

Democratic Aesthetics: The Discourse of Social Justice in
American Literature, Criticism, and Philosophy of the 1930's

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This dissertation provides a historical exploration of works of literature and philosophy which seek to conceptualize the role played by aesthetic forms, especially literature, in the promotion of social justice in the 1930's. I am principally concerned with a set of philosophers and literary critics, including John Dewey, Kenneth Burke, John Crowe Ransom, George Herbert Mead, and Mike Gold, who in a time of economic and political crisis formulate aesthetic theories about the social efficacy of art. By reading the work of these philosophers and critics with contemporary literature by authors who share their concerns, I locate an emerging interest in the contribution made by literary techniques such as voice and point-of-view, rhetorical tactics such as sentimentalism and irony, and somatic effects such as sympathy and identification in the transformation of individual feeling and social attitudes.

My examination of the aesthetic theories of John Dewey, Kenneth Burke, John Crowe Ransom, and Mike Gold in Chapter One culminates in a recognition of the blending of the mimetic and cathartic functions in two widely influential concepts: Burke's "symbolic action" and Dewey's "art as experience." Chapter Two explores sympathetic identification in James Agee and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Explicitly distinguishing their work from Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's You Have Seen Their Faces, Agee and Evans create an aesthetic based on phenomenological as well as emotional responses in readers. Chapter Three analyzes fictional instances of "conversion," a secularization of the illumination and transformation associated with religious experience, in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, Tillie Olsen's Yonnondio, and Richard Wright's Uncle Tom's Children. Drawing on Dewey's theory of consummatory experience, I show how both fiction and theory recognize the potential of imaginative structures to break down barriers and reveal common bonds. Chapter Four reads the competing accounts of Reconstruction in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and W.E.B. DuBois's Black Reconstruction in America with theories of democratic representation. Experiments with voice in both books provide a way of understanding aesthetic "mimesis" and political "representation" as parallel methods of authorizing the few to speak for the many.