

Literary Politics of the New Deal

Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. Pp viii, 370. \$64.95 (cloth), \$21.95 (paperback).

Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. Pp. 343. \$59.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper).

Pericles Lewis*

Literary critics often like to think of themselves as detectives, seeking out underlying motives in fact patterns that have no obvious meaning or a meaning that is all too obvious. They particularly like to revise existing accounts of such fact patterns and to show that a latent meaning, missed by earlier critics, has just been waiting for its moment and its interpreter to appear. With the current dominance of historicist scholarship in literary studies, literary critics are also anxious to distinguish themselves from run-of-the-mill historians. Sherlock Holmes complains that Watson “sees but does not observe;” he scoffs at “the authorities” who “are excellent at amassing facts, though they do not always use them to advantage.”¹ Like Holmes, literary critics attempt with their keen gazes to discern patterns of thought and motive that seem to escape mere historians, those Watson-like amassers of fact.

Among broadly historicist scholars of literature, one of the most compelling and prestigious types of pattern to identify is an

* Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Yale University. pericles.lewis@yale.edu.

1. ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *A Scandal in Bohemia*, in THE SHERLOCK HOLMES MYSTERIES 18, 21 (1987); ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE, *The Naval Treaty*, in THE SHERLOCK HOLMES MYSTERIES 239, 252 (1987).

underlying metaphor or analogy that seems to shape a particular era of literary and cultural history. The critic Walter Benn Michaels struck gold when, in *Our America*, he identified the “nativist modernism” of the 1920s and claimed to show that apparently cosmopolitan writers of that era, such as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Cather, were in fact obsessed with racial and textual purity.² No one writes any longer of a “Victorian Frame of Mind” or an “Elizabethan World Picture,” but critics still aspire to summarize a generation’s mindset, preferably in a counterintuitive, revisionist way. The two books under review, both indebted to some degree to Michaels’s work, aim to define the literature of the 1930s and 1940s in terms of debates surrounding the New Deal. They both undertake to draw analogies between the literary concerns of poets and novelists and contemporary political and economic debates. These analogies seldom rely specifically on the social history of the period or the stated political opinions of the authors under consideration. Rather, both Sean McCann and Michael Szalay boldly describe persistent patterns of thought that they claim are shared by writers, politicians, and social thinkers. McCann explores the reworking of the tensions inherent in twentieth-century liberalism through the genre of detective fiction. Szalay attempts to demonstrate the persistence of an “actuarial” imagination throughout the literature and social theory of the period and to trace the pattern of an underlying analogy between literature and insurance.

In *Gumshoe America*, McCann makes brilliant use of the “analogical” method to examine a narrowly defined literary field: hard-boiled crime fiction. By restricting himself to this quite distinct genre, McCann manages to develop a convincing analogy between the clear-cut conventions of detective fiction and the political implications of New Deal liberalism. The basic problem of classical liberalism from John Locke to John Stuart Mill, as McCann outlines it, is most clearly embodied in Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*: how does the individual pursuit of self-interest result in a functioning civil society? How does an “unplanned order” emerge from “seemingly anarchic, individual acts”? It can do so only in the context of the rule of law. “The detective story,” McCann writes, “had always been a liberal genre, centrally concerned with a fundamental premise of liberal theory—the rule of law—and with the tensions fundamental to democratic societies that constantly throw that principle into doubt.”³ McCann rejects the interpretation of the detective story as

2. WALTER BENN MICHAELS, *OUR AMERICA: NATIVISM, MODERNISM, AND PLURALISM* (1995).

3. SEAN MCCANN, *GUNSHOE AMERICA: HARD-BOILED CRIME FICTION AND THE RISE AND FALL OF NEW DEAL LIBERALISM* 6 (2000).

“an instrument of repressive ideology,” premised on the familiar Foucauldian view that liberalism is simply a ruse for the imposition of social norms onto individuals.⁴ Rather, he writes, “laws and norms are the basis of ethical claims and the grounds for any vision of social justice.”⁵ Nonetheless, he shows the tensions within classical liberalism that limited its vision of a common good. The classical detective story of Edgar Allan Poe or Arthur Conan Doyle represents the social world as full of dangerous individuals pursuing a war of all against all, and it thus reveals “the thinness and fragility of the classical liberal vision.”⁶ However, in the figure of the detective who solves the crime, it also offers a “strongly ethical component” in keeping with the normative content of liberalism.⁷ The detective is that “exceptional individual” who surrenders “heroic virtues for bourgeois habits.”⁸ While able to see society as an amoral “game of whist” (Poe), the classical detective also “banishe[s]” that purely negative liberal model by revealing liberal society as “not a soulless market but a reassuring culture, exacting unstated obligations, punishing outrageous actions, and rewarding reliable behavior.”⁹ The solution of the crime by the detective reaffirms this underlying order of civil society and the necessary bourgeois virtues of the law-abiding citizen, friend, and neighbor.

In the twentieth century, both liberalism and the detective story change dramatically. The classical detective story allowed all “strife” and “dissension” to be “absorbed by a healthy civil society.”¹⁰ In the era of the New Deal, “[h]ard-boiled crime fiction transformed that story by radicalizing its tensions.”¹¹ McCann argues that, faced with the depression, legal and social thinkers of the 1930s refashioned classical liberalism to take better account of how traditional liberal institutions might unwittingly serve the oligarchic and monopolistic forces of unbridled capitalism. For detective fiction, this meant a challenge to the image of the detective as at once enforcer of liberal norms and protector of the common good. Making intelligent use of both primary and secondary literature on the political debates of the period, McCann outlines three major responses to the challenge to classical liberalism: “paternalist administration,” typified by the managerialist “expertness” of James Landis, first chair of the

4. *Id.* at 310 n.8.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.* at 8.

7. *Id.* at 14.

8. *Id.* at 15.

9. *Id.* at 8, 14, 10.

10. *Id.* at 4.

11. *Id.*

Securities and Exchange Commission; “popular engagement,” exemplified by the sociologist John Grierson’s calls for a more participatory democracy; and “interest-group pluralism,” the ultimately victorious Keynesian vision of what Otis L. Graham called the “Broker State.”¹² McCann takes the analogy between theories of the state and detective fiction to the ambitious extreme of claiming that each major hard-boiled writer embodied one of these attitudes to governance: Dashiell Hammett the “expertness” model; Raymond Chandler participatory democracy; Jim Thompson and Charles Willeford interest-group pluralism. Finally, Chester Himes criticized the “decline of the New Deal” into a “Broker State.”¹³ It is no accident that McCann considers the least memorable of these writers, Thompson and Willeford, representative of the postwar Keynesian consensus. McCann summarizes the challenge to the generic conventions of detective fiction: “In the novels of [James M.] Cain, Hammett, Chandler, and their peers, civil society can no longer contain private desire, public knowledge rarely trumps specialized expertise, and the idea of a common culture seems both profoundly appealing and ultimately unbelievable.”¹⁴

McCann’s analogy between theories of the state and modes of detective fiction relies not only on the formal characteristics and thematic concerns of the detective novels themselves. Equally important are the competing visions held by mystery writers of the genre in which they worked. Each of the major writers of hard-boiled fiction, McCann argues, senses a tension between the homogenizing demands of a mass culture to which pulp fiction obviously belongs and the aspirations to avant-garde status of “high” modernist literature. Cain “despised the high art of the contemporary elite and the cheap entertainment purveyed by the mass media.”¹⁵ The desire to shape a popular, anti-elitist culture that avoids commercialism underlies the writers’ quest for new literary forms. As the civil society of rational self-interest portrayed in a Sherlock Holmes story gives way to “an all-but-universal predatory desire exemplified by the rapacious power of tycoons and the banal appetites of consumers,” hard-boiled detective fiction, as exemplified by its detective characters, attempts to speak for those aspects of a democratic culture that are undervalued by the “classical liberal” contractarian model of citizenship.¹⁶

Two contrasting hard-boiled visions of the state and of the

12. *Id.* at 31-34.

13. *Id.* at 36.

14. *Id.* at 4.

15. *Id.* at 3.

16. *Id.* at 29.

detective exemplify the New Deal revision of liberalism. McCann likens Dashiell Hammett's crucial contributions to the genre to the legal realist critique of liberalism. Summarizing the views of the legal realists, McCann writes that "[b]y their account, law was not primarily the system of ethical principles that their 'classical' predecessors had imagined, but a body of 'tools' or 'engines' to be used, like the methods of sociology and political science, by the 'sober technicians' of a professional elite."¹⁷ He quotes Karl Llewellyn's statement that "[w]hat . . . officials do about disputes is . . . the law itself."¹⁸ Hammett's novels show detectives engaged in a similar process of administration. Instead of "revealers of the truth who 'restor[e] moral certainty to the world,'" Hammett's detectives are "agents with ends in mind, and they pursue those ends by setting out to deceive, beguile, manipulate, and confuse other people."¹⁹ As Sam Spade says, "My way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery."²⁰ Ultimately, what distinguishes Hammett's detectives from criminals is their "purely formal adherence to laws that have been stripped of any ethical content."²¹ By contrast, Raymond Chandler's early work shares the emphasis on experience and democratic participation of John Dewey. McCann summarizes Dewey's response to the decay of classical liberalism: "Citizens would need to discover that true individualism did not mean an antisocial hostility to the common good, but rather the opportunity for self-development that came with participation in 'associated life.'"²² McCann argues that the typical detective figure in Chandler's novels "works to expand mundane affiliations and common emotions in order to create a popular coalition that might surpass the limits of corrupt institutions."²³ He reads *The Big Sleep* as an "allegory of economic predation in which the vernacular energy of the white ethnic falls prey to the economic elite."²⁴ The vampiric Sternwood family sucks the life out of the ex-bootlegger Rusty Regan and tries to do the same to Philip Marlowe. Regan is "an example of the mythic figure that FDR famously identified as the 'forgotten man'—the populist emblem of the ordinary worker exploited by a 'highly centralized economic system'."²⁵ Thus, both Hammett and Chandler offer

17. *Id.* at 105.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* at 112.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 114.

22. *Id.* at 151.

23. *Id.* at 160.

24. *Id.* at 166.

25. *Id.* at 170.

alternatives to the classic detective story that correspond to contemporary political critiques of liberalism.

Sean McCann's extended analogy between the development of crime fiction and the political debates of the 1930s and 1940s is remarkably convincing. Without having to claim that each fiction writer saw himself as serving a particular political philosophy, McCann nonetheless shows that contemporary notions of big business, the role of the state, and the potentialities of civil society shape the very conventions of literary form whereby the hard-boiled writers transform classic detective fiction. Although his heroes are hard-boiled detectives like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, McCann's authorial voice is more Sherlock Holmes than Humphrey Bogart. Fundamentally, he seems committed to the liberal ideal of civil society that hard-boiled fiction allegedly shows to be obsolete. The consistency and clarity of the entire approach, along with the excellent interpretations of particular crime novels, make *Gumshoe America* a wonderful model of interdisciplinary scholarship on literature, law, and politics.

At the opposite end of the cultural spectrum from pulp fiction, even the high modernists knew that the role of the state was changing in the 1930s. Wallace Stevens, the poet of modernist abstraction and supreme fictions, wrote his meticulous analyses of the "motive for metaphor" and the "intricate evasions of as" while serving as Vice-President of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. In 1937, he wrote an essay on the rise of collectivist states for an industry newsletter in which he commented that "[t]he truth is that we may well be entering an insurance era."²⁶ Most critics have tended to treat Stevens's day job as irrelevant to understanding his poetry, although some hostile readers have thought that it demonstrated his fundamental dilletantism, bourgeois mentality, or disconnection from reality. Michael Szalay instead takes Stevens's claim about the rise of an "insurance era" seriously as a way to account not just for Stevens's own idiosyncratic poetry but also for the entire direction of American literature in the 1930s. He gives this direction the memorable name "New Deal Modernism."

According to Szalay, "an ideologically diverse group of writers from the left as well as the right were active participants in the reinvention of modern governance" begun by Franklin Delano Roosevelt.²⁷ The centerpiece of the New Deal was of course the Social Security Administration, a vast scheme of social insurance

26. WALLACE STEVENS, COLLECTED POETRY AND PROSE 793 (Frank Kermode & Joan Richardson eds., 1997).

27. MICHAEL SZALAY, NEW DEAL MODERNISM: LITERATURE AND THE INVENTION OF THE WELFARE STATE 3 (2000).

currently under assault. Szalay claims not so much that the writers of the 1930s concerned themselves explicitly with insurance (although a surprising number did), but rather that a mode of thinking that he, following Kenneth Burke, calls “actuarial” came to dominate their understanding of the tasks of literature.²⁸ Stevens’s very tendency to abstraction typifies this “actuarial” attitude. Szalay writes, “[w]hat appears fortuitous to one person is, from a more totalized perspective, part of a predictable pattern [Stevens’s poem] ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’ depends on this move from the isolated individual to the population group”²⁹ Like McCann, who sees the era as a watershed in the challenge to classical liberalism, Szalay finds in the New Deal the transformation of the state into what Oliver Wendell Holmes had presciently imagined: a giant “mutual insurance company against accidents.”³⁰ Szalay identifies variations on actuarial patterns in such diverse writers as Ayn Rand, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright, not to mention John Maynard Keynes, John Dewey, and a host of lesser-known economists and social thinkers. His book, undoubtedly destined to have a major impact in its field, combines flashes of brilliant insight with remarkable erudition about the literature, economics, and politics of the 1930s.

Like McCann, Szalay makes use of the analogical method. However, he does not use just one overriding analogy, but several different ones. In each chapter of the book, Szalay defines an underlying pattern that bridges an aspect of the literary work and contemporary political debates: for example, an analogy between the integrity of bodies and the integrity of texts in Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, or a pattern of men deserting their families in search of some social ideal, which he identifies in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Betty Smith’s *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and Steinbeck’s own life. Szalay’s work offers a great deal of social history and biographical information about the period, but he makes his major claims on the basis of the analogical mode of criticism, which seems to promise insights of a more fundamental or structural character. Often, Szalay’s juxtapositions of social movements and literary works are startlingly original. Yet his analogies do not always convince. In the central discussion of Stevens’s actuarial imagination, the organizing analogy is between insurance and poetry. According to Szalay, Stevens imagines that “insurance and poetry both supervene at the limits of intentional agency; in his conception of

28. *Id.* at 16.

29. *Id.* at 130.

30. *Id.* at 12.

both insurance and poetry, the objectification of social relationships intrinsic to both practices compensates for the fact that no premeditated plan—in either poetic or political terms—can ever make the future sufficiently secure.”³¹ There is a suggestive kernel in this analogy. Szalay quotes Stevens’s own comment that “[p]oetry and surety claims are not as unlikely a combination as they may seem.”³² However, he offers little in the way of literary interpretation to support his claim that Stevens “endows the stock market with the same elusive performativity as a poem, and understands both poem and market in decidedly Keynesian terms.”³³

Ultimately, the test of such an analogy must be how it changes or amplifies our understanding of Stevens’s poems. Although Stevens receives more attention than any other writer, only one (fairly short) poem, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” comes in for extensive interpretation in *New Deal Modernism*. After a detailed discussion of Key West’s significance as a site for New Deal experiments in collective planning, Szalay proceeds to interpret the poem as being about “the difficulty of discerning, let alone controlling, the causes of events.”³⁴ The poem describes a female singer, “single artificer of the world / In which she sang.” A group, “we,” listens to her song and wonders, “[w]hose spirit is this?” The poet denies that the spirit is simply that of the natural world: “the meaningless plungings of water and the wind”: “it was she and not the sea we heard.” After meditating on the difference between this singer and the sea, the speaker addresses “Ramon Fernandez,” a leftist critic and friend of Stevens, and asks why, after the song was over, “the glassy lights” of the fishing boats near the town seemed to embody a sort of order. The poem concludes with an invocation of the “maker’s rage to order words of the sea, / Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” Szalay rightly suggests that Stevens is concerned here with the sources of our “rage to order” and the difficulty of distinguishing order imposed by the human mind on events from natural order. Yet the connection to Keynesian economics remains vague.

The plaintiveness of the search for order, writes Szalay, arises from the quest to “reconcile the world-organizing power of song with the fact that not all worlds are organized in the same manner.”³⁵ Szalay labels this an “actuarial” insight. He concludes his discussion of the

31. *Id.* at 127.

32. *Id.*

33. *Id.* at 145.

34. *Id.* at 150.

35. *Id.* at 155.

poem with the question of the source of the apparent order in the lights of the fishing boats: “the speaker turns toward the extent to which mechanisms of sensation and apprehension need continually to adjust themselves to changing physical realities that seem always, however nebulously, to show through the technologies that perceive them.”³⁶ This is a rather inadequate account of the issues raised by the poem. Szalay rightly perceives an obsession with finding order in apparently chance events and intriguingly associates this obsession with the “insurance era.” He connects Stevens’s concern with the question of poetry’s intentionality to the actuarial challenge of discerning order in apparently random events. However, he ultimately offers little proof that the politics and economics of the New Deal play a significant role in Stevens’s analysis of the “blessed rage for order,” with its quest for “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” He gives us some suggestive ways of thinking about Stevens’s statement that his book of poems, *Ideas of Order*, reflects “questions of political and social order,” but little reason to doubt Stevens’s claims that it was “primarily concerned with ideas of order of a different [i.e., poetic and existential] nature” and that “[t]he book is essentially a book of pure poetry.”³⁷ Szalay does provide much useful social history of the Federal Writers’ Project and interesting reappraisals of the political opinions of various prominent writers; on the central link between poetry and insurance, he offers impressive suggestions and illuminating analogies but not comprehensive readings of literary works. The sheer expansiveness of his reading and the dazzling mosaic of quotations from writers of all sorts make this an impressive first book, but the literary interpretations do not always sustain the massive weight of the historical evidence that is brought to bear on them.

Based on the evidence of the two books under review, the analogical method seems most fruitful when applied to a fairly specific genre or movement. The attempt to describe all the writers of an entire period as sharing a particular theory of the state immediately raises doubts; the claim that several writers in a particular genre shared certain political and social concerns seems more susceptible of proof. More importantly, for the analogy to have lasting power, it needs to show a sustained set of connections between the political or other extra-literary concerns and the specific literary task of putting together a poem, play, or novel. Michael Szalay’s impressive erudition shows that many writers of the 1930s

36. *Id.*

37. WALLACE STEVENS, Dust jacket of *IDEAS OF ORDER* (Knopf 1936), reprinted in STEVENS, *supra* note 26, at 997.

were thinking about the state and about insurance and suggests a wide range of possible implications for their literary production. Sean McCann's more focused inquiry convincingly demonstrates that the political debates of the era had specific literary consequences. Like Sherlock Holmes, he amasses interesting facts and uses them to great advantage. More impressively still, he shows that hard-boiled crime fiction has something to teach us about literature, law, society, and the state.