

UNDER COVER

The Craft of History

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Matthew Josephson was a titan among modern American historians. Books like *The Robber Barons* (1934) recaptured the past for contemporary Americans, making our history into drama even when peopled with fools and villains. And Josephson was history. He knew almost all of the significant figures in American intellectual life since World War I, and he was close to a great many.

David Shi's *Matthew Josephson: Bourgeois Bohemian* (Yale University Press; 314 pp.; \$19.95) almost lives up to its subject. It is diligent, and Shi says a number of shrewd things, along with a number of trite ones, about the "tensions" in Josephson's life, especially about the strain between the "bourgeois" and the "bohemian" sides of his personality. Yet Shi's book falls short of explaining Josephson to a new generation.

Shi's admiration for Josephson is highly ambivalent, and he presents two central criticisms of Josephson's work. First, he is disturbed that during the '30s, Josephson was a "fellow traveler" who "rationalized Stalinist terror." Second, Shi charges that as a historian Josephson lacked "impartiality" and "objectivity." This was especially true, he argues, of Josephson's economic and political histories of America. Oddly, Shi is less critical of Josephson's biographies of Zola, Victor Hugo, Rousseau, and Stendahl, even though, as a biographer, Josephson set out to get inside his subject's head and, in the interest of understanding, to lose his objectivity. Despite his esteem for the biographies, Shi has not imitated their author. He stays outside Josephson's thought.

Describing Josephson as a "fellow traveler," for example, really confuses the issue. Undeniably, Matty said a number of foolish and reprehensible things about the Soviet Union. But as Shi notes, Josephson never followed the "line," and his "Marxism" was always idiosyncratic. *The Politicos*, written in the mid-'30s, finds that political survival always held sway for professional politicians over their economic alliance with the robber barons. Matty's references to Marx were always more or less post hoc. Shi comments that he "imposed Marxist rhetoric and teleology onto a foundation of pragmatic liberalism," a judgment with which I agree, but one which suggests that this "foundation" would have been the proper object of Shi's critique.

Josephson's work was shaped by the two great dogmas of liberalism: individual freedom and progress in the war against nature. Progress was a lodestar for Matty; it moved his early aesthetic pursuit of "new forms" as well as his later histories. He adopted dadaism, in part, because it seemed up to date, eager to adapt to the "dynamic rhythms" of American life. Like bohemianism itself, the quest for new forms was a variety of bourgeois liberalism. Intellectuals needed modes in tune with progress, and they concentrated on form to the exclusion of substance—as Shi observes—because

in liberalism the spirit is supposed to take care of itself. Social and political creativity stops when it has created the appropriate form in which individual freedoms can flower.

Similarly, since Josephson believed that political liberty depends on economic well-being, any regime that advances material progress creates the potential for liberty. Since the Soviet Union started so far behind in the material "basis" of political freedom, its rulers could be excused for cutting corners in their threatened race to catch up. So long as Stalin was making material progress, in this view, he was creating the conditions for liberty. But he was also destroying the disposition to be free. Shi suggests that Josephson allowed the "promise" of the USSR to blind him to its "practice." I think, rather, that his fault lay in believing the promise at all.

Yet Josephson's faith in progress was despairing. He recognized that a "technical-rationalist" society cramps the individual and only hoped that in such modern societies there would be new space for intellectual, as opposed to individual, liberty. But he had no faith that technocrats would realize the possibility. Josephson saw that, in the last analysis, there is a radical opposition between materialism and human liberty. Progress, part of the liberal creed, menaces freedom, its first premise. Josephson rejected capitalism because its materialism was "unmitigated," but even under socialism Josephson insisted on the need for heroic intellectuals, able to stand against the current of the time. Only "moral certainty and moral passion" can redeem modernity.

This helps explain Josephson's history. In the first place he shared Beard's observation that, consciously or unconsciously, our "frame of reference" controls the facts we select and the way we arrange them. Josephson also maintained that to "recreate the past as it truly was" we must take morality seriously because people in the past took *their* moral claims seriously. To be impartial presumes that there is no way of judging between these claims and that people in the past were wrong to think that such judgments could be made. That, in turn, presumes that our recognition of the relativity of human judgment makes us superior to those who have gone before. To make *that* argument, Josephson contended, violates the commonality of human nature which makes it possible for us to write history at all.

In fact, Josephson the historian is the best critic of Josephson the Soviet sympathizer. His case for Russia presumes that present vice can be justified by future good. Yet, responding to Alan Nevins, he observed that we cannot condone capitalists on the grounds that the end justifies the means.

In *intellectual* life Josephson seems to have regarded morality and our common human nature as controlling; in *politics* he appears to have thought that matter rules spirit and that intellectuals must adapt to "realities." Yet his best work emancipates the human spirit from material progress, going beyond his own modern and secular theorizing. Josephson's art, if not his doctrines, showed his successors the way.

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