From the outset, Cotlar carefully distinguishes between Jefferson’s Democratic Party and the democratic movement that preceded it, one that focused far less on candidates and elections than it did on the creation of a cosmopolitan citizenry, a just economy, and a powerful public sphere. A conspicuous strength of the book is the clarity with which it represents these historical problems in the form of questions: What does it mean to be a citizen of the world? How can commerce foster equality and enable people to live freer lives? What are the responsibilities and tasks of citizens between elections?

Cotlar poses these questions because the self-described democrats of the 1790s did so. Of course, most Americans, including Jeffersonian Democrats, rejected cosmopolitan thinking and calls for economic justice by the end of the century in favor of a democratic vision that equated political action with voting. Conventional wisdom tells us that Americans simply eschewed what they perceived as the anarchic excess of revolution, spectacularly dramatized by the Jacobin Terror and, closer to home, by the Whiskey Rebellion. Tom Paine’s America reveals the complex and confrontational nature of this counterrevolutionary movement as it unfolded discursively in the pages of newspapers and in the meeting rooms of political societies. What makes this story so remarkable is not that moneyed, elite interests won out but that in order for them to do so, democracy itself had to be redefined.

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From one perspective, Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics is a detailed study of the ways in which Wallace Stevens, E. E. Cummings, Robert Frost, and William Carlos Williams responded to critiques they received from such “leftist” reviewers as Eda Lou Walton, Stanley Burnshaw, Babette Deutsch, Horace Gregory, Ruth Lechlitner, and Isador Schneider. From this standpoint, the work adds to our store of knowledge about the poets and their critical reception. Viewed from another angle, however, Milton Cohen’s book represents a late example of the narrative pattern Nina Baym identified in her
classic study “Melodramas of Beset Manhood” (\textit{American Quarterly}, 1981). The four poets, all of them versions of the American Adam, must fight off the aggression of hostile forces in the manner of Natty Bumppo or the Magnificent Seven. It is an unfortunate coincidence that the poets are all males with Anglo surnames, whereas the critics, many of them women, are more likely to have non-Anglo surnames. Just as Baym described, the logic of the narrative is circular and self-reinforcing. The poets prove they are “major” precisely by being “beleaguered” (pp. 2, 8), and they earn both attributes by seeming to be above ideological projects.

The dichotomy propounded in this analysis is not between “leftist” and “rightist.” Whereas the word “leftist” or one of its variants appears forty times in the space of the eight-page introduction, the word “rightist” never occurs. Only two kinds of evaluation exist: “leftist reviews” and “reviews.” This binary framework inevitably flattens out the complicated positions of the critics themselves, with Edmund Wilson and Kenneth Burke labeled “leftist” while Ezra Pound skates by as “apolitical” (pp. 97, 102, 97). Yet Cohen does not engage in a political crusade here; his tone is judicious and fair. At issue is the book’s political unconscious. It systematically identifies the politics of the Left while permitting those of the Right to float above designation, as if they were not political at all. Thus, Stevens may be a “conservative business executive,” but that fact only indicates that he is without “an interest in politics” (p. 52). If “Right” is the great unspoken, “Left,” though ubiquitous, remains an unexamined term and a slippery slope: “Writers went left, toward communism” (p. 9). These sinister reviewers become interchangeable avatars of “leftist bias” (p. 28), existing solely to challenge our nonideological heroes. In melodramatic fashion, the poets ultimately triumph over the comrades and harpies who have besieged them. Their ideas of order prevail, whereas the unruly mob fades from memory, to be revived as a footnote by the literary historian.

Ironically, \textit{Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics} itself originated as a quasi-political act; Cohen set out to rectify the exclusion of Stevens, Frost, Cummings, and Williams from “cultural studies” (p. 6). Unfortunately, in so doing he himself excludes all of the writers who have been recuperated by cultural and feminist studies. Most lamentably, he sidelines African American poets and critics. While the book carefully scrutinizes \textit{New Masses} and the \textit{New Republic}, it never looks at \textit{Opportunity} or the \textit{Crisis}. The “beleaguered poets” and the “leftist critics” in this analysis are uniformly white.
The book gains strength in its chapters on the four individual poets. Cohen tells interesting stories about how each writer responded to the progressive critical voices that emerged during the Great Depression. Stevens dialogued productively with his liberal and socialist interlocutors for several years before retreating from the discussion. Cummings bitterly rejected the Left’s interventions, often with disturbingly homophobic, racist, or anti-Semitic asides. Frost, discussed in perhaps the book’s best chapter, boisterously yet ambivalently challenged the Left, then felt wounded and depressed when he received criticism in turn. Williams, who had always been a liberal, joined the contentious conversations on the left as if he belonged in them.

Even these informative chapters, however, are sometimes perplexing. Most centrally, the titular conflict between “beleaguered poets” and their “leftist critics” generally fails to appear. Here, for example, is Eda Lou Walton “beleaguering” Stevens about *Owl’s Clover*: “Stevens is undoubtedly one of our best poets” (p. 70). Here is Ruth Lechlitner’s assault: “By recognizing the importance of political and social change but refusing to admit the desirability of the union of the mass with an ‘orderly’ life, Stevens is obviously open to attack from the left” (p. 70). Cohen finds in this comment “a touch of menace,” but her statement comes across to me as dispassionate. Ben Belitt complains that Stevens clots his rhetoric “with gingerbread” (p. 70), a judgment that may or may not have stood the test of time but that does not sound politicized. Stanley Burnshaw, Isador Schneider, and Babette Deutsch failed to review *Owl’s Clover* at all, “perhaps damning Stevens’s efforts more effectively than words could have” (p. 71). Or perhaps they were just assigned other books to review. Not everything is a plot. We find a similar pattern in regard to the other three poets. The “leftist” critics prove highly concerned with language, style, and aesthetics, and they are often positive in their assessments.

*Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics* sometimes misses the mark on subsidiary issues as well. Cohen quotes a few of Stevens’s racist and pro-Fascist assertions without additional comment, yet these remarks need analysis because they complicate the poet’s flirtation with a center-left position. Moreover, Cohen finds it “paradoxical” that while Williams disavowed communism, he wrote for such “left-wing magazines” as *Contact*, the *Nation*, and *Partisan Review* (p. 148). But where is the paradox? Williams was clearly trying to chart a course that combined humanitarian politics with avant-garde aesthetics. Perhaps Cohen believes Williams’s position as a noncommunist liberal
was the “paradoxical” element, but that intellectual stance is so standard as to seem not worth noting. The book also includes a number of small but unfortunate mistakes: for example, it wrongly portrays two Pound critics, Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff, as being on opposite sides of the “Pound-Stevens” debate (p. 6), and it asserts that Yvor Winters “favored cerebral poetry (à la T. S. Eliot)” (p. 189), an idea belied by Winters’s biting critiques of Eliot’s writing (collected in In Defense of Reason, 1947).

Cohen’s initial conception of canonical poets beleaguered by leftist detractors suffered from oversimplification, as he himself acknowledges (p. 8). But his efforts to complicate the story, while laudable, do not fix the problem. Recognizing that his thesis about “leftist critics” does not work very well, he switches to “leftist pressure” in his conclusion (p. 199 and passim). This new term properly recasts the reviewers as a subheading within a larger category of social and cultural phenomena. The era beleaguered poets and critics alike. But Cohen inexplicably continues to term the writers “essentially apolitical” (p. 192) despite his massive accumulation of evidence that each of them did have his “own politics” (p. 196)—as idiosyncratic and protean as everyone else’s.


Two new studies of the long Civil War period and its impact on American literature and culture probe the era’s political and ideological landscape, connecting back not only to the big-picture scholars of a generation ago such as Edmund Wilson and Daniel Aaron but also following the more recent paths blazed by John Carlos Rowe, Elizabeth Young, Drew Gilpin Faust, and others. The authors of these two new books, Randall Fuller and Cynthia Wachtell, investigate the shifting value of canonical works and their creators