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Old Left, New Class: Literary Anxiety in the Consumers' Republic

(on Stephen Schryer, *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post–World War II American Fiction* [2011]; Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* [2012]; and Alan M. Wald, *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* [2012])

In the post–New Deal era, the social location of the intellectual became one of paradox and anxiety. Understood as integral to a cultural center, organizing society through the dissemination of ideas, intellectual work emerged as the unlocatable nucleus of US culture. C. Wright Mills's notion of “the sociological imagination” embodied this sentiment. It is the task of artists, journalists, scholars, and scientists, Mills contended, to facilitate an understanding of one's “inner life” and “external career” within the larger contexts of history and society (1959, 5). Mills characterized intellectuals not as scripters of social policy but rather as implicit enablers; through the communication of this sociological imagination they made possible the reconciliation of self with society. Whereas the artists and writers of the Popular Front sought to enact change directly through their work, endorsing an internationalist antifascism, Mills's intellectual is at once central to and absent from the struggle for social reform. His theory thus forms a critical bridge from the thirties to the sixties; he was, as Michael Denning (1997) describes him, “either the last thinker of the Old Left or the first of the New” (110). Mills guided the transition from the proletarian campaigns of the thirties to the countercultural intelligentsia of the sixties while nonetheless recognizing the fissures within the latter.

The specific cultural work of literature is, in Mills's writing, ambiguous at best. He claimed, “Novelists—whose serious work embodies the most widespread definitions of human reality—frequently possess this [sociological] imagination, and do much to meet the demand for it” (14–15). But then he added, “What fiction . . . can compete with the historical reality and political facts of our time? . . . It is a social and historical reality that men want to know, and often they do not find contemporary literature an adequate means for knowing it” (17). Mid-century authors, according to Mills, paradoxically

capture human reality and yet do not clarify it at all; they comprise society's center and yet appear nowhere in it. Three recent monographs in different ways speak to this transitional and contradictory period in American literary production: Stephen Schryer's *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (2011), Michael Szalay's *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012), and Alan M. Wald's *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (2012). Whereas Schryer and Szalay address the fiction of and for the emerging professional-managerial class, Wald considers the transformation and suppression of the pro-Communist literary Left during the forties and fifties. They all nonetheless engage with what Lizabeth Cohen terms the postwar "Consumers' Republic," in which "good consumer" became synonymous with "good citizen" (2003, 119). What is the cultural work of literary fiction in a milieu in which nothing, it seems, exists outside the terms of commodity exchange? These studies trace this anxiety through the mid-century decades in which the dream of the Old Left met the fantasy of the new class.

Schryer charts what he calls the "realism of the cultural apparatus" in postwar American fiction. His *Fantasies of the New Class* argues that the end of World War II brought about a change in the way authors understood their contribution to society. Discarding the "social trustee" model of professionalism that circulated during the Progressive and New Deal eras, literary authors no longer understood their work in relation to specific social reforms but instead as molding society through the dissemination of progressive ideas. The economic growth of the postwar years generated a new class of university-educated knowledge workers, constituting an emerging market for higher education and literary fiction. This new class, it was thought, would remake capitalism from within; under their influence, the US economy would, in Lionel Trilling's words, "submit itself to the rule of mind and imagination" (1952, 319). Intellectuals, including literary authors, would guide them on their way. The new class thus not only became the target audience of literary production but also its chief source and subject, generating a realism of its own making. "For this reason," Schryer argues, "the critical intellectual's goal was not to extend the reform efforts of the New Deal era. Rather, it was to enliven the new class's critical imagination" (15). This "new-class fantasy" thus produced fiction that set out to transform society by addressing the same class from which it came.

Yet *Fantasies of the New Class* does not begin in 1945 but in the thirties with the emergence of two academic paradigms that together form an institutional prehistory to postwar fiction: New Criticism in literary studies and structural functionalism in sociological theory. Whereas the social sciences and humanities remained methodologically close in many ways through the early twentieth century—the Chicago School’s affinity with literary naturalism, for example—during the thirties and forties they began “a process of definition by mutual exclusion” (30). The functionalists aligned their work with the hard sciences, setting out to guide the public institutions of the Keynesian state through empirical research and macro theory. New Critics like John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks meanwhile remade literary studies as emphatically anti-instrumental, sheltering it, they argued, from the dehumanizing logic of the technocrats. Schryer nonetheless points to an implicit similarity: New Critics and structural functionalists understood their work as synthesizing technical expertise with an ambiguous morality. They both, as Schryer suggests, “exemplify the ways in which professionalism’s moral claims became fastened to a process of institutional routinization that often voided those claims of specific content” (51). New Criticism and structural functionalism point to the early shift from organization to imagination, laying the groundwork for paradoxically influential and impotent literary fiction.

Schryer traces this new-class fantasy through the work of major postwar authors, including chapters on Ralph Ellison, Mary McCarthy, Saul Bellow, the science fiction of Marge Piercy and Ursula K. Le Guin, and the later novels of Don DeLillo. Although he treads familiar ground, his readings are original in what they together illuminate: the desire of mid-century authors to reform capitalism from within through a cultural apparatus that works mysteriously for the common good, if at all. Schryer’s reading of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) is his clearest illustration of where literature and sociological theory tacitly agree on the work of the intellectual in postwar US society. Upon the publication of *An American Dilemma* (1944), Gunnar Myrdal’s prominent study of US race relations, Ellison became one of its most outspoken critics. He detested Myrdal’s work for characterizing African Americans as a pathological by-product of white American racism. Myrdal made the exceptionalist claim that the American creed, the true egalitarian character of the nation, formed the groundwork for US society; racism could then only be a localized and fleeting element

in the country's history. Myrdal consequently endorsed education rather than structural solutions to this psychic "dilemma." The story of Ellison's protagonist both affirms and contests this assumption. He embodies, Schryer argues, a belief in cultural educators as akin to Matthew Arnold's "saving remnant," leading society to a higher moral plane by example (57). Yet Ellison's scathing portrayal of his protagonist's alma mater and his ultimate underground marginality undermine any faith in the nonpecuniary interests of this university-educated new class. Ellison embraces, according to Schryer, "the idea that artists cultivate forms of cultural capital that negate the instrumental rationality associated with technical expertise and economic wealth. At the same time, through its anatomization of black intellectuals' dependence on white economic capital, the novel calls this cultural idealism into question" (81). This double bind is an outcome of life in the Consumers' Republic. Disillusioned with a by then decimated pro-Communist Left, the only escape from its market logic is to retreat underground.

Fantasies of the New Class is not altogether pessimistic about intellectual work, though. Whereas Don DeLillo's fiction represents the artisanal workingman as an alternative and somewhat nostalgic saving remnant, Schryer advocates for intellectual work that combines disciplinary expertise with public engagement in a way that restores the social-trustee professionalism of the Progressive and New Deal eras. The antistatism of the postwar counterculture in many ways facilitated the dismantling of the welfare state and continues to inflect the neoliberalism of the present. The high theory of the eighties and nineties, he further argues, ironically built its method on a New Critical legacy of anti-instrumentalism. Schryer instead endorses a critical engagement with public institutions and organizations, distinguishing between "instrumentalism in the service of private-sector profit and instrumentalism in the service of broader social goals" (201). His *Fantasies of the New Class* offers a compelling backstory to this intellectual commitment.

Szalay's *Hip Figures* registers a different but concurrent fantasy of new-class literary fiction. Many white authors of the postwar period, he contends, orchestrated a racial fantasy that tied African American "hip" culture to the Democratic Party. This fantasy represented a code through which Democrats endorsed African American civil rights with a "wink," thereby securing African Americans' votes without alienating the party's white racist constituencies. But selling hip to white consumers also, Szalay's study emphasizes, "involved selling them the fantasy that consumption could turn them black—but

only as long as they wished to be” (13). Szalay casts this work of deracination in the history of blackface minstrelsy. Literary hip, like blackface before it, alienates both the performer and the performed from the relations of production implied in it. The result is the reification of working-class African American labor and at the same time the mystification of the professional-managerial class’s complicity in organizing this labor. When at the end of the 1960 presidential campaign Norman Mailer referred to JFK as “the Hipster as Presidential Candidate,” he exercised a “doubly deracinated sign” that Szalay argues treated African America as a commodity while ensuring the absence of laboring African American bodies (3–4, 107–8). In the Consumers’ Republic, that is, the new class did not denaturalize consumption but rather masked and directed it.

Szalay relies on Marxist critic Wolfgang Haug’s theorization of “commodity aesthetics” in making his claim. Haug contends that in the twentieth century, commodities come to offer more than an immediate use-value; they in fact promise a “second skin” that “drifts unencumbered like a multicolored spirit of the commodity into every household” (1986, 50). The consumer is not attracted by the material commodity itself but by the fantasy of future exchange that the commodity conjures in the consumer’s mind; it becomes, for Haug, “the vehicle for an economic function” (16). Szalay literalizes Haug’s theory by considering the black “second skin” that authors and readers consume through the performance of hip. Szalay takes a useful detour through existing scholarship on blackface minstrelsy to clarify the way in which white men historically perform blackness to negotiate both desire and anxiety. Hipness then becomes, in the same way, a winking acknowledgment and uneasy concealment of extracting surplus value from African American labor-power. It is a fantasy that rests on “a strategy for asserting, in coded form, a wise relation to information that others cannot or will not handle” (61). Literary authors, Szalay argues, communicated this code to endorse the Democratic Party as the party of African Americans—whether present or not.

Hip Figures locates and analyzes the cultural work of hip in some of the most popular literary fiction of the postwar period. Chapter 1 takes on New Criticism by way of Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946). Szalay argues that the New Critics’ emphasis on poetic autonomy laid the groundwork for an unspoken African American literary presence, a dehistoricized stylization without recourse to the African American labor underwriting their agrarianism. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 analyze the fiction of Chandler Brossard, Ralph Ellison, Richard Condon, and John Updike as negotiating the fetishization of

racial difference during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Read alongside political ad campaigns, these writers spoke to and sometimes, Szalay emphasizes, sold the Democratic Party's promise of a second skin. The final chapters interrogate the numerous literary accounts of new-class self-liberation from the "bondages" of bureaucratic professionalism, none more notorious than William Styron's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967).

Fictionalizing the 1831 rebellion from the first-person perspective of Turner himself, Styron's *Confessions* met criticism from many African American writers for its racial ventriloquism. In fact, Szalay contends, Styron commodifies blackness as a two-part fantasy: the paternalistic fantasy in which liberal Democrats would free African Americans from the "slavery of segregation"; and the self-liberation fantasy in which the professional-managerial class would, through this second skin, free itself from the "psychic slavery" of market instrumentalism (181–82). This fantasy thereby masks an anxiety of the new class. These professionals aspired to the capitalist class and yet, Szalay notes, "effectively managing labor typically required the white-collar to disavow his role in extracting surplus value from those beneath him. We might hazard that the therapeutic exhortation so common to this period to free the mind from its self-incarnation emerged in part to mediate this contradiction" (185). The second skin then becomes an acknowledgment and a denial; it signals the relations of production as it masks them. In the postwar period, to be a good citizen and Democrat is, according to Cohen's account, to be a good consumer. And literary authors guided their readers to consume a deracinated and "liberating" second skin.

Although his study focuses on the postwar period of civil rights campaigns and the new-class professionalism, like Schryer, Szalay also gestures to the way in which the Consumers' Republic became a neo-liberal one. Although there is much to be said about Barack Obama's presidency in this regard, he focuses instead on Bill Clinton. Whether or not one agrees with Toni Morrison's contentious claim that Clinton was "our first black President" (1998, 31–32), it nonetheless represents a "literary coronation" that speaks back to Szalay's larger project. Hip, as Szalay argues, suggests a commitment to both personal liberty and social justice. In order to regain some of the Democratic Party's white constituencies, Clinton disarticulated these commitments by downsizing the welfare state while surrounding himself with African American faces. To be a "black President" (or at least a president of African Americans) became less about policy than performance. Yet Szalay

emphasizes that Clinton still needed Morrison's literary expertise to confirm this appointment: "Morrison didn't simply observe that Clinton was the first black president; she insisted that only one adept in figurative language might place the crown upon his head" (278). Whereas Schryer charts the retreat of new-class literary authors from social reform, Szalay's *Hip Figures* relocates them as political strategists within the coalition culture of the Consumers' Republic.

Wald's *American Night*, the final installment in his three-part history of Communist writers, offers a literary counterhistory to Schryer's and Szalay's. His emphasis is not on the rise of the new class but rather on the scattering of the Old Left during the late forties and fifties. Wald aims to trouble the fantasy of an insular suburbia that is a legacy of the professional-managerial class, addressing "postwar memory loss by disturbing the imagined community of the Consumers' Republic" (21). He complicates a literary history that tends to be told in the language of decline, looking instead to the ways in which the pro-Communist Left found other, more discreet spaces to reflect on and continue the work it began in the thirties. Whereas Denning's field-changing *The Cultural Front* (1997) refutes the core-periphery model of understanding the New Deal era—the Communist Party being the core and "fellow travelers" the periphery—Wald stresses that Communism's effect on the postwar period is nonetheless significant and complex. Wald restores and analyzes a body of texts he refers to as "Communist literary modernism," which embodies a more contingent understanding of history and identity than the realism that preceded it. But these authors did not, he makes clear, write "to express that there is nothing to express; it is only that their literature returns no answer to those in search of a ratification of social myth" (45). *American Night* thus works to correct for the memory loss of this pro-Communist literary legacy by tracing the many directions it took at mid-century.

Yet Wald's method is similar to Denning's in approaching the Left less as an ideological formation than as, à la Raymond Williams, a structure of feeling. The pro-Communist thirties are not, he underscores, a "gone world" but rather reside in different ways in the common sense of the postwar period. Considering the "enforced forgetting" of the McCarthy era, the postwar Communist presence is not easy to recount. Wald therefore analyzes the shifting definition of "progressive" during this period, a definition that became less and less clear as clandestine Communists began using the term to signal their allegiance without stating it outright. The term "mostly captured a

desired emotional truth—the hope that core Communist values were actually in the mainstream and thus compatible with Left liberalism” (12). That is, despite the term’s casual use in the decades to come, Wald historicizes its specific postwar meaning, one that speaks to the residual pro-Communism of an anticommunist moment in the United States. This leftist coalition endorsed what he terms a “late antifascism,” recognizing a fascist strain in the dominant consumerist and red-baiting US culture (17). That many of these late antifascists put their faith in Stalinist Communism, a faith lost in light of the 1956 Khrushchev Revelations, meant that they too would censure this postwar legacy of the Popular Front. If Schryer and Szalay shine new light on major postwar fiction, Wald, in contrast, shines the first light on many works of Communist literary modernism—as he describes it, a necessary “postwar archaeological dig” (xi).

American Night brings together a heterogeneous cast of authors who nonetheless share in common an outsider status, something Wald suggests “was an effect not a cause; the Party offered outsiders a vision and an opportunity” (297). The book begins with a chapter on poet-turned-novelist Kenneth Fearing. Wald analyzes Fearing’s thriller *The Big Clock* (1946) to highlight the ways in which the pro-Communist literary commitments of the thirties did not decline per se but rather emerged as a “new contingency” that engaged critical rationality and the tools of psychoanalysis (85–86). He then works through chapters on Communist criticism, considering the turbulent mid-century careers of Samuel Sillen and Charles Humboldt, and changes in the pro-Communist realist tradition after 1945. These critics and authors responded to the anticommunist postwar period in different ways, but they all struggled to define the cultural work of literature in the absence of a unifying idea, an anxiety embodied in Theodor Adorno’s negative dialectics.

Still, the bulk of *American Night* considers not literary form but the significance of social outsiders to postwar pro-Communist literary production. “Among the missing elemental points in most constructions of this era,” Wald maintains, “is an awareness that U.S. Communism, relegated to ‘outside’ status by the state, business, and the Right, naturally attracted other ‘outsiders’—especially Jews and African Americans but also homosexuals, ‘race traitors,’ bohemian artists, and various other diverse minorities and idealists” (297). Communism offered these writers a location from which they could imagine outside the state and social conformities of the postwar milieu. These writers, in turn, offered communism a complexity and

contingency that challenged many of its basic tenets. Yet their outsider subject positions did not always (and sometimes could not) come through explicitly in their work. In his discussion of the Jewish Left, for example, Wald notes that these writers had to engage their ethnic background through surrogate characters; acknowledging the “increased sensitivity about the capacity of white supremacists to exploit anti-Semitic stereotypes” after the Holocaust, Jewish writers had to find other ways to confront their complex social location (221). This is one of many sites at which Wald works to restore fragments of a repressed literary history. *American Night* is then a project of memory-work; Wald traces the “mnemonic symbols” that signal the pro-Communist literary Left as it endures under the memory screen of the Consumers’ Republic.

If Mills suggests that it is the work of the intellectual to relate “history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (6), Wald asks which history and to what end. If the Consumers’ Republic did emerge as the dominant culture after 1945, what residual and emergent cultures generated alternative meanings from its margins? Schryer, Szalay, and Wald all in different ways complicate the too-easy story of a declining Old Left and a compromising new class. Whereas Schryer and Szalay recount the fantasy of postwar literary authors working within the economic and political establishment, Wald locates the continuing presence of the Old Left both in and outside this same establishment. What they find is not a single account of an era but instead an entangled history of fantasy and forgetting, paradox and anxiety. They rethink a period that more than any other attracts nostalgic longings that are always more about desire than reality. We need, in short, more studies like these to continue to restore the complexity of this historical moment. After all, as Wald puts it, “The ingenuity of literary history does not belong to documents but to the queries posed” (xi).

Note

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