

The Power of Political Art: the 1930S Literary Left Reconsidered

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glue that bound together a large percentage of the working class" during the 1930s (210), but official Catholic teaching on racial justice proved incapable of binding the working class to the New Deal coalition when it shifted its focus from class to race in the 1960s.

The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered, by Robert Shulman. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xi, 340 pp. Notes, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Judy Kutulas is associate professor of history at St. Olaf College. Her research interests include radical intellectuals of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s.

Robert Shulman sets out to redeem the 1930s writings of Meridel Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, Richard Wright, Muriel Rukeyser, and Langston Hughes from their literary consignment to the trashcan of left-wing political orthodoxy. Their interests in political causes, their commitments to American Communism, and their willingness to use literature and poetry to express political perspectives, he contends, have marginalized them as writers. When reconsidering their writing, however, Shulman was surprised "to realize how much good work was done during the Popular Front" (6). Ultimately, he concluded that what he calls the "left avant-garde" (7) was more diverse than he thought.

Shulman seems to want to take on a central assumption about the 1930s literary left, that it was the anti-Stalinist writers (Marxist opponents of the American Communist Party, most of them clustered around the *Partisan Review*) who were the modernist, creative, "good" writers of the period. He does not take that assumption on directly but challenges the *Partisan Review* authors' marginalization of left-wing authors such as Herbst and Hughes.

To challenge the assumption that his subjects were not worth much as literary figures, he devotes a chapter to each, discussing their 1930s political works in depth and, when appropriate, considering—and usually attacking—existing literary analyses such as, for example, Constance Coiner's fine work on Le Sueur, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olson and Meridel Le Sueur* (1995). Shulman's heart is clearly in encouraging an appreciation of his authors. He goes lovingly through their works, pointing out inventive ways of writing about political events, contextualizing poems, and discussing innovative forms and structures. He knows and appreciates his subjects' works, and he helps his readers appreciate them, too.

He does not, however, so effectively prove that these works were avant-garde, and he seems generally less mobilized to address his larger thesis. Some of his work has already been done for him. Barbara

Foley's *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993) redeemed proletarian fiction by demonstrating how it blended traditional literary styles and methods with radical intentions and experimental modes. Shulman attempts to do something similar, but whereas Foley discussed a broad range of proletarian fiction and considered styles, themes, and kinds of novels, Shulman's subject is five individual authors and their work. There is no systematic engagement with the concept of *avant-garde*; it sometimes seems to be a synonym for *nonlinear*. Without a broader context (and a conclusion, which is missing from this book), his larger thesis cannot be supported. His literary watchdogs, who excluded politically engaged Communists such as Le Sueur, function, instead, as straw dogs whose opinions simply disappear. When all is said and done, Shulman really wants his subjects to stand or fall on their literary merit, something he facilitates by so thoughtfully explicating their work.

Students of the 1930s left literary circles, thus, will find Shulman's careful analysis of Le Sueur, Herbst, Wright, Rukeyser, and Hughes worthwhile reading, for it does redeem them as writers who worked hard to fuse their politics with the creative process in interesting and sometimes innovative ways.

Christian Petersen: Sculptor, by Lea Rosson DeLong. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 2000. xiii, 242 pp. Illustrations, notes, index, catalogue raisonné. \$44.95 cloth.

Reviewer Greg Olson is an exhibit specialist at the Missouri State Archives. He holds an M.F.A. in sculpture from the University of South Dakota and has researched and written about several historic sculptures and historic sites.

Produced as the catalog for an ambitious retrospective exhibit at the Brunnier Art Museum on the Iowa State University campus, *Christian Petersen: Sculptor* strives to define the legacy of this largely overlooked artist and teacher. Perhaps because Petersen was not given to offering insights into his work, exhibit curator Lea Rosson DeLong has collected the interpretations of an art historian, the artist's biographer, an art conservator, Petersen's widow, and two poets to explore the artist's work and life.

Born in Denmark, Christian Petersen (1885–1961) arrived in Ames in 1934 to become America's first collegiate artist-in-residence. For the next quarter-century, Petersen taught art at Iowa State University, where several of his life-size sculptures now grace the campus.

DeLong's biographical sketch traces the artist's career from his training as a die cutter in New Jersey in 1900 to his tenure at Iowa

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