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Hickman, Ben (2018) Life After the Avant-Garde: Proletarian Realism, Proletarian Modernism. *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 62 (4). pp. 585-601. ISSN 0340-2827.

DOI

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Life After the Avant-Garde:

Proletarian Realism, Proletarian Modernism

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Abstract

This essay analyses the category of “life” as mobilised by proletarian writing, and through this analysis explores proletarian realism’s relation to Marxism and the avant-garde.

Surveying the commitment to everyday life, inherited from avant-gardism, in the work of Michael Gold, Jack Conroy and Langston Hughes, the essay investigates the relation of two central modes of its expression: testimony and allegory. From here the claim is that proletarian realism’s everyday life was defined by two Marxist commitments: to relation and to purpose. In the case of the first, testimony and allegory are brought together to connect the immediate embodied particulars of working life to the wider processes that enforce them. In the second, they are brought together to mobilise this relation towards action. Here we see a bifurcation: on the one hand writing that, anxious to mould its particulars into a meaningful whole, attempts to fix them into an overarching economy in danger of draining its evocations of everyday life of vitality; on the other, writing that makes purpose a subject for thought and literary form and carries everyday life’s dynamism over into committed writing.

1. Life

“No straining or melodrama or other effects; life itself is the supreme melodrama. Feel this intensely, and everything becomes poetry — the new poetry of materials, of the so-called ‘common man,’ the Worker moulding his real world.” (Gold, “Notes” July 1930, 5) Thus in 1930 Mike Gold announced his commitment to that most ambiguous but most constantly weaponised category of modernity, “life.”¹ Less an idea than a demand for thought to move its focus from ideas to the embodied experiences of living, “life” invokes the familiar, routine and ubiquitous processes of day-to-day existence. Such demands are, of course, partly rhetorical: few artists set out to be lifeless, and one can mean almost anything by “life.” Drilling down into what Gold and other proletarian writers *did* mean by it, however, can illuminate proletarian realism, against its reputation for aesthetic conservatism, as a “new poetry of materials,” in all its complicated relations with experimental modernism. For beyond rhetoric, commitment to ‘real life’ announces a variety of allegiances that distinguish avant-garde movements from each other: to certain contents (the domestic, leisure, wage-labour), to certain attitudes (embrace, distance, resistance), to certain modes (habit, crisis, speed) and to certain forms to keep everyday life alive (epiphany, collage, realisms). Proletarian realism, at its best, consciously positions itself within these allegiances. In this, I will argue, we can recognise a unique development of avant-gardism and literary Marxism.

The avant-garde’s love affair with life is well known: it laboured to be absorbed by it, and failed. In Peter Bürger’s controversial but still clarifying account, avant-garde art wanted to both express life (as life) and negate it (as bourgeois life), and at the same time to integrate art into life through the integration of life into art (35-54). The aim was not to simply reinsert art into life but to institute a “new life praxis”—to move away from autonomous, institutionalised art towards an art that tries to change life by becoming it. In Bürger’s

¹ Even a cursory glance through modernist manifestos, such as those collected in Mary Ann Caws’s anthology, sees the concept invoked by almost every major avant-garde movement.

account, this project was a failure and therefore now merely “historical.” Why did it not succeed? At the level of content, experimental modernist or avant-garde texts mark a major shift in aesthetic decorum regarding appropriate subject matters of art. Formally, in part because of this content, life in avant-garde art is determined by its revelation in shock, through defamiliarising jolts confronting unconscious habit. Shock performs what seems to be the perfect ‘sublation of art in the praxis of life’ (50): it returns reception to the social and challenges the institution of art (shock and scandal being seen as political affects) while animating life through unusual representational form (stable aesthetic modes and habits are made to ‘move’). A contradiction arises in this practice, however: since its definitive mode is the event—the single moment, occasion, production or gesture—avant-garde practices often risk distorting the everyday in its very temporality.² As Henri Lefebvre points out: “the

² The relation between the everyday and the epiphany/event in modernism has been explored in much recent modernist scholarship, including at the 2013 Modernist Studies Association conference, *Everydayness and the Event*, and in the monographs of Olson, Saveau and Randall.

paroxysmal moment dispossesses mundane, everyday existence, annulling it, denying it. *It is the very thing which denies life: it is the nothingness of anguish, of vertigo, of fascination*” (125; original emphasis). Avant-garde shock, among other things, is a means of singular awakening, of suddenly *seeing what is there*, when what is there is meaningful. The Surrealist objective of a “general crisis in consciousness” as a way to “change life” (see Lefebvre xx-xxi) is typical in this sense: lifelessness is a habit of mind rather than a quality of everyday life itself. Shock at once transfigures the everyday formally into the event, the epiphany, the extraordinary, and thereby makes it visible in a sense, but for this reason is not active in ordinary life materially, day to day. The avant-garde artwork here tends towards transubstantiation rather than transformation, redemption rather than alteration, elevation rather than change, returning life to its better self. We are removed from the forward movement definitive of vanguardism.

One answer to the historical avant-garde’s incompletions in this regard, emanating from John Cage and the Abstract Expressionists and extending to the New American Poetry and Susan Sontag’s “erotics of art,” is thoroughly understood as such. This anti-symbolic presentism bracketed questions of meaning off to focus on everyday life as a source of immanent value

through which art can access the energies of the here and now. In the negative, it disengaged from the historical avant-garde's commitment to political transformation. Whether this represents a purer form of avant-gardism or its decisive negation I leave an open question here. Either way, this mid-century coalescence of artistic experiments was a significant factor in extending the life and viability of avant-gardism as such in the US. In abandoning the future-orientation of the modernist avant-garde, and trading meaning for form, it was able to make viable claims for the ability of innovative form to change and make visible everyday life *now*. This was only one answer, however, and certain aspects of this mid-century avant-garde—its aestheticism, its liberalism, its own philosophical underpinnings in Pragmatism—can be seen when placed in the perspective of a quite different response. I will not have space to consider this relationship at length here, but thinking through proletarian realism as an experimental project of everyday life can, among other things, suggest a different vantage on other developments of avant-gardism.

It is firstly, then, in the context of the unfinished business of the avant-garde life that we can see the 'real' of proletarian realism. Proletarian writing was, in its commitment to everyday life, a vibrant and vital development of avant-gardism. At the same time, however, in its original understanding of the category itself, in particular Marxist terms, and in literary forms that follow from this understanding, it represents a negation of the avant-garde.

Marx, then, is the other key context of everyday life in proletarian realism. The broad significance of "life" in Marx is well known: "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life" (Marx and Engels 47). What, though, is life here, beyond the textbook abstraction of 'material conditions'? Most simply and fundamentally, Marx means "consciousness taken as the living individual... which conforms to real life, and

consciousness is considered solely as *their* consciousness” (original emphasis).

Consciousness is manifest in particular lives and bodies rather than philosophically floating free. From here, still simply, the significant fact of this “life” is that it moves, transforming itself and its conditions through activity and its relations: “Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its further forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.” The life-process, then, is living, dynamically entangled in an environment constituted of the living relations of the active world.

Somewhere, of course, life goes missing. It is missed, or not lived, precisely because it is not seen as a process, a moving set of connected parts. Revising Marx’s earlier sense of ideology as an inversion available to critical demystification, consciousness here finds its truth in establishing relation, partly but never sufficiently in thought. Capitalism and its commodity form do not so much distort truth as make the world’s active relations seem dead, static, irreducibly *there*. The earlier version of ideology as life lived “upside-down as in a camera obscura” (Marx and Engels 47) becomes the more ambiguous operation of a “social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers” (Marx, *Capital* 135). That exploitation is never fully present to consciousness is built into the phenomenal fabric of capitalist life itself, meaning its supersession will require action from within that life rather than intellectual critique from outside it. Real life is a total process, a question of the connections between the flesh and blood misery of daily existence with the wider social relations that enforce it. *Capital*’s everyday life, for example, is the working day both within and beyond wage-labour: the common, labouring diurnal, defined as the relations between immediate familiars like eating, sleeping, illness and family life and less immediate but no

less definite phenomena like capital flows, technological change, class struggle, the law and imperial expansion. The child labourer's life of "scattered shreds of time" (403) is evoked down to the nervous system, but it is defined by enclosure, labour laws and the general laws of capitalism's "vampire thirst for the living blood of labour" (367). The final flourish of Marx's "Working Day" chapter makes the political import of his observations clear: "In place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man' there steps the modest Magna Carta of the legally limited working day" (416). In place of philosophical abstraction, that is, emerges demands that are everyday in the most literal, embodied and critical sense of the word.

Capital is not directly interested in how everyday immiseration is to be overcome. For this we can turn to the thought of Henri Lefebvre. In Lefebvre's early, influential work on everyday life, alienation is given a particular slant: a habit of thought that treats the world as fixed things rather than dynamic relations. Lefebvre's famous example of the everyday event makes it clear that what is 'within' this surface is paradoxically a set of connections:

[T]he simplest event—a woman buying a pound of sugar, for example—must be analysed. Knowledge will grasp whatever is hidden within it. To understand this simple event, it is not enough merely to describe it; research will disclose a tangle of reasons and causes, of essences and 'spheres': the woman's life, her biography, her job, her family, her class, her budget, her eating habits, how she uses money, her opinions and her ideas, the state of the market, etc. Finally, I will have grasped the sum total of capitalist society, the nation and its history. And although what I grasp becomes more and more profound, it is contained from the start in the original little event. So now I can see the humble events of everyday life as having two sides: a little, individual, chance event—and at the same time an infinitely complex social event, richer than any of the 'essences' it contains within itself. (57)

This is Marx's modernity, where the world market as "the connection of the *individual with all*" exists alongside its apparent "independence of this connection from the individual," expressed in intimate, everyday form (*Grundrisse* 161; original emphasis). Such alienation is not to be overcome through simply deconstructing modernity's surfaces to reveal its real core. The 'essence' is outside, and we need to go beyond the apparent 'object' to reintegrate this outside: "not satisfied with merely uncovering and criticizing this real, practical life in the minutiae of social life [...] integration is able to pass from the individual to the social" (Lefebvre 148). Such integration does not, as philosophical critique would for Lefebvre, take place from outside or above the everyday: it proceeds from it. The negation of everyday capitalist life, for Lefebvre, will take place from within it, only *more* within it, by being more attentive to other everyday lives. This is quite different from what would become the object of modernist defamiliarisation sketched so beautifully by William James:

We do not notice the ticking of the clock, the noise of the city streets, or the roaring of the brook near the house; and even the din of a foundry or factory will not mingle with the thoughts of its workers, if they have been there long enough [...] The pressure of our clothes and shoes, the beating of our hearts and arteries, our breathing, certain steadfast bodily pains, habitual odors, tastes in the mouth, etc., are examples from other senses, of the same lapse into unconsciousness of any too unchanging content [...] (455)

The problem for James is familiarity; for Lefebvre, it is atomisation. Rather than tearing off the veil of falsehood or the dead skin of habit, Lefebvre advocates creatively acknowledging and establishing relations. We can position avant-gardism and proletarian literature within a similar dynamic: just as experimental modernism's project is to make the unnoticed phenomena of daily life explicit, so a Marxist aesthetics of relation is about making everyday

and ubiquitous connections explicit, visible and active. These twin projects mark the life of proletarian literature of the 1930s: on the one hand an evocation of the stuff of concrete, embodied experience, and on the other an attention to the wider moving, dynamic and totalised relations of class, power and materials, beyond this immediacy.

In what follows I will argue that proletarian realism advocated a practice of testimony—a testimony that tends toward relation, by which the *I was there* of experience is joined to the manifold *Elsewheres* available to writing, and immediacy becomes fused with totality. An anxiety that such testimony would amount to no more than an aggregation of particulars, however, then calls for a further mode: allegory. Here potentially diffuse particulars are resolved by clarity of purpose, achieved through having a symbolic *point*. This is a tendency that repeats modernism's preference for transubstantiating and ennobling everyday life, although shifting focus from the interior (epiphany, shock, consciousness) to the social (revolution). The forms of this allegorical mode are various. I will conclude that, though this practice ultimately fails to fully articulate life as sketched by Marx, it represents an important, radical and original intervention as modernity's first aesthetics of labour.

2. Testimony

“Life” was the great signifier of *New Masses*, the decisive magazine of American working class writing from the late 1920s into the 40s, and Gold, its editor between 1928 and 1934, was life's great champion in its pages, constantly invoking the word as a marker of originality and vitality in the face of decadent capitalism. What did Gold mean by life, and how should writing stand in relation to it?

Life meant work, but more than this, it meant writing should either come out of work, or place itself within its activity, rather than being merely ‘about’ it. Though attacks on leisure and bookishness as life’s opposites are common in proletarian realist discourse—Gold’s hatchet jobs on Thornton Wilder (*Mike Gold Reader* 45-50) and T. S. Eliot (“Change the World”) are good examples of each—the more precise demand is that writing be somehow *in* work: “That every writer in the group attach himself to one of the industries [...] that he will write like an insider, not like a bourgeois intellectual observer [...]. He will have his roots in something real” (“A New Program”). Since working life is embodied, the writing of life must embody itself in it: “I don’t mean the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing, the professional poeticizing etc. No, the real thing; a knowledge of working class life in America gained from first hand contacts [...] a flesh and bloody reality, however crude, instead of the smooth perfect thing that is found in books” (“Go Left, Young Writers”). Writing in work is proposed as living writing: “the hard way, to go on living, and to try every day of one’s life to write about the living world” (“Notes” July 1930, 5). Informing this prioritising of wage-labour is a belief in the revolutionary vitality of working class experience, a sense of proletarian life as closer to the world’s sources of energy and value, as in Hegel’s master/slave dialectic: “Away with drabness, the bourgeois notion that the Worker’s life is sordid, the slummer’s disgust and the feeling of futility. There *is* horror and drabness in the Worker’s life; and we will portray it; but we know this is not the last word; we know that the manure heap is the hope of the future” (4-5; original emphasis). The conviction is that, though life is wage-labour and therefore exploitation, as such it is also *activity*, a living process that changes real world conditions as well as living through them. This is the dialectical double meaning of “the Worker moulding his real world.”

Proletarian writing asked itself what forms could give this life expression. Form here must be taken in a broad sense: as the above suggests, *New Masses* was far less interested in the correct internal aesthetic operations of revolutionary literature than it was concerned with who wrote it. The forms of organisation, editing and encouragement that might help give voice to working class experience were key. These are still questions of aesthetic form, though, and the magazine's approach to them is in keeping with Gold's aim that it "not be a magazine of Communism, or Moscow, but a magazine of American experiment" ("Let it Be Really New"):

WE WANT TO PRINT:

Confessions—diaries—documents—

The concrete—

Letters from hoboes, peddlers, small town atheists, unfrocked clergymen and school teachers—

Revelations by rebel chambermaids and night club waiters—

The sobs of driven stenographers—

The poets of steel workers—

The wrath of miner—the laughter of sailors—

Strike stories, prison stories, work stories—

Stories by Communist, I. W. W. and other revolutionary workers. ("Write for Us")

Though the approach to form is political rather than technical, this is still an *aesthetic* programme. Gold's own preference was for a kind of straight-talking reminiscent of Pound's Imagism, but this is itself a symptom of wanting to leave technical questions open to working class life itself: the proletarian's writing "is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment" ("Notes" September 1930, 4), while the worker's art

movement “has no manifestoes, it is not based on theories, it springs from life itself” (“A Letter”). Gold’s focus throughout his manifesto-like statements of the 1930s is on the type of *social lives* writers should lead and connect themselves with, and the kinds of writing that could be found and developed in proletarian social lives. As an experimental practice, the assumption for Gold and other writers was often that proletarian literature was already avant-garde in that it had rarely been seen before, and that if expressed naturally, as “crude, ungrammatical stuff,” its form would be inevitably confrontational and tough to digest for the bourgeois critic (see Kalar). The overall philosophical conviction mobilising this programme is that life will speak, if allowed to speak itself: that there is something in everyday life that escapes detached representations of it, a definitive *you had to be there* of social and bodily experience that must be gone through for its truth and antagonism to seep into art. I am calling this an aesthetics of testimony.³

Testimony is proletarian writing’s progress on and reaction against earlier “attempts to deal with the ‘poor but honest’ workingman as a ‘prince in disguise’” that, as Daniel Aaron writes, “failed to convince because the writers themselves were temperamentally and culturally too far removed from the proletarian’s world” (206). In this sense, testimony is different from documentary, long recognised as a key tendency in the development of avant-gardism into the 1930s. Unlike documentary, in which the figure of the photograph is central (see Allred and Vescia), testimony prioritises the first hand, the *I-was-there*, the ways in which witness is tied up with experience. For proletarian literature’s ambitious aims, testimony is the first step to revolution. It is only the first because, as Primo Levi points out in a very different context,

³ Two important and influential modes of testimony connected to proletarian realism and responding to identical problems of bodies and labour, but beyond the scope of this essay, include Charles Reznikoff’s *Testimony*, a ‘recitative’ of court cases involving poverty, work accidents, racism and much else besides, and Muriel Rukeyser’s account of a major industrial accident in ‘The Book of the Dead’ and of the Spanish Civil War in ‘Mediterranean’.

the horizon of testimony is potentially small and its scope narrow (6-7). It is a first step, nonetheless, because by connecting the first-hand to the totality of capitalist relations its exercise suggests the grounds for agency. Aesthetic testimony testifies above all to the witness's potential to translate exploitation, trauma, suffering, into solidarity and explicit sociality through forms of address that it thematises in a way document does not.

To see a form testimony might take, and how it might relate to questions of relationality, allegory, experiment and everyday life, we can look at one of Gold's short stories, "Home Relief Station." This story, published in the *Daily Worker* in 1933, is a short anecdote about a dole queue that turns into a riot (most Depression writers were as interested in wage labour's dialectical complements under capitalism, unemployment and unpaid labour, as labour itself). It takes a quintessentially everyday subject, waiting, and attempts a formal mimesis of it:

Single file. Four hundred people. Waiting. Waiting for hours. Waiting until everything aches with waiting. Feet and back and shoulders. Waiting and standing up for hours. No benches. Or just one. The bench that holds four at a time in front of the interviewers table. That's where you hand in your application slip. That's where they check up on you. Four at a time. It takes hours. And you stand and wait. Wait. Until everything aches. Feet and back and shoulders. (89)

The story here explores a tension between experience and representation. It is frustrated with expressing in language what by definition escapes: "If you've never been on a line in the Home Relief Bureau you don't know what it is. You don't know the feeling you get from standing there, hour after hour, like an animal, like a dog waiting to be fed. Nobody talks. Nobody says anything. You just stand." That is, to write is to somehow betray the condition of being "like a dog." to fail to reflect the silence in which "nobody talks." And yet, the

inadequacy of language, performed formally as well as stated explicitly, is precisely what guarantees the authenticity of Gold's testimony.

The story turns on the inversion of the queue into a riot. Gold neatly describes this as a *détournement* of everyday waiting itself, when a Swedish woman sits *heroically*:

Suddenly, she walked out of line, just walked right out, and plunked herself in the chair of the interviewer [...] Imagine, having the nerve to sit down in a chair! But she sat there, the big woman, folding hands deliberately across her broad breast and waited. For a moment the big fat cop, the ugly one, just stood in line and looked at her. Then he asked her to get back in line. She refused. She was sick and tired of standing up there [...] The cop said: "You gotta get up or get out." But he forgot something. He forgot that four hundred people standing in line there felt just as the big brawny Swedish woman felt. He forgot that her words were the words of all [...] She refused to leave the chair. The cop moved over to grab her arm. And then it happened. (90)

The "it" is an undefined riot. The word "wait" here no longer signifies humiliated submission, but combative composure, reversing the usual metaphor for militancy, standing up. The act of sitting has turned the atomised misery of individuals into a raucous solidarity of bodies recognising the relations between waiting and coercion, power and money, unemployment and work. Something else has happened in the act, however: waiting itself has been transformed from an experience that exceeds language into a symbol of resistance. The story, that is, tends towards allegory, and in doing so runs the risk of undermining, by making abstract, the *you-had-to-be-there* of the particular experience earlier invoked. In this case, the tendency to relate waiting to what is outside of it does not quite crystallise to mere allegory, and does not obliterate the earlier expression of embodied immiseration.

How this tension is resolved in more ambitious proletarian texts is a key question here. Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), perhaps the most famous proletarian novel of the 1930s, elaborates on the relations that "Home Relief Station" exhibits in miniature. The book's conception of 'real life' is directly decisive for its form: unlike the classic American ascensionist story of poverty redeemed by success, Gold's characters are constantly blocked from progress, and so *Jews Without Money* is without narrative arc, punctuated by false starts, dead ends, sudden reversals, lives cut short and meaningless suffering. The life of the novel, that is, defined primarily as poverty, refuses to be placed within an abstract system of meanings that would save it from mere drudgery and pain, the keynotes it refuses to transubstantiate into a redemptive narrative.

If the novel is not primarily concerned with reified or sentimental meaning, however, it is concerned with the relations of its various experiences to each other and the wider world beyond its setting, the Lower East Side. As in "Home Relief Station," everyday life is seen as the grounds of solidarity: "It's impossible to live in a tenement without being mixed up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one's neighbours. There's no privacy in a tenement" (30). Everyday life is what immiserates but also what connects, and in this lies its meaningful potential. The novel thematises this connectivity as both life-affirming and clarifying:

Each week at public school there was an hour called Nature Study. The old maid teacher fetched from a dark closet a collection of banal objects: birdnests, cornstalks, minerals, autumn leaves and other poor withered corpses. On these she lectured tediously, and bade us admire Nature.

What an insult. We twisted on our benches, and ached for the outdoors. It was if a starving bum were offered snapshots of food, and expected to feel grateful. It was like lecturing a cage of young monkeys on the jungle joys.

“Lady, gimme a flower! Gimme a flower! Me, me, me!”

In summer if a slummer or settlement house lady walked on our street with flowers in her hand, we attacked her, begging for the flowers. We rioted and yelled, yanked at her skirt, and frightened her to the point of hysteria.

Once Jake Gottlieb and I discovered grass struggling between the sidewalk cracks near the livery stable. We were amazed by this miracle. We guarded this treasure, allowed no one to step on it. Every hour the gang studied “our” grass to try to catch it growing. It died, of course, after a few days; only children are hardy enough to grow on the East Side.

The Italians raised red and pink geraniums in tomato cans. The Jews could have, too, but hadn’t the desire. When an excavation was being dug for a new tenement, the Italians swarmed there with pots, hungry for the new earth. Some of them grew bean vines and morning glories.

America is so rich and fat because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants. (40-41)

The narrator’s impatience with the world presented at school as a collection of discrete objects critiques the reification of relations in general in a manner that summons the commodity fetish in particular. These relations demand a formal fluidity not normally associated with proletarian literature, approximating collage. Tenement objects are seen to be alive in their relatedness, antagonism and dynamism, all of which are reflected in the form of the text itself, with its centrifugal focus connecting scene to scene through a series of quick jolts. The final paragraph, meanwhile, is paradigmatic enough to bring the listed items together into some kind of meaningful economy, but paratactic enough to avoid merely reducing them to an overarching schema.

The combination of affective evocation and symbolic signification is most vivid in the standalone story of Reb Samuel. Reb is a devout Chassidic Jew, the eponymous hero of “The Saint of the Umbrella Story,” a chapter relating his efforts to secure a rabbi for the Lower East Side’s Chassid congregation. Even before this narrative begins, we see Reb has excused himself from the everyday life of work in his umbrella store: “Reb Samuel was calm in the midst of the bedlam. He never interfered with his wife’s management. He never worried when a week passed and there was no rain. All this was of the world, and for his wife to worry about; Reb Samuel had more serious cares” (195). The world catches up with Reb all the same, however. Having saved up with others for the Rabbi’s steamship and other necessities, he sees his new Rabbi arrive. So, too, does the child narrator, who notices the Rabbi has an appetite, telling Reb so: “the new Rabbi is eating up all the food. There will be nothing left!” This breaks Reb’s “ecstasy” and angers him, so Mike is sent home for blasphemy (201). After, however, the Rabbi makes additional demands (for a home, for a servant), meanwhile “seem[ing] to prefer the rich” and bowing to their more liberal interpretation of beard orthodoxy. At this point Reb has “neglected his umbrella shop entirely” to raise money to pay for all this, before the Rabbi deserts the congregation for a “better-paying job” in the Bronx: “The blow crushed my teacher, Reb Samuel. He rarely spoke at home, or in the umbrella shop; he brooded within himself. His eyes lost their peace; his face no longer reflected the eternities. He became a tired, bewildered, lonely old Jew” (203). As an allegory of Gold’s aesthetic, the coordinates are clear: Gold will speak the blasphemous truth against mystification, and the modern world will prove him right. The episode also carries considerable tragedy, however. Reb quickly becomes paralysed as a result of his demoralisation, literally forced by a system of mirrors to look onto a world he can no longer live in: “Without turning his eyes, Reb Samuel could see everything in the

street. He was a man at a never-ending play. He was a spectator, a ghost watching our crazy world.” This is ambiguously positioned between punishment and tragic belatedness, but the bottom line is clear: Reb may not recognise everyday life, but everyday life recognises him. His blindness to it deceives him about wider class structures to which he becomes a too-willing victim.

Gold’s combinations of allegorical significance with an embodied realism of misery, where one is never allowed to subsume the other, is a compelling articulation of exploitation’s place in the world. Gold still reaches for the two holy grails of avant-garde ambition, everyday life and social consciousness, but attempts to go beyond the generalised noticing typical of both in avant-garde contexts, to evoke affective experiences and creatively make connections beyond them. To fully elaborate such evocations and connections, I want to finally explore proletarian realism’s vanguardism. Gold and others’ anxiety to mobilise testimony (to avoid the final situation of Reb, riveted to watching life with no hope of intervening in it) and the means used for doing so will be my subject now.

3. Purpose

The ending of *Jews Without Money* has been subject to much criticism for its inelegance and melodrama (see Klein 186, Nilsen 45 and Rideout 151-52). The novel’s conclusion rushes through the narrator’s coming into adulthood before a final few dozen words on his awakening consciousness of “Revolution” after seeing a “man on an East Side soap-box” (309). The abruptness of this conversion is hardly persuasive, but the manner in which it fails to give the novel unity, to comprehensively frame its incidents retrospectively, means the account functions as another embodied incident of chaotic life rather than merely

allegorically absorbing and thereby deadening its vividly evoked particulars. We are not left with a feeling that it was all leading towards this, and the incidents of the novel before it remain *life* rather than fodder for a higher, fixed meaning. The ending does, however, remain important as a crack in the façade of immiseration, a glimpse of changeability that is clearly key to its novel's motivation. The novel could not stand without it, which makes its sketchiness inadequate.

Gold's ending is symptomatic, if not thoroughly reflexive, of a central moving force of proletarian writing: the anxiety for and straining after *purpose*. Gold famously claimed that workers' literature "is never pointless" ("Notes" September 1930, 3). This conviction, or ambition, was both at the centre of proletarian writers' critique of avant-gardists and a defining anxiety about their own writing of working life. In terms of the former, one example—the reception of the "*Objectivists*" *Anthology* (1932), edited by the poet Louis Zukofsky's—is particularly instructive. The March 1933 issue of *Poetry*, for example, carried a review by Morris Schappes, a left intellectual, entitled "Historic and Contemporary Particulars," attacking the book's poetry for a descriptiveness that was "without direction, but *mere*" and discouraged "conscious action." The Objectivists, according to Schappes, were defeatist nihilists: "In protesting, [the Objectivist poet] nevertheless accepts [capitalism's] premises; instead of questioning its economics, its politics, its morals, its values, he denies that there are values." The editors of *Dynamo*, an independent quarterly of proletarian literature, would make much the same charge a year later. Sol Funaroff claimed that "the Objectivist has no objective," is "pre-occupied with the external" and "remains the dispassionate one, the non-partisan, without direction," when in fact the role of the revolutionary artist was to "transform himself from the detached recorder of isolated events into the man who participates in the creation of new values and of a new world." The poet

Herman Spector asserted in the same issue of *Dynamo* that the “fatal defect of the Objectivist theory is that it identifies life with capitalism, and so assumes that the world is merely a wasteland” (104). All these readings claim that a focus on the objects of contemporary capitalism leaves the reader feeling that nothing else, no life beyond capitalism, is possible. The consensus was that Objectivism the self-proclaimed ‘revolutionary’ poetic movement was indistinguishable from objectivism the bourgeois myth of detachment.

The Objectivist poets did not merely record “isolated events,” but Zukofsky did agree with the central thrust of the attack: he was happy to say that he wished poems to be free of “predatory intent” (25). To delineate the fine margins between deadening predation and animating purpose I want to turn finally to two key texts of the early 30s: Jack Conroy’s novel *The Disinherited* and Langston Hughes’s broadside poem “Come to the Waldorf-Astoria.”

The Disinherited (1933), like *Jews Without Money*, straddles novel and memoir—only emerging as the former at the publisher’s request (Conroy xi). It follows Larry Donovan from the coal pits and railcar repair yards of Missouri to the sawmills and rubber factories of Chicago, from child labour and industrial accidents to starvation and mass unemployment. The novel is neither detached in its approach, nor does it report events as isolated. In the case of the former, Conroy commits to testifying to work as it is lived in mind and body. Conroy makes the same point *New Masses* and other magazines had: “I know I’m half educated [...] but some things you never know till you live them” (215). These “things” are the experiences of labour, with an emphasis on exhaustion, boredom and strain—on, that is, the duration of work. The vividness of the novel’s explorations of the individual and social experience of worked time, especially on how to make it pass faster (88-89, 166) and of the effect of the

industrial working day on the body and nervous system distinguish *The Disinherited* from other proletarian novels. Conroy speaks compellingly to an everyday life that goes beyond undialectical notions of routine and leisure to articulate modernity's chaotic alternation of overwork and idleness, crisis and inertia, drudgery and uncertainty, more generally of work and unemployment, sketched by Marx in *Capital* (340-74).

The unremitting march of these experiences, the paratactic litany of different immiserating exploitations, is in part a reflection of their monotony and inescapability. It also, of course, presents a problem, in danger as it is of presenting life as an arbitrary collection of particulars. Gold felt this was a danger in his review of the book, which he otherwise admired: "There are too many unprecedented facts, and he is so involved in each one, that sometimes he cannot piece them together in any satisfactory pattern" ("A Letter"). Other reviewers were of a similar mind about writers like Conroy who "lacked the artistic sensibility which would enable them to churn a mass of experience into literary form" (Calmer 23). Conroy attempts to resolve this, in part, by looking to relation, as when a rubber factory gang encounter a Chinese supply box with a Chinese coin inside, suddenly expanding the claustrophobic world of the factory to the world market (157-58), or when the relation of stock markets to the most seemingly remote workscape is recognised (220). These individual instances of relation, however, evoked as persuasively coming out of a lived experience of work itself, are far less important to the novel than its ultimate narrative arc: the explicit, overarching and far more abstract awakening of Larry's class consciousness.

The catalyst here is the German exile Hans, a character so crudely drawn that he reads only as symbol. His first appearance is in the episode of the Chinese coin, which he identifies, impressing Larry with his "meticulously chosen speech, his crisp accent which sounded so

strange among the slurred syllables of the others” (158). The context of Hans’s clarity is the factory noise, described as not merely deafening but actually muting: “The words never seemed to leave my lips; the saw’s din pushed them back down my throat” (133). This is no doubt a symbolic description of how to rise above atomised labouring voicelessness, but it is one that vividly enough emerges from an actual embodied encounter. By the end of the novel, though, Hans is a kind of shade operating in no context at all, present only as helpmeet to the increasingly messianic Larry. The novel’s ending, describing Larry’s complicated return to Missouri as the chaos of the Depression unfolds around, sees once vividly described details of working life and the struggle to understand it reduced to an uncomplicated narrative of heroic, awakened consciousness:

I no longer felt shame at being seen at such work as I would have once, and I knew 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, the flivver tramps, boomers, and outcasts pounding their ears in flophouses. (286)

The novel ends with Larry quoting “The Mask of Anarchy,” becoming the man his father never could be, fully formed to intercede in the workers’ struggle (the details of how are, significantly, hazy). This is all described as “living poetry [...] an epic as vast as the earth,” but in truth it is *The Disinherited*’s most deadening aspect, a propagandising set piece in danger of reducing the entire life of the novel into uncomplicated abstraction, leeching its compelling evocations of working life of vitality. That Conroy does so in the guise of continuing these evocations, of pretending a continuation of realist style in what is obviously an allegorical and purposive narrative movement, undermines a novel that otherwise shows the considerable resources of this realism to articulate working life.

We find a quite different commitment to purpose in Langston Hughes's riotous poem, "Come to the Waldorf-Astoria." Printed as a spread in *New Masses* in 1931, it was the best thing the magazine published in its 22 year run. Obviously the text is a poem rather than a novel, but the distinctness of its approach to purpose goes far beyond this. At a simple level, "Welcome to the Waldorf-Astoria" is doubly everyday: its principal textual material, an advertisement in *Vanity Fair*, is low culture, and it parodies this advertisement's fraudulent democratic rhetoric to get at the real, hidden lives of those exploited in the Waldorf-Astoria's name. The latter is made explicit in Walter Steinhilber's illustration, in which the hotel stands on the destitute, both trodden underfoot and forming its foundation, following Hughes's central juxtaposition of rich and poor. As for the former, the poem occupies a space between the avant-garde medium of the everyday, collage, and the descriptive realism of more orthodox proletarian writing. Indeed, the relation between the two is a distinctive aspect of the poem, as Hughes attempts to expand the context of the Waldorf-Astoria's rhetoric, countering its fantasy with hardboiled realism. Neither fully collage or realism, then, Hughes's is a contextual practice which brings reality into contact with marketing through juxtaposition and description both.

Hughes turns the Waldorf-Astoria's language against itself by being placing it in relation to the reality on which it is built—by shifting the address of luxury from *Vanity Fair* readers to *New Masses* readers. Questions like "Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good enough?" and "You ain't been there yet?" on the one hand parody the advertising's language of shame. On the other hand, though, and at the same time, they are a literal adjuration to action. The hotel's democratic rhetoric is taken at its word to exhort real masses to descend on the place and take what they want. The manner in which the voice straddles the callous marketing of luxury and the sharp invocation to its destruction is the message of the poem:

the latter is imminent in the former. This dialectic, of course, follows the version of everyday life that would later be advanced by Lefebvre, who after all concluded the first volume of his *Critique* with poems from *New Masses* (234-35), in which the capitalist everyday may be negated only through itself. It is also founded on the central contradiction Lefebvre says this everyday life shows: between what *is* and what *is socially possible*. The Waldorf-Astoria is an exclusionary space of accumulated exploitation expressed as luxury, but it is also the possibility of that luxury for everybody. The synthesis suggested by Hughes, of course, is revolution, and the remarkable charisma of the poem is the way in which this synthesis is effected at the level of the individual phrase: “take a room” literalises marketing jargon into radical requisition, “an arrangement terminable at will” transforms no-strings-attached patter to assert of revolutionary agency, and so on.

“Welcome to the Waldorf-Astoria,” nonetheless, refuses to be the change it wants to see. Optimistic though it clearly is, the poem’s other message makes a more particular point about the kind of everyday it encounters and the limits of art to transform it. The hotel, that is, can only be accessed by someone like Hughes through its advertising. It can never be *lived* by the black, working class subject, and so the poem stages a discord between the vibrant attention-seeking of its rhetoric and the actual lifelessness of the place itself—an aspect of the poem made explicit in Steinhilber’s illustration, in which its rich occupants are mere skeletal outlines (the poor below are rendered with full features). The place is seen, only dimly, from

FINE LIVING ... a-la carte?? Come to the Waldorf-Astoria!

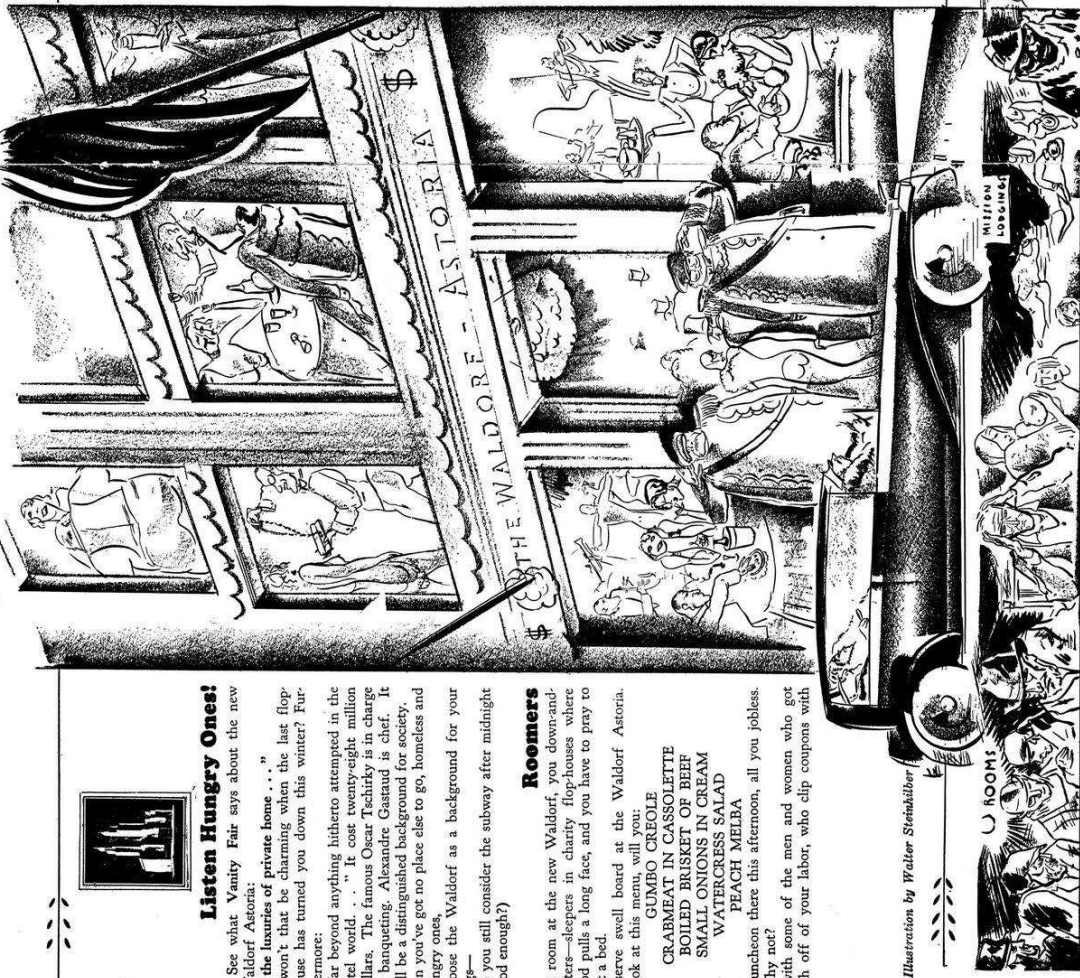


Illustration by Walter Steindler



Listen Hungry Ones!

Look! See what Vanity Fair says about the new Waldorf Astoria:
 "All the luxuries of private home . . ."
 Now, won't that be charming when the last flop-house has turned you down this winter? Furthermore:

"It is far beyond anything hitherto attempted in the hotel world. . . . It cost twenty-eight million dollars. The famous Oscar Tschirky is in charge of banqueting. Alexandre Gastaud is chef. It will be a distinguished background for society. So when you've got no place else to go, homeless and hungry ones, choose the Waldorf as a background for your rage—

(Or do you still consider the subway after midnight good enough?)

Roomers

Take a room at the new Waldorf, you down-and-outers—sleepers in charity flop-houses where God pulls a long face, and you have to pray to get a bed.

They serve swell board at the Waldorf Astoria. Look at this menu, will you:

- GUMBO CREOLE
- CRABMEAT IN CASSOLETTE
- BOILED BRISKET OF BEEF
- SMALL ONIONS IN CREAM
- WATERCRESS SALAD
- PEACH MELBA

Have lunch here this afternoon, all you jobless. Why not? Dine with some of the men and women who got rich off of your labor, who clip coupons with

clean white fingers because your hands dug coal, drilled stone, sewed garments, poured steel—to let other people draw dividends and live easy.

(Or haven't you had enough yet of the soup-lines and the bitter bread of charity?)

Walk through Peacock Alley tonight before dinner, and get warm, anyway. You've got nothing else to do.

Evicted Families

All you families put out in the street: Apartments in the Towers are only \$10,000 a year. (Three rooms and two baths.) Move in there until times get good, and you can do better. \$10,000 and \$1,000 are about the same to you, aren't they? Who cares about money with a wife and kids homeless, and nobody in the family working? Wouldn't a duplex high above the street be grand, with a view of the richest city in the world at your nose?

"A lease, if you prefer, or an arrangement terminable at will."

Negros

O Lawd, I done forget Harlem!

Say, you colored folks, hungry a long time in 135th Street—they got swell music at the Waldorf-Astoria. It sure is a mighty nice place to shake hips in, too. There's dancing after supper in a big warm room. It's cold as hell on Lenox Avenue. All you've had all day is a cup of coffee. Your pawnshop overcoat's a ragged banner on your hungry frame. . . . You know, down-town folks are just crazy about Paul Robeson. Maybe they'd like you, too, black mob from Harlem. Drop in at the Waldorf this afternoon for tea. Stay to dinner. Give Park Avenue a lot of darkie color—free—for nothing! Ask the Junior Leaguers to sing a spiritual for you. They probably know 'em better than you do—and their lips won't be so chapped with cold after they step out of their closed cars in the undercover driveways. Hallelujah! under-cover driveways!

Ma soul's a witness for de Waldorf-Astoria!

(A thousand nigger section-hands keep the road-beds smooth, so investments in railroads pay

ladies with diamond necklaces staring at Cert murlins.)

Thank God A-Mighty!

(And a million niggers bend their backs on rubber plantations, for rich behinds to ride on thick tires to the Theatre Guild tonight.)

Ma soul's a witness!

(And here we stand, shivering in the cold, in Harlem.)

Glory be to God— De Waldorf-Astoria's open!

Everybody

So get proud and rare back, everybody! The new Waldorf-Astoria's open!

(Special siding for private cars from the railroad yards.)

You ain't been there yet?

(A thousand miles of carpet and a million bath rooms.)

What's the matter? You haven't seen the ads in the papers? Didn't you get a card? Don't you know they specialize in American cooking?

Ankle on down to 49th Street at Park Avenue. Get up off that subway bench tonight with the evening POST for cover! Come on out o' that flop-house! Stop shivering your guts out all day on street corners under the L.

Christmas Card

Hail Mary, Mother of God! The new Christ child of the Revolution's about to be born.

(Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob.)

Somebody, put an ad in Vanity Fair quick! Call Oscar of the Waldorf—for Christ's sake!

It's almost Christmas, and that little girl—turned whore because her belly was too hungry to stand it any more—wants a nice clean bed for the immaculate Conception.

Listen, Mary, Mother of God, wrap your new born babe in the red flag of Revolution!

The Waldorf-Astoria's the best manger we've got. For reservations: Telephone Eldorado 5-3000.

by Langston Hughes

outside. The poem, that is, does not ‘expose’ the Waldorf-Astoria or triumph over its elite clientele. It stages quite a different confrontation that can only occur beyond the poem.

It is for this reason that the poem ends with the figure of pregnancy, a metaphor for potentiality. The poem invokes action rather than making any claim to perform it. And yet how does one actually encounter the poem’s riotous, outrageous ending? The final section performs a similar function to the endings of *Jews Without Money* and *The Disinherited*, making explicit through allegory the revolutionary lessons that are implicit in the text’s foregoing details. Clearly, however, it is distinct from these two endings. To begin with, it is everyday in a manner difficult for a novel, since its imagery speaks to its immediate present: the poem was published in the December issue of *New Masses*, hence the title “Christmas Card.” It is also much more explicitly dialectical: “the mob” will seek refuge in the “manger” of the Waldorf-Astoria at the same time as seeking its destruction. Most obviously and importantly, though, Hughes’s ending is unapologetically apocalyptic in a way that Conroy’s is not—daring in a manner that makes no concession to aesthetic unity (the only previous mention of Christ is in the previous section, “Jesus, ain’t you tired yet?”; the final line is a phone number) or sober stock-taking (the finale is propelled by the overall energy of the poem, speeding up rather than slowing down in the manner of *The Disinherited*’s denouement). The poem ends in movement rather than at rest, and it delights in this energy: the blasphemy of a line like “Kick hard, red baby, in the bitter womb of the mob” has a *jouissance* bordering on camp, revelling in its dramatic agitation. In short, the very notion of purpose is in itself thematised, avowed, and drawn on as a source of power—power because its effect is aesthetic pleasure, rather than the necessary medicine of so many proletarian novels’ final awakening.

Modernity is the way capitalism is lived, and proletarian writing aimed to make this fact explicit. Work was a category modernism struggled with—or, more often, refused to struggle with, either evading its obvious demands on art’s attention with the elegant but hardly satisfactory solution that *writing is labour*, or preferring leisure and the bits between work. Bryony Randall’s description of everyday life in her “Modernist Literature and the Everyday” as “eating, sleeping, shopping, cooking, washing, travelling to work and back—perhaps working itself” (825) shows these priorities clearly enough, for modernism and its scholars. Proletarian writing was far more explicit and rigorous in its treatment. Beyond work as subject, though, this writing’s originality, proceeding from the avant-garde commitment to the everyday, lies in its post-avant-gardism: in how it adapts a rhetoric of aesthetic destruction for a political art of construction, and more precisely the construction of relation. Rather than an immediate attack on prevailing institutions, proletarian realism aspires to construct what otherwise seem like remote relations—to make them alive, related, available, urgent, here. This writing often falls down when there is clear distance, as in *The Disinherited*, between this relational practice and the desire to fix relations into a dogmatism and unify everyday life through singular purpose. Where this purpose is avowed as such, however—where it becomes a subject itself for thought and literary form, emerging from and related to the energies of embodied life—as we see in both Gold and Hughes, we are presented with a hopeful and radical model of political art that may be due a renaissance.

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