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Protest Lit 101

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American Protest Literature. Edited by Zoe Trodd. Harvard University Press, 2006.

American Working-Class Literature. Edited by Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy. Oxford University Press, 2007.

The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle, T. V. Reed. University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Inevitably when I teach a course dealing with American protest literature—literature that self-consciously aspires to change the world—a student will pipe up at some point and raise some variant of the impertinent question: well, did it? It is tempting at these moments to turn to reliable trump cards like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* ("It helped spark the Civil War, you know"), *The Jungle* ("USDA inspections, anyone?"), or *Waiting for Lefty* ("Strike!"), but the truth is that such shorthand is often more trouble than it is worth. It plays into my students' expectation that, especially in the case of the art of protest, the work's "success" is best measured instrumentally, in terms of its impact on traditional political terrain; and by obliging their preference for cut-and-dry answers over imaginative speculation, it threatens to make much of our classroom discussion, revolving as it does around narrative strategies and specific turns-of-phrase, seem beside the point. Taken to an extreme, this impulse to show how protest literature matters in the world can lead to a narrowly empiricist cul-de-sac, where the best admissible evidence follows the formula, "X read Y, then was inspired to do Z."

So it is nice to see that, among scholars who focus on the conjunction of US literature and social movements, there is often a healthy worry about the dangers of oversimplifying that nexus. In a recent essay on protest art, Paul Lauter poses a series of theoretical questions—what is the relationship between individual creativity and social action? How do we distinguish between works directly involved in social conflict and those that, retrospectively, shape our memory of that conflict? What is the relationship between specific genres and social protest?—then ends with a plug for nuance and irresolution: "The question of protest literature is imbedded in the ambiguity of both of those terms. 'Protest' is not, after all, a conventional literary term like 'iambic pentameter,'

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'sonnet,' or 'fiction.' It is a social dynamic, and the relationship of art—largely produced by individuals—to such movements is always, at best, ambiguous and conflicted" (Lauter 12). The funky phrase here is "at best," which I assume is no glitch but a willful provocation. If ambiguity and conflict represent the best case scenario for protest literature, then we should be wary of any artist who claims to speak, unambiguously and with an easy conscience, as the voice of a movement; and we should welcome rather than shy away from the complicated questions of intention and reception that arise, say, when an artist aims for some sort of bull's-eye and discovers that he has been shooting buckshot, which scatters.

Similarly, in his comparative study of social movement cultures, T. V. Reed takes issue with the currency of the term "cultural politics," which, he argues, has often been improperly deployed in a way that subsumes the political into the cultural: when cultural resistance is found everywhere, it threatens to be nowhere, too (Reed 289). All artworks may have political facets, Reed suggests, but few artworks will have political resonance if they lack an audience—most often molded by subcultures and social movements—ready to understand them in that manner. Yet, as Reed argues against the grain, these audiences do not simply turn to protest art as a radical-messaging system for their movement; art does not just inspire, exhort, instruct, dramatize movement goals, or tell the history of the movement—as important as those functions are. In addition, a key role of art for a social movement is to "critique and transcend ideology" (303). Art suggests the limits of the movement, admitting pleasures that might be considered guilty and pulling against the drift into dogmatism (299–300): "[A]esthetic texts are always both ideological and in excess of ideology, and their role in and around movements can be to remind activists, who often are tempted by the pressures of political struggle into ideologically reductive positions, that the full lived complexity of cultural life cannot be reduced to any ideological system" (303). Reed, tipping his hat to Walter Benjamin ("The ideological tendency of a work of literature can be politically correct only if it is also correct in the literary sense") and Hannah Arendt ("The conflict between politics and art... cannot and must not be solved"), underlines that "the logic of politics and the logic of aesthetics objects seldom, if ever, perfectly collide" (303). Like Lauter, he sees the conjunction of art and protest as a space of argument as well as possibility: within most social movements worth the name, there are a number of aesthetic ideologies proposed to address its needs and to encapsulate its self-understanding. For Reed, who describes his position as "ideologically and methodologically less purist" (294), the arguments

even help create the possibility. It is a messy world, and a movement that shuts down its internal debates will have more difficulty maneuvering and leveraging its force.

The cautionary notes of Lauter and Reed are analytically useful but pedagogically challenging, and they pose their own set of dangers in the classroom. How to strike the right balance between the presentation of broader historical context and the close reading of individual texts, so that students can understand "the logic of politics" as well as "the logic of aesthetic objects?" How to keep focus while staging the arguments between a social movement and the larger political order, the arguments within a social movement, and the arguments between artists and the movements they affiliate with—not to mention the arguments contained within the pages of a novel, the lines of a poem, or the dialogue of a play? More basically, how to convey the complexity of the art-protest dynamic without getting bogged down in the ambiguity of it all—without losing the mood of urgency that charges so many of these works of protest?

Happily, a new set of books, all oriented toward classroom use—Reed's *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (2005), Zoe Trodd's *American Protest Literature* anthology (2006) and Janet Zandy and Nicholas Coles's *American Working-Class Literature* anthology (2007)—offer several ready-made frameworks for teaching protest literature. Less happily, they also suggest the difficulty of the intellectual juggling act required, and what happens when some of those balls drop to the ground.

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The Art of Protest is, above all, a useful book—easy to imagine as a textbook companion for a course on American art and social movements from the civil rights movement on. It is written with the sort of analytical clarity that is invaluable in classrooms: Reed will enumerate the five structural preconditions of the civil rights movement, or spell out the three-stage evolution of Black Power drama, or differentiate between five strands of ecocriticism (preservationist, ecological, biocentric, ecofeminist, and environmental justice, in case you were wondering), and each time his conceptual schemas are both sophisticated and easy to assimilate (7–10, 45–51, 224–228). Moreover, *The Art of Protest* offers a broad survey of a range of movements and expressive media: it explores, in turn, the civil rights movement and freedom songs, the Black Panthers and drama, second-wave feminism and poetry, Chicanismo and murals, the American Indian movement and film, Third World relief and "benefit rock"

concerts, ACT UP and the graphic arts, the environmental justice movement and eco-criticism (the odd duck here), and, lastly, the anti-globalization movement and the Indymedia drama of the "Battle of Seatlle." The book nicely bridges political and cultural history, offering synthetic accounts of each social movement and compelling speculations on why specific expressive forms came to serve specific movements. As a pedagogical bonus, Reed has created an *Art of Protest* website, with annotated bibliographies of each chapter and an extensive set of links to related primary and secondary materials online.

Perhaps the book's greatest analytical contribution is its brief for the open-endedness of protest art. Too often, partly as a legacy of the New York Intellectual crusade against Popular Front aesthetics during the Cold War, protest art has been derided as one-dimensional agitprop, sentimental evocations of "the common people." But as Reed repeatedly demonstrates, the most powerful forms of protest art often work by leaving contradictions unresolved and questions unanswered, and in fact there is a hard-headed, grassroots-organizing rationale for keeping terms fluid in that way: individuals within a movement are more likely to project themselves into an open-ended form. For instance, freedom songs rarely settled on a precise definition of "freedom," the core value and aspiration of the civil rights movement. Instead the songs channeled impulses often considered opposites of one another: they were both practical and idealistic, secular and sacred, political and spiritual, giving the movement its ballast and its higher ground. Performing freedom songs together was a crucial way that civil rights workers learned to have faith in one another and overcome their fear of death, but the force of the music was not the force of argument, the force of a manifesto or position paper. Rather, the songs provided "a baseline context in which differences could coexist" (37).

Likewise, Reed sees the murals of the Chicano movement as constructively ambiguous. For example, in a 1968 mural painted by Antonio Bernal on a United Farm Workers/Teatro Campesino cultural center, apostles of nonviolence like César Chávez and Martin Luther King, Jr. stand next to partisans of armed struggle like Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, and the Black Panthers; Chicano nationalism is evoked even though none of the historical figures in the mural fully embraced the nationalist position. For Reed, these sorts of disconnects are not a sign of the mural's intellectual incoherence, but instead part of the fit between the medium and the message: "No medium was better equipped to express this solidarity-in-difference than the wordless form of the mural where the complexities of verbal political positionings are muted in a visual language of pure juxtaposition" (111). For the Chicano

movement at high tide, that is, such murals perfectly expressed its dreams of community and revolution partly by not putting too much pressure on those terms, and partly by discovering a visual language (indebted to Mexican muralists of the 1930s, ancient Indian friezes, and traditions of *pulquería* art) that seemed to express a Chicano tradition while inventing it (114).

For all its acuity, *The Art of Protest* does have its analytical limits, some of which are self-imposed. In his introduction, Reed laments that "[m]uch cultural studies work has offered brilliant interpretative readings of cultural texts... but this work has not always been well grounded in relation to the institutions and structural social forces that shape and move through culture"; his book is an attempt to right the balance, an investigation of "social movements as sites for the production and reception of cultural texts" (xvii). Yet is it necessary, then, to write a chapter on "Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women's Rights" that not only offers no close readings of poems but also does not even cite a single example of a poem dramatizing the consciousness-raising aesthetic? Here one could imagine using the chapter effectively in the classroom, as a springboard for discussions of individual poets and poems, but as a stand-alone essay, it does not sufficiently illustrate its arguments—that feminist poetry was well-equipped to confront the separation of public and private spheres, and of emotion and intellect; and that "women's movement poetry" had different emphases than the "feminist poetry movement" (91, 95). In effect, Reed offers an interpretative framework, buttressed by historical background, without the nuts-and-bolts of actual interpretation. Elsewhere, too, one feels that "the logic of aesthetic objects" takes a backseat to "the logic of politics" even as Reed pays theoretical tribute to both.

While this shortcoming of *The Art of Protest* might have been finessed through the sort of cogent close analysis that Reed delivers in selected chapters, one wonders if it also points to a limit of Reed's structure-oriented analysis of culture and social movements. Partly since Reed disavows "fuzzy notions of culture as 'ideas in people's heads'" (288), individuals play a fugitive role in his book, popping up in thumbnail sketches but never fleshed out as participants in what Reed calls "the full lived complexity of cultural life" (303). As a result, we get an account of social movements that spends little time on the nitty-gritty of how individuals become radicalized, and a defense of the nuances of protest art that devotes little attention to the nuances of individual lives. Furthermore, although Reed allows in his theoretical epilogue that aesthetic discourse lives in tension with political discourse, the book generally (and understandably) focuses on their points of alignment, giving individual artists little role other than as movement tribunes. Here Reed seems to have run into the age-old

tradeoff between accounts that highlight structural causation and those that highlight individual agency, as he tilts toward the former; the schematic brilliance of the book, which recommends it pedagogically, seems to leave little room for explorations of individual pathways, individual dilemmas, individual moments of affiliation and stock-taking.

3

Zoe Trodd's collection *American Protest Literature* emerged out of a course with the same title, devised a few years ago at Harvard University by John Stauffer (who contributes a foreword), and it has the wide reach of a survey course, covering 11 movements from the revolutionary era to the present. *American Protest Literature* swings between such chestnuts as *Common Sense* (1776), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), *The Jungle* (1906), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and further afield choices like Lydia Sigourney's 1838 poem "Indian Names" (in the Native American rights section), Stanley Kramer's 1958 film *The Defiant Ones* (in the section on abolition), a radio interview with Democratic Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas (in the anti-lynching section), Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam's 1941 photo-text *12 Million Black Voices* (in the Great Depression section), and a letter from historian Gerda Lerner to Betty Friedan (in the second-wave feminism section). Intelligent but idiosyncratic, the anthology showcases the challenges awaiting those who would theorize and teach the slippery genre of "protest literature."

Whereas Reed downplays rhetorical analysis in his definition of protest art, focusing instead on the conjunction of social movements and cultural formations that make it structurally possible, Trodd and Stauffer venture a rhetoric-oriented definition of protest literature. Stauffer writes:

> The first two [rhetorical strategies of protest literature] are empathy and shock value. Empathy is central to all humanitarian reform, and protest literature encourages its readers to participate in the experience of the victims, to "feel their pain." Shock value inspires outrage, agitation, and a desire to correct social ills. The third characteristic of protest literature is "symbolic action," to borrow a term from Kenneth Burke. Symbolic action implies indeterminacy of meaning, rich ambiguity, and open-endedness in the text, which goes beyond the author's intent. . . . It prevents protest literature from becoming an advertisement, or propaganda, whose purpose is strictly teleological. (xiii)

On first glance, these criteria seem helpful enough—capturing the dialectic of identification and disorientation that marks much protest literature, and sticking up for the literariness of the genre—but the problem is that the criteria are so loose as to admit a vast number of American novels written over the last 200 years while being so exclusionary as to shut out many deserving works of experimental literature. Take a suburban novel like John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960), which is certainly rich in "symbolic action" (check): does it not make the reader "feel Rabbit's pain," his sense of suburban claustrophobia (double-check)? And does it not enjoin the reader to wish for a more liberated social world, where young men would not feel like they were in decline the moment they took off their varsity letter jackets (triple-check)? Yet however much we might see Updike's novel as fulfilling these criteria, it would seem to be missing the vital structural element offered by Reed: an audience mobilized to seek political resonance. A formalist definition of protest literature sidesteps the decisive issue of cultural reception.

Furthermore, one might question whether "empathy" should be a sine qua non of protest literature. The choice of this term, which emerged in the early-twentieth century just as "sympathy" lost its strongest intellectual currency and merged into "compassion," stresses the individual agency of the reader, who has the capacity to project him- or herself into the predicament of another; the term has resonances in both aesthetics and psychology, which would seem to make it a good fit for protest literature (Garber 240). But there has been longstanding skepticism of the dynamic that empathy establishes between the reader and the suffering other—especially, as Trodd herself notes, within the dossier of protest literature itself. Whether it was abolitionist Wendell Phillips noting "there is many a man that weeps over *Uncle Tom* who votes the Whig or the Democrat ticket," or Richard Wright aiming to write, in *Native Son* (1940), a book "without the consolation of tears," or Barbara Ehrenreich confessing that she undercuts empathy with "irony, sarcasm, and other forms of bitter humor," activists and artists have speculated about the self-blinding aspects of excessive empathy (Trodd 118, xxii, 240). More recently, of course, cultural critics like Lauren Berlant have warned against what happens when "the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy": "The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures" (Berlant 164). Perhaps, in defining protest literature, we would be better off saying that "empathy" has been a seductive goal for some and a flashpoint of concern for others, who have aimed to put an end to readerly self-congratulation,

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sometimes even by refusing to work within the framework of psychological realism itself.

How, we might ask, does Stauffer and Trodd's definition of protest literature reverberate through the anthology? That question needs to be answered with reference to the book's curious structure. *American Protest Literature* is diagrammatic in conception, with 10 documents selected for each of 11 movements; these 10 documents are then split up evenly, five as "the literature" and another five as "the legacy." All told, the anthology packs 110 documents into just over 500 pages, and since Trodd's headnotes are often extensive, the average selection in the anthology runs to around four pages, with larger print than is customary in an anthology. Perhaps as a way to sandwich the required number of documents into this small amount of space, there are no introductions to each social-movement section, so readers have to glean, piecemeal, what they can about abolitionism, or the civil rights movement, in scattered sentences placed with specific selections; the emphasis falls on the artists and the extracts from their work, with little sustained attention to movement cultures and histories.

The result is an anthology hard to imagine adopting in a course, though illuminating for someone looking to construct a syllabus of American protest literature. Although Trodd's headnotes are consistently shrewd—gem-like mini-essays—the selections are often too short, strangely excerpted, and presented without essential background. In the section on gay liberation, Trodd includes a mere eighteen lines of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956)—the first 11 lines and the section in which Ginsberg celebrates "wild cooking pederasty." The Ginsberg headnote, meanwhile, includes nothing on the Ginsberg and the Beats' relationship to Cold War radicalism, or on the political seeds of gay liberation planted in the 1950s—to mention two possible ways of articulating "Howl" to the protest cultures of its moment. Instead, Trodd offers two incisive paragraphs on how Walt Whitman's literary example helped shape gay liberation—incisive and yet, pedagogically speaking, over-subtle for many undergraduates. Later in the same section, Trodd excerpts Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), offering snippets of three different scenes—about five pages in all—and giving little in the way of guidance into the play's intricate plot. Tellingly, she excerpts the early scene in a coffee shop where Louis seethes to his friend Belize about the hollowness of American political discourse, but does not mention the harsh irony that saturates the scene: Louis has just left his lover Prior upon discovering that he has AIDS, so his righteous rant is best read skeptically, as an exercise in self-justification or a form of intellectual compensation, as well as for its insights into the political chill of the Reagan 1980s.

Part of the anthology's problem is that it seems to want to have it all ways at once, and in the process spreads itself too thin. On the one hand, Trodd aims to draw attention to the "politics of form" in her introduction and headnotes, and she can be marvelously suggestive about, say, how Elizabeth Cady Stanton's "Solitude of Self" (1892) succeeds rhetorically while offering "no evidence, argument, or logical progression," or how Richard Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home" (1936) develops the trope of the "hiding place" (149, 266). On the other hand, there is a strong instrumentalist tilt to the anthology, with many selections devised, it seems, to show that protest literature "works." How else to explain the inclusion of such documents as the Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act, or John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson's addresses on civil rights, or the judges' decisions in *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the case allowing same-sex marriage in Massachusetts? Unfortunately, the anthology's structure, with its sections split between "the literature" and "the legacy," exacerbates this sense of instrumentalism (and top-down legitimation); the anthology's emphasis falls on literature that aspires to the condition of jurisprudence.

Perhaps because Trodd wishes to demonstrate protest literature's traction in the political domain, *American Protest Literature* is a strangely non-literary anthology. According to my rough tallies, only two-fifths of the anthology's selections fit into genres traditionally considered "literature," such as poetry and lyrics (15%), fiction (13%), drama (2%), and autobiography and letters (10%). The rest of the anthology consists of visual art and photography (11%); political pamphlets, reportage, essays, and historical writing (25%); and manifestos, public addresses, and state documents (22%). Of course, the latter documents can profit from close literary analysis just as surely as the former documents, but the upshot to this balance is a thinner sense of protest literature as a strand in American literary history, and a thinner sense of the differences between literature and other fields of cultural production. If I were to teach the protest literature of second-wave feminism, for example, I would prefer to focus on the theater of Marie Irene Fornes or Adrienne Kennedy, the speculative fiction of Joanna Russ or Ursula Le Guin, or the many female bildungsromans that dramatized the "click" experience of 1970s consciousness-raising (none of which appear here), rather than the National Organization of Woman's "Statement of Purpose" or Shirley Chisholm's speech in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. The former would offer a more complicated sense of second-wave feminism's "structure of feeling," as interpreted by its most sensitive and sometimes conflicted partisans; the latter

offers its ideologies, quick-at-hand and in bullet-point form. Many of the texts in *American Protest Literature* do not really "dance an attitude," to riff on the Burkean framework of "symbolic action" that Stauffer introduces: they simply walk it.

4

Though not exactly pitched as a "protest literature" anthology, Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy's *American Working-Class Literature* more closely succeeds as such. Edited with care and ingenuity, the collection targets the axiom that the US is and has been a "classless" or "middle-class" society, tracing instead the long and unfinished struggle of working-class Americans for a dignified life on and off the job. Coles and Zandy fill out their brief partly by defining "working-class" and "literature" in inclusive terms. "[W]orking-class people," their anthology instructs, "share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace and content of their work, and aren't anybody's boss" (M. Zweig, qtd in Coles and Zandy xxi); given the fact that employment law in the US descends from a feudal model (Orren 1992), Coles and Zandy have a wide field to work with. The anthology's working class comprises, for starters, indentured servants and convict laborers in the seventeenth century; slaves, mechanics, and cordwainers in the eighteenth; mill girls, shipyard workers, housemaids, miners, wound-dressers, and homeless men in the nineteenth; and secretaries, prostitutes, orderlies, handymen, vagabonds, domestics, farmworkers, waitresses, and data-entry processors in the twentieth. More imaginatively, while Coles and Zandy pay their respects to the customary preoccupations of "labor literature"—there are accounts aplenty of physical labor and union struggles, and separate sections on the Knights of Labor, the Battle of Homestead, the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, and the Wobblies—they have also trolled outside its usual precincts. Just as labor history itself has opened up the question of class consciousness to include life beyond the factory floor, so their anthology aims to take up the totality of working-class life, from the labor of birthing and the experience of childhood to the dilemmas of aging and death, from the pressures of life at home to the release of the dancehall and the impromptu party.

Coles and Zandy also strike a keen balance between traditional and non-traditional literary genres, and between well-known and less-known authors. Few eyebrows will be raised by the names of the writers who earn more than 10 (densely packed) pages here—Herman Melville, Rebecca Harding Davis, Jack

London, Lola Ridge, Richard Wright, Muriel Rukeyser, Clifford Odets, William Attaway, Harriette Arnow, Tomás Rivera, and Cherríe Moraga—most of whom appear in such anthologies as *The Heath*. Other familiar authors appear, too, often placed in a refreshing context: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), commonly considered the first African-American novel published in America, is here named "one of the first prose accounts written from the point of view of the rural *female* laboring class" (92). But the anthology's strength is its unearthing of often obscure voices, which offer a thick sense of historical conjunctures like the bloody class warfare of the Gilded Age, the rallying of a racial and ethnic working class during the Great Depression, and the slow burn of class injury during the Cold War. (Admittedly, the anthology is strongest on the twentieth century: only 200 of its over 800 pages cover the period between 1700 and 1899.)

The section on the 1930s is particularly eye-opening, putting the lie to still-commonplace prejudices against the "one-dimensionality" of proletarian literature.[1] We get some of the standard reference-points—Odets's "Waiting for Lefty" (1935), Mike Gold's manifesto "Go Left, Young Writers" (1929), Wright's novella "Fire and Cloud" (1938), Rukeyser's docu-modernist *Book of the Dead* (1999), and the obligatory selection from *The Grapes of Wrath*—but we also sample Pietro di Donato's twisted-dialect novel of construction work (*Christ in Concrete* [1939]); Ben Reitman's impersonation of Boxcar Bertha, a hobo and prostitute with a heart of tempered steel (*Sister of the Road* [1937]); Tom Kromer's present-tense, sparse, and quasi-Beckettian tale of homelessness (*Waiting for Nothing* [1935]); Langston Hughes's wry partisan poetry; Sonora Babb's fatalistically vigilant Dust Bowl novel (*Whose Names Are Unknown*); Mary Heaton Vorse's participant–observer reportage of the Flint sit-down strikes ("The Emergency Brigade at Flint" [1937]); John Dos Passos's vivid account of Kentucky miners' struggles and the writers who came to their aid ("Harlan: Working Under the Gun" [1931]); and much more. Typical of the rest of the anthology, the section works on the level of labor and literary history. For labor historians, it surveys those industries, like mining, manufacturing, and agriculture, that were roiled by union-management conflict, and those, like the sex trade, that have fallen off the historiographical radar. For literary scholars, it offers the Cultural Front's range of aesthetic ideologies—the debates, sometimes explicit and often implicit, over how to represent the crisis of capitalism that Edmund Wilson called "The American Earthquake."

Yet *American Working-Class Literature* is not simply capacious. Like any anthology, it includes and excludes, and in

this regard its briskly stated criteria—to present "literature by, about, and in the interests of the working class"—seem to have kept Coles and Zandy from making some more adventurous choices. What, for instance, of working-class authors who write beguiling poetry of failure, bottom-dog presences like Charles Bukowski and Raymond Carver? What of an author like William Faulkner, who opposed the working-class politics of the New Deal but wrote, in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a novel deeply attentive to class inequality and remarkable for summoning a chorus of working-class voices to tell their story in their own terms (Entin 176–177)? What of a contemporary experimental poet like Ron Silliman, whose *Under Albany* (2004) is one of the most revelatory autobiographies to come out of the postwar white working-class ("Autobiographer's motto: you have a right to remain silent" [50]), but who now works as a market analyst in the computer industry? The anthology's main notes—the physicality of labor, the struggle for subsistence, the power of solidarity—are struck again and again, especially in the last section on the contemporary period.

Further, the authors who *are* included sometimes have their edges sanded down. The anthology's headnotes consistently bespeak admiration and sympathy—e.g., "Don West was a poet, preacher, educator, farmer, labor organizer, and political activist" (411)—but inconvenient details can be elided in the bid to construct a usable past. John Steinbeck's commitment to anti-Communism and the war in Vietnam; Zora Neale Hurston's questioning of the civil rights movement and its attack on segregation: these are the sorts of personal and political complexities that convey the fissures within the American working class, and are better acknowledged than underplayed.

In their patterns of exclusion, both *American Working-Class Literature* and *American Protest Literature* bring up a final issue to consider: how to handle, in anthologies that emphasize literature's "use-value" (Coles and Zandy xxiv), works that toy with or break the covenant of realism—works that seek less, perhaps, to transform the world than, first, to transform the way we see and understand the world. The two anthologies under consideration deal with the issue largely by burying it, and certainly there is enough fine work in a realist vein to fill up their pages, and more. But they seem not to recognize that, especially in a climate of political repression, artists will often "say the unspeakable" by coming at it from an oblique angle. There remains to be found an anthology that takes, say, Coles and Zandy's fine, hard-headed approach to class inequality in American history and brings it into contact with more ambiguous investigations of class found in the

literature: the science-fiction allegories of Samuel Delany or Octavia Butler; the magical realism of Rosario Ferré or Karen Tei Yamashitá (a genre that Michael Denning calls "the second stage of the proletarian avant-garde" [70]); and, more generally, the varied, baggy tradition of modernist and postmodernist experiment with the rules of representation.

The Objectivist poet George Oppen, who joined the Communist Party in 1935 and refrained from writing poetry during the rest of the Depression to devote himself to organizing industrial workers and direct-action strikes in New York, would be an interesting test-case for a future such anthology. Oppen's commitment to the political agenda of the Communist Party was strong, but he found little place for himself in the aesthetic debates roiling the Party at that moment, returning to poetry only in the late 1950s. "I am sick of a poet's / vanity," he wrote, before indelibly inverting Shelley's maxim about the world-changing force of poets: they were "legislators / of the unacknowledged / world" (Oppen 267). Yet while Oppen tried not to force his poetry to shoulder burdens he thought it could not carry, he brilliantly conveyed the searching qualities of poetry, its indefinite probing of accepted truths, and used it to examine the same ethical questions that sparked his political commitments. Here are the first two stanzas of "The Building of a Skyscraper," first published in the *Nation* in 1964:

> The steel worker on the girder
> Learned not to look down, and does his work
> And there are words we have learned
> Not to look at,
> Not to look for substance
> Below them. But we are on the verge
> of vertigo.
>
> There are words that mean nothing
> But there is something to mean.
> Not a declaration which is truth
> But a thing
> Which is. It is the business of the poet
> 'To suffer the things of the world
> And to speak them and himself out.' (Oppen 149)

I look forward to the anthology that includes the steel worker and Oppen both, together on those high girders.

Note

1. In *American Protest Literature*, Zoe Trodd symptomatically shifts attention from the plebian and emigré writers who fired this renaissance, and onto the middle-class observers who were their allies. Instead of featuring a range of proletarian literature, she offers simply John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, commenting that its "mythic resonances elevated the novel above the now-forgotten proletarian novels of the period" (298). Her first five documents—those classified as "the literature" rather than "the legacy"—favor government-employed photographers like Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein and the aesthete pair of Walker Evans and James Agee, rather than working-class writers who published in self-consciously working-class venues. Perhaps, most strangely, while every other section is named after a social movement, the section on the 1930s is named "The Great Depression," as if the hardship of the era eclipsed any social movement that the working-class created; the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the dynamo behind much of that era's radical political energies, goes unmentioned in the headnotes.

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