LITERARY RESPONSE TO NINETEEN-THIRTIES HISTORICAL MILIEU

...clusters of hungry men and women waiting like docile peasants for food handouts at the relief stations; the smokeless chimneys and rusting sheds of factories standing mute and empty behind their locked gates; the abandoned shops and stores, their doorways littered with trash, their grime-streaked windows staring vacantly upon half-empty streets; the drooping shoulders of a father, husband, brother, or friend whose pride had been battered into lethargy and dejection by months of fruitless job hunting; the panic and anger of the crowd milling before a bank entrance on whose door a typed note stated, "Closed until further notice by order of the Board of Directors."  

Distress and turbulence pervaded America in the 1930s. A number of playwrights, poets, and novelists in the United States viewed the injustices that the economic system inflicted upon society with intense loathing. In a time of crisis, they frowned on the concept of art for art's sake and subordinated it to art as social criticism. To this end they developed a new expression

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2In addition to Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice and Robert Sherwood, there were playwrights like Michael Gold, John Howard Lawson, Maxwell Anderson, poets such as William Carlos Williams, Muriel Rukeyser, Kenneth Patchen and Nelson Algren, and novelists such as Willa Cather, John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, and Josephine Herbst. Many of
that directly integrated politics and social criticism with literature. This chapter provides an overview of the literary response of socially committed writers to the socio-political milieu of the 1930s.

The intellectual ferment in 1930s literary writing was unavoidably rooted in the post-World War I period. War had brought about a new experience for all those involved in it. In the United States its suffering created tensions, hatreds, and dissensions among people of various classes. Its miserable aftermath was more brutal than that which any previous war had caused. For intellectuals, the Great War of 1914-18 meant sacrifice, discomfort and loss of personal integrity. T.S. Eliot, in The Wasteland, expressed, what he calls the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history." Eliot depicted the horrors of war and the spiritual neurosis that it induces the poem's war imagery: "I think we are in rats'
Writers like Eliot, however, concentrated more on the effects of war and the cultural starvation of post-war society. There wasn't any significant concern with specific problems relating to economic poverty or physical suffering of individual families. Admitting this tendency, Edmund Wilson remarked: "liberals . . . were not taking certain recent happenings as seriously as we should." Similarly, the disillusionment with war, which had given rise to T.S. Eliot's Wasteland (1922), evoked in Ernest Hemingway a deeply felt anti-war response instead of one that opposed society's injustices. The consumer culture of the twenties, on the other hand, inspired novels of social criticism such as Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt (1920) and Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby and evoked similar concerns from John Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser. Likewise, Joseph Wood Krutch in The Modern Temper (1929) indicted modern humanity's cultural drought, lamenting that the world of science and skepticism had attenuated and destroyed the mystery of the universe—the emotions

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and desires of humankind. Yet none of these writers wrote predominantly about issues relating to social and economic injustice that became a vital part of intellectual consciousness during the thirties. The dissimilarity lay in the emphasis. Unlike the writers of the thirties, who made a politically radical analysis of the class structure, writers of the twenties explored the spiritual deficiency of society, its commercialization, and emotional and aesthetic starvation. They were, as Peeler says, "more likely to be cultural radicals than political ones."

One can attribute the lack of socio-political writing in the twenties to the fact that the economic situation then was not as deplorable as it was in the thirties. Despite the ferment that World War I created, the decade was materially prosperous. The opulence of the twenties obscured the problem of economic deprivation, starvation, poverty, and unemployment, making these issues seem trivial and incongruent with the dominant mood of well-

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6Harold Stearn's 1922 collection, Civilization in The United States which contains thirty essays by authors such as H.L. Mencken, Lewis Mumford, Van Vyck Brooks and Stearns himself states that American civilization was wanting, not because of economic starvation, but because of an intellectual and "spiritual poverty."

being and hopefulness. The superficially spectacular brilliance of the post-war boom engendered among Americans, a positive, and almost frivolous attitude towards life and the illusion of self-sufficiency. Disregarding the dangers of complacency, the generation of the twenties believed that the United States had a future of unlimited profits, luxurious living, and social and political peace and happiness. The middle class fostered the notion that this plethora of wealth would gradually become more widespread and bring about permanent prosperity. American society believed that its business leaders would bring an unparalleled abundance of riches to every citizen in the nation. For the overwhelming majority, thus, the spirit was one of buoyancy and immense optimism in the economy. Naturally, therefore, most writers were more enthusiastic about dealing with subject matter pertaining to this mood. Ruminating on the "literary consequences of the Crash," Edmund Wilson claimed that writing in the twenties reflected the gentility of critic H.L. Mencken, one who engaged in "ironic, beer-loving [and] . . . living principally on the satisfaction of feeling superior to the broker and enjoying the debauchment of American life . . . ."

Footnote: "Wilson, The Shores of Light 492."
attitude of the decade, says Wilson, showed appreciation for business and an unmitigated intellectual detachment, creating a situation that "involved compromises with the salesman and the broker."9

Similarly, Malcolm Cowley, in retrospect, perceived the "the 1920s . . . like a long party . . . ."10 In Exile's Return11 (1934), Cowley conveyed that for socially conscious intellectuals the chief cultural experience of the 1920s was that of an exile that ended when writers and intellectuals finally returned from Europe to their homeland during the thirties. With the Depression, however, it seemed that Cowley and his fellow expatriates hoped to leave the "corrupt past" behind and enter a new phase of life.12

The Depression and the political events of the thirties threw up, as compared to the previous decade, many more tangible social problems. "With the Depression it was the physical human who was swindled," says Peeler. He further observes:

9Wilson, The Shores of Light 493.
Minus its tinsel, capitalism's economic and social injustices seemed more obvious than ever, and simple commercialism appeared to be one of its lesser evils. Unemployment, hunger, and dispossession were rife, and capitalism seemed determined to drag millions of innocents along with it as it sunk into the grave. Social writers and artists of the Depression witnessed this not only with anger but also anguish, and their acute despair over Americans' physical condition was a distinguishing mark of the thirties artist.¹³

Literary themes, thus, changed from Eliot's war images and Fitzgerald's and Lewis's exposure of the business culture in the twenties, to a concern for human suffering arising out of economic crisis. The mood that developed in the wake of the Depression was one of despondency and disillusionment. On October 29, 1929, the extended "party" of the 1920s and illusions of permanent prosperity ended when the bloated and spuriously prosperous stock-market collapsed, plunging the country into "the most momentous economic occurrence in the history of the United States."¹⁴ The crash abruptly exposed the flaws of capitalism that had stood concealed during the twenties under the veneer of industrialization, urbanization and increasing wealth. The economic debacle

¹³Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 10.

wiped out prosperity almost overnight. It led to an economic decline that continued until the middle of the decade, and deeply affected people’s lives throughout the period of the thirties. Within months of ensuing disaster, business houses collapsed, factories shut down, and banks crashed. It resulted in a colossal growth in unemployment, which created unprecedented poverty for the common man. The calamity rendered millions of men homeless, deprived families of their means of subsistence, and destroyed people’s savings while they fruitlessly searched for work. Threat of death and starvation became a common phenomenon during the decade. This economic catastrophe devastated families who were completely torn by illness and desertion—some temporarily and others permanently. Psychologically, it destroyed the self-esteem of unemployed men who started to doubt their abilities. To give vent to their feelings they often resorted to violence at home and sometimes deserted their families. Edmund Wilson observed that during the Depression, Americans seemed to be "experiencing not merely an economic breakdown but a distinct psychological change.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15}Wilson. The Shores of Light 525.
Industry suffered an enormous decline in profits by the end of 1932. The crisis in agriculture ruined farmers. School teachers were left unpaid. The standard of living came down to an appallingly low level for many and people suffered from malnutrition. The financial crisis wreaked havoc in the U.S. banking system. Construction work ceased, and foreign trade declined. Having witnessed this state of affairs, Edmund Wilson observed that "it may be true that, with the present breakdown, we have come to the end of something, and . . . we are ready to start on a different t[rack]."  

Thus, the economic optimism of the twenties gave way to the economic despair of the thirties. The gloom that had descended over the nation with the Depression further deepened when President Hoover’s assurance that "prosperity was around the corner" did not ameliorate conditions. Making little effort to counter the effects of the Crash and perceiving it as nothing more than a natural business cycle, Hoover provided verbal assurance with hope in a natural recovery of prosperity. Hoover’s conservatism and his administration’s laissez-faire policy further spread panic among the ranks of the jobless and intensified writers’ disillusionment. Unalleviated

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16 Wilson. The Shores of Light 529-530.
suffering and years of adversity increasingly exasperated them. By 1932 writers such as Steinbeck, Odets and Rice, among others, began to perceive the Depression as more than a temporary economic reverse. They viewed the American economic system as wasteful, inefficient and exploitative. Fearing the possibility of similar or even worse disasters, they viewed the Depression as the collapse of an inherited system of values and the end of a secure life. Such circumstances engendered in them a strong upsurge of social consciousness. Reviewing the situation at the time, Elmer Rice stated:

1932 . . . was the last year of the benign dispensation of Mr. Hoover. All right-thinking people were toasting in bath-tub gin, the iron inexorability of the business cycle. Shoeless, but ruggedly individualistic, farmers were burning their crops, while hungry . . . mill-hands were gazing gloomily at the windows of idle shoe-factories. On the Riversfront, just below Riverside drive, was a sordid "Hooverville" of impoverished shacks . . . . A block further away, an abandoned twelve story convalescent hospital, capable of housing thousands of the homeless, stood ostentatiously empty. Lawyers and housewives offered a fine variety of apples, at every street corner. When a bedraggled mendicant told a stout lady, in a mink coat, that he had not eaten in three days, she said sympathetically: "But you should force yourself!" Everybody agreed that the whole situation was deplorable."

17Elmer Rice, "A Note on Materialism," TMscc., nd, 4 pp., F 75-69, The Elmer Rice Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin, 1-2.
The public, too, reacted with outrage and pinned their hopes, in the election of 1932, on the leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt. To rectify the situation, Roosevelt’s New Deal aimed at restoring the economy and providing solace to the people through active government intervention in the process of capitalist production. It attempted to revive banks, help industry and agriculture, and provide relief for the old, unemployed and homeless through measures such as the Social Security Act, the National Recovery Act (NRA), the Agriculture Adjustment Administration (AAA), and relief agencies such as the Works Progress administration (WPA). To writers like Odets, Roosevelt’s humanitarian concern was comforting. Commenting on a radio speech by Roosevelt in 1940, Odets remarked:

He spoke of preparedness, of the state of the world, generalities, diffuse because of political reasons, a speech which was significant only because of the warm human tone in it, fatherly and friendly."18

The Depression also had deep repercussions around the world, and soon economic twilight descended upon Europe as well. No longer able to service their war and

reconstruction debts to the U.S., the European economy suffered a staggering blow when the U. S. withdrew its dollars (after the crash). Germany, France and England had been dependent on such inflows of U.S. currency since World War I. Thus, their own inability to recover from the devastation of the war and then the Depression finally reduced these countries to bankruptcy. England experienced widespread distress, prolonged crisis, intense anxiety, and fumbling leadership. The Depression forced her to abandon the gold standard in 1931. This constituted a shattering blow to her economy. It put approximately two million people out of work that year and reduced the value of the pound by 25%. According to Robert Graves, "all over the world prices were falling; this was leading to an increase in the burden of national debts, and to several cases of national default. World trade was declining, markets shrinking, interest from investments drying up, foreign exchange wobbling."70

In Germany, the number of unemployed increased from less than two million to six million by the end of the decade. The crash had torn the fabric of international

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A sharp rise in world-wide political tensions aggravated America's preoccupation with economic perplexity at home. In 1933, Hitler became chancellor of Germany, strengthening the fascist movement in Europe, a turn of events that threatened the very existence of world peace and democracy. His abuse of power led to the burning of the Reichstag and atrocities against Jews and leftists.

Meanwhile, in November of the same year, Sir Oswald Mosley, in England, announced the formation of the British Union of Fascists, and his followers began to appear in the streets of England in their Black shirts.²¹

The political events of the years 1936-1939 witnessed Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland, the abandonment of the Versailles treaty, the failure of the League of Nations, and the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. The most devastating event, however, was the eruption of a civil war in Spain in 1936. Franco's troops, backed by the fascists, brutally crushed working classes and destroyed leftist forces at work against the government, representing an intensification of fascist forces. These

²¹Mussolini made a deep impression on Mosley when the latter visited Rome in 1931. Upon his return he founded the British Union of Fascists to make an assault on democracy.
events are testimony to the terrible shape and momentum that events had taken.

The situation further perturbed the intelligentsia. The Depression’s hunger marches, angry workers and bankrupt entrepreneurs had convinced socially aware writers that the world-wide economic and social fabric had been torn beyond repair. Political events in Europe now created fears of domination by another, even less, humane system. The situation reinforced the need for a literature of protest. Writers, American as well as European, foresaw the advent of another cataclysmic disaster in the form of a world-wide conflict, involvement in which, they knew, the United States could not avoid. They assumed the responsibility of attempting to save the nation from this crisis. Committed to this cause, they turned towards themes that promoted democracy and condemned war during the second half of the decade.

Yet, if adverse circumstances of the thirties created despair, then they also created optimism amongst writers. This stemmed from evidence that capitalism was waning, and given the Soviet Union’s economic health, they believed that socialism might replace the capitalist
system in the U.S. In contrast to the dismal economic scene at home, socially conscious writers saw a new civilization blooming in the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union pictured a society devoid of unemployment and racial discrimination, one that honoured artists and writers, and opposed imperialism and Fascism. The introduction of the first Five Year Plan which seemed to eliminate capitalism in Russia and the rise in Soviet industry and agriculture to higher levels of production every year made the Soviet planned economy seem like a system wherein land, factories, mines and labour produced wealth not for the welfare of a handful of people, but for the prosperity of all classes. "The apparent success of the Plan," according to Wilson, "had its effect on all classes in the rest of the world--" Writers saw

Ironically, improvement in the Soviet economy, in great part, was a result of U.S. capital investment in the Soviet Union throughout the 1920s.


Actually, though, the Bolsheviks granted many concessions to U.S. business to develop oil, minerals and other resources.

Much of this success, incidently, was due to loans, capital investment (Henry Ford, Armand Hammer and others) and technically from U.S. private businessmen--even though the U.S. government did not recognize the Soviet Union.

Wilson, The Shores of Light 531.
knowledge, art, and science being made accessible to the mass of workers and peasants. The fact that workers themselves were creating science and literature astounded them. For instance, the U.S.S.R.’s progress made a deep impression on Elmer Rice, who made two trips to Russia during the decade (1932 and 1936). According to him, it presented "a 'hopeful vision,' a vision that earned the day's labour and mitigated the pangs of hunger."  

Impressed with Soviet Communism, Arthur Koestler stated: "the contrast between the downward trend of Capitalism and the simultaneous steep rise of planned economy was so striking and obvious that it led to the equally obvious conclusion: They are the future--We, the past."  

Given these impressions, it is not surprising that socially committed writers, at this time, believed that communism or at least socialism was the key to America’s future and they uncritically accepted the Soviet system of planned economy. As to the impression the Soviet Union was creating, Wilson stated:

With a businessman’s president in the White House, who kept telling us . . . that the system was perfectly sound, who sent General Douglas

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27Rice, "A Note on Materialism," TMscC, nd, 4 pp., Box F 75-69, The Elmer Rice Collection, HRC, University of Texas, Austin, 3.

MacArthur to burn the camp of the unemployed war veterans who had come to appeal to Washington, we wondered about the survival of American institutions; and we became more and more impressed by the achievements of the Soviet Union, which could boast that its industrial and financial problems were carefully studied by the government, and that it was able to avert such crisis.  

Thus, claims Wilson, that for "writers and artists who had grown up in the Big Business [E]ra, [and who] had always resented its barbarism, its crowding out of everything they cared about, these years were not depressing but stimulating." That, despite the suffering and the pain, "one couldn't help being exhilarated at the sudden unexpected collapse of that stupid gigantic fraud" of American capitalism. The crash, therefore, came as a relief to intellectuals such as Steinbeck, Dos Passos and others who now found a tangible reason to express their disdain for human suffering. The Depression and political events also provided them an opportunity to discover some answers that could lead human beings out of the ensuing calamity.  

The search for alternative solutions and the influence of Soviet success caused sensitive intellectuals

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2Wilson, The Shores of Light 499.
3Wilson, The Shores of Light 498.
4Wilson, The Shores of Light 498-499.
to question the functioning of the capitalist system, the contradictions within its structure and its concealed inequities under the guise of humanism. The rationalization for every aberration that the capitalists offered was that capitalism offered equality of opportunity in the most democratic manner and that anyone who wished to become an entrepreneur was free to do so. Furthermore, the economic system was designed to work in national interest; it created employment, increased production, raised the standard of living of the working class, and with its competitive functioning, implanted in the workers the admirable traits of thrift and hard work.

Having witnessed the crash of these ideals with the onslaught of the Depression, and unable to stomach the consequences of the economic crash, a number of intellectuals, if by no means a majority, reacted immediately to the situation. After being awakened to capitalistic inadequacies, they were drawn towards Marxism which they sought as a means of interpreting the social milieu through the content of their art. Soon the temper of the United States began to swing leftwards. Many intellectuals started attending left-wing discussion groups, organized writers’ congresses,32 and commiserated

with factory workers and farm laborers.

A number of factors caused this gravitation towards Marxism. The theory of class struggle attracted a great number of writers. It explained that a small class of land-owners and capitalists were in a position to deprive the workers of a fair share of the values of his labour by controlling the means of production and paying the worker just enough wages to enable him to live and work, widening, as a consequence, the cleavage between the working and the ruling classes. It also explained poverty not as a result of the periodic slumps of a capitalist system but as the exploitation of the poor by the rich.

The Marxist dialectic provided writers with a useful tool with which they could interpret the meaning and significance of prevailing social and political phenomena. Some intellectuals found comfort in the belief that the chaotic social situation would soon be resolved and America would experience a utopian future, if it applied the principles of dialectical materialism postulated by Marxism. Essentially, the Marxist principles of equality, justice, and liberty for all appealed to them as the highest form of humanism. Counter to the capitalist

Wright signed a call for a Communist party-backed American Writers' Congress, to discuss the necessity of writers to help "accelerate the destruction of Capitalism." Peeler. **Hope Among Us Yet** 179.
humanist rationalization, whose failings had been exposed by the Depression, intellectuals who saw capitalism and war as sinister enemies, found reasons to put their faith in a collectivist economy and applied it to interpret the contemporary American situation.

Adopting Marxist and socialist philosophies, they sought to fight against the injustice of the existing system and inspire the people to believe that with collective effort they could eliminate social injustice and eradicate inequities. Max Schachtman, in Hard Times reports the Depression’s role in engendering this change in political temper:

Until the Crash occurred, it was thought that there was something unique about American capitalism. Even the radicals felt it. They were in bad shape. The Communists were wracked by internal strife. The Socialists were stagnating. Ford was paying his workers $5 a day—unprecentedly high wages. It seemed the class struggle was coming to an end, and radicalism might disappear. But the 1929 crisis created a revolution in thought: it affected liberals and, in many cases, conservatives as well as radicals.33

Appreciation of socialist ideas led to an enormous increase in the circulation of numerous liberal pamphlets,

such as Culture and the Crisis,\textsuperscript{34} and left-wing magazines and journals such as The New Republic, The New Masses, and The Partisan Review. These journals published articles that featured the anger of the working class. They expressed a confident positive outlook in Marxism which, they contended, would establish a classless society. Through these magazines, American writers expressed a desire to replace the old capitalist society with a new socialist one. For many in the intellectual community, Marxism, without suspicion of disloyalty, became a faith that lasted till the close of the decade.

However, while Marxism attracted a number of writers, it was essentially a functional theory, one that they adopted primarily to express their discontent. Underneath the Marxist garb, the characteristic intellectual initiative was rather utopian and one that sought a regeneration of humanity and the triumph of humanistic ideals. Malcolm Cowley’s retrospective summary of the social consciousness of the thirties’ writers, in

\textsuperscript{34}Culture and the Crisis was a pamphlet that fifty-two artists and intellectuals signed at the peak of the 1932 presidential campaign. Among those who signed it were Sherwood Anderson, Erskine Caldwell, Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Sidney Howard, Lincoln Steffens, and Edmund Wilson. These writers posited that capitalism had failed and that the only efficient alternative for the overhauling of the entire structure of the system was the Communist Party’s program.
the New Republic, explains this phenomenon:

We might say that the age was Marxian in a broad sense, but here and there qualifications are to be made. Even the left-wing writers of the time were not much interested in Marx as a philosopher or in Marx as an economist . . . or Marx in his favorite role as a scientist of revolution. Instead, they revered him as a prophet calling for a day of judgment and a new heaven on earth. 35

Furthermore, though they were attracted to communism's emphasis on justice and egalitarianism, the Communist Party's literary policies that demanded loyalty of thought and action, and a literature of its choice, repelled them. David Peeler observes:

Not only did the party seem too self-important, it wanted writers to do more than simply disapprove of capitalism. Its program for proletarian literature demanded that the . . . [writer] become an actual combatant in the class struggle, one who demonstrated Party doctrine through formula stories and rallied others to the cause with prescribed militant appeals. 36

This policy naturally did not appeal to writers whose main concern was to portray human misery and not propagate Party principles. The Party’s position on the importance of literature assuming an active role in the

35Quoted in From the Crash to the Blitz 392-393.
36Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 179.
world had been agreeable to them. They were prepared to go along with the Party’s belief that the thirties was a time to replace the conventional concept of "art for art’s sake" with social criticism and analysis. Josephine Herbst, for example, had reached this conclusion at the start of the Depression. In 1930, she attended the Communists’ Second World Plenum of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, held in Kharkov, Russia; she returned with endless enthusiasm in the creation of a fiction that emphasized politics instead of concentrating on psychology and symbolism. But like most writers, she felt compelled to reject the party’s dogmatism. Since writers were committed to the concerns of human welfare and not to any political dogma, they could not sacrifice the former for the latter. Moreover, to confine to Party rules was to give up their freedom to write, which all writers cherish. Therefore, even while they expressed revolutionary ideas, they rejected the Party policies. Daniel Aaron recollected that writers attended the Communist-Party backed First American Writers’ Congress of 1935 to voice their concern for human injustice and not because of a staunch belief in political ideology. Of the two hundred and sixteen writers who

37Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 178.
attended, Aaron claimed:

Most of them were not privy to the decisions of the Communist party, knew very little really about the Communist party, but were brought together simply because of their common opposition to Hitler, Fascism, and by the general feeling that somehow the Soviet Union represented the forces of progress. But as a group they weren’t particularly ideological-minded.38

Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley, who were both present at the conference, when Aaron made this claim, agreed with him. Cowley conceded that “[o]ne feature of the late 1930’s was the fact that the ideological level was quite low.”39

Evidently, as Cowley stated at the conference, an enormous idea working through the minds of writers of the 1930s was "the value of human dignity." He further observed:

In one work after another, you would see this feeling that each individual person had a right to dignity. And these ideas all worked together to a synthesis which the Communist Party had taken advantage of.40


39“Thirty years later,” The American Scholar 498.

40“Thirty Years Later,” The American Scholar 505.
Likewise, despite his willingness to work with the Party towards the common aim of producing a literature of the people, Dos Passos declined to write fiction based on the demands of Party leaders. He conveyed his stand on this issue at the Writer's Congress: "To impose formulas on literature was to have writers give up the freedom of thought. For novelists to follow the Party's "minute prescriptions of doctrine" was to engage in "boss rule thuggery."" Others, such as Josephine Herbst and James T. Farrell, remained committed to writing about social realities and human life and abandoned the orthodoxy of the Party's program which, according to Peeler, seemed inclined "to forge literature into a political weapon in which truth was subordinated to doctrine."

Another idea that drew writers towards the Party was the socialist idea of comradeship. A sense of community and solidarity gave writers a feeling of security that they "were no longer alone, isolated, helpless, . . . [and] if [they] . . . took the side of the working class [they] . . . were one of a large body of people marching toward something." Such insights became the subject

41Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 179.
42Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 180.
43"Thirty years later," American Scholar 504.
matter of Kenneth Burke's poem "Plea of the People" and the plays of Clifford Odets.

The need to protest had become an integral part of the literary consciousness at the decade's beginning. Thus, even writers who were not impressed with the Communist Party could not help associating with it. The dilemma that the decade's problems had posed led to their association with it. William Phillips' stated that:

In one way or another, and in varying degrees, we felt that the Communist party was a bad influence organizationally and ideologically. At the same time it seemed to us to be the only Party capable of doing anything, the only party capable of providing some kind of central force around which to organize. And we were all caught at various times, and in varying degrees, in this contradiction."

As the situation grew worse it became hard to dispel the feeling. Therefore, the urgency of the political events after 1935 again drew writers towards the Communist Party. International politics created the need for measures to relieve not only economic injustice, but to protest against Fascism and war. They also compounded the perplexity of writers. This disenchantment with politics abroad and confusion regarding the economy at home resulted in the enactment of the Communist Popular


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Front policy amongst "those who saw Western civilization's only chance of survival in a banding together of all the anti-fascist powers . . . including Soviet Russia." Keeping with this course of action, the Communists united with all pro-democratic nations in common opposition to the growing fascist menace and formulated a programme based upon a fight against imperialist war and Fascism. According to the 1937 Congress, their main aim was "to maintain and extend democratic rights and civil liberties." The party appealed to writers because under its Popular Front policy, it loosened its ideological rigidity to welcome liberal allies whose chief aim was to produce a literature that sought to protect the nation's democratic institutions from fascist oppression. Thus, to writers such as Sherwood and Rice, Communism's "emphasis on justice for the oppressed appealed to their democratic instincts."

That international political events recast the literary consciousness, in political terms, is evident in Elmer Rice's article which identified art as a weapon:


"Rabkin, Drama and Commitment 26.

"Peeler, Hope Among Us Yet 177.
... fascism is the enemy of art and art must forever be the enemy of fascism. ... Fascism is grounded in fear, hatred, cruelty, negation and blind submission to authority. ... those of us who believe in liberty, in the dignity of the human race and in the eventual self-betterment of mankind must resolve to destroy the ugly anti-human nihilism of which fascism is the evil outgrowth and rediscover those principles of truth and beauty that are the essence of great art.

Therefore, in a time when death and despair stalk the world and our cultural inheritance is everywhere wantonly attacked, it is particularly fitting to establish a temple of the arts in which its free citizens army find not only that purging of the emotions which is a solace in hours of darkness but also that elevation of the spirit and quickening of the imagination which increase the human stature and promote the good life."

In England, a similar concern was manifest in the works of Cecil Day Lewis, Michael Roberts, Stephen Spender, W.H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood, among others. Unable to refrain from addressing critical political issues, the poet, Roberts said, "We can no more forget the world of politics than the soldier-poets could forget the wounded and the dead." Spender expressed his concern thus:

"We can no longer permit life to be shaped by a personified ideal, we must serve with all our faculties some actual thing," Mr. Yeats has written in a recent preface. This seems to be

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true. The "actual thing" is the true moral or widely political subject that must be realized by contemporary literature, if that literature itself is to be moral and serious.50

Auden and Isherwood, who voiced their commitment earlier in the decade by portraying the detrimental effects of the Depression in plays such as Auden's *The Dance of Death*, turned to themes of Fascism in Europe and the fear of another war in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F-6*, and *On the Frontier*. In Germany, Bertolt Brecht and Irwin Piscator founded a political theatre for the purpose of delineating political and social issues.

This world-wide response of the literati indicates that the historical milieu of the thirties led writers to believe that literature and literary criticism was "to be a function of the movement of history, and so, given the historical situation . . . it . . . [was] correct and necessary that writers should be political."51

Since the political aspects of literature and literary criticism in the thirties was largely a consequence of political and economic events, writers gradually departed from it towards the decade's end and eventually rejected it as a means for giving direction and


order to their lives. This was because after 1939, the political and economic situation at home changed. As the economy recovered and employment increased, it restored writers' faith in the American economic system. Moreover, the war that broke out in Europe gradually absorbed the fervour of their commitment. With war's outbreak, victory and return to peaceful prosperity were the chief issues occupying writers' minds.

Another important factor that affected writers' commitment to a socialist-based humanitarian literature was the revelation of Stalin's brutal oppression and extermination of the kulaks or rich peasants in his effort to collectivize them, and the purge trials from 1934 to 1938. The purges' brutality showed that the Soviet Union was also a repressive state, little different from fascist Germany which the Soviets had been indicting. Liberals who deplored the violation of individual rights during these trials, now felt disillusioned with the Socialist system. This shock intensified in 1939 when Russia signed a non-aggression pact with Germany—the epitome of Fascism. The collusion dealt a shattering blow to leftists' faith in the Soviet Union. Consequently they started to lose confidence in the Communists with whose Popular Front Policy, of saving all democratic nations from Hitler's malevolent designs, they had allied themselves. The
cumulative effect of these events was a sharp retreat of American writers' pro-Russia stance, and a subsequent decline in revolutionary and political literature.

Nonetheless, the impact of political and economic crises on society was consequential. It evoked a desire among intellectuals to write about problems of immediate concern with the lives of ordinary people, thus giving birth to a literature and particularly a drama committed to the problems of society that chiefly based itself on a humanistic concern.