

Josephine Herbst's "Proletarian" Trilogy —Recreating the Past and Self—

Reiko Maekawa

Prologue

"Nowhere in the literature written in that decade is this double sense of times, the negative and the positive, better given, it seems to me, than by the now forgotten Josephine Herbst in her now largely forgotten trilogy," wrote Walter Rideout in his 1983 article. The decade he refers to is the 1930s, which, according to Barrows Dunham, "began in hunger and ended in blood." Yet, Rideout points out that the decade of despair and violence also embraced such positive essentials as "the deep, widespread sympathy for others suffering the same disasters, and the hope for a better society."¹

Since Rideout deplored the scholarly neglect of Josephine Herbst, two biographies and several critical works dealing extensively with her novels have appeared. Left in obscurity for a long time, she was indeed rediscovered by a group of literary scholars interested in the literary radicalism of the 1930s generally and women writers on the Left in particular.² Born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1892, Herbst was one of those rebellious daughters of the Midwest who were willing to exchange lives in their drab small towns for the excitement of the New York Bohemia. Like many others of her generation, she was politically radicalized early in the 1930s. When she died of cancer in 1969, Herbst had left behind her seven novels, memoirs, numerous short stories,

and sociopolitical essays contributed to the *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, *Scribner's*, *The American Mercury* and other important journals of her time.³ Among her substantial literary and journalistic achievement, what gives her a unique place in American literature is her trilogy of novels published individually as *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933), *The Executioner Waits* (1934), and *Rope of Gold* (1939).⁴ Trying to locate the source of her inspiration for the trilogy, she once wrote: "The family [her maternal family] for generations had kept diaries and letters, and the first inkling I had of the complexity and significance of people in relation to each other and the world came from these documents. Living seemed constantly fertilized and damned by the tragic burden one generation passed to the next."⁵ Reliving and reconstructing the now dim past of her maternal family remembered from the tales of her mother, Herbst worked on her trilogy steadily throughout the 1930s.

As Rideout points out, one of the reasons why her trilogy was not given the attention that it deserves might be that these novels "were never brought together in a single massive volume like Dos Passos's *U.S.A.*"⁶ Added to this rather unfortunate oversight were the political circumstances surrounding her at the time of the publication of the final volume of her trilogy. It was published in the year of the Nazi-Soviet Pact that prompted many radical intellectuals to leave the Communist Party or jump out of the fellow-traveling bandwagon. Although Herbst was never a member of the Communist Party, Herbst remained a political radical amid the onset of anti-communism. Elinor Langer, Herbst's biographer, explains that "the trilogy was stigmatized as 'proletarian literature'" when "intellectual anti-Stalinism merged with popular anti-communism particularly during the Cold War."⁷ The reputation of her trilogy certainly suffered when it was dismissed as "the party line novels" or "the books written close to the shadow of Stalinism" by such influential anti-Stalinist intellectuals as Irving Howe and Lewis Coser. They even claimed that "barely fulfilled qualities" of such writers as Josephine Herbst, Robert Cantwell and

William Rollins "suggest how much talent was betrayed in the thirties, how big a price such writers paid for surrendering their gifts to the wardens of the party."⁸ This condemnation is ironical because Herbst, an extremely idiosyncratic and polemical woman, was famous for not agreeing with any warden of the party on practically any issue.

Although political factors adversely affected the trilogy's reputation, other factors also contributed to its obscurity. Leftist male critics tended to consider radical women writers' concern with the family and the personal sphere as an irrelevant issue unrelated to a radical program of social and political changes. Granville Hicks, for example, was puzzled by her treatment of the middle class family and her seeming preoccupation with the past bound up with the history of a little family. He cited Herbst as "a novelist with wide knowledge of and considerable insight into a [historical] period" who nevertheless fails to "bring out its relevancy for our time." "A proletarian author," according to him, "expresses his dissatisfaction with the past in constructive labors for the future, and he would therefore feel little temptation to become nostalgic." In case of "the representative middle-class novelist," Hicks argues, "his vague discontent with the present and his lack of hope for the future almost force him to assume an elegiac tone."⁹ Hicks was apparently disturbed by the seemingly contradicting elements in her novel—the authentic portrait of the decline of a middle class family seen from the Marxian theory of history, on the one hand, and an elegiac remembrance of things past that seem irrelevant to the class struggle, on the other. Reviewing *Rope of Gold* in *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv also comments on what seems to him a puzzling contradiction in the trilogy that "has been advertised as a chronicle of the American middle class in decline." He states, "her nervous and nostalgic style is fundamentally at odds with her objective subject-matter."¹⁰ Interestingly, Hicks commended her most when Marxist conceptions "inevitably emerge from the substance of her story," making

her characters both "living human beings" and "the instruments of great impersonal forces."¹¹ Rahv, on the other hand, reserved his praise for what was left out of the correct application of the Marxian theory of history. Thus, he wrote: "The best parts of the novel are the long ruminative, nostalgic passages, in which personal affection and the memory of the dead and gone bring back the old American times, making the past seem close and worth doting on."¹² While Hicks wanted Herbst to do away with her elegiac attachment to the doomed middle class, Rahv wanted her to get rid of her superficial rendering of the class struggle of the proletariat. Understandably both of them were disturbed by Herbst's ideological inconsistency and her ambivalence toward her "proletarian" subject. Yet, they missed "the trilogy's distinctive documentation of the history of an American family"¹³ and Herbst's unique ability to hold two contrary visions in balance.

Alfred Kazin's perceptive review of *Rope of Gold* seems to give a key to shedding a new insight into Herbst's much neglected and misunderstood trilogy. He calls her heroines "sensitive and thoughtful individuals caught in a moment of suffering" who are at the same time "trespassers of memory without yielding to it." He suggests that for these women remembering the past is not merely a sentimental and nostalgic act but the act of repossession that makes it bearable and even meaningful to live the present. Kazin also places her novels in "that long line of Mid-West chronicles of failure which have joylessly hacked the Valley of Democracy." As if to connect Herbst's characters with the bewildered and defeated men and women of the short stories of Sherwood Anderson and the novels of Theodore Dreiser, Kazin writes: "Somewhere, her people know, they have been trapped; and they sit on the empty plain, on porch steps, in beer parlors, asking where they have made their mistake, retracing the cycle of a man's defeat."¹⁴

As a political radical, Herbst may have believed in the advent of a classless society after the inevitable collapse of capitalism. She may have believed that the alignment

of the working class and the middle class will result in the final realization of the American dream. Yet, as Kazin says, "The Middle West has never believed in the happy ending." Herbst's hope for a better society was mingled so precariously with her preoccupation with "the cycle of a man's defeat." Her sympathy for her co-sufferers was mixed with her awareness of human stupidity and irrationality. This double vision is perhaps what Rideout meant when he suggested that Herbst and her trilogy mirror and illuminate the hope and despair of the 1930s.

I . The Dead and the Defeated

Herbst's trilogy is filled with the pattern of the cyclical repetition of life and death, of unpredictable elements such as illness and insanity, and of irrational motives underlying people's actions. We are reminded of what Christopher Lasch said about the middle class family of the 19th century: "In family histories one reads of the uncle or sister or brother gone suddenly crazy. One senses the bafflement and helplessness of those still sane in the face of this grimmest of witnesses to the inscrutable sadness of life."¹⁵ This sense of hopelessness and bafflement permeates *Pity Is Not Enough*, the first volume of Herbst's trilogy. The little tragedies of the Trexler family point to unpredictable and uncontrollable elements in human life rather than an orderly and rational progression toward a hopeful future.

Joe Trexler, second eldest son of Joshua and Mary Trexler, is one of the central characters of this volume, a naive adventurer who spends life as a fugitive after being involved in a railroad scandal in post-Civil War Georgia. Yet, he is always remembered as "the most generous brother, poor Joe" by his sister Anne Wendel who tells her daughters of the family stories over and over again. Joshua Trexler, a respected member of community who worked as a surveyor and represented his county in the Pennsylvania State Legislature, died, leaving a widow, six children and

debts behind him. The family headed by the widow Mary Trexler struggles to survive, hanging on precariously to their former middle-class respectability. Joe, who goes to the South in search of wealth and power, becomes a source of both pride and anxiety for his mother and his three sisters.

In her early twenties Catherine, one of Joe's sisters, dies of "brain fever"—"a disease caused solely by worry and anxiety."¹⁶ In the chapter which depicts her last agonizing hours leading to death, Catherine "screamed out in the sudden darkness" (195) after having spent many hours reading and rereading the newspapers and court documents stored in Joe's trunk in the attic. Catherine once believed that Joe was "entirely innocent" (102) and had no place in the railroad scandal. When she gradually becomes aware of Joe's complicity in the crime which has brought the downfall of Joe's otherwise hopeful career, She cries, "Joe, Joe, where was Joe? What had he done?" (189). The evidence suggests to Catherine that Joe played only a minor role in the scandal in which the Republican governor, superintendent of the state railroad and president of a railroad car company plotted to plunder state funds for purchasing railroad cars which were actually never delivered. Yet, in her perception Joe, a member of "Honest, peaceable Trexlers" (190) and her dear brother, falls from grace. With it also goes her illusion of life as something hopeful and meaningful.

From one of Anne's daughters' perspective Catherine's death was "to those left behind a remediable death, that is one that they fancied might have been avoided like death from starvation." They felt that "they knew the circumstances that had done this girl to death and guilt was always with them." This guilt made it impossible for her two younger sisters, Anne and Hortense, to "show the whole true Catherine to their children." Hortense romanticized Catherine's death by making up a story "Catherine had died because she had loved and expected to marry a man already married" while Anne told another story: "Her sister had studied too hard trying to pass her examination" (196). These interpretations reflect two separate and yet

interrelated fears. Hortense fears that sexual repression might lead to death. Anne is afraid that going beyond the domestic sphere and trying to become a career woman risks a woman's life.

Although neither Anne nor Hortense "would have breathed a word against their brother Joseph" (196), Catherine's death is partly caused by "the full burden of the family on her shoulders" (170). As Mary Ann Rasmussen suggests, "The Trexler sisters repeatedly sacrifice their own desires and interests to increase their brothers' chances of economic success."¹⁷ The three Trexler brothers—Aaron, Joe and David—are expected by their old-fashioned mother to take care of the weaker sex. It is, however, their mother and sisters who morally and sometimes financially support them. After her husband's death Mary supports her family as a dressmaker. Both Catherine and Anne are willing to contribute part of their meager earnings to support the family and help pay David's schooling at a pharmaceutical college.

Unlike Anne and Hortense, Catherine, however supportive of her family, is not fully satisfied in staying in the domestic sphere. She "worked hard outside of her teaching hours on her French hoping to qualify as a teacher of language some day" (163). Out of her intense desire to know about the world surrounding her and her fascination with written words, she "collected all of her father's diaries and old letters and began reading them" (171). Feeling "like a nun, closed in and shut tight from the world," she is compelled to read obsessively Joe's papers in the attic in order to comprehend "what had really happened in the South" (175). The continual and increased attack of wasps that "buzzed around her head" and "passed in and out of her eyes and bored into her hair" (195) while she was trying to decode the meaning of the historical documents seems to suggest that Catherine is somehow punished for trying to know the truth about the history of post-Civil War Reconstruction, and thus violating the boundary between the private sphere and the public sphere. Her desire to go beyond the private/feminine sphere bound by familial

ties and affections and look inside the public/masculine world of politics condemns her to death.

A strange dream Catherine dreams one night is suggestive of her strong anxiety as she tries to join the masculine world represented by Joe. Trying to sleep after studying hard for the exam, Catherine has "dreams that she could not pass the exam or worse that Joe was digging a terrible hole in the ground to find gold, but at the last minute it turned into a grave for a dead baby" (177). At that time Joe, having "magnetized himself with money and followed money and the news of wealth" (169) is actually thinking of going to Colorado to find gold. Shortly before Catherine has this dream, she learns that Mrs. Ferrol, Aaron's mistress, "had died giving birth to his child" (176). The dead baby of her dream may symbolize many things—Joe's abortive effort to find gold, that is, success and power in the masculine world, Catherine's equally abortive struggle to join such a competitive world meant for the fittest, Mrs. Ferrol's sacrificial death and Catherine's sexual repression as a result of her longing for her brother Joe whose ambitions and failures she cannot help identifying herself with. Finally the dead baby is Catherine herself who punishes herself for her sin of trying to know too much and trespassing on the masculine world.

Just as Anne and Hortense did not tell their children much about Catherine's death, they also "kept a mysterious silence" (196) about Joe's death. Yet, in an oblique way, Catherine's abrupt and tragic death is connected with Joe's further misfortune and his eventual insane end. After Catherine's death Joe feels "as if he had fallen down to earth with a hard bump and all his optimism about a quick road to fortune was silly" (200). Homesick and lonely, he comes back to the family's farm house in Grapeville, New Jersey and works there as a "hired man." However, his identity as a fugitive from the embezzlement scandal in Atlanta is soon discovered by one of the townspeople, who turn him in to the sheriff to "earn five hundred" (200).

When he is about to be arrested, he makes a narrow escape, aided by the faithful family members who "were like animals, wary, and ready to jump at a whisper (217). Thus, in May of 1874 Joseph Trexler disappears and "poor Joe" now calling himself Victor Dorne decides to "light out and go West" (221). While crossing Mississippi, Joe remembers his father, one of the early pioneers, who "had died at a critical time, when machinery was coming in, roads were opening up and the country changing." Telling himself that "he would not die, he would live and not fail" (224), Joe sets out to find gold in one mining town to another in Colorado and South Dakota.

Interestingly, the unfulfilled dreams and aspirations of their parents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters prompt both Catherine and Joe to seek for something better not only for themselves but also for the sake of those who were gone. At the same time, they often feel burdened by what seems to them a cursed family tradition that includes illnesses, untimely deaths, insanity, poverty and failures. Joe determines not to repeat either his father's promising but broken career or Catherine's career that ends in the mysterious and unexpected "brain fever." He, however, eventually fails in every venture he gets involved in. After having failed in prospecting ventures in the Black Hills and lost his eyesight, he starts suffering from a nervous breakdown. He is promptly sent to the State Asylum at Yankton, South Dakota by his wife Agnes, the daughter of a wealthy Eastern stockbroker. It is his sister Anne, now married to Amos Wendel and living in Oxtail, Iowa, who rescues "poor Joe" from the asylum. He dies insane after having spent his last years in Grapeville under the care of his aged mother who "refused to allow her son to be insane" (357).

Undoubtedly Joe's hapless career as a carpetbagger and a prospector is an integral part of the sweeping history of the Reconstruction Era and the Westward movement of 19th century America, thus connecting the history of the Trexler family with "the grand scheme of History."¹⁸ Joe might be seen as both a victim and an accomplice in the reckless and chaotic development of American capitalism. Towards the end of the

novel, David's steady success in the drug business is contrasted with Joe's economic demise with the implication that David's cold-hearted calculation and indifference to others better qualify him as a nascent capitalist while Joe's wrong-headed generosity and sympathies doom him to failure.

Yet, the seemingly obvious connection between the homely family history and History is a rather fragile construction in *Pity Is Not Enough* as the narrators and interpreters of Joe's story are basically excluded from History. The fact that Catherine's death takes place while she struggles to understand the history of Reconstruction Era in which Joe played a minor part indicates one female historian's failed and suicidal attempt to decode History. Anne and Hortense survive by suppressing their memory of Catherine and Joe and by confining themselves to the domestic sphere safe and separate from the maelstrom of History. Even the attempt by Anne's daughters to piece together her biased stories and the written documents left in the attic does not fully reveal the missing link in the novel. The readers are left with the frustrating feeling that they still do not know what had really happened in the South and in the West. This sense of frustration is the one expressed by Catherine who has to confess, "For all her pains, she still knew nothing" (191). Yet, her desperation suggests that it is not an easy task to know the whole truth about history, whether it is the personal history of someone you know or History whose grand scheme seems so transparent to those who seem to know where it is heading. Thus, *Pity Is Not Enough*, the first volume of Herbst's trilogy, ends rather inconclusively in 1896 when Anne receives Joe's last letter erroneously dated 1881, suggesting that his letter, a product of his cloudy mind, is no longer a reliable document, the "window to the world" which it used to be.

II. Rosamond's Death—Life's Treachery

A large cast of major and minor characters fills the pages of *The Executioner Waits*, the second volume of Herbst's trilogy, which encompasses the period roughly between World War I and the beginning of Depression in 1929. The individual life stories of the Trexler family, whose members and offspring now scatter to various parts of America, seem to be engulfed by the historical forces that sway them all to their uncertain destinies against the backdrop of the war and the impending economic crisis. Yet, in *The Executioner Waits* the most powerful and critical incident in its emotional ramifications is the unexpected death of Rosamond, the youngest daughter of Anne Wendel. The circumstances leading to her death is complicated, but it repeats Catherine's tragedy in a different context.

Rosamond, after two years of county school teaching and one year at the University of Wisconsin, decides to marry Jerry Stauffer, son of a dairy farmer. Right before Jerry's departure for Europe to serve in World War I, they get married. Rosamond gets a job interviewing patients and keeping records at a hospital in Detroit where she becomes reunited with Jerry who finally comes back from France. Finding no better job than an errand boy in a real estate firm amid the post-war recession, Jerry looks as if he lost all his fighting spirit. Tired out and nervous, the young couple comes back to Oxtail, Iowa, their hometown. Jerry takes up a night-shift job while Rosamond worries about their future. Her sense of hopelessness becomes intensified when she discovers she is pregnant. She even makes herself sick by taking "vile medicine." The night before she is scheduled to have an abortion, she drives out into the country, and to her death.

Rosamond's agony over her decision to abort the baby is interlocked with her sense of frustration with the unreasonable world over which she has no control. Her husband can do nothing but say, " 'It's your life. I don't think anyone can decide but

yourself.'"¹⁹ She realizes that it is impossible for him to help her when he himself is "frozen in his helplessness" (210). Rosamond and Jerry share their radical sympathies as they give their full moral support to the I.W.W. and industrial and agrarian strikes of the early 1920s. Yet, the feeling of camaraderie that exists between Rosamond and her husband cannot prevent a widening emotional chasm between them, as she has to face their problem all by herself.

The process of her gradual disintegration leading to her accidental and yet suicidal death can be detected by the premonition of death that dominates her mental landscape. While working at a hospital in Detroit, Rosamond is often haunted by the thought of the sick babies she sees every day and wakes at night in terror. She "had a haunted look that troubled Jerry" with her hair "pushed back and a wild look in her eyes" (196). Even in her parents' house, she feels alone, "belonging nowhere and to no one" (201). As she watches the Missouri from her room, she has "the feeling sometimes as if treacherous rivers were weaving around Oxtail, waiting to strangle it." She remembers a fearful incident of years before in which "she and Vicky had almost got sucked into the Missouri at the mouth of the Big Sioux when paddling in a canoe" (206).

Curiously, her fear and premonition of death gradually lead her to a kind of death wish as she dreams of her solitary and nocturnal drive:

If only Cliff weren't so tight with his car. She longed to drive with it at night, to take it alone and go out along the road and keep driving. Drive to the Black Hills where Uncle Joe had lived and had gone mad without finding gold. It would be great to hit straight across Nebraska out to the knobby country of the Hills. Perhaps get lost winding around in the hills the way she and Vicky were once lost in the cornfield. "Where are we, Vicky?" she had said, in all that green, green reaching to left and right, in front and back, nothing but the rustle of green

and overhead a blue staring eye of sky. They had kept on marching through the rows, talking of perhaps starving like the boy in the story. They too might fall down between the rows, until they starved to death in the ripening corn and crows came to pick their white bones or the farmer cut the corn and the shocks would topple around their skeletons, bleached and clean. (208)

Both Uncle Joe's reckless and ill-fated adventure in the West and her remembered sensation of unrestrained freedom in the cornfield connect Rosamond's present to the past in which death loomed large as the image of both potential liberation and final closure: nothingness.

In her last letter to Vicky, Rosamond writes, "Send me the *Liberator*, will you?" (207). It is as if she were trying to clutch her fleeing fate by finding some political solution to her problem, hoping that the revolutionary future symbolized by the *Liberator*, one of the communist publications, might liberate her from her current fix that makes her feel "caught like a stuck pig" (212). Her anger, at least on one level, is directed at the economic system that does not allow a young couple to support "the baby that wanted to come into the world" (209). As Rosamond impulsively gets into her brother-in-law's car in the middle of night and passes through "the rich country with the different colored fields" (211), her thoughts wander off from the beauty of an Iowa corn field to those who are disinherited: "Oh, there was good rich living in the land and why should it get pinched off, why should people feel squeezed and beaten, it wasn't the fault of the land." Her anger is momentarily turned to "the middlemen in town" (212), but her despair becomes more acute as she can neither understand nor articulate what is wrong with the system. Just like Catherine who tries to decode the history of the Reconstruction Era in vain at the moment of her death, Rosamond wishes to understand the historical forces that prompt her honest father's business failure, her husband's inability to find a decent job and her

reluctant decision to kill her unborn baby.

Rosamond gets impatient at the slowness of any change to come. She despairs over "the foolish false optimism of people always expecting things to get better" (212) and the impotence of any political movement to solve her problem of now and here. More confused and puzzled than angry, Rosamond speeds up as she drives until the car shoots ahead, "clean ahead, ripping out suddenly like a broken spring tearing down the hill" and hitting "the big dark truck stalled without a tail light near the bottom" (213).

After Rosamond's death, the novel's focal point seems to shift from the personal sphere to the public sphere as if to atone for the failure of politics to solve her problem. Both Jerry's new career as a union leader and the gradual radicalization of Jonathan Chance, son of a wealthy Michigan businessman and husband of Victoria Wendel, Rosamond's sister, point to this direction. The juxtaposition of the rising proletariat and the declining middle class, for example, can be seen in the last scene where the aging David Trexler, the youngest and most successful of the Trexlers, encounters a group of angry "agitators," who are burying a man shot by a cop during the picketing, at the cemetery in a gloomy Pennsylvania coal mining town. David's physical deterioration and spiritual demoralization are depicted as being prompted by the prospect of the economic crisis.

Yet, Herbst narrowly resists her temptation to make her novel too mechanical and schematized. Clearly, the awareness of unpredictable and irrational elements in human life as well as the bafflement over "the cycle of defeat" is central to the consciousness of the Trexler family. The deep sense of life's treachery and mystery is expressed in Anne's agony over Rosamond's death:

She had not been able to save her girl. . . . Where had her girl gone? People who were able to call accidents the hand of God were fortunate. She was not that

kind. Sometimes sitting at the table in the dining room in the silent house she had the feeling that she could unravel the mystery. Then her life as a girl with its joys and sorrows rose before her. Her dead sister Catherine who had been no older than Rosamond seemed now the freshest in her memory. If she could think that there was a heaven where those two young girls were wandering now, hand in hand, it would be a happy way perhaps, but she knew better. (229)

After having witnessed the declining fortune of the Trexler family, the tragic deaths of Catherine and Joe, and finally the broken promise of Rosamond's would-be-happy life, Anne herself faces the inevitable and uncontrollable—her death.

Even the seemingly hopeful future of Victoria and Jonathan, who choose to side with workers and farmers instead of clinging to their middle class origin, is overshadowed by the ghosts from the past. The silver teapot, Uncle Joe's wedding present to Anne, which comes to Victoria's possession after Anne's death, stands out in their room "like an evil warning" (344). The likeness of Jonathan to Uncle Joe frightens her like "the stab of a knife." At the same time, her sense of urgency for a fuller and more meaningful life becomes even stronger as she feels the pressure of the hands of "all the injured and defeated ones of her own family" pressing at "her back demanding new life" (345). In her optimistic mood, she determines not to get stuck and to keep going to create the hopeful future. Yet, in her pessimistic mood, Victoria has "a terrible fear and premonition that he [Jonathan] would end like Uncle Joe." As if to suppress such a fear, she tries to believe that they are "young, strong, nothing could stop them." Then the face of Death that has taken Rosamond away suddenly horrifies her. Remembering also her mother whose dead face was "rigid and lonely as a face on an old coin" (345), Victoria realizes that she now has to bear the full burden of the Trexler family with its legacy of the unfulfilled lives of Catherine, Joe, Rosamond and her own mother.

III. Victoria's Radical Journey

Rope of Gold, the final volume of Herbst's trilogy, focuses on the difficult relationship between Victoria and Jonathan against the background of political radicalism of the 1930s. In this interlocking tale of the private life and the public life, Victoria continues to feel the binding hands of the past—the voices of "all the injured and defeated ones of her own family" telling her to explore the still unmapped territory and yet warning her against unexpected hazards and treacheries.

As the novel opens in the comfortable living room of Mr. Chance, we find Victoria nervous and isolated not only from the members of the conventional and wealthy Chance family but also from Jonathan Chance, her husband. On the surface, Victoria and Jonathan, both committed to radicalism, seem to form a united front against the Chances who are hostile to any movement threatening to their status quo. It becomes clear from their conversation that Jonathan and Victoria have just attended a farmers' organizational meeting that endorsed a radical program including cancellation of debts and an end to evictions. As well-documented by Langer, this meeting refers to the Farmers' Second National Conference, which met in Chicago from November 15-18, 1933 at "the peak of rural protest during the Depression" and at "the peak of Communist influence."²⁰

In spite of their sense of camaraderie, however, the chasm between Jonathan and Victoria has been already widening. Even their farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which they bought with the hope that their love would be nurtured and their life would take roots in the rustic surroundings, comes to have a rundown and forlorn look. While Jonathan, having given up his literary career, becomes involved with the local farmers' protest, Victoria feels dissatisfied with being degraded into "a leftist wife appendage."²¹ The radical movement, whose implicit sexism tends to force women to stay home while their radical husbands go to political meetings and

do organizing work, drives Victoria to a peculiar predicament; she is isolated from both mainstream middle-class life and male-centered political radicalism. Furthermore, Jonathan's childlike indifference to money, which makes it necessary for Victoria to earn their bread by doing under-paid odd jobs, wears her out.

Most importantly, Victoria's sense of isolation becomes intensified after having lost her baby. As in the cases of many other misfortunes that fell upon the Trexlers and Wendels, the miscarriage resulted from a series of unfortunate circumstances: her father's sudden illness, a telegram from home, Jonathan's usual absence, and the bad winter weather. After Victoria's "mad trip three miles to town"²² to send the sick man a telegram to get well, the child was born dead. And her father had died before the telegram reached home. Yet, the episode that foreshadows this accident occurs a few years before the actual miscarriage as Jonathan recalls:

He remembers now with pain Victoria's face when he had said brutally he would run away if she had a child. She had been standing at the window in the farmhouse in the country. Her head had turned slowly to look at him; her eyes had rounded, wide and brilliant, like a cat's when it prepares to pounce. Not a word had been spoken but now he knew that her long slow withdrawal from him had really begun at that moment. (20-21)

Although Jonathan is tormented by "his own deep sense of guilt," he also wants to escape from the past that seems to accuse him of his many failures and inadequacies. Thus he observes: "Memory could become a chain as well as poverty; one had to cut it sometime or become a cripple" (21). Revealingly, Victoria's preoccupation with family lore "sometimes fascinated her husband, sometimes disturbed him darkly as if, lost in so many tangled roots, he could never truly find her" (37). For Jonathan the past including his mother's death, their baby's death and his own past controlled and

manipulated by his rich and stern father is nothing but oppressive. As Victoria is also "bound up with it [his past], " he wants to free himself from her accusing and pitying eyes which too often "witnessed his defeat" (114). Jonathan tries to break off with his past by joining the Communist Party. His decision to join the party is prompted by the fact that the farmers in their community want him to be a section organizer. Yet, his political and public decision is closely connected with his personal and psychological need to be liberated from the chain of the past and to "see himself in his new role" (20) as a responsible communist.

Unlike Jonathan, Victoria begins her search for selfhood by reconnecting herself with the past. The memory of the dead baby seems to remind her of Catherine's sexually repressed life, the tragic life of Uncle Joe who died insane without finding gold or fathering a child and Rosamond's death caused by her agony over a difficult decision to abort her baby. Yet, instead of letting her life be "damned" by "the tragic burden one generation passed to the next," Victoria tries to listen to the muted voices of the dead out of the past that "had a way of tolling, like some bell." In particular, Victoria recalls that her mother "had to quit school at eleven and pedal a sewing machine until her leg ached." Victoria's mother never doubted that "her girl was merely to have everything the world holds": career, marriage, love, children and anything else she wants. Inspired by her mother's unfulfilled aspiration for education and, moved by her loving belief in her, Victoria realizes that "losing her baby was a sign she should have something of her very own to do and be" (47). Victoria's decision to go to New York to find a job is initially economically motivated, as the couple's need for cash is so acute. Her new journey is, however, meant also a way out of her sense of isolation and worthlessness in the working world as well as in the radical political milieu.

Victoria's gradual development of a career as a labor journalist and Jonathan's rise to an important position within the Communist Party indicate two divergent paths to

the future, reflecting two differing radical visions. That they take divergent paths is both the cause and the effect of their marital disharmony and eventual separation. In *Rope of Gold* neither Victoria's new life as an aspiring career woman nor Jonathan's increasing commitment to the Communist Party is glorified; each is depicted with sympathy and austerity. Victoria gets a job doing research for a magazine with which Lester Tolman, Jonathan's friend, is connected. She constantly feels lonely in the impersonal city and tells herself: "She was a woman for the country as her people before her" (165). During her occasional sojourns at their Pennsylvanian farmhouse, she often spends her time in an attic. The relics of her family remind Victoria of her "fertile and hardy" forebears including her own mother and grandmother. Although "the thought that she had no children to push on for her made her feel almost an outcast," she consoles herself, thinking "she had only beliefs and her hopes that she shared with Jonathan as if they were their little children" (171).

Ironically, just at the moment Victoria clings to the idea that she and Jonathan could at least share their common beliefs, he triumphantly tells her that he has just signed up with the Party. Victoria can do nothing but say faintly: "'That's fine but I thought, I always thought we'd do it together; this is the first time we haven't been together'" (171). Victoria's disappointment elicits an angry response from Jonathan who coldly condemns her: "'It's sentimental to talk like that. Even silly'" (172). In the center of Victoria's radical vision there is the future "fertilized" by the past as well as the individual life enriched by its connections with others. Yet, Jonathan increasingly comes to regard his radical commitment as an act of erasing his past and severing his connections with familial and communal ties.

The disagreement between Victoria and Jonathan becomes even clearer when he later announces that the Party wants him to leave the farm work and become a "Front." Jonathan, well dressed, handsome, urbane, is chosen to "work with city people in the hope of getting more firm support" (242). In fact, he internally suspects

that these "well-intentioned" sympathizers "distrusted the very people they longed to see rise from poverty"(239). Nevertheless, he feels that "he ought to be willing to go where he was most needed." Victoria strongly objects to what seems to her Jonathan's passive subjection of his will to the "omniscient"(242) Party. She instinctively knows that Jonathan tries to find personal salvation in his selfless commitment to the Communist Party. It seems to her that he wants to escape from his intellectual responsibility by surrendering his free will to the Party. According to the Party's code of behavior, his surrender is justified and even endorsed as a conscientious and responsible act. Victoria's radicalism involves no such abnegation of the free will. Excluded from the radical movement because of her gender and therefore far less hypnotized by the Party, Victoria maintains her independence of thought and moral integrity by following her gut feeling about what is right.

As Victoria predicts, Jonathan's new "robust role that did not fit him"(329) only frustrates him and alienates him from the very people, the farmers and workers, he originally longed to work with. When last viewed, Jonathan is a cynical and mechanical follower of the Party as his "feeling of guilt about the many vacillations of his life had made him harden his doubts into acceptance of whatever was assigned him (398). Before sending his ultimatum to Victoria, he makes a vow to himself—"He must cut the tie, once and for all, if he were not to be completely faithless, if he were to live"(401). With his new liaison with Leslie, a woman who "accepted without quarrel or question his terrible lonely need"(332), and with whatever new role the Party will assign him (it is suggested that he will join the communist underground), he chooses to erase memory, his past itself. His seemingly radical departure from the past is doubly ironical as his earlier obedience to his parents and his adolescent rebelliousness come full circle when he chooses a path of unquestioning obedience to the Party, whose authoritative voice is both oppressive and compelling. Herbst's critical portrait of Jonathan bending to the Party at the cost

of his moral and intellectual independence seems to suggest that she herself was no slave to the party line.

Significantly, Herbst's more sympathetic account of Victoria's radical journey subtly oscillates between elation and despair, indicating that she herself was trying to find her own significance in the barren radical milieu. The path Victoria chooses to thread is just as thorny and contradictory as Jonathan's although it is probably less cynical and potentially more fruitful. Critics such as Laura Hapke tend to view Victoria's elevation from "comradely wifehood" to "a realistic career woman for the 1930s" as a significant departure from "male-centeredness" that her "self-subordinating" female forebears were "raised to accept." Hapke sees Victoria as a positive female role model: "an alternative New Woman, vocationally dedicated yet physically passionate, individually ambitious yet politically committed, willing to balance the search for work with the struggle for marital approval."²³ To read *Rope of Gold* as a New Woman novel is, however, to miss the deeper implications of this novel as well as "a certain dark music"²⁴ that subtly echoes throughout her trilogy. Although Victoria's modest success in journalism is a hard-won victory in the face of sexism both in the larger society and in the radical movement, she is expected to achieve much more. Her mother once told her: " 'You'll have to be my eyes when I am gone' " (170). To see what her mother could not and cannot see, and to connect the past-laden present to the present-laden future is what she is expected to do. As a journalist, a keen observer of historical events, she could be empowered to decode, record and even affect History. She could finally realize the unfulfilled dreams of Catherine, who died of a brain fever while trying to decode the history of the Reconstruction. She could do more than pity "poor Joe," who was never aware of the impersonal power of History that finally drove him to insanity. She could atone for her inability to help her sister Rosamond, who died so young and vulnerable. Yet, Victoria is not so naive as to assume that her new and independent life as a journalist

is a cure-for-all. She knows that she is helpless in face of the impending crisis in her personal life and in the world heading for another war. There is always an underlying fear that she is just as much trapped in "the cycle of defeat" as farmers in the drought-afflicted Midwest whose struggles she is assigned to report.

The merging of the personal with the political in Victoria's life with its new contradictions and possibilities is presented most dramatically in the episode centering on Cuba. Heart-broken by what threatens to be the final resolution of their marriage, Victoria, nevertheless, ventures into a reporter's mission to Cuba to cover the Cuban uprising of 1935. Her Cuban trip can be seen as a journey of personal regeneration and that of heightened political awareness. Before she departs for Cuba, she experiences utter despair. In what becomes the last Christmas together with Jonathan, Victoria becomes ill and cries to her mother for help in a delirious state: "Everything in her was drawn out, and she could only repeat in a nightmare, I'm so tired The wall had broken in at the cellar and water was pouring over all the good preserves and help, she called in a loud voice, mother, mother, help me, help me, but she was alone again"(316). She remembers Rosamond, Uncle Joe, her dead child and Aunt Hortense who is dying. The image of death is now associated in her mind with the impending war: "It was taking a long time to bear a new war; it was being born now in the world, and what a painful thing it is to struggle and then bring out a dead child"(315). Her thought of the long series of futility of the previous generation only resulting in the dead end of the world intensifies her despair: "It was no use to go back to the dead; they had failed her"(317). At the same time, Victoria remembers her mother saying, " 'You were meant to live for something' " (315) when she survived scarlet fever in her childhood. As if to exorcise "the consciousness of the dead and gone" so strong as a "hand at her back"(170), she resolves to live instead of "waiting for death"(317). She has to survive no matter what will happen to her personal life or the world.

When Victoria arrives in Havana, the city is gripped with the fear of the impending general strike. Based on Herbst's Cuban trip to cover the opposition movement for the *New Masses*, Victoria's journalistic mission is depicted as more dangerous and tense than her previous assignments. Alone at a hotel in Havana, Victoria waits for a chance to have access to participants in the opposition movement to find out what is really happening. Her interviews with "United States government employees with their charts and figures" and "Cubans in white suits and briefcases" (358) yield nothing worthwhile. They patronizingly try to assure her that there is nothing to worry about. Victoria, however, is convinced that the United States and Batista, the soon-to-be military dictator who smashed forcefully a second general uprising in 1934, protect the sugar interests that dominate this island. After waiting patiently for a while, Victoria at last is introduced to "the secret members of the union who worked on the sugar plantations" (359). They are part of the revolutionary underground that is preparing for a general strike. Excited by the feeling that she is living an important historical moment, she decides to venture into Realengo in the mountains of Oriente Province where the revolutionary movement is known to be the strongest. She slides into "the workman's overalls and shirt" (369) and enters the unmapped territory where no foreign woman has trodden before. Riding on a horse to the place where she is going to see Lino Alvarez, "the mysterious leader of the mountain men" (383), she feels strangely happy and her personal problem seems "remote" (370). She feels as if she had seen "riding by her side a strange company of faces she had never seen, her grandfather with his straight tall figure and deepest eyes, the optimistic handsome Uncle Joe, and even Uncle David Trexler." In her imaginary vision Rosamond is also somewhere nearby and Jonathan is "just behind her" (371). The moment of a happy family reunion is suddenly shattered by the sad realization that "something happened" (372) to her and Jonathan. She again compares the large families of the previous generation to her single self as she reflects: "If I

only had six children, like my grandmother, left a widow and their livings to make, it would be easier, she thought. The worst is to be alone" (372).

Her sense of aloneness never goes away, but comes to have a different meaning by the end of her journey. In Realengo Victoria feels overwhelmed by the trust given by Lino and his mountain people. Lino wants her to understand the entire background of the struggle in Realengo as he explains: "The land had been given to them years ago for fighting in the war for freedom. They had paid taxes. They had done all the work. Then the sugar companies began trying to get hold of it." He wants the world to know their struggle "through her." Entrusted with "an important duty that she must by no means forsake" (384), she feels a strong sense of responsibility not only as a professional journalist but also as a historical subject who could and would change the course of History.

Victoria's hopefulness at the end of her Cuban trip seems to reflect her inner regeneration rather than the external circumstances surrounding her. By the time she leaves Cuba, the strike has been lost. In her personal life, she receives Jonathan's letter telling her of the end of their relationship. Feeling that she must "hurry for fear that something should break inside," she begins writing her first byline article; "It was like an antidote to poison, the harder she struck the keys, the quieter she became" (403). On her journey back to the United States, she again remembers the dead and gone—Uncle Joe, her mother, Rosamond and Jonathan who "had undergone some change as mysterious and complete as Lot's wife, turned to salt" (405). Victoria recalls that her mother said when Rosamond died: "'When I think of my mother's sorrows, I can bear this'" (405). She feels as if "'the exquisite burden of life'" (170) was suddenly revealed to her: "Victoria thought how little she had understood then and at this moment, at the very point where her life had failed her, it began to come back to her. She seemed to have been floundering around in the dark and had just seen a tiny light on the other side of a black swift-running river" (405).

When she is last seen in the novel, she vows that she will never forget the Cubans who are fighting for freedom. Although she is alone, she cries no more; "I have myself, she thought, no one can take that from me" (406). This may sound like a solipsistic statement, but in fact she seems to recreate her self by reconnecting herself with the past. At the same time, she attempts to go beyond the isolated shells of selfhood by sharing the historical present with nameless others whose fates are likely to be bound with hers.

Epilogue

When David Madden asked Josephine Herbst to contribute an essay to be included in his edited volume *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, she wrote her letter of rejection by expressing her misgivings about the term "proletarian." In her letter to Madden she wrote, "my work has been considerably damaged by the category, and that the term since the Second World War has been used more as blackmail than as a definitive term with any valid meaning." Although Herbst's rejection of being called a "proletarian" novelist may have been partly indicative of the scars of anti-communism and the political name-calling of the 1950s, her letter to Madden suggests that her objection was not merely political. Referring to her trilogy, she further stated that "I never thought of it as 'proletarian'—in fact I hated the term, and thought it never comprehensive enough." As if she suddenly became aware of the need to explain her seemingly emotional recoil from the term with which her work has been associated, she added: "I guess that I hate it because I always proposed to write about what I knew something of and I didn't know the proletariat. The poor aren't proletariat Only the communist *The Worker* could make an organic proletariat out of them."²⁵

In his 1929 article "Go Left, Young Writers!" Michael Gold preached to aspiring

writers: "The America of the working class is practically undiscovered But there is no need yet of going to Africa or the Orient for strange new pioneering. The young writer can find all the primitive material he needs working as a wage slave around the cities and prairies of America." In Gold's vision the image of the American proletariat is almost identical with that of a new proletarian writer: "a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America." He further declared: "His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment His 'spiritual' attitudes are all mixed up with tenements, factories, lumber camps and steel mills, because that is his life."²⁶

If we try to apply Gold's definition of the proletariat to a large cast of major and minor characters in Herbst's trilogy, we realize that there is hardly anyone who fits into his definition. As Paula Rabinowitz observes, "Within Party-dominated literary circles, the development of proletarian literature codified masculine metaphors for the working-class struggle."²⁷ Tellingly, Herbst's trilogy mostly deals with "real struggling people"²⁸ who elude the image of the traditional masculine proletariat. When Herbst tried to write about people she knew, drawing heavily on the homely family stories told by her mother, her narrative became a complex jumble in which unclassified people lived all mixed up in a series of personal and historical events over which they had very little control. Herbst's heroines are not militant mill workers whose lives Gold encouraged proletarian writers to depict. The Communist Party's "estimation through the decade that 'basic industry'—steel, mining, auto, etc.—contained the most important sector of the working class"²⁹ also excluded farmers from the radical mainstream. Struggling yeoman farmers of the Midwest, whose fate aroused Herbst's compassion, became somewhat irrelevant to the working-class struggle envisioned by the Party. Furthermore, intellectuals as a

group, seen as a suspicious and unreliable element by the Party, were regarded as antithetical to the traditional masculine proletariat. Rabinowitz wrote: "Because literary radicals engendered the male intellectual as feminine but refused a place for the radical female intellectual, such a woman inhabited a multiply contradictory space."³⁰ Herbst's choice of Victoria, the radical female intellectual, and Jonathan, the male intellectual, as the two main characters of *Rope of Gold* seems to underscore Herbst's objection to the term "proletariat" with its narrow and exclusive connotation. Herbst also rejected Gold's proposal that American proletarian writers should write about American proletariats. Her inclusion of the Cuban episode in *Rope of Gold* is one indication that she felt no need for limiting her scope to the American scene. Her eyes were open to the international revolutionary movement. When Herbst tried to write about all the struggling people near and far away, her inclusiveness resisted a narrowly defined concept of the proletariat.

Herbst's trilogy also shows her divergence from the future-oriented perspective of the literary left of the 1930s. Throughout her narrative of the Trexler-Wendel-Chance family, she repeatedly emphasizes that the future and the present cannot be separated from the past. As the title of the final volume suggests, each individual is bound by a "rope of gold" which might be variously interpreted as the family tradition, the past, the communal solidarity or the materialistic basis of our existence.³¹ At the beginning, an invisible and oppressive rope passed from the previous generation, which, like the Gordian knot, Victoria cannot cut, tangles her. Yet, at the end, the same rope saves her from despair and isolation. Herbst might have hoped, as Rideout claims, "that the disintegration of her own middle-class family might be related dialectically to working-class integration and that the classless society would become an historical reality."³² Yet, she knew better than to believe in the vision of the future as a *tabula rasa* on which one could imprint the classless society free from ancient evils and "a complex of human, racial, and familial

relationships."³³ In this context, Herbst could not agree more with James Farrel's contention: "But the proletariat does not exist in total isolation from the bourgeoisie, nor from bourgeois influences; it does not, for one thing, live free from tradition."³⁴ In Herbst's view, it is not possible that a new radical Adam—"the isolated individual, standing flush with the empty universe, a primitive moral and intellectual entity"³⁵—would suddenly emerge out of nowhere and create a utopia. We recall that Herbst depicted Jonathan's way of erasing his past and his new commitment to the Party as a dubious choice. Victoria's selfhood is enhanced by her renewed connection with the past and nameless others. Even Steve Carson, a farm radical who joins the 1937 Detroit sit-down strike at the last episode of *Rope of Gold*, is not a heroic Adamic figure that creates a utopia for the working class. Seen by the camera eye of the invisible labor journalist, possibly Victoria, Steve is only one of many nameless individuals whose rural past with familial and communal relationships are intertwined with his radical present.

Herbst's compassion for the disinherited was more inclusive than the official Party's idea of class solidarity. Her emphasis on memory, the past, and the family made her unique among "authors writing during the Thirties and early Forties in the general ambience of Marxism." If "proletarian writers" include "people who were writing fiction when Marxism and the Communist Party were, at least for them, vital parts of the general culture,"³⁶ Herbst, her objection notwithstanding, might be still considered a proletarian writer. Yet, such an epithet is perhaps less important than the lasting legacy she left to one epoch of American literary history born out of the decade of despair and hope.

Notes

1 Walter Rideout, "Forgotten Images of the Thirties: Josephine Herbst," *Literary Review*

- 27 (Fall 1983): 28. Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956) is one of the pioneering works on the forgotten writers of the 1930s including Josephine Herbst.
- 2 For detailed accounts of Herbst's life, see Elinor Langer, *Josephine Herbst* (1983; reprint, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994); and Winifred Farrant Bevilacqua, *Josephine Herbst* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985). The recent works that treat Herbst's novels include Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Nora Ruth Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen, and Josephine Herbst* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996); and Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- 3 In addition to her trilogy, Herbst's published novels include *Nothing Is Sacred* (1928); *Money for Love* (1929); *Satan's Sergeants* (1941); and *Somewhere the Tempest Fell* (1947). Her memoirs were collected in *The Starched Blue Sky of Spain and Other Memoirs* (1991).
- 4 To date no publisher has brought together Herbst's trilogy in a single volume. Different publishers recently reissued these linked novels originally published by Harcourt, Brace & Co. See *Pity Is Not Enough* (1933; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); *The Executioner Waits* (1934; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1977); and *Rope of Gold* (1939; reprint, Old Westbury, N. Y.: Feminist Press, 1984).
- 5 Quoted in Rideout, "Forgotten Images," 29.
- 6 Ibid., 28.
- 7 Elinor Langer, afterword to *Rope of Gold* by Josephine Herbst (Feminist Press, 1984), 447.
- 8 Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical Study* (1957; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 306.
- 9 Granville Hicks, "Revolution and the Novel," in *Granville Hicks in the New Masses*, ed. Jack Alan Robbins (New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), 21-22, 23. This essay was originally serialized over seven issues of the *New Masses* in April and May, 1934.
- 10 Philip Rahv, "A Variety of Fiction," *Partisan Review* 6 (Spring 1939): 110.
- 11 Hicks, "Revolutionary Literature of 1934," in *Granville Hicks in the New Masses*, 279. This essay was originally published in the January 1, 1935 issue of the *New Masses*.
- 12 Rahv, "A Variety of Fiction," 111.
- 13 Langer, afterword to *Rope of Gold*, 447.
- 14 Alfred Kazin, "Flies in the Mid-West Kitchen," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 5 March 1939, 7.

- 15 Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 3.
- 16 Herbst, *Pity Is Not Enough*, with an introduction by Mary Ann Rasmussen (University of Illinois Press, 1998), 196. I have used this edition throughout. Subsequent citations from this work will be documented parenthetically.
- 17 Ibid., xxiii.
- 18 Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 122.
- 19 Herbst, *The Executioner Waits* (AMS Press, 1977), 210. I have used this text throughout. Future citations from this work will be given parenthetically in my text.
- 20 Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 150.
- 21 Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 21.
- 22 Herbst, *Rope of Gold* (Feminist Press, 1984), 21. I have used this edition throughout. Subsequent citations from this work will be given parenthetically.
- 23 Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression*, 195, 203, 200, 203.
- 24 Kazin, "Flies in the Mid-West," 7.
- 25 Quoted in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), xv, xix.
- 26 Michael Gold, "Go, Left, Young Writers," in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 188, 189.
- 27 Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 61.
- 28 Quoted in Langer, *Josephine Herbst*, 149. Herbst used this phrase in her letter to Katherine Anne Porter: "The trouble with us and our kind is that under this system we are such isolated bastards. . . . Once we are grown we have too little contact with real struggling people."
- 29 Robert Shaffer, "Women and the Communist Party, USA, 1930-1940," *Socialist Review* 45 (May-June 1979): 78.
- 30 Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire*, 138.
- 31 Nora Ruth Roberts interprets the "Rope of Gold" image as a symbol of "the fusion of class forces"—"the forging of a new class force in the merging of interests of the working class and the middle class." See Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers*, 138, 144.
- 32 Rideout, "Forgotten Images," 35.
- 33 R. W. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 50.
- 34 James T. Farrell, *A Note on Literary Criticism* (1936; reprint, New York: Columbia

University Press, 1992), 82. Herbst met Farrell at Yaddo, an artist colony, shortly before going to Cuba. According to Langer, she respected Farrell's literary talent as well as his policy of cooperating with the Communists on political issues while criticizing their literary ideas. When Michael Gold counterattacked Farrell for his acid criticism of the cultural politics of the Communist Party in late 1935 and early 1936, Herbst, along with William Phillips, Philip Rahv, Nathan Asch and Horace Gregory, defended Farrell.

35 Lewis, *The American Adam*, 50.

36 Chester E. Eisinger, "Character and Self in Fiction on the Left" in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, 158.