

There are two exceptions. Within the areas of abortion and affirmative action right-wingers seem to have lost, says Schwartz. *Roe v. Wade* has not been overturned by the courts, and affirmative action has been preserved in higher education as well as in the private sector where many affirmative action programs are still in operation. However, even these two positive developments may turn out to be limited victories at best. "The Republican war cry is 'no more Souters' or liberals, and so long as George W. Bush or someone who shares his views is president, there won't be any" (*ibid.*) There will be retirements on the Court within Bush's second term as president. And one thing is certain: Bush will never make the mistake of appointing ideologically unreliable judges.

On this, Schwartz' prediction has come true. During his second term in office, Bush has been fortunate enough to be in a position to appoint two new justices to the Court. When Chief Justice Rehnquist died in the summer of 2005, Bush nominated and the Senate confirmed Judge John G. Roberts Jr. as new chief justice. And as the present review is going into print, we are waiting to see if the Senate will confirm Judge Samuel A. Alito Jr., the president's pick to fill the seat of retiring Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. O'Connor, who was the first woman on the Court, was nominated by Ronald Reagan, and over the years she has become the swing-vote. In terms of whether the Court will become more or less conservative in the future, it therefore matters very much who will succeed her.

In polls during the election year 2004, Americans identified issues such as health care, education, the war in Iraq, the economy, and unemployment as the top election issues. Democrats could – and in my opinion should – have driven home the point that the courts will have a great deal to say about how all of these issues play out. Unlike the Democrats, the Republicans were fully aware that the intellectual, legal, and political composition of the federal judiciary was one of the most important issues at stake in the 2004 presidential election, because the next president would have the power to create many new judges in his own image and thus place his stamp on every aspect of public policy for the next three decades.

It's the Judges, Stupid ...!

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Per Seyersted, *Robert Cantwell: An American 1930s Radical Writer and His Apostasy*. Introduction by Alan Wald. Oslo: Novus Press, 2004; xii + 345 pages. Sources, notes, index; ISBN 82-7099-397-2; NOK 384, € 48.

Thirty-five years separate Per Seyersted's groundbreaking 1969 critical biography of Kate Chopin and his last book, *Robert Cantwell: An American 1930s Radical Writer and His Apostasy*, published a short time before his death in April 2005. In both books Seyersted immersed himself in the life and work of a writer who had slipped below the horizon of literary recognition. Seyersted played a major role in bringing

Kate Chopin into the American literary canon. Readers may wonder whether he will now be responsible for bringing yet another forgotten writer into view. He was able to persuade many that Chopin would be worth their attention and *The Awakening* is taught in Am. Lit. courses all over the world. May we now look forward to a similar apotheosis of Robert Cantwell's 1934 novel *The Land of Plenty*?

Robert Cantwell (1908-1978), a colorful minor character on the literary scene of the 1930s, grew up in the Pacific Northwest in a middle-class family fallen upon hard times. In his teens he showed literary promise. He also tried the life of an industrial laborer and was one of the few members of the radical left with the experience of working in a factory. When he moved to New York in 1929, he had already received critical attention: Alfred Kreymborg had accepted his short story "Hanging by My Thumbs" for publication in *The New American Caravan*. Although survival in New York was a struggle at the time of the beginning depression, Cantwell's immediate success seemed to promise a great literary career. His early stories got him the attention and acquaintance of many prominent writers and critics as well as publishers, and a contract and advance from Farrar and Rinehart for a novel. *Laugh and Lie Down* was published in 1932. By this time he had also published seven short stories and had acquired a reputation as "the best book reviewer in New York" (31). We may well ask, "Why is not Robert Cantwell a household name in American literature?" Seyersted's book may be read as a study in failure.

The facts of the matter are: his eighth and last short story appeared in 1935; his second and last novel was published in 1934. He wrote an average of 15 major book reviews and journal articles a year in addition to a steady stream of journalism and occasional editorial work during the 1930s. Indeed, his output remained steady for these ten years with 20 articles in 1939 alone. His engagements as book editor with *Time* began in May 1935 and he was on the staff of *Time* and *Fortune* until a breakdown and a long period of illness and hospitalization in 1942. After a difficult period as a freelance writer he worked for the new *Sports Illustrated* from 1956 till his death in 1978. In the post-World War Two years he wrote, edited and ghostwrote quite a few books. The best were three biographies – *Nathaniel Hawthorne: The American Years* (1948), *Alexander Wilson: Naturalist and Pioneer* (1961), and *The Real McCoy: The Life and Times of Norman Selby* (1971) – and a book about the region of his childhood and youth: *The Hidden Northwest* (1971). Some of his best writing is to be found in the pages of *Sports Illustrated*. Was Robert Cantwell merely a gifted man of letters of interest for historians of his times or was he a writer whose fiction and non-fiction should be read for their lasting literary value? These are important questions to keep asking about more or less forgotten writers of the past for all who find canon maintenance an essential task for the critic and literary historian.

It was difficult for the young Cantwell to survive on book reviewing. His first novel did not sell well enough to make up for the advances he had already received but he was nevertheless given advance for a second novel, *The Land of Plenty* (1934). Others too had faith in him and through Malcolm Cowley he got temporary appoint-

ment as book review editor for *The New Republic*. Then, with his second novel still unfinished, he accepted an appointment that with hindsight seems quite unrealistic: to be ghostwriter for Lincoln Steffens of a biography of the Boston millionaire E. A. Filene. His second novel was not only delayed but eventually completed in a rush. He wrote well enough to impress contemporary critics and writers but his heart does not seem to have been in his fiction. When Hemingway in 1950 regretted that he hadn't written more fiction, Cantwell "replied that he hadn't had enough time. Both books had been finished 'at forced draft,' in order 'to be able to raise another advance. It was so rushed that I never felt good about it.'" (81).

Per Seyersted's book is a biography; his focus is on Cantwell's life rather than on his fiction. Seyersted has provided summaries rather than literary analyses, perhaps because he realized that his biography would not have many readers who were familiar with the texts. This seems a wise decision, but it means that Cantwell's fiction is not given critical interpretations that may have provided both writer and reader with a basis for an esthetic evaluation. In spite of this limitation, however, Seyersted's discussions of the two novels and several short stories are convincing evidence of Cantwell's potential. Seyersted, moreover, presents a careful account of Cantwell's literary and ideological development during the five years in which he produced the output by which he must be judged. *Laugh and Lie Down* belongs, Seyersted convincingly demonstrates, "among the Lost Generation novels in its depiction of rootless, disillusioned youths" (47). *The Land of Plenty* (1934) is a marxist-inspired proletarian novel, but was criticized by the influential Granville Hicks in the Communist *The New Masses* for not giving the reader "a sense of ultimate triumph" (104). To Lincoln Steffens it was "a new sort of fiction," and he predicted, "That boy will go far" (108). Cantwell was less interested in toeing the party line than in creating a literary work of art. According to most reviewers he succeeded and one was sure that he would "in time outrank his literary hero, Henry James" (106). But although his second novel sold a little better than his first, 2,000 copies were not sufficient to make up for the advance. What we may call the post-literary life of Robert Cantwell is dealt with in the remaining two thirds of his biography.

His transition from novelist to journalist and from communist fellow traveler to uncommitted liberal was in the year from May 1934 to 23 May 1935, Cantwell's first day as temporary employee at *Time*, then "considered fascist or semi-fascist by New York intellectuals" (185). Four of Seyersted's sixteen chapters are on this twelve-month period, with an entire chapter giving a fairly detailed history of the 1934 San Francisco strikes, on which Cantwell reported for the *New Republic*. The strikes were met by violence from police as well as vigilantes and Seyersted convincingly demonstrates that the intimidation he experienced here was an important factor in what he calls Cantwell's apostasy. Independence of mind may have been another factor, but here the account is necessarily less clear. The Communist Party demanded obedience from its writer members. In his confessional *The Naked God: The Writer and the Communist Party* (1958), Cantwell's contemporary Howard Fast gives a troubling account of how he and others routinely submitted drafts to the Party for review before

publishing. Never a party member, Cantwell did not subject himself to such discipline. Yet, as late as 14 June 1934 he responded to a questionnaire from the communist *The New Masses* by defending himself against the criticism of Hicks and argued that his recent novel “is, quite simply, a work of propaganda” (122). These are strange words from a writer whose leading light was Henry James!

Fear is a third factor that may help us understand what Seyersted calls Cantwell’s apostasy. As he came to fear for the safety of his family in a society that not only tolerated but encouraged the use of violence against leftists, he also increasingly reacted to the manipulations of the Communist Party in using the strike for its own agenda. When he wrote to his wife that he would turn down the invitation to speak at the 1935 Writers’ Conference – a Communist front organization – he explained that “he did not want to ‘arouse any unnecessary antagonism.’” In Seyersted’s reading he did not now fear antagonism from the right but from the party because “he had started on the road to apostasy” (180). A fourth factor seems to have been his strange contract to write a biography of Filene for Steffens. Seyersted has an excellent account of the difficult triangular relationship between Filene, the aging “progressive capitalist” (182), Steffens, the equally aging established leftist, and Cantwell, the young radical and promising novelist. It seems clear that Cantwell’s main motivation was his need for money for his family. To Steffens, Cantwell’s draft did not make sense: “You must have been pretty ‘mad’ to write a whole book for me alone” (181). The pretence of working on this biography was kept up until Steffens died in August 1936 and in May 1937 Cantwell sent Filene a manuscript that he knew could not be used (201).

Seyersted has an admirably well researched account of Cantwell’s family background and youth as well as of the leftist intellectual context of the mid 1930s. Consequently, he can give us a sense of how difficult the transition from committed leftist to struggling non-political journalist was for Cantwell:

What really worried him ... was the “treacherous” conflict of warring impulses within himself. In Oakland he had felt that he had reached the end of his youth, that he saw he had to break “that forced response” to what he thought was expected from him. The real secret of his present distress, he now thought, was that he was still checking his impulses to suit editors and others, and he wished to let go of his restraints and get back to what was basic in himself, that is, his solidarity with his “own people” ... What Cantwell was now dreading in his own character was the conflict going on in this fellow traveler who had started moving away, not from his basic fellowship with workers, but from Stalin, the CP, and all groups; leaving the belief he had been clinging to, he was on his way to another, more conservative set of values, closer to what he appreciated in his ancestors. (190)

Since he still was only intermittently on a regular salary, Cantwell sought and accepted assignments from all quarters. But it does not seem to have been difficult for him to write in a manner acceptable to Henry Luce, the editor-in-chief of Time Inc. Dwight Macdonald was a writer for *Fortune*, a Luce publication, and was experiencing ideological difficulties there. He was assigned to write a series of four articles on U. S. Steel and asked Cantwell, assumed to be a fellow Marxist, to do the third one

on labor relations. The management of the corporation had objected to Macdonald's first two articles and so close were the ties between capital and the law that Cantwell, suspected of being a communist, was spied upon by a FBI agent while doing research for his article in Pittsburgh. The editors of *Fortune*, however, saw no political problems with the text he handed them in March and it was published in May 1936. By contrast, Macdonald's fourth installment, "an outright indictment of the Corporation," was rejected and Macdonald resigned (192). The point here is not that Cantwell was prostituting himself but that his views had changed. The days of the "American 1930s Radical Writer" of Seyersted's title were over.

For readers without personal recollections of the 1930s, however, it may be difficult to appreciate the repressive nature of the times. Yes, Cantwell had changed his political affiliation and when the news of the Moscow trials came to New York he immediately understood that they were rigged. In this society, however, not only communism but even a moderate liberalism was considered dangerous. His four-year-old daughter attended a progressive school in New York and after Cantwell had written an article for the periodical published by the school on the need to be aware of fascist trends in the United States, she was expelled. On the other hand there were quite a few communists on the editorial staffs of *Time* and *Fortune* and the Party retained its powerful influence on the intellectual life of New York. Cantwell, concerned with the fascist organizations he had experienced in California as well as fascist regimes in Europe and increasingly convinced that communism had little to offer the working class, was caught in the middle.

For most of his adult years, Cantwell's life was interwoven with that of Whittaker Chambers, who, for a period when he was an underground agent for the Communist Party, even used Robert Cantwell's original name as his alias: Lloyd Cantwell. They remained close friends both before and after their political turnabouts, when they both found a haven of sorts in the Episcopal Church. Even so, Cantwell lived in constant fear of exposure by Chambers.

The pressure on Cantwell was enormous. In the late 1930s, Seyersted explains, "Cantwell felt it important to hide both his past and his present political views. The Communists at *Time* were liable to taunt him if they knew of his apostasy; at the same time he feared that his job might be less secure if his superiors were to learn about his early radicalist involvement" (212). The climate was such that after Fred Dupee had been fired as literary editor of *The New Masses* in 1937 because of his support of Trotsky, "Cantwell did not have the courage to continue seeing his very close friend" (201). On the other hand he also kept his distance to those who still supported the Party and he did not sign the manifesto in support of the Moscow trials the following year. According to Seyersted, "there is no question that he was somewhat delusional in harboring an exaggerated sense of being in danger" (234) and in March 1942 he became a "voluntary patient" in a mental hospital for seven months, subjected to an ineffectual insulin therapy as well as electro shocks. Apparently, he never fully recovered from this treatment.

Nevertheless, the last twenty years of his life, beginning with his Hawthorne biography in 1948, may be regarded as his most productive period as a writer in spite of the pressures he experienced during the McCarthy era. And, as Seyersted argues, some of his very best writing appeared in *Sports Illustrated* where he was given considerable freedom to decide on his own topics. Although he never got very far into his projected third novel, *The Enchanted City*, and did not get beyond notes to a planned autobiography, the republication of his second novel and the quality of his late non-fiction lead Seyersted to give his penultimate chapter the title, "A Writer Vindicated." But Seyersted does not see him as having fulfilled his promise. His concluding paragraphs are on what Robert Cantwell might have done rather than what he actually accomplished:

Probably this unquestionably highly talented author was meant to be a novelist, and had conditions been right, he might have given us something from his heart in a third novel. In the first two he had reflected his life in the Northwest in the late 1920s. Afterwards, having a rich store of further experiences, and a new-won sense of freedom and self-confidence, he might have produced works that would have given him a more lasting name in American literature. (294)

When Per Seyersted began his Cantwell project – his earliest listed interviews were in 1972 – he may have had literary expectations of the kind he must have had when he began his work on Kate Chopin. Clearly, as he immersed himself in his project, he came to realize that Robert Cantwell, for all his admirable traits and all his promise, would have to be characterized as a minor character in the history of American literature

Sadly, this is the last book we will have from Per Seyersted. It was one of two biographical projects that took much of his time in the decades after his Chopin book. The other, a life of Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, was shelved after Seyersted had published a fine volume of four essays in 1984: *From Norwegian Romantic to American Realist: Studies in the Life and Writings of Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen*. Seyersted's own literary gifts are evident in his fine Norwegian translation of the ancient epic of *Gilgamesh* (1967). Per's lasting contribution to our understanding of American literary history and the shape of the American literary canon is his book on Kate Chopin. Few non-American scholars have in such manner contributed to the resurrection and canonical recognition of a forgotten American writer. While his *Robert Cantwell* may not have the same powerful impact as his *Kate Chopin*, this is because of the different qualities of the two subjects rather than a difference in quality between the two books. In his last book, Seyersted has given us not only a fine biography of a fascinating literary character but a remarkable story of the literary politics of the 1930s as well as enlightening glimpses of life in the magazine empire of Henry Luce. We have all reason to be grateful to Per Seyersted for completing this book before he left us.