

More on Feminist Biography: Josephine Herbst, The Story She Could Never Tell.

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This past summer I stood idly in front of "New Books" at the Ottawa Public Library waiting for my daughter to choose her weekly collection from the 'Young Adult' section: she is thirteen. Readers may not believe this but suddenly a book swung itself off the shelf and into my arms. A most unlikely book. I had never heard of Josephine Herbst and, furthermore, I never read biography. Too 'trivial' for serious reading, too heavy for escape. Nonetheless, this book refused to return to the shelf and we found ourselves together by a lake soon after. For the next few days I lived two lives, and the more intense and salient was not my own. My distress when the book ended, led to an unusual plea to *Atlantis*: please let me write a review. That way my involvement with Josephine Herbst could be prolonged, and others could be pulled into the web.

Yet a few weeks later when the time came to write, I began to wonder why on earth I had offered to write a review of a *biography* of an obscure American woman, or indeed of any particular woman. That task was surely one for others, not for a sociologist-cum-historian. We spend our time on the broader picture.

But then fate played another of her cards, and the Spring 1985 issue of *Atlantis* with Susan Trofimenkoff's lead article on "Feminist Biography" fell into my lap: you should proceed, it said. Trofimenkoff explained why feminists found biography writing—an expression of the particular activities of 'great men'—a contradictory activity at best. How was our collective interest in understanding and transforming the situation of all women to be furthered by the conventional biography that plucked one person out from all the rest? Substituting a woman for a man, and shining her up to look special—this kind of tokenism was to be expected of traditional male historians, but was surely not a worthy task for feminists.

Trofimenkoff does not ask us to engage in or accept such work. What she argues is that we do need feminist biographies, but that in "form, content or purpose" they should "offer something a little different to readers and practitioners alike." (p. 7) Her suggested criteria—the emphasis on political commitment ("however scary" to traditional intellectuals), on life cycle, on relationships, on how the pattern of constraints and possibilities for a particular woman sheds light on her less-favoured contemporaries,

on explanation rather than accomplishments and upon the relationship between biographer and subject indicated that Elinor Langer had written an exemplary feminist biography. Through reading it we come to know not only Josephine Herbst but also Elinor Langer, not only about Herbst's accomplishments but about the relationships which shaped, hindered and provoked them, not just about her own struggles but about the structured set of constraints which beset the women of her age, not just about the external obstacles which confronted her but about her never-resolved tension between autonomy and dependence, in the period before feminists placed such conflicts in the centre of a political analysis.

But now I feel the pages of *Atlantis* everywhere beginning to shake with fury or anxiety: who indeed was Josephine Herbst? You are not the first to ask. Langer described her movingly in the first chapter "If in Fact I Have Found a Heroine" her own almost inadvertent discovery of this quite remarkable woman.

How could it be that I, who wished my father had stalked the barricades of Spain so that I could attend reunions of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: who envied my red-diaper-baby friends the warmth and security of their extended families: who claimed the radicals of the 1930s as my rightful ancestors and for years had pored over their histories as faithfully as any daughter of the other revolution had ever studied her family tree: How could it be that I had never heard of Josephine Herbst?

Langer discovered Herbst in 1973: "I was in retreat from the radical movement of the 1960s and...spending most of my time mulling over what had happened to the movement, and to myself and why. I knew, of course, that mine was not the first radical generation to rise and founder, as I hoped it would not be the last, at least to rise..." (p. 5) That led her to the literature

of the 1930s and to the first references to Josephine Herbst who was born in Sioux City, Iowa in 1892 and who died seventy-seven years later in New York. As Langer quickly discovered

Josephine Herbst was a substantial writer with a productive career spanning half a century, from the little magazines of Europe and New York in the 1920s to the international literary quarterlies of the 1950s and 1960s, with more than a hundred pieces of fiction, criticism, journalism and memoirs—as well as several novels and a biography—in between. (p. 5)

She was quickly absorbed by Herbst's writing, first by her trilogy written in the 1930s ("for sheer identification, I felt as I had at no other time my my life except when I read *The Golden Notebook*" (p. 5), and then by her other writing. Furthermore, Herbst had clearly been well-known by the public, and counted many writers from Hemmingway to Kazin to Katherine Anne Porter among her friends, as an obituary in *The New York Times* attested.

As a feminist, Langer now had a task—the republication of Josephine Herbst's writing. For she could easily explain why her work had not survived. As an "innate feminist" and "unshakable leftist" she was "not only a victim of the patriarchal literary establishment but also of the cultural anti-Comintern whose adherents had governed American letters since the end of World War II." (p. 8) Yet as she proceeded, explanations became less simple. Herbst's literary friends as well as the editors of the magazines to whom Langer sent off her first article all had one message: go do a job on Herbst's life. She's more than the sum of her work, and the reasons for her work's short life require more of an explanation than you are providing.

Langer was incensed. Life is about history and politics, she proclaimed. Why did they need to know about Herbst's life to appreciate her work?

Their reaction had surely been simply the normal put-down of women. As one editor wrote to Langer, "We think it is worth venturing the suggestion that the political issue interests *you* more than it did *her*." (p. 10) Langer initially refused to write a biography. Her objection paralleled the critique of traditional biography offered by Trofimenkoff.

In a biography, at least by convention, the character took centre stage...If they were present at all, social forces were only also-rans, winds-of-change sweeping through every chapter while the heroine, or more often the hero, grew up, went to school, got married, whatever, as if all of his or her energy were coming from within...To write a biography of a heroine for whom those winds of change were the breath of life could only be a contradiction. (p. 12)

In this book Langer tackles the contradiction and emerges victorious. For a most extraordinary woman comes to life in these pages, a rebel in early days, a cultural and social revolutionary from young adulthood. Through engaging in her life we participate in the faltering days of the Weimar Republic, in the Spanish Civil War, in attempted revolution in Cuba, in union organizing in the United States; we see American communism from the inside and feel the growing tyranny of McCarthyism. And by untangling some of the riddles in Herbst's life, Langer also sheds new light on some of the public events in which she participated. Through it all we are with Herbst, the writer and analyst, who longed even on her deathbed to write her own memoirs "the story she could never tell." For if she was exceptional in her vision, her perception, her analysis and, the risks she was prepared to take, she suffered, suffered terribly, and yet in a very ordinary way, from relationships with both men and women that seldom brought her what she longed for, that left her lonely, in despair, and immobilized her for the greatest task she set herself: an analysis of her own life that was empa-

thetic yet lacking in self-indulgence, that shed light from the vantage point of distance.

In the midst of her reporting from Cuba in 1935 where the "hope of revolution" lay on every page (p. 176), she also wrote this poem in her notebook:

Case of a reliable
comrade gone nutty from
personal worry and despair
unable to do the job right. (p. 165)

Her marriage and most important relationship to the writer and Communist John Hermann had finally and irrevocably failed, and as she wrote just before going to Cuba, "I've been in the last few months, the most unhappy woman alive." (p. 154)

There was precious little support for a woman like Josie. As I read her story, it seemed to me she was a socialist *and* a feminist before we had coined the hybrid, before we had developed an ideology which permitted us to see, analyze and cope with the personal *as if it were very important*, as if it were indeed integrated inextricably with the "winds of change." If only she had had friends like Elinor Langer perhaps she would have written her own memoirs, for her personal 'failures' could have received the air, the attention, the penetrating analysis that she brought to bear on social and political life. As she wrote to a friend in 1962,

to get at this creative core, I had to get at Me, and this has made all the trouble. For there are then problems to solve and technical devices to invent which will allow me to use the material I have to use, some of which is so painful that I can't do it directly but have to find its metaphor...For instance, I have to deal really and truly with love—and what I mean by it, and its relation to just plain sex, the volcano below. And I have to deal with the ruin it can make, and

its dreadful craters and what can spring out from its ashes, as the grape vines do from the ashes of Etna. And I want to say some things that women don't ordinarily say, alas, and to do it objectifying myself—standing off, and seeing me, and being able to do it...(p. 135)

It was more than she could do. As Langer put it, "Memoirist yes, but woman as well, with a

morality rooted in an earlier era and decades of tumultuous experience for which every day she was still paying a price—did she really want to tell all those stories?" (p. 316) As well as someone else could do it, as beautifully, as poignantly, with great attention to ambiguity and conflict, Elinor Langer has told the stories. Women like Josephine Herbst deserve biographies. And we need them.