The Thirties: Literature and Culture

1988 Summer Seminar for College Teachers

Director: Morris Dickstein

Location: Graduate Center, City University of New York

Dates: June 20 - July 29, l988

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your interest in my seminar in New York next summer. This letter will describe the general area to be covered by the seminar, though the specific readings may yet evolve, depending on the background and interests of the participants. Bear in mind that the seminar runs six weeks rather than the more typical eight weeks. As a result it will be fairly intensive, though I trust not overwhelmingly so.

The seminar will examine how the social and economic crisis of the 1930's affected the arts, and how they in turn reflected and influenced the way many Americans saw themselves during the period. The course will center on the literature of the period, but will also use works of film, journalism, music, drama, and still photography to provide a cultural context for the literary material, and to help us explore the massive shift in sensibility that took place in the years immediately following the Crash, which soon made the 20's seem extraordinarily remote. Yet the course will also show how the mood of the Depression years was far from uniform, and will examine how its impact in the arts varies strikingly from work to work.

For example, we'll explore the tension between a revival of naturalism in the writers most prominent during the period, such as Steinbeck, and strong undercurrent of modernism in other writers like Faulkner, Agee, and West, who are more widely read today than they were then. We'll look at the conflict between social protest and sheer escapism in the books and films of the period, signified on one hand by an attempt to deal with the cruel realities of the Depression, and on the other hand by the proliferation of gangster and horror films, screwball comedies, and backstage musicals. On one side were writers who tried to deal with the fate of drifters, strikers, or sharecroppers; on the other side were the audiences who devoured historical romances or elegant fantasies of the effortlessly rich. Even among the best writers themselves, there were strains between those who had been radicalized by the Depression and were committed to social and collective solutions and those who still focused on individuals and their complex personal fates.

In order to accommodate these tensions within the high and popular culture of the period without slighting the most enduring works which appeared then, I plan to organize the seminar in the following way: There will be two 3-hour morning sessions each week that will center on writing--including literature, contemporary journalism, and historical material--but also a weekly afternoon session devoted to visual and aural culture. Here we'll have time to look at screenings or videocassettes of the key films of the period, slides of the work of FSA photographers and WPA painters and muralists, or listen to the most significant music of the period, such as Cole Porter's songs, Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, or the music of Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson. These explorations of aural and visual material will feed into the literary discussions, and will in turn be supplemented by the great wealth of other 30's artifacts on view in New York, such as the masterpieces of Art Deco architecture and design or the 1930 murals which Thomas Hart Benton executed for the New School.

This seminar is based on the assumption that works of art or popular culture don't exist in a formal or aesthetic vacuum, and they can't be dismissed simply as commercial artifacts or the mere expressions of an individual sensibility. On the contrary, especially during a period of significant social upheaval, such as the Depression years, they must be understood on their own terms but also in relation to each other and to the public pressures of the age, which they at once reflect and illuminate. Certain themes recur throughout the period with many different individual accents: the return of the expatriate generation, the conversion experience in the encounter with poverty and radicalism, a new interest in the American heartland and in how the common people were coping with the Depression, a surge of ethnic writing among Jews, blacks, and other children of immigrants, a strong current of daffiness and frivolity that survives from the 20's and provides an escape valve from Depression anxieties, as in the Marx brothers, W.C. Fields, and the great screwball comedies, and continuing interest in formal elegance and modern design that we find in the Deco architecture and machine-age technology of the period, which provides us with a necessary counter-theme to the more committed and sociallly conscious art.

I myself have long been fascinated by how art and literature respond to social crisis. My interest in modern writers has gradually developed into a more general concern with American cultural history. The approach I've taken can be sampled in my book on the postwar years, Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties (Basic Books, 1977), which led to a 1978 NEH seminar on this subject. For the past five years I've been doing similar research on the Depression decade for a book which should appear in 1989 or 1990. This seminar will be closely related to the work I've been doing for this book.

I've found an immense interest in the 30's among students who have grown up in the relative affluence of the postwar years. They seem fascinated by a period when life was lived closer to the bone, when survival itself was at stake, not simply self-expression and material comfort, and when artists, writers, filmmakers, and photographers felt the urgency of great and trying public events, as they did again in the turbulence of the 1960's. This seminar is directed at college teachers interested in literature, in film, or in cultural history, for this is period when literature cannot be isolated from what was happening in the other arts and in the country at large. I hope we can provide a cultural and historical context for research and teaching in the literature of the interwar years, and even with a methodology for dealing with literature in relation to its social environment. Similarly, I hope the seminar might attract a few historians and social scientists, whose training will complement the viewpoint of those who come from literature and the arts.

The literary and historical part of the seminar will begin with Malcolm Cowley's Exile's Return (1934), an account of how the expatriate and modernist generation of writers of the 20's became the troubled and committed generation of the 1930's. This will be supplemented by William E. Leuchtenburg's book The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932 (Chicago, 1958). Since the seminar will begin with a discussion of Cowley's book, participants will be urged to read it, if possible, before they arrive. A list of other recommended background works will be provided in the spring. The initial readings will be followed by the first of a series of striking contrasts between different writers of the period, beginning with Michael Gold's raw, proletarian Jews Without Money (1930), a study of ghetto poverty, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night (1934), a failure-story which is also a bittersweet farewell to the 1920's. This may be followed by some of the 1931-32 Depression journalism of Edmund Wilson, from The American Earthquake, which is just one specimen of the Depression reportage undertaken by key American writers of the period.

The next comparison will be between a proletarian novel like Tom Kromer's Waiting For Nothing, Edward Anderson's Hungry Men or Meridel LeSueur's The Girl and Nathanael West's wild, parodic study of human misery, Miss Lonelyhearts, by a writer schooled in surrealism rather than literary naturalism. This will be followed by equally sharp contrasts between two books on the rural poverty of sharecroppers and tenant farmers, the widely read work of social protest You Have Seen Their Faces (text by Erskine Caldwell, photos by Margaret Bourke-White) and the late masterpiece of 30's documentary, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (text by James Agee, pictures by Walker Evans). This will also point up the difference between the taste of the period and our own retrospective view of the 30's.

In the next section, John Steinbeck's most effective political novel, In Dubious Battle, will be juxtaposed with John Ford's remarkable film adaptation of Steinbeck's novel The Grapes of Wrath. This in turn will be contrasted with Faulkner's very different treatment of an arduous family journey, As I Lay Dying, a novel filled with macabre comedy and fragmented in a modernist way into many different points of view. This will be followed by another, very different family drama, the best and most realistic of Clifford Odets's plays, Awake and Sing, perhaps to be accompanied by some of the wildest of the screwball comedies, such as My Man Godfrey or Bringing Up Baby. The final literary pairing, if time permits, will be the two Hollywood novels by Fitzgerald and West, The Last Tycoon (unfinished, 1941) and The Day of the Locust (1939), dealing with the dream-factory that played such an important role in the fantasy-life of the 1930's.

The afternoon sessions devoted to films and music will begin with works that look back to the war and postwar years, including the first major social-consciousness movie, I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang, and one of the key gangster films of the same period, The Public Enemy, with James Cagney, a key icon of the era. This will be followed by Pare Lorentz's two key New Deal-sponsored documentaries, The Plow That Broke the Plains and The River, with scores by Virgil Thomson. Other films besides those previously mentioned may include King Vidor's utopian fantasy, Our Daily Bread, William Wyler's study in urban contrasts, Dead End, and at least one key 30's comedy and musical, such as 42nd Street, Duck Soup, or Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. (Some of the works not included on the syllabus below will be taken up in individual reports.)

Members of the seminar will be asked to do oral reports on other works not included in the syllabus, as well as on key secondary works. For example, someone interested in feminism might report of the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Josephine Herbst, or Tillie Olsen. Other literary reports might deal with James T. Farrell, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, or Henry Roth, whose work could not be included in the regular syllabus. Some reports will provide useful background for the seminar discussion, e.g. a report on the Group Theatre the week we discuss Clifford Odets. Historians might wish to report on some of the initiatives of the New Deal: its agricultural policies, for example, the week we discuss the sharecropper books, or its cultural agencies, such as the WPA Arts Project, the Federal Writers' Project, or the Theatre and Music Projects, so that we can all examine the implications and final results of this experiment in government patronage of the arts. Or they might report on some of the key secondary works on the period, such as Schlesinger's Age of Roosevelt volumes.

In addition to the readings and discussion, participants will be expected to pursue an independent project while they are involved in the seminar, and they'll be encouraged to report on this project at least once to the seminar as a whole. I'll discuss these projects individually with each member of the seminar soon after everyone arrives. This could lead in any number of directions: towards a new avenue of research, towards a publishable essay, or even towards the development of a new undergraduate course.

This seminar will meet at the CUNY Graduate Center, convenient to key museum collections and to the New York Public Library, as well as the Lincoln Center Library of the Performing Arts and the Museum of Broadcasting, where recordings of 30's music and radio programs are available to scholars. (The Graduate Center has not only its own library but also a reciprocal arrangement for use of the main branch of the New York Public Library, just across the street. The Graduate Center also has a computer facility in the building where members of the seminar will be able to do their word-processing. I trust it will be under no heavy demand in June and July.) New York provides not only good research libraries and important museums but also a living reportory of theatrical revivals, such as the current production of Cole Porter's Anything Goes at Lincoln Center, and a panorama of architectural history, from the Chrysler and Empire State buildings to Rockefeller Center and the Radio City Music Hall. The history of design can be studied in the many artifacts available at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. I expect all these subjects to find their way into our discussions.

The need for affordable housing in the middle of New York City can create knotty problems, but they proved to be manageable when I directed another seminar at the Graduate Center in l978. Some faculty sublets will be available. The Graduate Center also has a new residence facility called West Hall at 120 West 44 Street. Some rooms here will be available for a 3-month period but not for shorter terms. A description is enclosed. For further information call Roberta Zalkin, Director, at (212) 642-1600. There are also residence halls at other schools nearby, such as the Fashion Institute of Technology at 230 West 27 Street (description enclosed). For further information call Arlene Shore or Anne-Marie Grappo at (212) 760-7885. These dormitory rooms and studio apartments, while offering only limited space in an institutional setting, might well be suitable for single people and in some cases for couples. With the help of my administrative assistant, Lynn Kadison, and my graduate assistants, Peter Mascuch and Wayne Narey, I'll be soliciting faculty sublets to complement those available through the off-campus housing offices of the Graduate Center, Columbia, and NYU. In your application, please indicate what your housing needs are likely to be. Participants will be expected to make their own housing arrangements but we'll do everything we can to provide help and information. Your first stipend check will be available on your arrival.

If you decide to apply for this seminar, please give me some idea of what your teaching and research interests are, and how this seminar might contribute to your future work as a teacher and scholar. If possible at this preliminary stage, let me know what independent work you might be interested in pursuing as a member of the seminar, though this would no doubt be the subject of discussion later on. Please write or call if you have any additional questions. Remember that applications must be postmarked by March 1, 1988. Those selected to participate will be notified by March 31, 1988.

With all good wishes,

Morris Dickstein

Please direct all mail to me at the Ph.D. Program in English, CUNY Graduate Center, 33 West 42 Street, New York, NY 10036. Tel.: (212) 642-2206.