

## The Politics of His Poetry

### Walter Lowenfels' Poetic Response to United States v. Kuzma (1953-54), His Smith Act Trial

**Brian Daldorph**

I was sitting at my desk in the enclosed porch of our cottage in the woods, working on a poem. Suddenly floodlights and shouts broke through the darkness and the silence. Eight men pointing revolvers converged on my typewriter as if it were a machine-gun emplacement. It was 2 A.M., July 23, 1953.

It was a most successful raid; I haven't yet recovered from the surprise. In the years that followed, I was never even able to figure out what the FBI expected to find. If they were arresting me for my sonnets, I might have understood, and so might others. But for editing the *Pennsylvania Worker*? For sitting through hundreds of meetings? The Department of Justice should have advanced bearing medals, not guns.

Under steely-eyed surveillance I was told to put my clothes on. Lillian, in a state of shock, handed me shorts and socks, insisted over and over again she must make some coffee. She was to be left alone to live out this nightmare with the deer and the rabbits — the only fellow conspirators in our immediate neighborhood.

They let me bring one book with me. *Leaves of Grass* kept my mind off the proceedings that followed. I was taken to a building in Philadelphia that houses the FBI — along with other Philadelphians under similar custody. About 6 A.M. six of us were taken before a commissioner and each held in \$100,000 bail. Never before or since in the United States have I been held in such esteem.

This extract is from Walter Lowenfels' account of his arrest and indictment under the Smith Act, "On Trial," published in *The Portable Walter: From the Prose and Poetry of Walter Lowenfels*.<sup>1</sup> Mike Gold's translation of Louis Aragon's account of the arrest is published as part of an introductory essay to Lowenfels' chapbook, *The Prisoners*.<sup>2</sup> After nine years in France, Lowenfels (1897-1976) returned in 1934 to the United States an avowed Marxist, then worked on the Pennsylvanian edition of *The Daily Worker* for fifteen years (1940-1955). The American government, in the throes of McCarthyism, arrested Lowenfels with eight others in 1953, indicting them as Communist Party members under the Smith Act of 1940 for conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the United States' government by force and violence. Despite poor health, Lowenfels survived this arrest, trial, and conviction.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the ordeal

1 Walter Lowenfels, "On Trial," *The Portable Walter: From the Prose and Poetry of Walter Lowenfels* (New York 1968), 34-54.

2 Walter Lowenfels, *The Prisoners* (Philadelphia 1954).

3 Lowenfels was not the only poet hounded during the McCarthy Era. The African-American poet Langston Hughes (1902-67), whose poetry and politics were clearly leftist, was summoned before McCarthy's HUAC committee in March 1953 when the Wisconsin senator was trying to embarrass a government agency by accusing it of purchasing radical

revitalized his poetry; *American Voices* in 1953, *The Prisoners* in 1954, and *Sonnets of Love and Liberty* the next year contained many poems concerning his arrest and trial.<sup>4</sup> Lowenfels, who saw himself in the tradition of “partisan poets” from Dante and Chu Yuan and Whitman to the profusion of writers on the left of the 1930s to such leftist contemporaries as Louis Aragon, Aime Cesaire, and Langston Hughes, believed that socialism, “a singing thing,” could give us back our song, our humanity, stripped from us by the capitalist system “that turns people into mechanical objects, robs them of personality, of humanity, makes them slaves to bread and to bread alone, takes away the song of life and gives them a jingle for a brand of deodorant.”<sup>5</sup> His trial channelled his radical energies into poetry condemning a system which seemed set on stifling his voice, and his own persecution helped him sympathize with all “The Burned, The Jailed, The Banned,”<sup>6</sup> and with all of us living under the shadow of nuclear annihilation. Roger Asselineau calls Lowenfels “the most neglected American poet of the twentieth century,” claiming Lowenfels as “the closest approximation to Walt Whitman” this century.<sup>7</sup> I agree with Asselineau that Lowenfels’ poetry “deserves to be better known” because it raises, and to some extent answers, vital questions about the nature of “committed” literature, questions that have in recent years come to the forefront of studies in the humanities.

In his valuable essay, “Culture and Commitment: U.S. Communist Writers Reconsidered,” Alan Wald argues that in spite of recent revisions to the canon of English literature increasing the representation of women and people of color, leftist writers are still largely neglected.<sup>8</sup> There are several hundred U. S. writers on the left who

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books for libraries overseas. Some of Hughes’s early books were on the list. Hughes told the committee that he had never been a Communist, and that he believed in democratic solutions to economic and social problems. He refused to name names. After he was dismissed by the committee, lecturing opportunities, an important source of his income, dried up for a long time. Milton Meltzer, *Langston Hughes: A Biography* (New York 1968), 240. Whereas Lowenfels received a two-year prison sentence, Hughes was punished with what Earl Latham terms the “prescriptive publicity” of appearing before HUAC. Earl Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington: From the New Deal to McCarthy* (Cambridge 1966), 5.

- 4 Walter Lowenfels, *American Voices* (Philadelphia 1953). Lowenfels, *Sonnets of Love and Liberty* (New York 1955).
- 5 Walter Lowenfels, *The Poetry of My Politics* (Homestead 1968), 29.
- 6 Walter Lowenfels, “Dedicatory Sonnet: for Eugene Dennis,” *The Prisoners*, 3.
- 7 Roger Asselineau, “A Neglected Transcendentalist Poet of the 20th Century: Walter Lowenfels (1897-1976),” in Marta Sienicka (ed.), *Proceedings of a Symposium on American Literature* (Poznan 1979), 31-42. Asselineau begins his essay by defining what it is to be “the most neglected American poet of the twentieth century”: “Walter Lowenfels’s name does not appear in the *Literary History of the United States* or the *Oxford Companion to American Literature*. Sylvia Beach and Janet Flanner both ignore him in their books of reminiscences. George Wickes in his *Americans in Paris, 1903-1939* mentions him twice in passing and rather condescendingly.” (31)
- 8 Alan Wald, “Culture and Commitment: U. S. Communist Writers Reconsidered,” in Michael E. Brown *et al* (eds.), *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U. S. Communism* (New York 1993), 281-305.

have received no critical attention; they are to be found not in literary anthologies, but in FBI files.<sup>9</sup> According to Wald, a major problem causing this lack of attention is the quality of Walter Rideout's *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954* (1956), and Daniel Aaron's *Writers On the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961): "Three decades after their publication, [these] two books remain the loci classicus for scholarship on the communist literary left." Critics have found it difficult to go beyond them. Also, there has been a tendency among scholars to "recycle old material about a dozen or so top male, mostly white, figures, neglecting the hundreds who made up the infrastructure of a politico-cultural movement unparalleled in U. S. history, with the one possible exception of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s."<sup>10</sup> Wald claims, however, that writers on the left have been receiving more attention of late, especially in Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945* (1989), Paula Rabinowitz's *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991), and Constance Coiner's "Literature of Resistance: Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen." (1990) Wald begins his essay with an account of Walter Lowenfels' arrest and trial, seeing him not only as a significant poet of the left, but also as an editor of "prematurely anti-canon" anthologies such as *Poets of Today* (1964) and *Where Is Vietnam?* (1967).<sup>11</sup> Salzman and Landerer's *Social Writings of the 1930s: Poetry* anthologizes 24 important leftist poets of the 1930s, including Richard Wright, Mike Gold, Sol Funaroff, Edwin Rolfe, Muriel Rukeyser, and Genevieve Taggard, though the poems included here lose a lot of their power when removed from their original context of publication.<sup>12</sup> Nelson's project in *Repression and Recovery* is to

9 *Ibid.*, 285.

10 *Ibid.*, 283.

11 In order to recognize Lowenfels as an early challenger to the canon of English literature, it is useful to compare his "Editor's Foreword" to *Poets of Today: A New American Anthology* (New York 1964), with Paul Lauter's "Preface to the First Edition" of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (Lexington 1990). Lowenfels says that the 85 poets included in his anthology "(many of them for the first time in any anthology) show there is an avant-garde poetry in this country that is being ignored in most studies of American literature." (7) Concerned in particular with the underrepresentation of "Negro" poetry, Lowenfels writes: "While there are now in print two recent anthologies of Negro poets, most general anthologies of American poetry exclude Negroes. In a review of what I called 15 years ago 'The Oxford Book of (White) American Verse,' I drew attention to segregation in poetry. Research in this field shows no improvement since then. Apparently other editors do not consider the kind of poems by the 20 Negroes I have included to be poetry. My choice has been determined not by color but by what I respond to when 'I hear the voice of America singing..." (7-8) Lauter says that *The Heath Anthology* was first conceived in the late 1960s in response to what was perceived as the "narrowness of what was taught as 'American Literature'." (xxxii) He argues that "scholars in the late 1960s, recognizing the richness and diversity of American culture, began to seek out the large number of lost, forgotten, or suppressed literary texts that had emerged from and illustrated that diversity." (xxxiii) *The Heath Anthology* attempts to reclaim literature hitherto "lost, forgotten, or repressed."

12 Jack Salzman and Leo Zanderer (eds.), *Social Poetry of the 1930s: A Selection* (New York 1978).

recover what can be saved of “the immense amount of writing of great interest, vitality, subtlety, and complexity — writing, indeed ... of demonstrably high quality” which has been hitherto suppressed by cultural custodians.<sup>13</sup> In particular, he tries to reclaim “the politically aggressive, socially critical literature” of the 1930s, which was “the major focus of the culture’s forgetfulness during the late 1940s and 1950s.”<sup>14</sup> Nelson, too, sees Lowenfels as a significant, largely neglected poet and anthologist. My essay, then, is an attempt, in Nelson’s terms, to recover a vital part of our cultural inheritance which has until recently been all but forgotten.

A native New Yorker born in 1897 to Jewish immigrant parents from Eastern Europe, Lowenfels left the United States in 1926 to become part of an expatriate group of writers — including Cummings, Hemingway, and Joyce — living in the Latin Quarter of Paris. His poetry was published in avant-garde literary magazines including *Transition* (France) and T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, and between 1929-34 he published seven books. In “On Trial,” he describes his turn to the left while in Paris in the early 1930s, explaining that socialism seemed to him the only “way out of the graveyard toward which I saw our civilization headed”:

I began attending rallies at the Salle Bullier on the Boulevard St. Michel, just a block away from where we lived on the rue Denfert Rochereau, turning toward the “real world” unconsciously and instinctively like a heliotropic plant. Remembering now the poster I saw in front of the hall of a rally to be held for the Scottsboro Boys, with a picture of one of the Scottsboro mothers, Mrs. Wright, I went to the meeting, stood in the back of the crowded hall and saw for the first time posters with slogans on them — “Free Ernest Thaelman” ... “Free The Scottsboro Boys” ... “For Peace and Socialism,” ... and heard dimly the speakers, not only Mrs. Wright but the French Communists of the day, whose names I forget and whose words I forget, but it stirred some curiosity in me ... and I bought the pamphlets one buys at such meetings, one of which I still had until very recently — “Program of the Sixth International...”<sup>15</sup>

Lowenfels then describes how strongly he felt a part of the crowd hounded by the flics on the way home from the rally, and of the February crowds marching toward the center of the city to demonstrate against the attempted Fascist putsch in 1934: “All we knew was where our hearts were and our feet.”<sup>16</sup>

As an ardent Marxist, he began work in 1934 as, ironically enough, a wholesale butter merchant in the office warehouse of the family business, Frederick Lowenfels & Son. He moved to Philadelphia in 1940 to become a reporter for the Pennsylvanian edition of *The Daily Worker*. After his privately printed book *Steel 1937*, Lowenfels published no more poetry until *American Voices* (1953). In *Jewish Life*, Annette Rubinstein wrote of Lowenfels’ long hiatus from writing poetry:

13 Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory 1910-1945* (Madison 1989), 5.

14 *Ibid.*, 253.

15 Lowenfels, “On Trial,” 51.

16 *Ibid.*, 52.

... that is not to say that his pen has been idle ... He has ... had over half a million words published in newspapers and magazines, half a million words devoted to a defense of his fellows' right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. But as the great poet and pamphleteer, John Milton said three centuries ago, a poet writes only with his left hand when he writes even the most urgent and vital prose. And today, under pressure of the sharpest necessity, Walter Lowenfels, like his great predecessor, again raises his own most characteristic voice.<sup>17</sup>

Under the "sharpest necessity" of political and personal crises of the early 1950s, Lowenfels rediscovered his right hand, his poetry.

The Alien Registration Act of 1940, better known as the Smith Act, which made it a crime to knowingly or willfully advocate the violent overthrow of the U. S. government, was one of a series of measures aimed in particular against those on political fringes, both right and left. The Smith Act became law the year after the CPUSA reached its peak membership of 100,000, with an influence which, historians agree, went far beyond this membership. But after Nazi Germany invaded Soviet Russia in June 1941 and the CPUSA position shifted from hostility to the Roosevelt administration to support, Communists were no longer targets under the Smith Act. During the Popular Front years of the 1930s, Party members had been permitted by the Party to hide their membership, and though this was useful for making allies and infiltrating institutions (especially the labor unions of the Committee for Industrial Organizations), it also led to fears about so-called Communist "submarines." According to Klehr and Haynes, writing about Communist involvement in labor unions:

Mistrust of Communism was deep ... and CIO Communists found it easier to hide their communism than to acknowledge it and overcome suspicions ... Whatever their intent, Communists' habits of secrecy and exploitation of their concealed network gave a conspiratorial cast to their union activities.<sup>18</sup>

Guenther Lewy makes the same argument, which is a strong one even though it suggests that being "above board" was just another option for a Party member:

If Communists had been above board and had openly acknowledged their membership in the Party it is unlikely that there would have been the need to ask the most notorious question of that troubled era: "Are you now or have you ever been ..."<sup>19</sup>

CPUSA support for the war effort reduced domestic hostility toward them. But after the war, as Communist rule spread into East Europe and Asia, there was renewed antagonism toward communism in America. This was heightened by revelations about Soviet espionage, convincing many Americans that all Communists were traitors. Between 1947-50, Communists were purged from unions including the United Autoworkers Union, the CIO's largest and most dynamic union. With Cold

17 Annette Rubinstein, *Jewish Life* (September 1954), 12.

18 Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York 1992), 101.

19 Guenther Lewy, *The Cause That Failed: Communism in American Political Life* (New York 1990), 128.

War tensions mounting, government pressure on the CPUSA, in abeyance since 1942, resumed. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 restricted legal protection of unions to those whose leaders signed non-Communist oaths, striking directly at concealed Communists in unions. In 1947 President Truman's order set up a loyalty program for federal government employees, which was especially troublesome for former Communists now employed by the government. After the anti-Communist Mundt-Nixon Bill failed to pass in 1948, the Truman administration, to head off Republican exploitation of the issue in the 1948 election, in July 1948 indicted twelve Communist leaders — including Party chair William Foster and General Secretary Eugene Dennis — under the Smith Act. Despite their argument that since the 1930s the Party had called for the constitutional path to socialism, the defendants were convicted. In 1951 the Supreme Court upheld this conviction, ruling that individual rights had to be limited when the exercise of these rights constitutes a “clear and present danger” to the security of society. More than 100 other Communists — including Lowenfels — were indicted and convicted under the Smith Act, though a number of federal judges disliked the standard used in the Dennis decision and directed acquittals. But with the Cold War against the Soviets and the hot war against North Korea raging, hostility to Communists grew. According to Earl Latham:

The temper of the time was suspicious, excited, emotional, pathetic, and hard. There was rage and outrage, accusation and defiance, a Babel of shouting anger in these tense years.<sup>20</sup>

And American Communists were, of course, at the center of the storm. This was the era of the excesses of the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, of the substantial expansion of FBI surveillance of Communists, of the “Hollywood Ten” and blacklists, and of the McCarran Act of 1950 which stated that “subversive” organizations had to register with the government. Eugene Dennis claimed it was a few minutes before the midnight of Fascism. Klehr and Haynes, however, argue that although the government — with enthusiastic popular support — harassed, prosecuted, and persecuted the Communist movement in the late 1940s into the 1950s, the Party was still allowed to function legally, and its leaders were allowed to speak, and its presses to publish.<sup>21</sup> Though it is true to say that U. S. government actions against the Party were far less extreme than those of Stalin in the notorious Moscow show trials of 1936-38, for example, it is also true that the government stepped far outside the bounds of the constitution in order to harass those it labelled “subversives.”

In “On Trial,” Lowenfels notes that he and his fellow defendants were not prosecuted for their own words; rather, the prosecution chose “passages from *State and Revolution*, as interpreted by FBI Marxists.”<sup>22</sup> Lowenfels' description of his trial

20 *The Communist Controversy in Washington*, 3.

21 *The American Communist Movement*, 181.

22 Lowenfels, “On Trial,” 35.

is reminiscent of the black comedy of Kafka in *The Trial*, in which it is too easy to forget the suffering underneath the absurdly comic surface. Because of bad health (he had suffered a heart attack a few years before the trial), Lowenfels was required to spend only two hours in court each day. In court — and not included on official records — Lowenfels worked on translations of French and Italian poets rather than getting “bogged down in the legal verbiage.” Finding it hard to work on his own poems in court, Lowenfels says he “developed a routine — I wrote verse on my own time and translations on the government’s,” clearly pleased with this minor subversion.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in a consultation with the other defendants before the trial, it was agreed that Lowenfels’ best contribution to the defense would be to write poems. He obliged. In the “maximum security” division of Holmsburg County Prison, he wrote:

The murderer across the corridor  
 is my own age.  
 I never see his full face  
 just his panther figure  
 pacing his cell  
 stopping to clutch bars  
 becoming a hawk with hands  
 gripping the false  
 shelter of a nest  
 he can't fly from.<sup>24</sup>

The trial lasted four-and-a-half months. According to Lowenfels, prosecution witnesses were “former Communists who had become informers and agents of the FBI at a fair rate of pay”:

They testified about meetings they had attended, who was present, and what was *really* meant by what had been said. Their smoothest fabrications couldn't overcome the dullness of their narratives. It is hard enough to understand dialectics and how social changes take place throughout history, and what Marx and Engels and Lenin really meant. In the verbiage of the witnesses, Marxist thought and terminology became such a long-drawn-out gobbledegook of “proletariat,” “cadres,” etc., that I turned to Ben W., one of my co-defendants, one day and observed: “This jury is going to find us guilty of having endured boredom and convict us of talking nonsense.”<sup>25</sup>

Convicted and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment, Lowenfels served none of this time, because these convictions under the Smith Act were reversed by the U. S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit “for lack of evidence,” although as Lowenfels notes, the evidence was “as material or immaterial as that for which many others have served from three to eight years in prison.” Lowenfels makes light of his four-year “jail period” between arrest and final exoneration, claiming that the experience gave him

23 *Ibid.*, 37.

24 *Ibid.*, 38.

25 *Ibid.*, 41.

notoriety at least: "I was the only poet in recent times deemed worthy of being put on trial for my beliefs."<sup>26</sup>

Lowenfels' arrest, trial, and conviction were clearly the defining experiences which charged the poetry of *American Voices*, *The Prisoners*, and *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*.<sup>27</sup> Lowenfels had come to see poetry as inextricably, symbiotically bound with politics; in "On Trial," he wrote, "As for myself, I am not a poet despite my political convictions; it is my political convictions that are the final cement in my lifework as a poet."<sup>28</sup> In a letter to *The Daily Worker* (1 March 1957) reprinted in *The Poetry of My Politics* (1968), he wrote of his renaissance as a poet in the early 1950s: "The fact is, I never gave up poetry. Politics was and is poetry for me — an act of creativity. I see no division between politics and poems. What I gave up was the poetry of death. Politics as poetry saved my life."<sup>29</sup> Of course there is the question of how a Marxist can write lyric poetry, which necessarily focusses on selfhood and personal desires, without losing track of the masses, the larger agenda. Lowenfels tried to answer this question by insisting that the work of any individual necessarily has larger political implications, which must be kept in sight. As he wrote in *The Daily Worker* (1 March 1957): "What the word poem does today is a small thing, but a larger thing is implied. It is one effort, along with all our others, to identify and integrate the dignity of human personality beneath the world's terrific freight." For Lowenfels, this "terrific freight" was the iniquitous capitalist system, which could be resisted to some extent by politically conscious poetry.

Whittier Press in Kingessing Station, Philadelphia, published Lowenfels' pamphlet *American Voices* in 1953.<sup>30</sup> The pamphlet contains a seven-page poem "American Voices,"<sup>31</sup> which is a response to Lowenfels' arrest and trial in the form of a

26 *Ibid.*, 41.

27 Lowenfels had returned to writing poetry in 1951. As he says in *The Poetry of My Politics*: "Some critics have said it was my arrest in 1953 and Smith Act trial that started me writing poems again. It's true that I did work at the craft in court where I concentrated on translating sonnets from Dante and Baudelaire while Marxists [sic] experts from the FBI occupied the witness stand. But I had already resumed my own work earlier, in 1951, during the Korean War. Another turning was the death of Stalin in 1953 ..." (24) Though Lowenfels was writing poetry again (for the first time since 1934) in 1951, his arrest and trial in 1953 were clearly major reasons for his revitalization as a poet, apparent in the three books he published between 1953 and 1955.

28 Lowenfels, "On Trial," 43.

29 *The Poetry of My Politics*, 30.

30 The three books I discuss here can all be classed as "small press." Discussing "Literary Modes of Production," Terry Eagleton argues that "if it is possible in Western societies to produce fiction for the capitalist market, it is also possible to distribute one's handwritten poetry on the streets." Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London 1976), 45. That Lowenfels was closer to distributing his poetry on the streets than writing bestsellers has, of course, considerable implications as far as the putative readership of his work is concerned.

31 "American Voices" was republished in revised form as "A Spoken Cantata for the First Day of Spring" in *American Voices* (1959). The main stylistic shift in the poem is the shortening of lines. Thus the first line of "American Voices" spreads across three lines in

collage of voices including the poet's own, newspaper cuttings, and Willie McGee's last letter.<sup>32</sup> Lowenfels' technique here, reflecting his democratic impulse to open up his poetry to others' voices and thus demonstrate the diversity of protest, is similar to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia at work in the novel, "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."<sup>33</sup> Both Bakhtin and Lowenfels recognized the subversive implications of this diversity, which disrupts the privileged voice of the author and the hierarchical society that single voice reflects. Lowenfels was attempting in this way to make poetry less the work of the lone, omniscient author, and more a collage of the voices of people at large, thus opening up the literary medium to those who would most often be excluded from it. Though this was a limited gesture on Lowenfels' part (his poems were still published under his name), it does reveal once again his commitment to breaking down hierarchical restrictions on who is allowed to speak in society, on who ultimately has power. Lowenfels' technique here is similar to that of Mike Gold (1893-1967), Party poet and editor, in his so-called "Worker Correspondence" poems which used materials from his 1930s column in the *Daily Worker*. According to Nelson, "Gold's series of 'Worker's Correspondence' poems were apparently sometimes assembled from letters sent to the paper and sometimes invented out of his populist sympathies, often combining a number of letters in one poem."<sup>34</sup> Here is Gold's poem titled "Indianapolis, Ind.":

We held a red funeral for a child who died of hunger.  
 We marched in thousands to her grave.  
 Red roses came from the Communist Party  
 A wreath of lilies from the Unemployed Councils.  
 Our banners flashed in the sun.  
 But our hearts were dark with anger.  
 When at the grave like red soldiers  
 We swore to end the world's poverty  
 Brave comrades were seen to weep  
 Fathers and mothers of hungry children.<sup>35</sup>

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the 1959 version: "Spring raided our street,/broke through the thin glass of daybreak,/found ..." Thematically, Lowenfels moves away from his concentration on the Korean War and includes many more references to the nuclear threat. Indeed, the poem now begins with a sonnet in response to the headline, "H-BOMB MAY MAKE MANKIND STERILE." The sonnet ends: "I thought I saw them — children of all lands — /pleading with us — the lovers — for their birth."

32 Willie McGee (1914?-1951) was a convicted rapist executed in Laurel, Mississippi, on May 9th, 1951. Willie McGee, who was black, was considered by many as the victim of a racist justice system. No white man had ever been executed as a rapist by the state of Mississippi.

33 Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin 1981), 262.

34 *Repression and Recovery*, 104.

35 *Social Writings of the 1930s: Poetry*, 87.

In “American Voices,” Lowenfels’ own persecution is set in a broader context of social injustice and turmoil, under the shadow of nuclear annihilation.<sup>36</sup> With the “winter” of World War II ending, there was hope for spring. But there were new troubles: the Korean War, racism, and the nuclear build-up. According to Mrs. I. F. Epps in *The News Leader*, Richmond, Virginia (quoted in Lowenfels’ poem), “Now we are reaping what we have sown.” Spring is personified in the poem as a sort of secret policeman. The poem begins:

Spring raided our street, broke through the thin glass of  
daybreak, found  
houses asleep. Certain birds call out their love of trees,  
neighbor’s cyclamen bush  
redder than it was yesterday. The tree of heaven in our backyard  
stretches out a new branch of buds. All these objects, Spring  
seized and said  
a poet would spell it out.

Lowenfels’ spring investigates, swears out warrants for breaches of the peace, holds open hearings, and quizzes defendants.

Lowenfels’ sympathies for the underprivileged emerge as the poem develops. The abundant comforts offered by American society to the elite are paid for by the sufferings of others, especially by American blacks:

The morning is beautiful, Spring said,  
if the dogs don’t bark at you  
and the police don’t hanker after you,  
and you sleep the lingering hours into sunlight,  
your bed supported by the muscles of sixteen million Negroes ...

The lucky ones sleep through the dark American night, living only in sunlight. Lowenfels’ sympathies here reflect the CPUSA’s early commitment to racial integration breaking down the barriers of capitalist society, a commitment given form in the establishment, for example, of the American National Negro Congress in 1925, and by the nomination of James W. Ford as Vice-Presidential candidate for the 1932 election — the first African-American to be nominated for national office. Lowenfels, the defendant in a Kafkaesque trial, identifies not only with persecuted blacks but also with American troops in Korea who too often have little idea of what — if anything — they are fighting and dying for:

Soldier, brother — son:  
Whose Bunker Hill is this mountain top you clutch so quietly?  
Who owns this blade of grass you stain with your dying sweat?

36 Lowenfels wrote in *The Poetry of My Politics*: “All our emotions are different in the 1960’s because of what happened in Hiroshima in the 1940’s. Spring, love, children — you name it — the words are no longer the same with Strontium-90 in the air. This is the inescapable framework for all our lives, all our poems.” (92)

How do you spell the name of the village whose house-tops you  
kissed with your trigger?

The poem which began with a dawn raid — based, no doubt, on Lowenfels' own  
experience of arrest — ends with another "raid":

The pounding of our hearts and feet, the knocks of our hands  
on your doors,  
bring you Good Morning, neighbors! H'ya partners! Shake!  
Look for us this morning, with the first Western light,  
bringing you peace, to be won.

It is typical of Lowenfels' gritty optimism to end with a Whitmanian "hug." The  
context of these lines lift them out of pure cornball. In spite of persecution, Lowenfels  
was determined to hang onto his positive vision of America.

The first edition of *The Prisoners* (Whittier Press, Philadelphia, 1954), a compan-  
ion volume to *American Voices*, was one thousand copies. The book contains fourteen  
poems, some of them published in *Masses and Mainstream* and *The Daily Worker*,  
and in journals in Mexico, Chile, Paris, and Rome, many of them addressed to fellow  
political activists. Both the places of publication and the dedications indicate Lowen-  
fels' leftist, internationalist stance. *The Prisoners* includes a short essay about  
Lowenfels by French poet Louis Aragon, in which Aragon associates Lowenfels with  
other imprisoned writers — Christopher Marlowe, Francois Villon, and Nazim  
Hikmet. Aragon ends his essay celebrating Lowenfels' "prayer" from prison "sent  
to free men everywhere" and calling for freedom and peace:

Let the voice of freedom ring with bold and powerful echoes here  
and everywhere, rising from the heart of man AND FROM HIS ANGER,  
RISING FROM THAT ENORMOUS POWER WHICH IS THE LOVE OF PEACE  
AND WHICH IS CAPABLE OF BREAKING ALL MAN'S CHAINS.

Lowenfels' first poem in *The Prisoners*, "Dedicatory Sonnet: for Eugene Dennis"  
(the main defendant in *Dennis v. United States*), is indeed a call for peace, which he  
sees as close at hand and yet, ironically, something that has to be fought for. The  
sonnet ends:

But say the sun has sunk and ocean sleeps  
and geiger counters clock the summer rains—  
still you hold eternity in your hand:

The loveliest prisoner of today, peace,  
awaits eternal freedom from her chains;  
She lies with us The Burned, The Jailed, The Banned.

Lowenfels recognized (in a paraphrase of Emerson quoted in the book) "the austere  
condition of liberty ... that it is always slipping from those who boast it to those who

fight for it.”<sup>37</sup> The second poem of *The Prisoners* ends with a toast from “we hundred Smith Act women and men” in prison, to miners, mothers, and sharecroppers: “this toast, this beaker brewed especially for you/from our heart’s blood especially for you ...” Like Frederick Douglass whom he later quotes, Lowenfels was fully aware that although he was particularly concerned with one cause (in his own case, the cause of socialism), he was sympathetic to the struggles of all oppressed people. As Doxey Wilkerson wrote: “And the message of Lowenfels’ verse is imperishable ... [its] fighting power ... reflects a consummate artistry which has matured through deep understanding, direct participation and confidence in the working class and people’s struggles.”<sup>38</sup>

Lowenfels’ ready identification with the oppressed is evident in “At Bushkill Falls, Pennsylvania (for My Children),” in which he identifies with Native Americans in order to temporarily assuage the guilt he feels for the exploitation of the indigenous population. Such exploitation is, for Lowenfels, symptomatic of the capitalist system — of which he was an unwitting part — which he now works to replace with a less discriminatory socialist society. At a “secret spring” of the Indians, a holy place, Lowenfels pleads for forgiveness:

You arrogant Me that stands up and dares the world  
to judge your genesis in genocide.  
I free myself by association. I will be Indian  
a native of Dry Tortugas. Give me your blood  
give me your copper skin, my fathers.  
Get me out of this fix! Help!  
I am drowning, Mother, drowning in the blood  
I have spilled  
over these waterfalls ...

At best this is no more than a gesture, heartfelt though it is. The poet is only momentarily freed by association, for even the most sincere identification cannot atone for the blood pouring over the waterfall.

In the sixth poem here, “Christmas Prayer,” Lowenfels returns to his own cause, claiming that the “gibbeted,” “hundred” arrested under the Smith Act are America’s best hope, as they are the ones who will fight for the highest ideals of their country at whatever cost:

We are your cross, your ghost,  
your wound, your frozen angels, your dream,  
your hope, your despair. We persist.

Lowenfels quotes Bernard Shaw on the American government’s arrest of twelve people charged “with advocating the overthrow of the government by force and

37 *The Prisoners*, 3.

38 Doxey Wilkerson, “Poems of Peace and Freedom,” *Political Affairs* (November 1954), 63-64.

violence, which is exactly what Washington and Jefferson did, thereby creating the United States of America.” Lowenfels’ fight for his own freedom from oppressive government heightened his sympathy for the struggles of other activists and oppressed people, such as Ben Davis, Jomo Kenyatta,<sup>39</sup> Native Americans, slaves, and, referring to his Jewish ethnicity, “the Hyam Solomons from whom I came.” The eighth poem of *The Prisoners* includes these lines:

A song is sung and dies away  
but out of every hill  
the freedom song we hear in jail  
is never, never still.

Inspired by the voices of freedom of Lincoln, Douglass, Eugene Dennis, Leonardo Da Vinci, Giordano Bruno, Shaw and Montesquieu, among others quoted in the book, the prisoner Walter Lowenfels kept singing for freedom.

And won it for himself. In the final poem of *The Prisoners*, “On Bail,” Lowenfels catches the odd joy of freedom at last, of reacquainting himself with old familiar places:

My first night out. I wander through the house  
touching things, making as if free.  
At my side eight whispering voices  
saying, *Remember me, remember me!*

I drink a cup of coffee, draw up plans  
to help set my *eight companions free*,  
one hundred and sixty million other voices  
whispering: *Remember me, remember me!*

In this short poem Lowenfels reemphasizes his political commitment, vowing to work for the release of his fellow prisoners. His precarious freedom is suggested by the phrase “making as if free”: not only is he unused to the feeling of liberty so he must act it out, he is also aware that at any moment his liberty might be snatched from him again.

*Sonnets of Love and Liberty* is dedicated to peace, “the loveliest prisoner of our time.” Again the focus is on the Smith Act trial, and again Lowenfels makes use of the sonnet form, this time exclusively. The sonnet’s “strong” form resists “Hell/rag[-ing] round our lives,”<sup>40</sup> the form reflecting the way that moral strength helps the individual resist persecution. In the introductory “A Note on the Sonnet,” Lowenfels

39 In 1943, Benjamin Davis, Jr., a Communist leader, was the first African-American elected to the New York City Council. Jomo Kenyatta (1897?-1978), first president of Kenya and one of the leaders of the Pan-African movement, was born near Nairobi, Kenya (then a British colony). Kenyatta led his country away from European domination toward self-rule, becoming prime minister of Kenya in June 1963, six months before independence, and president in December 1964.

40 *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, 35.

explains his reasons for choosing this unlikely form. As he says, “How is it that a form invented during the days of chain armor is still found useful during the hydrogen age?” Lowenfels explains that he wrote the later sonnets in *Sonnets of Love and Liberty* during his trial, and the “pressure of time required poems to be brief. At the same time, the form had a history of carrying more content than any other 14-line arrangement.”<sup>41</sup> As in *The Prisoners*, Louis Aragon helps set Lowenfels’ work in context. Aragon identifies Lowenfels’ predecessors as the poets of sixteenth century France who “taught a lesson to kings” with their sonnets. In Lowenfels’ book, “political thinking is the substance that weaves together content and form; the old and the new; traditional design with up-to-the-minute news, and makes the old form appear once more a link between reader and writer in the year of the hydrogen bomb tests.”<sup>42</sup> Aragon describes the sonnet as a “thinking machine,” and claims that Lowenfels employs it as such against technologies which threaten our annihilation. In the first sonnet, for Albert Einstein, Lowenfels introduces his sonnets of peace as a challenge to the “destroyers.” In “Dedications,” the first section of *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, five sonnets are prayers for peace to “seed with your love of life and dancing feet/our cobalt bomb.”<sup>43</sup> In Sonnet V, Walt Whitman assures us that “even in the deadly ash, my Leaves glow.” Even in the Nuclear Age, Lowenfels still believed in Whitman’s humanistic vision.

Sonnets VII-XVIII, “For Lillian (1954),” directly concern the Smith Act trial, with Lowenfels claiming that personal integrity and love for his wife, Lillian, will overcome the political “filth” of the trial. In Sonnet IX he vows that with Lillian he will “stamp out lies in streets that Tom Paine walked.”<sup>44</sup> Compared to the “rot” of the courtroom, Lowenfels sees spring trees outside his cell window, and though he would celebrate spring as the season of new life, in sadness and anger he acknowledges the threat of an “idiot blaze/explod[-ing] our lovely world.”<sup>45</sup> Though “bombed with hydrogen,” spring is still the season of hope, especially for the oppressed. At the end of Sonnet XIV, the black dove says: “*Spring is a prison flower, its petals fold/and unfold over the jailed, the burned, the martyred,*” echoing the ending of the dedicatory sonnet of *The Prisoners*. In Sonnet XV, Lowenfels awaits “the unborn new tomorrow’s clear sunrise,” readying to celebrate the birth of children and the advent of socialism, both seen as forces of nature bringing new hope.

Sonnets XIX-XXVII, “For Lillian (1925-29),” written as the title informs us in the latter half of the 1920s, are basically traditional love sonnets, though the final

41 *Ibid.*, 7.

42 *Ibid.*, 10.

43 *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, 19.

44 Thomas Paine (1737-1809), Anglo-American pamphleteer, political scientist, and religious thinker, issued the first public call for the American colonies to declare their independence from Britain. Inspired by the American and French Revolutions, Paine became an international spokesman for political equality, natural rights, and civil liberties. It is easy to see why Lowenfels would regard Paine as a kindred spirit.

45 *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, 31.

poem of this sequence, Sonnet XXVIII (“Coda — 1954”), gives these older poems a new significance in light of the Smith Act trial. In this last sonnet, love is seen as a force opposing the persecution Lowenfels endured, as a force building liberty and peace:

... the love we share  
is more than us, and builds our victory  
with others, further and further without end.<sup>46</sup>

In an age in which powerful destructive forces deny our individuality, love celebrates it, and in reaching out to another in love we might achieve the sort of solidarity to oppose the “destroyers” introduced in the first sonnet of the book. This is Lowenfels’ long hope.

In the final section of *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, “Six Sonnets in Response to a Letter,” Lowenfels explains how poetry might be allied with a particular political commitment. Here is the epigraph to this section:

The letter (from a liberal writer — an old friend), reads in part as follows: “... Creative people are among the spokesmen for freedom, and because of this great responsibility we are not permitted to speak in the name of any political party ... Aragon was not strong enough to stand alone and so he is lost as an individual, which I believe is the greatest tragedy not only for the creative person, but for any man ...”

In the first sonnet in this section, Sonnet XXIX, Lowenfels insists that Aragon thrives as both poet and Party activist. The sonnet ends, “So you, dear flame of reason, warm and glowing,/shine with the song the Party in you sings.” Lowenfels argues that political commitment empowers the individual as artist, rather than disqualifying him from creativity. Jomo Kenyatta, who “moves in freedom through our prison age,” should also inspire those hungry for liberty and peace. This man threatens lynchers and their kind with “the freedom root whose tree he grows.”<sup>47</sup> In Sonnet XXXI, Lowenfels sees the Party in the tradition of the great visionaries of freedom, including Frederick Douglass. In Sonnet XXXII, “For Joe Magarac — Steelworker,” he commits himself to building liberty with the workers of the world:

Our hands have learned to love, enduring much.  
Out of the graveyard years of hate and greed  
we build our freedom in the human name.

Despite the cost of the struggle, Lowenfels writes that “our triumph is near,” inspired by the words of Eugene Debs who on being sentenced to ten years in jail proclaimed: “The Southern Cross is bending, the midnight is passing, and joy cometh with the morning.”<sup>48</sup> Both men claimed at least the triumph of retaining and propagating their

46 *Ibid.*, 48.

47 *Sonnets of Love and Liberty*, 52.

48 Eugene Debs (1855-1926) founded the Socialist Party of the United States in 1898 and was its candidate for president five times between 1900 and 1920. During World War I, he

leftist, humanitarian beliefs within a hostile political system. Lowenfels did not feel disabled in writing poetry by his deep political commitment to radical causes, nor was he dismayed by the limited audience for his work. As a lifelong activist, he knew too well the difficulty of rousing people from their political slumber. His politics involved him in issues which inspired his passionate art, as can be seen in his prolific poetic output triggered by his Smith Act trial.

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encouraged resistance to the draft. In 1918 he was charged under the Espionage Act, and sentenced to ten years in prison. In 1920 he ran his presidential campaign from prison and won about a million votes. President Warren Harding commuted his sentence in 1921.