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# THE SOUTHERN REVIEW

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# PROLETARIAN LITERATURE: A POLITICAL AUTOPSY

*Philip Rahv*

**T**HERE IS hardly a literary critic in America who has not at one time or another taken a hand in the controversy concerning proletarian literature. Few of the contributors to this historic controversy, however, were aware of its concrete political background and perspectives. What was new about the proletarian literary movement was its emphasis on political and social relations; and in approaching this movement the critics, it is true, discussed the connection between art and politics and between art and society. But they failed to notice that it is not these general and abstract connections but primarily its specific political history which explained proletarian literature.

Like other types of literary creation, this literature undoubtedly reflected class interests, needs, and attitudes; yet unlike other types, it reflected such interests, needs, and attitudes through the coordinated medium of a political party. That party is the Communist Party, which alone of all parties in the labor movement displayed any solicitude for proletarian literature—a solicitude, needless to say, in full measure returned by its recipient.

It is impossible, in my opinion, to understand the development of this literature, its rise and fall, without understanding its relation to the Communist Party. There are other factors, of course, but all of them have been modified by this one fundamental relation. Thus the Marxist doctrine, for

example, whose existence antedates that of the Communist International but in whose name the Communist literary critics habitually speak, has been generally taken as the theoretical basis of proletarian literature and its source of values. In identifying their own views—that is, the views of their party—with those of Marxism, these critics constructed a strategic mystification which had important consequences. One can place most of the books and essays dealing with Marxism and literature under the heading of this mystification, for what they actually deal with is literature and the particular interpretation of Marxism held by the official party. As such it is a perfectly legitimate subject, but the writers who use it should be aware of its real nature and hence of its limitations. Another result has been that it is the Marxist philosophy and not specifically the Communist Party which has been held responsible for the excesses and crudities of proletarian literature and which has drawn the fire of its opponents; and yet there are Marxist thinkers of reputation who believe that the theory behind this literature has nothing in common with revolutionary thought. Manifestly, a subject as intricate and contradictory as proletarian literature needs more than a purely theoretical analysis. Let us look first to its political history.

To revolutionary optimists the triumph of the left-wing in American literature seemed inevitable in the early nineteen-thirties. And, on the whole, in looking back at those years, the expectation of this triumph appears to have been based on plausible enough grounds. At face value most of the factors entering into the situation were indeed favorable to a realignment of letters along radical lines.

The suffering imposed on the bulk of the population by the economic crisis elevated the "common man" to a martyrdom that almost overnight integrated him into the sympathies of the literary artist. Humanized by the calamities that befell him, the "common man" now began figuring in the imaginative scheme with positive force. Notwithstanding the contempt heaped upon him for many years as a mobster and a boob, he now emerged as the ideal-carrier of fictions, invocations in verse, and critical manifestoes. In the part of petty beneficiary of a prosperous and soulless materialism he had long typified the negation of values; cast in the rôle of at once

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a piteous victim and militant rebel he typified their revival. And his apotheosis was consummated when writers made a practice of detaching him from his ordinary human environment in order to place him within "the glorious collectivity of the embattled proletariat."

A further causative factor was provided, of course, by the exhaustion of the literary modes current in the 'twenties. Being for the most part expressions of disillusionment with society, these modes could not cope with the demands for its reconstruction. The various regional programs, designed as they were for local uses, appeared inconsequential in the face of a national crisis involving profound spiritual and material transformations. The proletarian program, on the other hand, invoking history in all its tenses to confirm its ambitions, laid claim to a universality and radicalism of outlook poles asunder from the restricted and polite values of the past.

Furthermore, a political party existed in America, the Communist Party, which made haste to identify this literary program as a part of its own larger perspective and which welcomed into its political home all writers wishing to realize in practice their conversion to the revolutionary cause. This party, at that time virtually in sole occupation of the Marxist arena, thus became the organizer of proletarian literature and its ultimate court of appeal. The left literary magazines were published under its auspices or edited by its members. It appointed political commissars to supervise the public relations of the new literary movement and to minister to its doctrinal health. It furnished it with an initial audience and with an organizational base; and, finally, it conditioned the writers that had come under its control to conceive of the Soviet Union, its own source of strength and seat of highest authority, as the living embodiment of their hopes for socialism.

Nominally, despite the elaborate and often weirdly sectarian theories proclaimed by individual members, the program of this literary movement was quite simple and so broad in its appeal as to attract hundreds of writers in all countries. It can be reduced to the following formula: *the writer should ally himself with the working class and recognize the class struggle as the central fact of modern life.* Beyond that he was promised the freedom to choose his own subjects, deal with any characters, and work in any style he pleased. The Communist Party was seldom mentioned directly in

connection with this formula of conversion. Granville Hicks' book, *The Great Tradition*, was in effect nothing more than a historical argument for the realization of this formula by American literature, whose liberation from "confusion, superficiality, and despair" was predicted as the reward of compliance.

This formula, however, despite its deceptive simplicity, is actually a complicated political mechanism. Its abstract political meaning conceals multiple confusions that proved to be as beneficial to the fortunes of the Communist Party as they were pernicious in their consequences for literature. In the first place, it should be noted that this formula is empty of aesthetic principle and advocates no particular aesthetic direction; second, it establishes no defensible frontiers, so to speak, between art and politics—it merges them; third, it draws no distinctions between the politics of writing in a *generic and normative sense* and the politics of an individual writer in a particular historical period; and lastly, it fails to define in what way a writer's alliance with the working class is or is not an alliance with any particular political party of that class. Through this formula the writer was actually offered a contract of an unprecedented character, but all the specific stipulations were left to be written in after he had attached his signature to it. The principal mystification involved in this transaction consisted of the fact that while the writer thought he was allying himself with the working class, in reality he was surrendering his independence to the Communist Party, which for its own convenience had fused the concepts of party and class.

The Communist critics, sometimes deliberately and sometimes through ignorance, cultivated these mystifications, for it is with their aid that they succeeded in stuffing the creativity of the left into the sack of political orthodoxy. In their criticism, opinions as to the literary merit of a work of art were by no means ruled out, but the fundamental criteria concerned themselves with the author's loyalty to the working class and his interpretation of the class struggle. And it is exactly at that point, of course, that the literary critic resigned in favor of his party. Loyalty to the working class? Interpretation of the class struggle? What are these if not political matters, and who is better versed in political matters than the party under whose patronage proletarian literature was developing? No critic, regard-

less how learned in Marxism, could possibly presume to pit his own judgment against the party's political sway and reputed infallibility in the reading of the law and the prophets. To impugn the party's political authority meant to court excommunication. Thus it turned out that a novel or a play was certificated "revolutionary" only when its political ideas—existing or latent—corresponded to those of the party. And since the party had long ago awarded itself a monopoly of *correct* politics, the seemingly liberal formula that had enticed so many recruits was soon filled with a content altogether at variance with its manifest meaning. If not in origin then in function it became no more than an administrative tool, a political contrivance for imposing party views on critical and creative writing. What we were witnessing was a miniature version of the process which in Russia had resulted in the replacement of the dictatorship of the proletariat by the dictatorship of the Communist Party. Within the brief space of a few years the term "proletarian literature" was transformed into a euphemism for a Communist Party literature which tenaciously upheld a fanatical faith identifying the party with the working class, Stalinism with Marxism, and the Soviet Union with socialism. The "literary movement" droned these beliefs into its members with the result that instead of revolutionary writing—which may mean a thousand and one things depending upon time, place, and individual bias—an internationally uniform literature was created whose main service was the carrying out of party assignments. For strategic purposes, of course, the official spokesmen found it advisable to conceal their essentially factional inspiration and narrow standards under a variety of pseudonyms designed to give the appearance of flexibility, objectivity, freedom from control, etc. However (and I think I can allow myself the dogmatism of saying this), unless we understand the relation of these pseudonyms to their referents we can learn very little about left writing in America, or, for that matter, in any other country.

It is essential to understand the difference between the literature of a class and the literature of a party. Whereas the literature of a class represents an enormous diversity of levels, groupings, and interests, the literature of a party is in its very nature limited by utilitarian objectives. It cannot properly be called literature, for it tends to become a vehicle for the

dissemination of special policies and views; a party is too small a unit of social life to serve as the base for the formation of a spiritual and artistic superstructure. Expressing the historic being and consciousness of an entire sector of society, the literature of a class accumulates organic traditions and norms. Confident of its past and frequently of its future as well, it permits a free exchange and conflict of feelings and ideas. A true class literature constantly strives and partially succeeds in overcoming and transcending its given social limitations; its aim is the all-human pattern and image, though this aim may be frustrated by historical needs of the opposite character. A party, however, being merely the political instrument of a class and usually of only one or several groupings in that class, must necessarily reproduce itself in literature in all its narrowness and rigidity.

But there are classes and classes, as there are parties and parties. Not all classes are capable of producing an art and literature of their own. The conception of a proletarian literature relies for its defense on abstract and formal analogies between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Literature is the outgrowth of a whole culture, one of its inseparable parts and manifestations. A class which has no culture of its own can have no literature either. Now in all class societies it is the ruling class alone which possesses both the material means and the self-consciousness—independent, firmly rooted, and elaborated—that are the prerequisites of cultural creation. As an oppressed class, the proletariat, in so far as it is a cultural consumer, lives on the leavings of the bourgeoisie. It has neither the means nor the consciousness necessary for cultural self-differentiation. Its conditions of existence allow it to produce certain limited and minor cultural forms, such as urban folklore, language variations, etc.; but it is powerless to intervene in science, philosophy, art, and literature. Neither is it admissible, for the purpose of proving the possibility of a proletarian culture, to compare the proletariat of today to the bourgeoisie of yesterday, when the latter was itself oppressed. While the oppression of the bourgeoisie by the feudal regime was chiefly political, the modern property relations dominate the proletariat in a *total* fashion. Because it was already an owning class, disposing of considerable wealth and leisure, the third estate could begin creating cultural values even before its political emancipation. The prole-

tariat, on the other hand, before it can achieve the freedom that participation in culture requires, must first institute changes in society which include its own abolition. And if that historic task is ever accomplished, it will not be the proletariat—which will then no longer exist—but a classless and stateless humanity that will shape the new culture in its own image.

Virtually all the theorists of proletarian culture are fetishists of ideology, which they naïvely equate with and substitute for culture. And since they believe that in Marxism the proletariat possesses a distinct and separate ideology of its own, they conclude that all that is lacking for the creation of an art and literature of the working class is a plan and the will to carry it into effect. But the truth is that Marxism is not an ideology of the working class—it is an ideology for the working class brought to it from without. "The history of all countries," Lenin wrote in *What Is To Be Done?*, "bears witness that the working class is capable of developing only a trade-unionist consciousness. . . . that is, the conviction of the necessity of joining together in unions, of conducting a struggle against the employer, of demanding from the government this or that legislative measure in the interests of the workers, etc. The socialist doctrine (Marxism), however, has proceeded from the philosophical, historical, and economic theories which originated with educated representatives of the owning classes, the intellectuals." Now inasmuch as proletarian literature, by the innumerable definitions\* of it given by its own theorists, is nothing more than the socialist doctrine transferred to the creative sphere, it follows that it is a literature produced outside the proletariat and brought to it from without. But it is impossible to conceive of a literature issuing fullblown from a doctrine—it must also have some kind of concrete political basis. That political basis is none other than the Communist Party, which conceives of itself as the guardian of the socialist doctrine and its organizational embodiment.

\*In his *The Novel and the People*, the British Communist critic, Ralph Fox, states that "Marxism gives to the creative artist the key to reality. . . ." "He [the proletarian writer] will be unable to make his picture a true one unless he is truly a Marxist, a dialectician with a finished philosophical outlook." The Soviet Russian, Sergey Dinamov, speaks of the writer's "Party and class evaluation of life." The German, Otto Biha, contends that the "proletarian writer can view the world only from a consistent Marxian standpoint. . . ." The American, Edwin Seaver, defines the proletarian novel by its "acceptance and use of the Marxian interpretation"; another American, Edwin Berry Burgum, defines it similarly, as "a novel written under the influence of dialectic materialism from the point of view of the class-conscious proletariat."

This analysis is confirmed by an examination of the works which the official critics have accepted as proletarian. Whether we choose Soviet novels by orthodox authors like Gladkov, Fadeyev, and Sholokhov; or recent "militant" works by the Frenchmen Aragon and Malraux; or the revolutionary\* prose and verse of American writers like Robert Cantwell, Fielding Burke, Michael Gold, Clifford Odets, John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Jack Conroy, Ben Field, Isidor Schneider, Josephine Herbst, Kenneth Fearing, Muriel Rukeyser, Edwin Rolfe, etc.—in none of them shall we find an imagination or sensibility which is not of a piece with some variety—either plebeian or aristocratic but mostly the former—of the bourgeois creative mode. It is purely in a doctrinal-political fashion that these works differ from "the literature of another class." But even the doctrine, the one distinctive element in it, is not proletarian in any real sense; into literature as into the proletariat it is imported via a political party by "educated representatives of the owning classes" (Lenin)—the Marxist intellectuals.

It is clear that proletarian literature is the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class. This fact explains both the speed of its development and the speed of its disintegration. Its peculiar artificiality, the devious and volatile nature of its critical principles, its artistic chaos plus its political homogeneity and discipline, its uses as a cover for organizational activities—all these are explained by the periodic shifts and changes of the "party line." The growth of proletarian literature in this country between 1930 and 1935 is precisely coincident with the growth of the party during that period, when its policy was ultra-left and opposed to any united or people's fronts. At that time the party saw the revolution as an immediate possibility, and its literature was extreme in its leftism, aggressive, declamatory, prophetic. It was intolerant of all other schools of writing and proclaimed itself to be the sole heir of the literary creations of

\* Throughout this article, in conformity with the practice of the international Communist press, the terms "proletarian literature" and "revolutionary literature" are used as synonyms. That this usage is still current is shown by Joshua Kunitz's article, *In Defence of a Term*, in the *New Masses* (July 12, 1938). There have been attempts to define "proletarian literature" as writing by people of proletarian origin about the life of their class. This definition, however, is purely formal and politically neutral. Obviously, a writer, though of proletarian origin and proletarian in his subject matter, might at the same time be fascist in his political allegiance. As a matter of fact, there are such literary types in Nazi Germany. Hence Communist critics have always insisted that the "proletarianism" of a work should be defined in relation to its political outlook rather than by its author's choice of themes or class origin.

the ages. Its practitioners were persuaded by the party-critics to turn out sentimental idealizations of the worker-types they were describing in their stories and plays. These works, most of which were quite crude as literary art, presented a silly and distorted picture of America. Despite good revolutionary intentions, their political content was schematic. Instead of giving a realistic and individualized portrayal of social experience, their authors *inferred* its characteristics by speculative methods from the theses of the Comintern about the "world-situation"; and since the Comintern had declared at that time that the workers of all countries were ready to seize power and establish socialism, they endeavored to demonstrate that the Comintern was right by showing "reality" behaving according to its directives. The better writers, of course, such as Josephine Herbst, Grace Lumpkin, Robert Cantwell, and Kenneth Fearing, avoided these fantasies by sticking to what they knew. But proletarian literature as a whole, here and abroad, followed the party in predicting and celebrating the victory of the revolution in a period when it was actually losing every battle.

At present this literature is withering away because the party no longer needs it. Since 1935 the party has acquired respectability by reconstructing itself on a reformist and patriotic basis. Having abandoned its revolutionary position and allied itself with liberal capitalism, its cultural requirements are altogether different from what they were in the past. Everything within its orbit, including the proletarian literary movement, which separates it from other reformist and left-bourgeois tendencies in being done away with in order to expedite the "building of a democratic front." That the political party which fathered proletarian literature should now be devouring it is no cause for astonishment. A certain type of internal cannibalism—witness the Moscow trials—is intrinsic to its history and necessary for the fulfillment of its peculiar tasks.

The period of the proletarian mystification of American letters is now definitely over. To say this, however, is by no means equivalent to saying that in recent years the official Left has declined in size and in influence. On the contrary, there are more writers today extending active political support to the Communist Party than ever in the past. To read the long and diversified lists of names signed to some of the appeals or petitions is-

sued by the League of American Writers, an organization controlled by members and sympathizers of that party, is to realize that in such centers as New York, Chicago, and Hollywood a large sector of literary opinion is in substantial agreement with the policies of the American section of the Comintern. Nothing could be more naïve, however, than to equate the popularity of these policies among writers with the triumph of the proletarian literary program. The actual process is in the opposite direction.

The official left is now engaged in reestablishing that dichotomy between the writer as citizen and the writer as artist which it once decried as a source of bourgeois infection. It has discovered how to take advantage of a dualism between art and life that in the past it pretended to find intolerable. Why examine what a writer puts into his books when the real profit is derived from regulating his political conduct as an individual to conform with that of the Communist Party. The official Left is today primarily interested not in literature but in *authors*; from them it seeks to obtain public statements approving its political program on current issues—a favor which it is only too glad to reciprocate by guaranteeing to the works of the obliging literary men immunity from its “Marxist” criticism. (In the case of the more prominent literary personalities the rate of reciprocity is, of course, much higher. Eulogies, such as have been provided for a recent novel by Ernest Hemingway, are expected and delivered.) Thus the narrow, one-sided truism of Granville Hicks and his colleagues defining *art* as a weapon becomes in practice the many-sided opportunism of converting the *artist* into one. This takes the form of extracting from him surplus publicity-value by putting his public reputation to work in political testimonials which directly or indirectly refer back to the Communist Party or any of its agencies. Such political habits are in themselves sufficient to render insincere the attempt to introduce a radical content into literature, but in the present surreptitious abandonment of this attempt these habits are only of minor importance. If at present proletarian writing in this country is in the last stages of dissolution, it is largely because it is under political orders to commit suicide.

The experienced literary politicians who once acted as the apostles of proletarian literature would doubtless vehemently deny that they are in the midst of abolishing it. But that is exactly how their party code requires

them to behave. It is now no longer news, except to fanatical Stalinists and reactionaries bent on maintaining a red scare, that the Comintern has put away its revolutionary aims and embarked on national-reformist policies; and it is no friendlier to revolutionary ideas in the cultural than in the political sphere. Its literary adherents are, of course, lagging behind the "party line." A cultural lag is to be expected. All sorts of amusing inconsistencies and atavisms are to be observed in the pages of the Stalinist literary periodicals. In a purely academic way the small fry are still permitted to play with Marxist notions. The literary movement as a whole, however, is being quickly dissolved in the body of American writing. It is a long time since we have read a programmatic article on proletarian "aesthetics" in the *New Masses*, which has replaced its former standards of evaluation with the abstract categories of "progress" and "reaction." This year only one novel and two volumes of verse were published in America that follow in any appreciable degree the accepted patterns of the proletarian literary mode.

In fiction the themes of unemployment and union organization have persisted. Being objectively present in the material of the social-minded writer, they cannot be arbitrarily cast aside; and neither does the politics of reformism make such a casting aside necessary. The question relates entirely to the political treatment such themes receive. If once, in following the official perspective, the proletarian writer transformed his positive characters—who invariably were either unemployed or on strike—into revolutionaries performing some act that symbolized the overthrow of the system of private property, today he would have to resolve their problems by attaching them to some activity of the New Deal. The new Communist orthodoxy having decreed that peace, progress, and prosperity are possible under capitalism, the writer is unable to revolutionize his characters in any concrete sense without violating the precepts of the political faith of which, presumably, he is a loyal adherent. To be really logical, the unfortunate practitioner of the "party line" in fiction would have to substitute one of the President's fireside chats or a resolution for an immediate declaration of war on Japan for those visions of proletarian upheaval and the ultra-future of the classless society which nourished his inspiration in the past.

There are certain forms of demagoguery, however, which a medium as

palpable as fiction—unless it degenerates to the level of pulp propaganda—excludes by its very nature. Thus the media of art, if only by that fact alone, prove their superior humanity to the media of politics. The kind of casuistry which may easily pass for truth within the pseudo-context of a political speech or editorial, will be exposed in all its emptiness once it is injected into the real context of a living experience, such as the art of fiction strives to represent. The novel is the preëminent example of an experiential art; and to falsify the experiential terms in which it realizes itself is infinitely more difficult than to falsify abstract reasoning. Whereas politics summarizes social experience, the novel subjects it to an empiric analysis. Hence the test of the novel is more rigorous, less at the mercy of manipulation and rhetorical depravity. Proletarian fiction cannot *maintain its identity* while following its political leadership into an alliance with capitalist democracy. The only alternative for a school of writing that finds itself in such extraordinary straits is to abdicate. As citizens the members of that school are still moving within the orbit of their party, but what they write is increasingly becoming a matter that concerns no one but themselves—and the individual reader and critic, of course. The orientation towards capitalist democracy has deprived the proletarian writers of those political values which alone distinguished them from the nonproletarians. If historically American literature can be said to possess an ideology that generalizes it socially, it is none other than the ideology of capitalist democracy; and it is hardly necessary to develop a proletarian literature so that it may practice ideologically what American literature has been practicing virtually since its inception.

The other wings of cultural expression dominated by the Stalinist party are in a similar state of disintegration. That the revolutionary theater is dead no one doubts. As for Marxist criticism, it finds itself with less and less work on its hands. All that the Marxist critics can do is write conventional pieces with a slight social edge or else compose political polemics against the “counter-revolutionary fascist-aiding Trotskyites.” These trenchant compositions, however, have as little in common with an analysis of art or letters as Trotskyism has with fascism. It is the absence of enemies, of course, which determines this Marxist idleness. If your critical sphere is American writing—in which there are as yet very few traces of

fascism—and you have accepted the notion that your only real enemies are the fascists and that with everyone else it is necessary to coöperate, then to all intents and purposes your function as a Marxist critic has been abolished. What is left, of course, is the party-task of misrepresenting and assaulting the work of those left writers who have repudiated Russian “socialism” and the Comintern. Michael Gold, for instance, has recently arraigned John Dos Passos before the bar of “progress” and convicted him of writing nothing but *merde*.\* But such critical activities are exercises in the art of abuse rather than in the art of criticism.

In the last chapter of *The Great Tradition*, revised in 1935, Granville Hicks wrote that “if revolutionary writers should become convinced, on adequate or inadequate grounds, that capitalism could survive, that revolution is unnecessary or impossible, they would cease to be revolutionary writers.” Given the political milieu in which Mr. Hicks works, it was rash of him to commit himself to so definite a formula, which has the virtue of proving the statement that revolutionary literature, at least as Mr. Hicks conceived it in 1935, is no longer in existence. But it passed away without the benefit of any kind of convictions, either “on adequate or inadequate grounds,” on the part of Mr. Hicks’ “revolutionary writers.” An episode in the history of totalitarian communism, it will be remembered as a comedy of mistaken identities and the tragedy of a frustrated social impulse in contemporary letters.

\* In the *Daily Worker*, Feb. 28, 1938, Gold wrote: “On rereading his trilogy, one cannot help seeing how important the *merde* is in his psychology, and how, after a brief, futile effort, he has sunk back into it, as into a native element,” etc. etc. Hailed as late as 1936 as the foremost representative of the revolutionary novel in America, he is now condemned as a hater of humanity and a decadent. This “critical” revaluation is based, to be sure, not on a “rereading” of the trilogy as Gold pretends, but on the fact that since 1936 Dos Passos has emphatically expressed his disagreement with Stalinist policies in Spain and elsewhere.