

**AMERICAN ROMANTIC TRADITION  
AND THE PROLETARIAN NOVEL IN THE 1930s**

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The culmination of the long and little known career of Olive Tilford Dargan (aka Fielding Burke) was her 1932 novel *Call Home the Heart* about a North Carolina mountain woman's involvement in a textile mill strike. At the time it was variously credited or discredited as an example of "proletarian literature," or rather, as that term was just coming into use, as a kind of revolutionary writing.

It is an excellent illustration of the difficulties which confront a novelist attempting to make his political and social convictions explicit rather than implicit in his writing. The problem that it raises, or some variation of it, is a major literary problem of the moment. . . . Many writers who accept the need for revolutionary correction of social ills are still uncertain, or perhaps completely baffled, as to how this belief can be expressed dramatically, in terms of action, without the loss of certain qualities they believe good writing should possess. (Cantwell 606)

Although the "problem" Robert Cantwell identified was, in the narrow sense, to be of limited moment—the attraction of American writers to "proletarian literature" being generally understood as having been a relatively brief "flirtation"—the importance of *Call Home the Heart* endures, as do the works of other socially committed writers of the 1930s, chiefly because of the "difficulties" it presents. The contribution of Dargan's novel to American literary tradition as social criticism depends on keeping the controversies which surrounded its appearance somewhat alive. To see the difficulties it presented, to critics both sympathetic and hostile to the idea of proletarian literature, means to recognize Dargan's attempt to recover a spirit of romantic idealism as a vehicle for encountering the problems of social reality. It is also to understand how, at the same time, she used the occasion of the social imperative for a proletarian

literature—for a literature of social actualities—as an opportunity for romantic revival.

I borrow the phrase “social imperative” from Marcus Klein, who uses it in the plural to include the large “facts” of social, economic, and cultural trauma that had begun to accumulate in early modern America by the 1880s, facts such as the rapid growth of urban population, of immigration from outside Northwestern Europe, of black migration from the South. These, along with other changes, helped to transform the “locale and personnel” of American civilization and bring on a continuing crisis of cultural authority (*Foreigners* 12-14). It was to those imperatives and that crisis, Klein maintains, that the making of American literature 1900-1940 was especially responsive to.

Given these imperatives, the import of “proletarian literature” for literary historians goes well beyond its existence as “a slogan distributed by the American Communist Party.” Klein points out that, as a movement, proletarian literature embraced the conviction that “the current task of the American writer (was) to pick a quarrel with the culture, in order to lead the culture to right values.” It based itself on ideas that were already current in “modernism,” ideas about what qualities are valuable both for literature and for society:

The sense of fact, a sense of the moral role of literature, the sense of an adversary position within the general culture all these constitute a great amount of what modernism meant. . . . Proletarian literature was a literary rebellion within a literary revolution, to which it was loyal. It had as its aim refreshment of that revolution by way of bringing to it a knowledge of current realities. . . . [it] was whathappened when modernism met the depression (“Roots”137, 139).

Although Klein has come under fire in Barbara Foley’s massive and recent survey of proletarian fiction for “ignoring the political differences dividing proletarians from their bourgeois experimentalist contemporaries” (Foley 62), it nevertheless seems reasonable to admit that the writers in question, as writers, could only have had political aims by also having literary ones. Cantwell, the self-identified proletarian writer of *The Land of Plenty* (1934), assumes as much

when he laments the difficulties that arise from the desire to “express the need for revolutionary correction” “without loss of certain (literary) qualities.” Why bother to write “literature” if the aim is merely to devise propaganda? Why write at all, rather than become an organizer or something else more directly “revolutionary?” Which is not to suggest that having literary aims is apolitical, or ever can be. Translating particular aims into particular books and thence into particular actions, however, does raise vast problems of theory and practice. Sorting out such problems was manifestly enabling for writers, as writers. It gave them something to do. And, this being the 1930s and not the 1990s, it gave them hope of a considerable audience who were themselves, with varying emphases, both interested in “literature” and concerned about “social ills.”

Commentators have frequently turned to Van Wyck Brooks’ statements in *America’s Coming of Age* (1915) to describe the characteristically “modern” attitude writers brought to the challenges of their times. Brooks helped establish the consensus that the need to break with the immediate past, which had shown itself inadequate to new conditions, required a re-sifting of the less immediate past, a re-formulation of a “usable past.” By the 1930s there existed many competing models for the “reordering of American literary tradition” whose aim was to discover the “main currents” and make them available to be pressed into new service. Among these, Vernon Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-30) focused on past exemplars of American idealism from Jefferson through the Transcendentalists, seeking to show that “the promise of the future has lain always in the keeping of liberal minds that were never discouraged from their dreams” (Ruland & Bradbury 296). The idealism of many “proletarians” owed not a little to the romantic revivalism which was one of the places to which the modernist movement had led, a “calling home the heart” to its capacity to dream of an enlightened future.

However, not every reader of Dargan’s novel was ready to countenance her style of idealism. The *New Masses* reviewer of *Call Home the Heart*, for example, although he welcomed Dargan’s endorsement of Communism, regretted the novel’s “utopian mould” as a hopelessly bourgeois sentiment, and saw its idealism crowding out the realities of class struggle:

Its guiding principle is an abstraction, such as human perfectibility or the advance of human knowledge, given an

omnipotence to enlighten by its irresistible effluence the understanding of all men. . . . In such a utopian scheme of things, what place has the tumultuous combat which is the inevitable result when class is pitted against class? (Jerome 14).

This criticism, however, was a friendly one, coming in answer to an earlier attack, this one by Elmer Davis in his notoriously titled “The Red Peril.” Davis saw the novel’s didactic second half as evidence of a “Red infiltration into present-day literature” whose threat to “disinterested thinking” lay in its disguising of a political dogmatism akin to religious fanaticism behind the “ostensible triumph of reason.” “Nothing will satisfy (Dargan),” he observes, “but drenching her later chapters in the sincere milk of the Word, and the unsaved will find that milk pretty sour” (Davis 661-62).

Both of these critics rejected aspects of Dargan’s novel depending on what side each took up in the “literary class war” (a phrase first used by Edmund Wilson in an essay for *The New Republic*, 4 May 1932). Their debate discovered grounds within the same novel for accusations of bourgeois naivete and ideological evangelism. That both grounds exist is not so much a result of Dargan’s desire to satisfy opposed critical audiences—to satisfy one with “art” and the other with “propaganda”—though this is not to deny the presence of those rhetorical pressures. Rather, they stem from Dargan’s romantic fascination with the idea that History belonged to the downtrodden—but not quite in the sense of a belief in an “abstraction” detached from social reality. No. Dargan was fascinated by the idea, by the hope, that the Ideal was about to be made Real. Her novel conveys a nearly biblical enthusiasm for the day when the last shall be first and the weary made strong, not in heaven but on earth.

Knowledge of this feeling of having a part to play in making real a grand historical drama is given to Dargan’s heroine, Ishma Waycaster. Here the young mountain woman finds herself among fellow mill workers, studying their faces as they listen to a Communist Party labor organizer:

She knew the yearning and thirst that was on them, stirring through the lines and scars of an ever losing battle. Faces like these had hid in catacombs, bearing a light that now

darkness could but out. That hunted light had encircled thrones. Faces like these had whitened in the dungeons of serfdom, while bleeding dug away the foundations of feudalism. Was this starved, feeble handful part of an unconquerable host? Would they win again, and the mountain in their path be levelled? Or would they fall and rot, more fertilizer for its rank, material blooming? (Burke 284).

But although Dargan was capable in such passages of expressing political desires with strong evangelical emotion, it seems that she was also too true to her imagination, in the romantic sense that she conceived it, to avoid the ironies of its logic—a logic that made the most noble the most weak and therefore the most doomed.

More crucially, the direction of the novel, not long after this scene, begins to exhibit its author's aversions to the demands of the very History that so attracts her imagination. The fate that lures Ishma to the mill town and the precincts of revolutionaries is brought up short, and we begin to sense Ishma's reluctance to play her role, her feeling of entrapment in historical drama, and, above all, her fear of collapsing into the mass. Only in the final pages does hope for continued revolutionary struggle and ultimate victory reassert itself, and only through Ishma's rediscovery of her affinity for Nature.

*Call Home the Heart* had begun with Ishma at home in the midst of Emersonian nature—in the remote high Carolina hill country. Its beauties, slopes and waters, we are told, are capable “of replenishing her channels of being.” As a girl, Ishma learns to read and write with the knowledge that “it was a way to power and larger life.” The trouble is that the daily demands on her energy prove too much for the sustenance of nature; the terms set for her life and sex too limited to repay intelligence. “In the first place,” complains Ishma's mother, “the gal knows too much. That sort always dies, er goes wrong, give 'em time.” By the time she reaches her early twenties, after three years of marriage and two childbirths, after the death of two babies, and much economic hardship, she has had enough:

How hard she had worked!. . . It was no use to fight any longer there on the mountain. . . . A houseful of children that were no better than a million other housefuls of children. . . . Farming—without tools, stock, seed. Nothing to pour into it but their strength. What had it brought them? Debt, sneers, injustice. Nothing to wear. The crudest food, and no time to prepare it. Nothing for study—books—trips. Just bare life. (106)

So she escapes to the mill town where she finds only the hardships changed, the result the same: bare life, grittily detailed and numbingly devoid of meaning. Commenting on the appearance of Dargan's novel along with a set of others based on events of the 1929 Gastonia, NC textile strike, Jonathan Daniels saw in Ishma's career "the indigenous story of the last of the old, hard-struggling rural America engulfed in the new bitterness of the barren town which held out promise of escape from the barren land" (Daniels 537). If Emersonian Idealism had believed that "society would only improve when the individual self was sufficiently cultivated" (Ruland & Bradbury 108), the career of Ishma makes it all too clear that that cultivation is impossible before a requisite improvement of society.

In *The Liberation of American Literature*, which also appeared in 1932, V. F. Calverton urged his readers that "the faith in the common man which Emerson and Whitman entertained was faith in him as an individual and not as a mass. . . . a belief in him as a petty bourgeois individualist; our belief must be in him as a proletarian collectivist" (229). And so Dargan, along with Ishma, tried to believe. Ishma, feeling that her "young years cried out for their due," hears the comrade's message about "the ideal of industrial unity" and in a chapter called "In the Ranks" becomes a labor organizer herself:

The greater part of herself, meant to march with the racial entity, was out of its prison. Her body might grow cold and rot with death, but here was something of herself that would go as far as mankind (Burke 305).

But this new work wears her out more than ever, and finally, she recoils from “the racial entity” that literally seeks to envelop her. When the wife of a black striker whom Ishma has heroically saved from a lynching embraces her in passionate thanks, Ishma is “filled with uncontrollable revulsion,” and flees as quickly as she can back to the mountains. It’s a clumsy episode, but a remarkably logical turn for the novel to take. For now Ishma is free for a reconciliation with nature. It comes one evening when the woods have caught fire, as they periodically do in high summer, in a vision of conflagration older than her oldest memories:

What she saw held no disappointment. At last life was kind. Here was invincibility, and beauty was its breath. Looking at it, she herself became fire, power, beauty. Like plumed boughs the burning curves rose upward, and she rose with them. Light raced round the horizon, and she was the light. An ocean of white smoke sent its rolling waves against heaven, and she too glided upward to beat at the doors of the sky. . . . She didn’t intend to wait until the flames drooped and the ecstasy sagged. She must carry that power and fire back to her work. (422, 424)

What *Call Home the Heart* seeks to accomplish is a revision of the romantic paradigm known to the English Romantics, those poets who conceived of a fragmentary self seeking fulfillment in the ultimate coherence of Nature only to find the dissolution of self proffered by that ultimate union terrifying, unacceptable, impossible, or suicidal. The revision begins, as I have suggested, by the substitution of History for Nature, until the recoil from entrapment in the dissolving “mass” is felt. Needing to save the self in order to preserve its capacity for visionary encounter, Nature is then re-substituted for History, wherein a transcendental encounter proceeds in full Emersonian optimism with nothing of the individual diminished in its ever reaching flight. This vision secured, the self is ready for a new encounter with History.

In retrospect, the 1930s was a period of major advances for trade unionism. But the unions themselves turned out to be not very interested in revolutionary

correction, or the membership in merging with History. Perhaps its time for a new vision, a new romantic revival, a new literature of social actualities, that can take us a little further before we turn back, turn back and then start again.

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