

Review of Milton A. Cohen's *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams in the 1930s* (U of Alabama P, 2010)

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For any scholar and devoted reader of modernism and American modernist poets, Milton Cohen's book provides a welcome explanation of the upheaval faced by major American poets in the 1930s, a decade often given little consideration in the literary canon. When addressed in the anthologies, the 1930s are labeled as an era of Mike Gold's *New Masses*, and we are exhorted to turn our attention (albeit briefly) away from modernism to Dos Passos (the modernist exception to the rule), Steinbeck, Odets, and Richard. Therefore, it is with appreciation that we read Cohen's insights into the career paths of four major poets through contextualization of their poetry within the revolutionary talk and action of the times.

The well-supported thesis of *Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics* is that the social, cultural, and political upheaval of the 1930s directly affected each poet and that by following their careers closely through this decade, we come out on the other side with a much better understanding of the perspectives and choices of each poet. In Cohen's description of the complex pressures put on the modernist poets, he posits that "the poetic responses of all four poets to the Left [are in] a kind of bell curve of political involvement and disengagement" arcing from little or no engagement, to involvement with the Left by the mid-thirties, to "separation" by 1939 (5). The effects of the interactions of Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams with Leftist politics, magazines, editors, and publishers ended with the poets evolving from their pre-1930's aesthetics to places that—while not aligned with Left—were not "static" either, as the Left claimed. As Cohen shows, "their political responsiveness in the thirties transformed itself into social and political concerns in the decades following the Depression"—and their careers moved along various points on the Left-Right continuum (5).

Cohen writes an engaging story, as is clear from his first page:

Imagine you are a modernist poet, and it is 1931. In the 1920s you were a critical success: you enjoyed the approbation of your peers, a small circle of poets and critics—the cognoscenti. Now, almost overnight, everything has changed. . . .

Modernism is out; proletarian literature is in. Freud is out; Marx is in. . . . *The Dial* and *The Little Review* are defunct. *New Masses* and *The New Republic* are what the intelligentsia now read. Now the subject is the American working class, unemployed or striking for decent wages or better working conditions. . . . If your writing is still grounded in the aesthetics of 1920s modernism, you are going to be scalded in reviews, at best considered “confused” or, worse, dismissed as outmoded, a bourgeois decadent. (1-2)

With this opening narrative, Cohen places us firmly in the perspective of the modernist poet, suddenly confronted with a whole new set of dictates about writing and the purposes of the writer. We feel the shock, for those of us devoted to modernist literature sympathize with and enjoy the modernist aesthetic. From this quick brush stroke, Cohen unfolds his argument through representations of compelling dialogues about poetry among poet, reader, and critic: “[these] stories describe patterns of attraction and repulsion, involvement and resistance that say something about the experience of the poet in a political age” (47).

It is precisely this story that can be, in a sense, surprising to anyone who has not specialized in this decade. From a sweeping perspective, all four poets display proclivities that would seem acceptable to the Left—consideration of the “average” working person and of different classes of people are evident in the poetry of Cummings, Frost, Williams, and even Stevens. Two of these poets—Williams and Stevens—had full careers well outside of art and academia, providing a unique context to their writing. While much of their poetry exhibits the “purity” of the modernist aesthetic, other poems are grounded in real life (regardless of modernist stylistics), as those of us studying Cummings know well. What is most interesting then is to follow Cohen through his trajectory, to see in detail the “pressures,” as he calls them, of this political decade and its literary, leftist critics, and to read his analyses of key poems through this lens.

The first chapter very helpfully sets the stage with an overview of the Leftist magazines, writers, editors and the various ties to the Communist Party, causes, and “front groups,” the League of American Writers and the

American Writer's Congress, and the Popular Front. We get an overview of the language and perspectives of specific figures through presentations of several key texts, such as Mike Gold's early articles on proletarian literature and Edmund Wilson's 1931 essay "An Appeal to Progressives" in which Wilson, as Cohen summarizes, exhorts his reader: "don't just adopt Marxism, Americanize it" (11). Cohen explains how non-Communist writers are, by the mid-thirties, allowed to contribute to the leftist magazines if they position themselves as "fellow travelers" or are recognized as among the group of "middle-ground" writers who could be "courted" (43). Cohen uses this contextualization to elaborate on the situation faced by Stevens, Cummings, and Frost, and even William Carlos Williams (despite his already having some leftist leanings and "credentials"). It seems odd, for instance, that the highly intellectual and accomplished poet, Stevens, was suddenly considered as one of the confused, dissatisfactory, middle-ground writers. Each chapter follows the same structure: situating each poet's publications in the 1930s and then examining critical reactions and the poet's resulting reactions to the critics and the general demands of the times. Political views and poetic theories of each poet are explained in this context as Cohen shows how the four poets attempted to meet—or resist—the calls on the Left for a new type of writing.

Cohen's chapter on Stevens elucidates a jump in his publishing career between both versions of *Harmonium* (a modernist text published in 1923, virtually reissued in 1931) and *Ideas of Order* (1935) followed by other publications of the decade. Cohen outlines Stevens' experience of the Great Depression as he dealt with bankrupt companies in the 1930s and establishes Stevens' awareness of contemporary conditions. He cites Stevens' complaints that "I believe in doing everything practically possible to improve the conditions of the workers," yet noting how he feels a great deal of conflict about how or if poetry should respond to contemporary events (61). Cohen explicates several poems as expressions of this conflict. The chapter ends with a reconsideration of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937, in the book of the same title), as a poetic consideration and juxtaposition of "the wrangling of two dreams"—Marxism (and the "murderous alphabet" of organizations in the U.S) and the artistic dreams of the guitarist (75). Cohen asserts that while Stevens "seems to accept" the promise of a Marxist society, "he concludes by affirming the power of the imagination, his value, transmuted into 'we'" (76). While we are used to hearing insightful criticism of Stevens from many scholarly critics, it is

Cohen's next step that really intrigues, as he brings us the voices of the influential, leftist critics of the time, who deemed Stevens' poetry "dimmed" and felt that his work "would profit from a choice of subject that might force him closer to the good earth" (78). Hearing such dismissive critiques gives us a new appreciation for the pressures on Stevens.

As for Cohen's chapter on Cummings, several readers may have read a similar version published in *Words into Pictures*, so I will not elaborate here. Cohen follows the same structure of poetic text followed by leftist dismissal, and then poet's response. Placing the article in the context of this book, however, deepens our understanding of the forces behind comments regarding Cummings' work. As Cohen explains, Cummings was one of the few writers to travel to Russia, and his resulting book *EIMI* was met with a "scathing" response by leftist critics (97). Given the state of publishing at the time, as elaborated here, it is no wonder that Cummings had such trouble publishing *No Thanks*. Critics belittled Cummings as showing the "typical ignorance and malice of the anti-Communist" (102). Although today we might admire his lifetime support of individualism, neither he nor Frost appealed to their audience with this message, since the 1930s milieu was committed to the life of the social group, not the individual.

Frost might be attended to less often by those of us interested in the avant-garde and not so much in the popular appeal of Frost (my apologies to fans of Frost). Regardless, Cohen's treatment of the wrestling matches between Frost and the Left are instructive, and his readings of Frost's poetry of the time are engaging. Like Cummings, Frost was denounced as static and "out of touch" (115). Unlike Cummings, he responded less with bitter satire and more with developed and nuanced political stances. Unlike Cummings at the time, Frost was continually in the public arena and often used the stage to challenge the leftist position and give expression to his anti-collectivist, individualistic views (to such an extent that, as Cohen tells us on page 147, he was viewed as an unpredictable ambassador for the U.S.). In his treatment of several poems, Cohen shows how Frost was challenged and then responded in anthologized poems such as "Two Tramps in Mud Time," "Neither Out Far nor In Deep," and "Desert Places" as well as others such as "A Roadside Stand" and "Build Soil." Cohen extends his argument about the poet's reactions through analysis of poems like "Two Tramps" to point out elements that can be considered differently than the standard critiques. Situating the poem's speaker faced with two tramps asking for work, the set-up seems typical of writings of the time that addressed

the unemployed, yet the poem does not resolve the speaker's dilemma. Furthermore, as Cohen points out, Frost states in the poem that a "life of self control" is one in which there is not the "strike for the common good." He concludes that the poem is "in short, anti-proletarian" (125). Leftists were not amused.

Cohen's treatment of William Carlos Williams is equally detailed, as he sees Williams' comings and goings among the leftist groups of the times as part of the complex situation that Williams helped create for himself. Although the most willing of the four to join in the cause, Williams also pulled away on many occasions. Cohen continues to weave stories that helpfully illustrate the pull of the politicized times. In one instance, Cohen describes how Williams favorably reviewed the writing of H. H. Lewis, a farmer turned writer, although apparently a writer without much talent. Cohen finds this review for *New Masses* to be illustrative of the situations faced by writers:

Was that praise, then, the dues Williams felt he must pay to be published in this shrine of the Stalinist Left . . . ? I prefer to think that, rather than knowingly compromise his aesthetics, Williams had temporarily deluded himself into thinking that Lewis' monothematic fervor represented a likely future for poetry in a political age. In any case, he was certainly not alone in wanting to be part of the leftist avant-garde. Recall that Stevens found it "extraordinarily stimulating" to be part of "that milieu" when his book was reviewed in *New Masses*. (177)

In short, Cohen provides a sympathetic and rich understanding of Williams and aids the reader in tracing his path from *Spring and All* to *Pater-son*, through poems such as "The Sun Bathers," "An Early Martyr," the much anthologized poem "The Yachts," and "The Poor"—"the poem . . . that best represents the ambivalent relationship between Williams' aesthetics and leftist ideology" (185).

Cohen's concluding chapter involves key questions—"What do their stories tell us collectively about the vicissitudes of the modernist poet in the 1930s?" (193). Was their engagement with the Left "in retrospect, harmful or beneficial?" (198). "Did they really abandon their political poetics?" (200). Cohen argues against the claim that the political poetry of the four poets could be dismissed as minor, given the impact that the decade

had on all three. His conclusions to these questions, as delineated through well-researched presentations on each poet, are worth reading. In short, this reviewer highly recommends Milton Cohen's new book. I found it educational and appreciated the clarifications that Cohen brings to the 1930s. I hope that we continue this discussion of the impact that the political era had on the modernist poets.

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Work Cited

Cohen, Milton A. "From Bad Boy to Curmudgeon: Cummings' Political Evolution." *Words into Pictures: E. E. Cummings' Art Across Borders*. Ed. Jiří Flajšar and Zénó VERNYIK. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007. 68-89.