

The Art of Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited*, a Novel of the 1930s

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Abstract

The proletarian novel *The Disinherited* (1933) by worker-writer Jack Conroy, while far from being famous, has always met with a good reception when placed among the other proletarian novels of the 1930s. Objections were raised, however, from its first appearance about its “episodic” nature (it was composed of some thirteen “sketches” interlarded with narrative), and even Conroy himself called it not so much a novel as a testament to the times. Still, many features of the Bildungsroman appear in *The Disinherited*, although Marxist critics like Barbara Foley prefer to call it “Proletarian Fictional Autobiography” to distinguish it from the more “individualistic” traditional Bildungsroman.

The novel, praised at its introduction by such writers as John Dos Passos, is made “art” largely by its compelling sense of immediacy, its aura of first-hand testimony (the much valued “Authenticity” of its ‘30s genre), and by the strong quality of workers’ folklore interwoven through it. New Journalism author Tom Wolfe has written of Stephen Crane’s first novel *Maggie* that “it is not so much a narrative as a series of vignettes for vignettes’ sake,” treasured for themselves, quoting Crane’s own idea that a novel should be ““a succession of sharply outlined pictures which pass before the reader like a panorama, having each its definite impression” (“Afterward,” *Maggie*, Signet, 2006). These words generally describe the art of *The Disinherited*, though it is also a “worker’s education” in the tradition of Zola, London, Dreiser, and Gorky. And while it may evidence the typical “conversion ending” of the proletarian novel, it also radiates with warmth and humor and folk wisdom, so much so that it becomes an identifiable “work” of the writer’s craft.

Text

Two words are problematic in the title to this paper: *art* and *novel*. That is, Jack Conroy’s proletarian novel *The Disinherited* (1933) has been accused of both being “artless” (Larsen 94) and not really being a novel at all. Conroy himself bowed to the second accusation by trying to make his second and last novel, *A World to Win* (1935), more traditionally novelistic (and named from a line in the *Communist Manifesto*, at the suggestion of his editor). And he seconds both accusations by describing *The Disinherited* as a pastiche of sorts, a stringing together of some thirteen previously published short stories (or “proletarian sketches,” as the genre has been termed), the “Ur-Text,” as it were, with an added narrative thread suggested by his publisher, Covici-Friede, and his editor, Edward Seaver. Conroy explains, “The sketches were rejected by thirteen publishers, and then Covici-Friede called the MS back for a second look. They asked me if I would consider fictionalizing the sketches somewhat, running a narrative thread through them. I said I would. This necessitated considerable revision and re-adjustment, and some addition of new material to supplement the parts that had appeared in *The American Mercury* [five sketches, up to a third of the novel], *Pagany*, *International Literature [Moscow USSR]*, *Common Sense*, and some other magazines [including *New Masses*]” (Fried 43). Later in his life, Conroy termed it “an example of the picaresque novel,” saying, “It’s still

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episodic” (Thompson 150). Conroy further explains, “I for one consider myself a witness to the times rather than a novelist. Mine was an effort to obey Whitman’s injunction to ‘vivify the contemporary fact’” (Conroy *Reader* 133).¹ “I wanted to be a witness to the times,” Conroy writes in his 1982 Introduction to the reprinted *Disinherited*, “to show how it feels to be without work and with no prospect of any kind, and with the imminent fear of starvation, to move people to think about these things, and, what is more important, to do something about it” (28).

The first of the separately published stories or sketches, “Hard Winter,” which actually serves as introductory part to the last section (Section III) of the completed novel, was published in H. L. Mencken’s magazine *American Mercury* in 1931. Conroy has acknowledged Mencken as a great mentor (“the best friend a young writer ever had” [Aaron]) and he has said that “Hard Winter” “was really my beginning as a ‘arthur,’ as we still call ‘em down here [Moberly, Missouri, his hometown]” (Fried 42). “Hard Winter” the story or sketch is a prelude in the novel to what Conroy later called an “agonizing journey” from Toledo, Ohio, where he and his nephew Fred Harrison (called “Ed” in the novel) had been working in the Willys-Overland automobile plant, back to Moberly in a beat-up car (two cars, actually). It was 1929 and Conroy had been averaging about a day’s work a week in the auto factory. He and “Ed” had been tending an “enormous enameling oven” at the Overland works, contending with the infamous “speed-up” system when they were laid off. After weary searching, they land a job at the Lakes Milling Company stacking raw beet pulp in enormous bags. The boss asks, “Ever truck—heavy work—outside—only a few days—forty cents and ten hours?” (*Disinherited* 224). The job gets them through a “hard winter like you’ve heard the old folks talk about. You’ll tell your kids about it—if you live through it” (211).

Another sketch follows, one from the April 1931 *New Masses* entitled “High Bridge,” in which Larry Donovan (i.e., Conroy) and Ed claim to be riveter and bucker-up as they work on a high steel bridge. A stiff breeze almost lands them far below in the river in a semi-comic ending to this brief job. Finally making it back to Moberly, where Larry finds his family in severe straits, the two work on a cross-country pipeline, another bout of dispiriting labor, this incident drawn from a sketch in the *American Mercury* of 1932, “Pipeline.” Still another sketch, this from the *New Masses* of February, 1932, “Paving Gang—On a Job in Missouri,” finds Larry in one of the most grueling of 1930s jobs. Conroy has said that he either worked or observed all of the jobs described in *The Disinherited* (a virtue of the book, he thinks):

And the paving gangs, I did that around Moberly. A lot of these pavings you drive over were laid by poor old Jack. By the end of the day these big, heavy paving bricks weighed seventy-five pounds apiece. Big granite paving bricks. The hardest work ever undertaken by man is laying bricks and paving. Workers now don’t have to do those hard jobs—everything is mechanical. (Thompson 158)

In the paving sketch, a torrid pace is set by an older, experienced black worker, “Steamboat Mose,” until he collapses in the hot sun. “Well, it was only an old nigger played out. That was the way it appeared to the boss and many of the others. But here also was the death of a life and the setting of a sun” (*Disinherited* 271). In the 1940s, Conroy had worked closely with Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps and had written with him a study of black

migration to the North, *They Seek a City* (1945); Conroy was always adverse to racial discrimination, from his mining days forward.

The “thread” woven through *The Disinherited* is largely based on Conroy’s own life, making the novel “Proletarian Fictional Autobiography,” to use Marxist critic Barbara Foley’s classification. Foley posits that the proletarian fictional autobiography “rejects the bourgeois conceptions of selfhood, personal development, and social accommodation accompanying a classical bildungsroman such as Dickens’ *David Copperfield*” (284). And while she generally praises Conroy’s book as a valuable example of the much sought after Authenticity in the worker-writer genre, she faults the “conversion ending” of it—a typical feature of the proletarian novel—as unprepared for, an ending in which Larry Donovan decides to go West with a veteran workers’ organizer, forsaking his sweetheart. Foley writes:

Indeed, for all the didactic force of Larry’s status as a type of his class, the novel seems to turn less on the Communist theme of constructing an identity than on the essentially bourgeois motif of finding one. Larry’s discovery of his father’s latent powers within himself [his father was a United Mine Workers union organizer killed in a mining accident when Larry was nine], as well as his decision to forge this identity in the West—that traditional “frontier” for white male self-discovery in U. S. cultural myth—suggests that the novel has projected onto left-wing materials a conventionally individualistic conception of character development. (313)

To continue with Foley’s conjecture about *The Disinherited*’s “entrapment in bourgeois narrative conventions” (320), we find that Larry’s love interest in his Moberly neighbor “Bonny Fern” reinforces the “inadequacies of the 1930s left in confronting ‘the woman question’” (317). Conroy’s charming if rather stereotyped and naïve handling of women in the novel (taking leave of the mellifluously named Bonnie Fern, Larry muses, “I thought she looked prettier every year, even if she was tanned and freckled and her hands rough and red. But I had to be free” [283]) comes in for heavy Marxist feminist formalist criticism:

For the paradigmatic plot invoked here is gendered in a consummately individualistic and masculinist way: girl wants to marry boy, marriage is a trap, boy must get out of it if he is to be “free” to do what he has to do. At the moment of narrative closure traditional male-coded notions of selfhood come to the fore. What is in some ways a tale of awakening to revolutionary class consciousness is, in other respects a familiar narrative of male self-discovery. (314)

Foley seems to ignore that familiar—or not-so-familiar—narratives of male self-discovery have constituted a large body of Western literature from Homer to James Joyce and beyond. Added, then, to the early criticism that Conroy’s quasi-novel is too episodic is the stricture that *The Disinherited* doesn’t adequately take into consideration female consciousness. But Conroy’s original intent was apparently to concentrate solely on the male worker’s dilemma; it was Editor Edward Seaver who advised him to add sex interest to the novel. It seems a bit much to ask a novelist who approaches the subject of actual starvation in his work to incorporate male-female consciousness raising, too, even given the novel’s “revolutionary” premise. As an added note to critic Foley’s perception of a lack of revolutionary theory or ideology so as to create a truly “oppositional politics” in Conroy’s work, respected Conroy

scholar Douglas Wixson notes that in relation to Conroy's part in creating the Rebel Poets society, a leftist writers' group, "Conroy himself had come under fire from the [Communist] Party, which accused him of 'bohemianism,' of tolerating unorthodox positions, courting apostates and 'social fascists,' and of revealing an undisciplined independence" (288). Turning from Conroy's supposed lack of "theory," a more positive approach to the art of *The Disinherited* is to take Wixson's observation in his book *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism* that "Jack's method of composition in writing *The Disinherited* involved the montage of separate pieces that had their basis in orality, folklore, popular culture, and worker narrative" (340). The real joy of *The Disinherited* seems to me to lie in the artistry of the book as it encompasses the popular elements Wixson mentions, along with more conventional literary devices that any good writer would employ. As Wixson himself puts it, "The essential elements of literature about workers, Jack reasoned, was 'insight and feeling' and a sensitivity toward language" (340). Daniel Aaron wrote in his preface to the 1963 "rediscovered" edition of the book, "It is Conroy's Defoelike veracity that makes *The Disinherited*, despite its technical flaws, so solid and convincing and gives it an honored place in the annals of the Great Depression" (xiv). It is Douglas Wixson's opinion—and even that of Steinbeck scholar Warren Beck—that the significance of *The Disinherited* "is [its] method of literary transposition, the creative use of language that I believe makes it far more authentic than Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, in portraying American workers in their own accents and idioms" (1991 Intro 21-22). One is reminded of Whitman's lines in *Song of Myself*, section 24, beginning, "Through me many long dumb voices/ Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves" (508-509).

To articulate here the full range of "voices" captured by Conroy would be to prolong this essay unnecessarily. I recall Mark Twain's claim in his "Explanatory" note at the beginning of *Huck Finn* that he had incorporated seven different dialects in the book, each of which he distinguishes so that the reader would not suppose "that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding." Conroy, who had planned a biography of Mark Twain some time before writing *The Disinherited* (Wixson 124), likewise incorporates the many and varied "sounds" of his time, a time which includes the "Other Twenties" of dislocation and servitude—not Scott Fitzgerald's "Roaring Twenties"—as well as the beginning of the Depression Thirties.

A good bit of the flavor of *The Disinherited* is attributable to what Larry calls in the "Hard Winter" section of the book "the acidulous and pertinent wit of the down and out" (220). He gives an immediate example from the mouth of a bum in a breadline:

"Thanksgiving's most here, and I'm thankful, praise God! Yes, I'm thankful," intoned a wag whose phonographic cadence told me that he had a good joke, but that the initial jest had been diluted by excessive repetition.

"What the hell are you thankful for?" marveled Ed.

"Why, I'm thankful I ain't constipated." (220-221)

A standard bit of '30s humor comes from the Wobbly [IWW] songbook: "How the hell can I work if there's no work to do?" Another tattered gem is a hobo's claim, "Hungry! . . . Christ!

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my belly thinks my throat is cut” (221). Sardonic wit like these examples may have had more immediate appeal then than now. Something of a chestnut in the “Hooverilles” of the day must have been the observation that “most of the men in our fair city here has got so ga’nt [gaunt] they got to stand twicet t’ make a shadder” (234).

As a fan of folk epigraphy, otherwise known as the writing on bathroom walls, I find this warning to use condoms by a “latrine poet” in a “cribhouse” especially notable:

[The] clap is bad,
Syph is worse.
Watch your step,
Safety first! (115)

Technically, this would be trochaic dimeter catalectic.

The book also has a full range of songs of the day, from children’s rhymes to drinking and other popular songs. A good children’s play rhyme is:

Bushel o’ wheat,
Bushel o’ rye,
All not ready,
Holler “I.” (83)

One lyric that Conroy cites as coming from his experience in the gaseous rubber heel plant in Hannibal, Missouri, is actually a well-known blues song:

O jelly roll! Jelly roll!
Jelly on my mind.
You jazzed my poor ol’ gran’pa
And my poor ol’ gran’ma blind. (166)

Another suggestive lyric of the day, one Larry hears while trying to rescue a former lunch-cart girl from life in a bordello, celebrates a gold digger:

She’s got great big diamond rings.
She knows her onions.
She’s got lots of other things.
She knows her vegetables. (198)

“To know your onions” was an expression from 1920s America meaning to be knowledgeable about or experienced in something. The song “She Knows Her Onions” was recorded on 78 rpm at least three times in 1926, a year corresponding to the plot line of *The Disinherited*.

Other songs or stanzas in the book include a graveyard epitaph, one means by which he truthfully includes the sentimental nature of the literary tastes of the disinherited (and for which inclusions he was roundly criticized by the Marxists):

Remember, friend, as years pass by,
As you are now so once was I.
As I am now, so you must be.
Prepare for death, and follow me. (247)

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Among others, there appears what seems to be a risqué version of an old Child ballad and a field holler or field cry, called an “arwhoolie” by musicologists:

Water jack!
Oughta been here
And half way back! (270)

Taking a more strictly literary bent, I note in *The Disinherited* a method discovered or at least analyzed by New Journalist Tom Wolfe in the narrative style of Stephen Crane’s first novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, a novel which opens with what Wolfe calls a “vignette of purest gold” (194): “A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley.” In scenes like this Wolfe sees Crane as a reporter-artist in New York’s Bowery capturing what he calls “the vignette—for vignette’s sake!” (200) Wolfe explains, “The strength and weakness of *Maggie* [and one might say of *The Disinherited*] is that it is not so much a narrative as a series of vignettes for vignettes’ sake” (200). Apparently speaking of Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, he adds, “Crane later expressed this approach in theoretical form, saying that a novel should be ‘a succession of sharply outlined pictures which pass before the reader like a panorama, having each its definite impression’” (200-201). With such a succession of pure vignettes, there was no “sentiment” to relieve *Maggie* of its essential squalor, and I think something of the same could be said of Conroy’s novel. The social purpose of *The Disinherited* is there, surely, seen most clearly in its title, but there is, too, an underlying artistic purpose. The scenes which Conroy captured individually as a “witness to his time”—something akin to Crane’s Bowery reporting—are indeed sharply and individually outlined, though longer than the typical vignette. Yet each scene, starting with Larry’s boyhood at the Monkey Nest Mine in northeast Missouri, all the way to the farmers’ “penny auction”—a feature of the early ‘30s—to save a family from displacement at the novel’s end is vivid in its own right, while at the same time yielding a “novel of education” for the first person narrator. If Conroy has less “distance” than Stephen Crane, admittedly the greater artist, he benefits from being an intimate:

Somebody called me the proletarian Odysseus, wandering from city to city in search for work and in the process acquiring a familiarity with all phases of a worker’s life described in the book. So I believe *The Disinherited* is free of the artificialities and falsities that most so-called proletarian writers, some of whom gathered their material from a short fling at factory or mill work during college vacation, put into their work. (1982 Intro 28)

Not a theorist and famous for saying, “Just to look at *Das Kapital* on the shelf gave me a headache” (quoted in Aaron xii), Conroy noted in 1933, “I picked up a lot of education on freight trains, in the shops, and in the mines, too. It’s been a pretty long course” (Aaron xiii). (Officially, Jack had ended school in the 8th grade at age 13, aside from an abortive start at the University of Missouri.)

Another famous motto or saying associated with Conroy was the motto of *Anvil* magazine, which he edited from 1933 to 1935: “We prefer crude vigor to polished banality” (Conroy *Anvil* Intro xiv). “We simply were plowing a comparatively untilled field,” Conroy has explained (xiv). The Rebel Poets group, whose magazine he edited just before editing the *Anvil*,

had in its manifesto the slogan, “Art for Humanity’s Sake.” Definitely not in the Art for Art’s Sake camp, still Conroy had his admirers. A letter to Conroy from John Dos Passos, who later was to write famously in *The Big Money*, “all right we are two nations” (371), rated *The Disinherited* “as good as the best of Jack London, and that, in my opinion, is saying a lot” (quoted in Conroy, 1982 Intro 26). Erskine Caldwell wrote to Conroy of an advanced copy, ““That’s the kind of book I’d like to write”” (quoted in Wixson 327)). In his 1971 *Confessions*, increasingly eccentric `30s and later writer Edward Dahlberg, famous for his grim 1930 novel *Bottom Dogs*, quotes from *The Disinherited* and gives Conroy some measure of praise by including him among his `30s companions who “epitaphed our times” and “abhorred the grease of cupidity,” though he also quotes Villon in adding, “None of them was worth a couple of onions” (274), primarily because of their preferred vernacular style, it can be assumed. Writer James T. Farrell, in a hostile review in *The Nation*, found more sincerity than art in *The Disinherited*: “As reporting, his work is satisfactory. As a novel, it is superficial. He has described a number of things. He has re-created almost nothing” (quoted in Wixson 331). Farrell and Conway, once friends, remained on the outs until sometime before Farrell’s death. Generally, though, the book got good reviews, if rather mediocre sales. Since its “rediscovery” in 1963, it has gained a steady readership (the latest edition is by the University of Missouri Press) and translation into quite a few languages. It was followed in 1935 by *A World to Win*, Conroy’s only other novel, whose story was more traditionally “novelized.” It was a lesser, if interesting, proletarian novel (a definition of which has never been satisfactorily arrived at, by Conroy’s own words²), partly, I believe, for its lack of the “vignette” style out of which Conroy fashioned his first novel. In the 1940s, Conroy went on to be a pioneer in the field of “Industrial Folklore” through his work for the WPA in Chicago (the Illinois Writers Project), and in 1984 he was made a life member of the Missouri Folklore Society. Conroy in the early fifties became friends with renowned folklorist Vance Randolph (whom he called “the Ozarkian Chaucer” in an inscription of the 1963 paper edition of *The Disinherited* given to Randolph and his wife, fellow folklorist Mary Parler).

He had started writing tall tale type children’s books with Arna Bontemps in the 40s, edited a collection of Midwestern humor called *Midland Humor: A Harvest of Fun and Folklore* in 1947, and wrote innumerable encyclopedia articles in his Chicago years (twenty-eight years until the mid-`60s). In his Moberly retirement years, he alternately signed himself “The Sage of Moberly,” “The Moberly Po’ Lazarus,” “The Moberly Also-Ran,” and “The Moberly Savonarola and Sainte-Beuve.”

In the end, in large part it is the broad folklore element in *The Disinherited* that distinguishes its art; Wixson in his Introduction to Conroy’s *The Weed King and Other Stories* calls him “primarily a raconteur” (xxiv). But from whatever angle of vision, *The Disinherited* is a book that can move people socially and engage them artistically. If a proletarian novel can ever be called “charming,” this is one.

Notes

1. From Whitman’s prose epilogue to *Leaves of Grass*, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” which appeared as the first essay in *November Boughs* (1888/9):

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“The true use for the imaginative faculty of modern times is to give vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glow and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only. Without that ultimate vivification—which the poet and other artists alone can give—reality would seem incomplete and science, democracy, and life itself finally in vain.” (Par. 8)

2. Conroy has said about the debates over what constitutes “proletarian literature”: “We used to talk about it endlessly and never arrived at any definitive conclusion” (Thompson 159).

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Biographical Sketch

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