The Federal Writers’ Project

A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts

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Prologue: The Writer in Crisis

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THE PICKET LINE PASSED BACK and forth in front of the entrance to New York’s Port Authority Building. It was an orderly demonstration; the police would have no trouble. Marching in twos, the twenty-odd men (joined by three or four women) appeared presentable, even well dressed, on the brisk February afternoon. Some smiled and chatted with lookers-on, while others gazed sternly into photographers’ lenses. Normally, the press would not have bothered to cover the episode. Such lines were thrown up every day. But it sensed a news item which made this protest different: at the head of the procession, a man had tied a placard around his neck which read: “CHILDREN NEED BOOKS. WRITERS NEED A BREAK. WE DEMAND PROJECTS.”

Writers in search of jobs had never dramatized their needs in such fashion in this country, but those who marched that day were desperate. The public did not recognize the fledgling writer Earl Conrad or the poet Leon Sabian Herald, but it spotted the legendary Greenwich Village bohemian Maxwell Bodenheim in the front ranks. His risqué novels had been the toast of literary circles in the 1920s, but Bodenheim had publicly repudiated this earlier work a short time ago in favor of a fervent allegiance to Communist doctrine. Further back in the line strode Samuel Putnam, the noted literary critic and translator of Pirandello and Rabelais, who had recently returned from seven years of expatriation in Paris. Upon his arrival he had become a member of the Communist party because he wanted his young son’s later respect. Both men, along with most of their unknown colleagues, now found themselves in such straits that federal relief rolls were their one source of security. Dissatisfied with a dole, they wanted the government to give them work befitting their talents. Perhaps some publicity will help, the picketers thought, as they quietly broke formation after an hour or so.

But the New York Daily Mirror, with little sympathy for their demands and cultural concerns, chose to photograph the event for posterity with the caption "our future Walt Whitmans." Latest reports, the morning paper declared, were "that the only work in sight was for the writing of more placards." Other city newspapers neglected the incident entirely, focusing on leads such as "Fervor for Nazis Waning in Munich," "Babe Ruth Claims He Is Good for Several More Years," and "Jimmy Walker Broke, Wife Foots Bills." The feeble protest, it appeared, had accomplished nothing.  

This unusual scene could not be considered surprising in early 1935, another year in the Great Depression. This decade, as no other in the history of the United States, saw the nation threatened with special economic and psychological devastation. At the same time that it reached into every home or "Hooverville," the Depression challenged the very mythology that had buttressed what Jefferson had termed "the great experiment." The sense of America's uniqueness, of a land where hopes became realities and paupers self-made men, seemed to vanish, as breadlines and "bindle stiffs" captured the public imagination. All could agree with Marc Connelly's Angel Gabriel that "everything nailed down is comin' loose," as the sum of industrial wages and farm incomes plummeted from $81 to $41 billion. The only rising figures were market losses, which increased from $30 to $75 billion, and unemployment, which more than tripled to pass 12 million in 1932.  

At the beginning of the Depression, people still maintained great confidence in the titans of industry and finance. President Herbert Hoover himself regularly pointed out, every few months, that the worst had passed. The Democrats adopted "Happy Days Are Here Again" as their song for the 1932 campaign, but "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?," written the same year, caught the true mood. One historian has suggested that the new Zeitgeist was reflected even in the popularity of Donald Duck, symbol of "strident panic," which was growing at the expense of that of Mickey Mouse and his "crassy individualism."

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Critics sneered at the President’s philosophy and “ragged” (rather than “rugged”) individualism; the Twenty-third Psalm underwent some alteration to read “Hoover is my shepherd; I shall do nothing but want.”¹ Businessmen began to speak of economic “maturity” rather than “prosperity,” while panaceas galore were offered by Democrats, Republicans, Communists, Trotskyites, Socialists, Farm-Laborites, Huey Long, Fathers Divine and Coughlin, Dr. Townsend, and a host of others.

In addition to challenging the national mythology, the economic shock raised the question of whether the diseased patient could recover at all. The emergency suggested the steady decline of the West which had been pessimistically forecast by Spengler in 1918. The closing of the country’s Western frontier had, moreover, long since ruled out the traditional possibility of turning in that direction for hope.² America was no longer certain of its providential future. “B.C.,” and “A.C.,” might take on additional meaning as “before the Crash” and “after the Crash” and, whatever the final economic effect of this challenge, the nation and its citizenry would never be the same.

The convulsions of what Edmund Wilson called “the American Earthquake” were graphically registered by writers in the turbulent thirties. These “seismographs of social shock” reacted in different ways; yet for the overwhelming majority certain underlying responses could be discerned. Having denounced the shallowness of the bourgeois mentality in the 1920s, retired to Proustian introspection and “l’art pour l’art,” or boarded the first ship for Paris, many writers now felt vindicated by the collapse of the market and of the businessman’s prestige. The Great Depression did not seem altogether depressing to writers who, having pointed out the follies of the system, found a new sense of freedom and power with “the sudden, unexpected collapse of that stupid fraud.”³

In their exhilaration, many became *engagé* in the fundamental, revolutionary sense. “Gone the bohemianism and cynicism, the con-


cern with sex and aesthetics that I remembered,'" noted the poet Orrick Johns in recalling the excitement which pervaded literary circles. "A madly hopeful time," wrote Malcolm Cowley of this period, and he concluded Exile's Return in 1934 with a plea (struck from a second edition) that art and propaganda merge "to take the worker's side." One of his disciples later reminisced about Cowley's belief that "salvation would come by the word, the long-awaited and fateful exact word that only the true writer would speak.""7

Such feelings separated many writers from the majority of Americans, but the Great Depression forced them into a common position with their neighbors. Even while the spirit of the writer stirred in revolt, his physical wants had to be satisfied. The Depression caught the writer especially unprepared to win food and shelter with his talents. Wherever he turned for work in his trade, only very limited opportunities presented themselves.8

The economic crisis rocked the publishing world with considerable violence. Firms which in 1929 had taken in an estimated $42 million from the sale of trade (non-textbook) publications found four years later that their proceeds had dwindled to half that amount. Unable to afford to buy books, readers increased their borrowing; the American Library Association estimated that between 4 and 5 million new borrowers registered with public libraries in this time, and the total circulation of public library books in the United States increased by nearly 40 per cent. But this provided little comfort to publishers and authors, who only had to scan the monthly production statistics to realize the extent of their catastrophe: 9,035 new books and editions were printed in 1931-32, a decrease of 1,272 from the preceding year. The first five months of 1933 yielded 460 fewer new printings than the corresponding period a year earlier; by December there were 950 fewer new printings. Faced with such figures, Publishers Weekly could only advise pub-

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7 Orrick Johns, Time of Our Lives, p. 399; Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's; Alfred Kazin, Starting Out in the Thirties, p. 5. In this period of fundamental dislocation, writers drifted steadily leftward toward the Communist party. For the political and emotional aspects of this affiliation, see Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left and Malcolm Cowley et al., "Memories of the First American Writers' Congress," American Scholar 35 (Summer, 1966): 495-516. This relationship affected the future writers' project as well. See chap. 9 below.

8 This point is overlooked by Leslie Fiedler, who argues that the division between writers and the American public created "two memories" of the Depression. See Fiedler, in David Madden, ed., Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, pp. 3-25.
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4 Sherwood Anderson, Memoirs, p. 453; Weeks, "Hard Times." The writers' pose of the previous decade — the lonely individual against the Philistines — or self-sacrifice to the needs of the State could not present easy solutions after cuts in advances and the fall of the gold standard in 1933. Editor Schneider's interview, May 30, 1968.

5 Editor and Publisher 86 (Jan. 23, 1933); 5; Author and Journalist 19 (June, 1934).
the field reached 48 per cent, and by the end of the Depression only about 120 cities had more than a single newspaper publisher. In the same week that the New York Times closed its Brooklyn plant for all but Sunday editions, a leading columnist estimated that in New York alone 1,500 craftsmen were out of work. In May, 1934, replies from hundreds of New York newspapermen to a questionnaire showed that the majority could not live on their present savings for more than six months; many could not do so for more than six weeks. A comparison of editorial salaries on thirty-one dailies by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the fall of that year revealed that almost 17 per cent earned less than $20 a week, 28 per cent earned between $50 and $100, and only 3.4 per cent received $100 or more weekly.12

Competition from radio and the motion picture industry also added to the woes of the authors. While, for example, magazine advertising lineage dropped 22.5 per cent in 1931, broadcasting advertising continued to climb, with that of the National and Columbia radio systems increasing 33 per cent during the same twelve months. The end of 1933 saw a gain of 23 per cent over totals reached by December, 1932, in this field. As for seeking refuge in Hollywood, almost any published novelist had the opportunity to work for twelve weeks at good wages, but conditions were so unstable that the majority often found themselves out of a job and without prospects at the end of this period.13

All these facts, however, did not change overnight the popular image of the writer’s lot. An aspiring poet just out of Vassar in the depths of the crisis had been brought up with the idea that “writers weren’t living people.” “The public saw them as trash,” in Muriel Rukeyser’s opinion. “Living meant going to the office. Writing for magazines was jeered at, unless it was for the Saturday Evening Post. That meant acceptance, money and the proper capitalist virtues.” Privation and suffering were the writer’s proper lot, argued a syndicated columnist: “No writer is worth shucks until he can and has taken punishment. . . .

12 Editor and Publisher 64 (June 11, 1932):7, 38, 52, and 66 (Jan. 27, 1934):110-11; Vecter, Great Depression, p. 245; Guild Reporter 1 (May, 1934):12; Monthly Labor Review 40 (May, 1935):1137-48. By contrast, in April, 1930, these figures had been 13, 41, and 5.7 per cent, respectively.
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He’s supposed to go hungry and ragged and cold, to drudge at chores he loathes, to suffer endless humiliation and rejection doing the thing he loves in infrequent, stolen moments or baking beans. It MAKES a writer, and weeds out the POSEURS, the people with a smattering of talent but no salt or spunk, lacking which no writer is worth a hoot.” Ensooned in the editorship of the Saturday Review of Literature, H. S. Canby pontificated that authors should not go on salary, since “profits in themselves don’t stimulate good literature.” Regrettably, the editor did not disclose any basis for his concluding claim that “no good (and celebrated) story-teller or playwright, even in 1932, can fail of a decent reward.” Such views, moreover, took no account of the observation of Dr. Johnson, “This is truth ev’ry where confess’d / Slow rises worth by poverty depress’d.” Instead, the New York Times concluded its criticism of “lazy” American writers by asking: “Can it be that they waste too much time attending literary teas?”14

Most writers had to forego such pleasures to attend to the job hunt. But the Depression caught them particularly ill-equipped, since they had little or no training and experience for anything except their métier. Anxious interviewees often discovered, as a short story by Saroyan well related, that their one stock of possible value was the ability to use a typewriter. Greenwich Village’s intellectual colony could therefore consider itself most fortunate in having free lunches and suppers for a quarter at the privately organized Artists’ and Writers’ Dinner Club. Others borrowed small sums from the Authors’ League fund or, swelling their pride, applied for the $2-a-week food check at Home Relief bureaus and became euphemistically known as “clients of the government.” In March, 1935, about 1,400 writers who had been sacked from various journalism posts were listed on the relief rolls. However, many of their colleagues refused to submit to the often excruciating experience of application, including the humiliating procedure of attaining relief certification and of proving that one met the arbitrary eligibility standards set up by relief agencies. Some tried their hand at odd jobs, which were few and far between. Harry Roskolenko became a ditchdigger in the Eighth Avenue subway. Harvey Breit delivered telephone books, and Studs Terkel counted bonds for the

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Treasury Department. With “the world falling around me,” Josef Berger left New York for Provincetown, where he lived largely on free fish from native fishermen.15

Outside sources could not be depended on for adequate help. Private organizations attempting to establish a specific program for white-collar workers quickly discovered that the lack of funds vitiated the best intentions. Thus, the Philadelphia Committee on Unemployment Relief and the New York Emergency Work Bureau, both begun toward the end of 1930, soon had to cancel their efforts. Municipal and state governments lacked sufficient funds and taxing power to offer adequate relief. Those state programs that did exist generally provided work of the lowest manual type. The New York state legislature took a significant step in September, 1931, by passing the Wicks Act. Creating the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, it ruled that the state had to refund 40 per cent of all municipal expenditures for home and work relief. In time, Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt and TERA’s head, Harry Hopkins, gave the nation its first comprehensive relief program. But it only represented a start and did not offer anything definite for writers and others in the creative arts.16

Offering a luxury item on the public market, most writers in the Depression years could only await an arbitrary return on their stock in trade. They did not care for the prescriptions of the New York Times for literary inspiration, such as Victor Hugo’s diet of orange peel scraps and the claws of crayfish, or George Eliot’s—red pickled cabbage, onions, and coffee.17 But many, unprepared to work in other fields, did not have money even for meals such as those. Picket lines, at the same time, led nowhere. Unless new champions were found to help them meet their economic needs, the future seemed bleak, even hopeless.

16 William McDonald, “Federal Relief Administration and the Arts” (Library of Congress, 1949) (Music Division, Reel MUS 64), chap. 3; Harry Hopkins, Spending to Save, chap. 2.