Farrell's comments, referred to earlier, were in large measure directed at the kind of analysis represented in Rusak's remarks. Second, a comparison of London's writing between 1900 and 1916, when he died, reveals two conflicting ideological trends influencing his political development. His A Daughter of The Snows was clearly affected by the Nietzsche framework, The Iron Heel was more in the Marxian mold, and Marxism and Nietzschean philosophy are totally incompatible.

A related question would be is Farrell's "spiritual poverty" theme a proper subject for inquiry by the Marxist novelist? Some Marxists would probably say no, since it fails to deal directly with the class struggle. Critics like Rusak seem to suggest that once capitalism is done away with many of the problems facing mankind, including the matter of "spiritual poverty" will automatically disappear. Most Marxists, and Seaver and Schneider fall into this category, reject this simplistic notion. It is curious that Averbakh was, to a large extent, sensitive to the problems involved in changing basic cultural attitudes, yet he made little or no distinction among those traditions which might be compatible in a socialist or communist society, those which might fit in one but not the other, and those which would not fit in either. Furthermore, most Marxists and communists would acknowledge that socialism and communism may not be able to resolve all the problems facing human society. This is essentially what Marx and Engels were getting at in their treatise Socialism, Utopian and Scientific.

C. Continuing Issues in Marxist Analysis of Literature and Politics

The controversy in Marxist literary criticism is really secondary to much broader issues. Although there is general agreement among Marxists that capitalism is a dying system, there is still some debate about what form and direction the transition to socialism will take. What will be the relations between socialist states, assuming a degree of uneven development between states? If the "unevenness" is primarily one of economic development, it is one thing. However, to the extent that there is an interrelationship between economic, political, and social development, the problem becomes much more complex. If Marxist ideology is followed, at least in principle, the stronger states will help the weaker ones. On this point there seems to be a general consensus. But what form such "help" will take raises a whole set of political problems.

Marxist ideology talks about international working class solidarity and the right of self-determination among nations as mutually compatible goals. But what happens when these two goals conflict with each other can become a ticklish issue in a world of supposedly independent and sovereign states, particularly when what takes place in one country or group of countries has an impact beyond their national borders. Even if the "end of ideology" argument is rejected, the question still remains to what extent, if any, do the problems of modern industrial mass society transcend ideological barriers? The problem of "over-consumption" of natural resources is primarily a product of capitalist society. And yet, the social consequences of "over-consumption" are likely to be felt long after capitalism has passed or been pushed from the scene. These are matters beyond the scope of this dissertation, except that they

represent issues to be examined in literature, fiction as well as non-fiction. They are of particular import when one confronts the Marxist-Leninist concept of the "withering away" of the state, an essential stage before communism can emerge.

In the final analysis, then, Marxist humanism addresses the entire range of questions facing humankind. It sees economic, sociological, and philosophical issues confronting society as interconnected -- that is to say, one cannot be treated adequately without an awareness of its possible effects on the other component parts.

FOOTNOTES - CHAPTER FIVE

118 Emile Durkheim, Suicide, (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1951), pp. 160-17, (translated by Joseph Spaulding and George Simpson).

119 Ibid., pp. 14-15.

120 Ibid., p. 15.

121 Melvin Seeman, "On The Meaning of Alienation," American Sociological Review, Vol. 24, (December, 1969), pp. 973-977.

122 Gaylord C. Leroy, "The Concept of Alienation: An Attempt At Definition," in Marxism & Alienation, ed. Herbert Aptheker, (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), pp. I-II.

123 Ibid., p. II.

124 Selsam and Martel, Reader In Marxist Philosophy, pp. 204-6.

125 Ibid., pp. 313-14.

126 Ibid., pp. 38-39.

127 Rasul Gamzatov, "The Social Purpose of Artistic Creation," World Marxist Review, Vol. 20, No. 1, (January, 1977), pp. 108-113.

128 Foner, Jack London: American Rebel, pp. 3-129.

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