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Panthea Reid, *Tillie Olsen: One Woman, Many Riddles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010, \$34.95). Pp. 449. ISBN 978 0 8135 4637 7.

Panthea Reid tells one of twentieth-century American literature's most compelling stories: how an ethnic, working-class woman writer went from early fame through punishing political oppression and career failure to the sublime second act of *Tell Me a Riddle* and *Yonondio: From the Thirties*. Her book supplies a wealth of new information about an elusive and perplexing writer, while raising troubling questions about the nature of biography and the biographer's relationship with her subject.

Olsen was born, in 1912, to Russian Jewish, Yiddish-speaking parents, forced to flee Tsarist tyranny as a result of their involvement in the Jewish socialist organization the Bund. Olsen's youth in Omaha, Nebraska is presented in compelling detail: her relationship, while still at school, with Eugene Konecky, a local trade union leader and newspaper editor; her decision, in 1929, to join the Young Communist League; her marriage, two years later, to Abraham Goldfarb, a young Communist writer and organizer; the birth of a daughter, Karla (named after Karl Marx). Reid is especially illuminating on the effect of Olsen's early success when, in 1934, her poem about exploitation in the garment trades, "I Want You Women up North to Know," was published in *The Partisan*, the magazine of the West Coast John Reed Club, to be followed by the appearance of the first chapter of an unfinished novel in the fledgling *Partisan Review*.

Olsen's participation in the San Francisco longshoremen's strike helped propel her to the attention of a left-leaning intelligentsia looking for the authentic literary voice of the Depression. Reid shows how Olsen labored for the rest of her life under an insupportable burden of expectation and conflicting demands. We get a vivid sense of how time for writing was displaced by Olsen's political commitments, as she continued her work for the Communist Party, organizing in the shipping and automotive industries and speaking at anti-Franco rallies. During the war, Olsen held a high-profile position as president of the California CIO Ladies' Auxiliary, and married union organizer Jack Olsen, with whom she brought up three daughters. After the war, she fell victim to what Reid somewhat euphemistically calls "the suppression of leftist voices during the McCarthy era," fired from her copywriting job at the American Automobile Association after Budd Schulberg named "Tillie Lerner" at a HUAC hearing in 1951 (269).

Reid establishes that Olsen suppressed the details of her first marriage, was sometimes neglectful of Karla, and played down the role of her relatives in her first daughter's upbringing. But long before the end of her story, one suspects that Reid has fallen profoundly out of love with her subject, to the point where her judgment is in danger of becoming unbalanced. When she accuses Olsen of "trott[ing] out her personal protocol of complaints about lacking the circumstances to write," one senses a lack of empathy (295). When Reid goes to some lengths to track down examples of graceless behavior, as when Olsen was haughtily indignant towards a Denver bookseller who did not stock her books, one detects a distinct *froidueur*. Reid attempts to clarify her ambivalent feelings about Olsen by ending with a self-reflexive chapter, "Enter Biographer," detailing her own friendship with the writer,

which threatened to disintegrate when Olsen initially refused to grant permission to quote from her unpublished works. Reid strives for a tone of objectivity, but ends up sounding merely exasperated. The tone undermines the attempt at distance, which might, in any case, be the wrong strategy to adopt with a writer this beguiling and elusive, and with a genius so fundamentally flawed. Bred-in-the-bone anti-communism is also not a helpful qualification in assessing the life of a communist writer.

While reserving moral judgment on her youthful bohemianism, Reid lambasts Olsen's political beliefs. Quoting a youthful hymn to a communism "more incredible and beautiful than mama," Reid protests "the foulness of an ideology that displaced conventional morality" (66). But it is clear that from an early age Olsen rebelled against convention by exploring the possibilities of sexual pleasure and personal relationships. The party line that its own political interests outweighed bourgeois homilies – the sanctity of private property and the nuclear family – was thus not an "abstraction" (Reid's favored synonym for anything that smacks of left-wing ideology). Communism blended into an experimental bohemian culture of free love and self-expression which appealed to a wide range of writers, artists, and intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s. Attentive readers of recent cultural histories such as Christine Stansell's *American Moderns* and Barbara Foley's *Radical Representations* will better appreciate than Reid does here that American communism formed identities and made careers, even as it proposed to change the world.

The most serious problem with Reid's approach is that her antipathy to Olsen's politics leads her to suppress her political voice. When we hear that "CP-USA comrades like Tillie had excused [Stalin's] purges, denied atrocities, and justified [Soviet] expansionism," the litany of political sins is familiar, but we have only Reid's summary judgment, not Olsen's own words (207). Throughout, there is no detailed engagement with the substance of Olsen's communism: her speeches, arguments with comrades, and participation in larger debates. In a footnote, Reid passes on an unattributed statement by Olsen, to the effect that she left the Communist Party in 1948 "over its sexism," but does not pursue the matter. Reid's determination not to believe that communism ever had any potency or force means she has nothing useful to contribute to a deeper understanding of Olsen's politics, or the dilemmas that faced her as an intrinsically political writer. She ends her biography with the claim that Communist Party ideology "spoiled" *Yonnonidio*, since Olsen was unable to convincingly conclude her story of the Holbrook family's disasters with a purely "abstract" salvation (333). Reid follows this with an even more specious claim, that "a residue of party ideology" "spoiled" the later, grant-supported and prize-winning Tillie Olsen, by convincing her that proletarian victims of capitalism were "entitled to be kept" by capitalist largesse (333).

Anyone devoted to Olsen must be grateful to Reid for her painstaking research. We now have a coherent outline of Olsen's life, a better sense of the blockages and barriers that inhibited the full flowering of her remarkable talent, and a compelling portrait of a "magnetic" personality. But Reid traduces Olsen's radical past by simply not taking it seriously or appreciating its lasting effect: Olsen's claim that the Communist Party was "ahead of the times in granting women's rights" is given only in paraphrase, and goes unelaborated (304). It seems that Olsen sensed Reid's lack of interest, gently chiding her biographer by telling her, "I'm a Marxist, honey," and

stating that the pathbreaking feminist scholarship of *Silences* was “context” (316). She died on New Year’s Day 2007, stricken by Alzheimer’s disease, singing the labor movement songs of her youth. Reid speculates intriguingly that the early, undiagnosed onset of Alzheimer’s in her fifties was responsible for a “fragmented mind-set,” forcing Olsen to guard for the rest of her life the “terrible secret that she could not write” (333). But, as Reid’s richly detailed but in its own way neglectful biography shows, there is more than one terrible secret at the heart of Olsen’s career, and more than one kind of silencing.

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