DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 097 697 CS 201 616

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TITLE American Literary Radicals from Jefferson to Ginsberg.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, November 22-24, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *American Literature; Conflict; *Dissent; Eighteenth Century Literature; *Literary History; Nineteenth Century Literature; Opinions; Political Attitudes; Social Attitudes; Twentieth Century Literature
IDENTIFIERS *Radicalism

ABSTRACT

The depth and peculiar nature of America's radical tradition in literature stand as achievements deserving special attention and renewed emphasis as the bicentennial celebration of the American Revolution approaches. This extensive and varied tradition--including poems, stories, novels, essays, sermons, journals, and letters--extends from the colonial days to the present, with some of the greatest literary radicals belonging to the immediate past--the First World War, the Depression, and the period since 1955. The possibilities of exploring the growth and continuing strength of the radical tradition are numerous, either by tracing the tradition historically or by concentrating on a specific period, on particular issues, or on groups of people. (JM)

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Chairman's Presentation
Focus Group AB 25
NCTE National Convention
Philadelphia Civic Center
Friday, November 23, 1973

American Literary Radicals from Jefferson to Ginsberg

The tradition of American literary radicalism is as old as the early eighteenth century pamphlets whose arguments Thomas Jefferson repeated, in elegant form, in the Declaration of Independence, and as new as the speeches of several characters in Daniel Berrigan;s play, The Trial of the Catonsville Nine. As we approach the bicentennial celebration of the American Revolution, it is right and proper to call attention to that tradition, in courses, in community events, and particularly in projects that relate to local history, both political and literary.

Randolph Bourne was the first writer to refer to himself as an American literary radical. He did so in order to call attention to a particular tradition in American literature, one that he said the official "ministers of culture" often ignored or attempted to cover over a tradition that he saw dating from the time of Thomas Paine and continuing in the work of Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson, up to his own time.

At the time of Bourne's death in 1918, a new generation of literary radicals had just begun to appear, with the novels of John Dos Passos and the poems and essays in the pages of the Masses and the Liberator. Just earlier, in the decade before World War I, through the Wobblies (the songs of Joe Hill) and through various socialists and anarchists (the writings of Upton Sinclair and Emma Goldman), the tradition had enjoyed one of its most vigorous and productive periods. More recently, in the poems of Paul Goodman and Robert Bly, one finds that tradition alive and well, still awaiting the attention it deserves. In their novels, poems and essays, these writers suggest that the "spirit of '76" is something more than a catch phrase to be advertised on soap boxes, water glasses, and decals stamped with American flags. It is, rather, a body of knowledge, a set of principles, and a literary canon to challenge and inspire people and to help us understand what a humane culture based on libertarian values will really look, sound, or feel like.

When Allen Ginsberg wrote, in 1969, that "conscientious objection to war tax...is the gentlest way of political revolution in America," he spoke in terms that Paine and Thoreau would have understood. By his life and by his writings, Ginsberg shows the strength of that tradition. Whatever its limitations as a political theory, at lease as many Marxists view it, American literary radicalism offers some concrete suggestions about reconstructing the social order to guarantee the principles of "life, liberty,

and the pursuit of happiness." When Ginsberg writes, in the same context, "If money talks, several hundred thousand citizens refusing tax payments to our War Government will short-circuit the Nerve system of our electronic bureaucracy," one hears the ghosts of the Boston Tea party organizers cheering him on.

But in making a case for the tradition, one should be as specific as possible about what that tradition implies. In doing so, the work of the historian Staughton Lynd is particularly valuable. Several self-evident truths about the nature of government, law, and freedom that apply to the work of the writers already mentioned above, as well as to others that should be included. These affirmations have particular bearing on a whole body of literature by Sons of Liberty, abolitionists, labor organizers, wobblies, feminists, Marxists, black and white radicals from 1776 to now: (1) "that the purpose of society is not the protection of property but fulfillment of the needs of living human beings"; (2) "that good citizens have the right and duty, not only to overthrow incurably oppressive governments, but before that point is reached to break particular oppressive laws"; and (3) "that we owe our ultimate allegiance, not to this or that nation," but to the whole human family.

Poems, novels, and essays embodying these sentiments have been written by a considerable number of men and women, their work usually growing out of and responding to the political pressures of the moment, much as Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" grew

out of the debate of the Mexican War in 1846 or Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night responded to a conflict over the expanding American empire a century later. Their work recommends not a mere embellishment of surfaces, but a renovation at the roots, to make us see and eventually to act in new ways. It is an effort to create a new culture, at base, that informs the poems of Whitman, occasionally the novels of Howells, the essays of Paul Goodman, the journals of Dorothy Day. What is true of these writers, in a literary sense, is more obviously true in a political sense, in the work of Elihu Burritt, Eugene Debs, Martin Luther King. The line that separates a literary document from a purely political tract is often very thin, as George Orwell pointed out. And from the beginning of American history, political radicals and literary radicals have consorted together in publishing ventures, literary salons, and occasional political rabble-rousing.

The literature of American radicals since the Colonial days has been extensive and varied, including not only poems and stories, but sermons, journals, and letters as well. Up to 1776, the items historians regard as establishing the ideological origins of the American Revolution number over 400. In a variety of literary devices, some in imitation of tracts by English dissenters and others in imitation of the poems of Pope or the Spectator papers, they prepared the way for the Declaration of Independence, sowing the seed that the Founding Fathers harvested.

From the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, the radical position in literature was carried on through the work of the abolitionists, in the South as well as the North, through the speeches and writings of people like William Lloyd Garrison and Margaret Fuller, as well as the old line American Socialists and New England anarchists. In the 1881 edition of Leaves of Grass, Walt Whitman admonished the states to "obey little, resist much," a call that has gone out repeatedly in the work of a number of American poets, in responding to later national crises: "Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved./ Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city, of this earth ever afterward resumes its liberty."

In the late nineteenth century, several novelists sympathetic to radicalism were caught up in the struggles of American labor. William Dean Howells in A Hazard of New Fortunes dramatizes the problem with close attention to its effect on the life of the working man; and in Traveler from Altruria, he pictures a society that embodies the positive values of a truly egalitarian culture. Many unique literary documents that tell labor's story are scattered and isolated pieces, such as Edwin Markham's moving call for radical reform, "The Man With the Hoe," and the songs and poems of working class people, Joe Hill's and Woody Guthrie's among them.

Some of the greatest literary radicals, of course, belong to the immediate past, particularly around the time of the First

World War, the Depression, and since 1955. The value of looking closely at the American radical tradition in the twentieth century is that it brings one in close touch with much of the literature that the "ministers of culture," as Randolph Bourne referred to them, have for some reason placed outside the main tradition of American culture. Calling attention to the poems of the Wobblies or the neglected writings of poets and novelists of the Depression, for example, helps to restore a history and a literature that many students of the period never knew existed. For teachers of literature, elementary through college, there is the added benefit of helping students discover these documents and rebel voices for themselves, especially those by local residents, quite apart from the assigned text or the official histories. Veterans of the Federal Writers Project, the Spanish Civil War, and the great sit-down strikes in the 1930's live in almost any section of the United States and are often only too happy to come and tell of their adventures during the anxious decade. They indicate by their own lives and their culture how the radical tradition maintained itself in earlier times, even as it does today.

Interestingly enough, in recent years, the radical tradition has found some of its most faithful followers among various religions. In that bleak period of American history known as the Cold War, the American radical tradition was kept alive, in part, by the so-called radical Catholics or, as they are more properly known, by the Catholic Worker movement. The growing literature associated with that movement--a fascinating topic in literary history itself

--includes a number of remarkable poems, plays, memoirs, and essays by Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, Thomas Merton, and Daniel Berrigan. Jack Cook's Rags of Time: A Season in Prison is one of the most remarkable books in the whole history of American literary radicalism, in a direct line of the tradition established by Thoreau in Walden and "Civil Disobedience" and in the prison memoirs of Alexander Berkman.

A full documentation of just now specific writings embody and dramatize the affirmations associated with American literary radicalism is obviously somewhat beyond the scope of these introductory remarks. But possibilities of exhibiting that tradition, its growth and continuing strength in American letters, are numerous, either by tracing the tradition itself from the eighteenth century to now or by concentrating on a specific period (the Revolution, World War I, the Depression) or on a particular theme (the Abolitionists, the Wobblies, the Catholic Worker). The following outline may be useful in suggesting several other approaches:

AMERICAN RADICALISM: A GUIDE TO SUBJECTS AND PEOPLE

Issues	Literary Radicals	Political Radicals
Colonial Settlement	John Woolman (1720-1772)	William Penn (1644-1718)
American Revolution	Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)	Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
Abolitionism	Walt Whitman (1819-1892 Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)	William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) Elihu Burritt (1810-1879)
Civil Disobedience	Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)	Adin Ballou (1803-1890)
Labor Movement	Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) William Dean Howells (1837-1920)	Big Bill Haywood (1869-1928) Eugene V. Debs (1855-1926)
World War I	Randolph Bourne (1886-1918) John Dos Passos (1896-1970)	Emma Goldman (1869-1940) Jane Addams (1860-1935)
Russian Revolution	John Reed (1887-1920)	Lincoln Steffens (1866-1935)
Women's Liberation	Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)	Abby Kelley Foster (1811-1887)
Depression and World War II	Edward Dahlberg (b. 1900)	Norman Thomas (1884-1969)
Civil Rights and Black Liberation	Leroi Jones (b. 1934) Eldridge Cleaver (b. 1935)	Martin Luther King (1929-1968) Malcolm X (1925-1965)
New Left and Vietnam War	Paul Goodman (1911-1972) Allen Ginsberg (b. 1926) Robert Bly (b. 1926)	C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) A. J. Muste (1885-1966) Noam Chomsky (b. 1928)
Radical Christians	Dorothy Day (b. 1897) Daniel Berrigan (b. 1921)	Ammon Hennacy (1893-1970) Catonsville 9 Milwaukee 14

In emphasizing the conflict between promise and reality, between the humanitarian values affirmed by the Declaration of Independence and the injustices they endeavor to correct at a particular time, American radicals return frequently to two major figures. Whatever his limitations as a man, as an aristocrat whose life style conflicted with his public statements, Jefferson remains as a central presence in the history of literary radicalism. Robert Bly a poet who has made a contribution to the tradition by his life, as well as by his work, has dramatized the conflict between the reality of contemporary life and the promise of the Revolution in this way:

> The cry of those being eaten by America,
> Others pale and soft being stored for later eating
>
> And Jefferson:
>
> Who had hope in new oats...
>
> That is why these poems are so sad
> The long dead running over the fields
>
> The mass sinking down
> The light in children's faces fading at six or seven
>
> The world will soon break up into small colonies of the saved

The other major figure who remains a constant for American literary radicals is Walt Whitman, "our celebrated bard, our national prophet," as Allen Ginsberg described him to a Chicago Seven courtroom. At that time, Ginsberg pictured Whitman's vision of America as one

that emphasized reclaiming our many loves, many of which are suppressed, as "the only way that this nation could save itself," the only way that the people could work together, not as competitive beasts but as friends and lovers. Whitman held, according to Ginsberg, "that unless there were an infusion of feeling, of tenderness, of fearlessness, of spirituality, of natural sexuality, of natural delight in each other's bodies, into the hardened, materialistic, cynical, life denying, clearly competitive, afraid, scared, armored bodies, there would be no chance for spiritual democracy to take root in America."

In rediscovering and rejuvenating the Jefferson and Whitman tradition, these contemporary poets remind us of the depth and the peculiar nature of America's radical tradition in literature--an achievement that deserves special attention and renewed emphasis at the time of the Bicentennial and in the future.