1. Prologue

AMERICAN literature has been in the main a democratic literature closely allied to the shifts and changes of American society. For this reason, since socialism in various forms was continuously talked about and experimented with from the time our national literature began to emerge, one would expect to find it reflected in that literature. And so it was.

Most of the “literature” by socialists or about socialism has hardly been literature in the sense of having much artistic significance. This is true of nearly all the “literature” produced in religious socialist communities such as Ephrata and the settlements of the Rappites and Shakers; it is true also of the writings of John Humphrey Noyes of Oneida. Nor did such writings usually aspire to be art—their purpose was ordinarily either theological or propagandistic, and only very rarely were they intended to have literary quality.

For these reasons the writings of the religious communitarians will be neglected here. For similar reasons, the writings of the secular utopians—such as the American followers of Owen and Fourier—will also be passed over in this essay, even though they are often interesting and important as social documents.

I shall start instead with the great authors of our Golden Day, men who were vitally interested in social problems but nonetheless rejected the socialist answer. Thus it was with Emerson. Yet while Emerson refused to join the community at Brook Farm (he was seldom a “joiner”) there are many passages in his work which show how deeply he had pondered the social thinking of those who had ventured at West Roxbury—and whose venture finally led them to Fourierism. Thoreau, too, had thought deeply about social problems even though, philosophical anarchist that he was, he could not have been expected to applaud the efforts of his friends who talked of Fourier and Brisbane, of phalanxes and phalansteries. The measure of his resistance to their ideas can be seen in his remarkable review of J. A. Etzler’s The Paradise within the Reach of All Men, without Labor, by Powers of Nature and Machinery (the review was published in 1843). Thoreau had many reasons for being horrified by Etzler’s proposal for making an Eden of America by harnessing its power resources, but what dismayed him most was Etzler’s contention that this could be effected only through cooperation. The vision he conjured up of a vast cooperative society evoked one of the strongest expressions of Thoreau’s anarchistic individualism: “Nothing can be effected but by one man. He who wants help wants everything else. . . . We must first succeed alone, that we may enjoy our
success together. . . In this matter of reforming the world, we have little
faith in corporations; not thus was it first formed.“

Cooper’s rejection of socialism was motivated by his strong sense of
property and his notion of an educated elite, fitted by training and sense
of responsibility to govern the state. When in 1847 he created a kind of
utopia in his novel The Crater, he made it very plain that this fictive
society was not socialist during the period of its flourishing. Nor did
Melville, writing political allegory two years later, in his Mardi of 1849,
adopt socialism as the means by which his ideal state, Serenia, was
brought into being. Some of its features have a socialist cast, but
Melville makes it clear that “in all things, equality is not for all. Each
has his own. . . Such differences must be. But none starve outright,
while others feast. By the abounding, the needy are supplied. Yet not
from statute, but from dictates born half dormant in us, and warmed into
life by Alma [Christ].”

Not even from Hawthorne, among these pre-Civil War writers, do we
get any wholehearted acceptance of socialism. He had put his savings
into Brook Farm and lived there in 1841, but he soon found that com-
munal labor was not productive of creative thoughts and asked to be
released from his obligations. His Blithedale Romance (1852), though
he took pains in its preface to declare that the characters are fictitious,
is nevertheless a beautifully ironic study of his association with the
reformers at West Roxbury. In spite of his protestations of respect for the
“cultivated and philosophic minds” who took an interest in the enter-
prise, the novel illustrates Hawthorne’s conclusion that “no sanguine
man will long retain his sagacity if he live exclusively among reformers and
progressive people.”

Thus, while one finds that most of the leading American writers before
the Civil War thought and wrote, of necessity, about the socialism of
their time, their reaction to it was negative. It could hardly have been
otherwise in view of the fact that individualism and self-reliance were for
them the most admirable of human traits.

The literary situation between 1865 and 1910 is more involved and more
confused. The dominant strain in American writing was Idealism, and such
writers as Aldrich and Stedman who upheld the standard of the Ideal had
no truck with socialist ideas nor even with reform. Another group of
writers—Mark Twain is the most conspicuous example—found little to
criticize in the business practices of the day and were welcome guests
in the homes of tycoons like Carnegie and H. H. Rogers. At the same
time a few American writers of distinction had at last been converted
to socialism—of some kind—and became propagandists for it in their
work. Most notable of these are Edward Bellamy, W. D. Howells, and
Jack London.

Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888) enjoyed an enormous popularity.
Its ideas produced a nation-wide social movement (the Nationalist clubs)
and its influence reached Europe. Why it should have been so widely read
can be explained. For one thing its Marxism is so completely denatured
and Americanized as to be scarcely apparent. Moreover, Bellamy was a
liberal Christian and the strong ethical content of his book veiled its
economic radicalism. Howells’ conversion to socialism came late and was
the result of his gradual moving to the left, in which direction he was
impelled by his admiration for Tolstoy, the C. B. and Q. strike of 1888,
the Homestead strike of 1892, and the distress he felt at the time of the
trials of the anarchists for their alleged implication in the Haymarket
affair. Howells’ A Traveller from Altruria (1894) is a landmark in American
socialist writing but it is more interesting as a satire on American middle-
class standards than as a forward-looking program for social action
made palatable as fiction. The case of the third of these writers, Jack
London, is, as Huck Finn said of Pilgrim’s Progress, “interesting but
tough.” He boasted that he was a socialist and he gave generously to
the cause, but he got what socialism he had through personal contacts and
desultory reading, and his naturalism (with its ugly implications of Nordic
superiority) was always at war with it. Yet because of London’s
immense popularity, books in which his socialist bias is most evident—
The People of the Abyss (1906), The War of the Classes (1905), The
Iron Heel (1908), Revolution (1910)—probably did more to spread ideas
of socialism in this country than have the writings of any other American
author. And years after his death they were to enjoy an immense
popularity in Soviet Russia.

No discussion of socialism in American literature during the years
between 1865 and 1910 would be complete without mention of a fas-
cinating burst of utopian fiction in the eighties and nineties. A few
American utopian novels are to be found before this period but the
publication of about fifty such novels in those twenty years is a phenom-
enon of considerable significance. Allyn B. Forbes, who surveyed these
works (in Social Forces, December 1927), has noted several remarkable
facts about them. All of them conceive of society in economic terms and
many can be called socialist, yet none of them advocates the attain-
ment of the utopian goal by means of force. Strangely enough, too, the
terms socialism and communism do not appear in any of them. Aside from
Bellamy, Howells, and Ignatius Donnelly, their authors are so little
known as to be almost anonymous. It is significant, also, that very few
of them were issued by the large and respectable eastern publishing
houses. In a sense they constitute a kind of underground literature and
their influence is for that reason difficult to assess.

As we move into the twentieth century, we begin to find writers who
definitely allied themselves with the socialist movement and who speak with principles and platforms in mind. Outstanding among these is Upton Sinclair. A new pattern, typical of episodes in the careers of many leftist writers of the 1920's and 1930's, is seen in the circumstances of the composition of Sinclair's best-known novel, The Jungle (1906). He was on assignment from the socialist Appeal to Reason when he made his far-reaching investigation of conditions in the stockyards of Chicago and his goal was the writing of a serial for that magazine which would use fiction to arouse sympathy for the proletariat.

One stage more had to be reached. The socialist movement needed a literary magazine in which intellectuals who had been converted to the movement could appeal to their own kind and attempt, as best they could, to reach the working-class audience. This magazine came into existence in 1911 when Max Eastman and Piet Vlag formed the Masses (1911-1918). Associated with them were Floyd Dell and John Reed. Socialism at last had a journal to which writers could rally; one can say that there was at last a school of socialist writing in America.

This, in outline, is the course of American socialist literature for the hundred years before 1920, the date which is the starting point for the rest of this essay. There are two reasons why I have chosen to devote most of this chapter to certain careers and events of but two decades, 1920 to 1940. In the first place a filling out of the synopsis just given here of the years before 1920 would yield interesting but on the whole fairly negative results. That is to say, there were few American writers before 1920 who had so wholeheartedly committed themselves to some variety of socialism that they wrote with this commitment as their chief motive. My second reason for focusing so much of this chapter on two decades of American writing will require a few paragraphs of elaboration.

In the magnitude and brilliance of its accomplishment American writing from 1920 to 1940 can be compared only with one earlier period, the years between 1840 and 1860, when most of the major work of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville was produced. The writers of the second American Renaissance were sensitive to the materialistic blight of the Prosperity Decade and even more sensitive to the horrors of the years of depression which followed the stock-market crash of 1929. Even those who, like T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land (1922) and Ernest Hemingway in The Sun Also Rises (1926), seemed to reflect most despairingly the disillusionment of their generation were, it is now clear, moral writers for whom the loss of certainty and faith was the chief motivating force. It is true that many of them seemed to turn their backs on America and its problems when they took flight to London or Paris or the Riviera; but, as later events proved, they were not so much fleeing from an America in whose values, or lack of values, they could no longer believe, as searching for a new faith.

Other writers of the period—Theodore Dreiser, for example, in An American Tragedy (1925) and James T. Farrell in The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan (1934)—revivified the mode of naturalism and anatomized, more profoundly than such predecessors as Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris had done, the newest diseases of American life. Some, who swung in the orbit of H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, satirized without mercy the provincialism, religious sectarianism, caste snobbery, and smart business ethics of the American Babbitts and "patrioteers" who flourished under the rule of Harding and Coolidge.

Without doubt the most powerful of all the literary currents during these twenty years was the leftward movement of the novelists, poets, playwrights, and critics. In one way or another, for a longer or a shorter time, nearly every writer of the period was drawn to the movement even if only to rise up and denounce it. Some old socialists like Upton Sinclair were lifted on this great tide, along with Bohemians like Floyd Dell and Edna St. Vincent Millay, young radicals like Michael Gold, Joseph Freeman, and Isidor Schneider, academic writers like Robert Herrick and Robert Morris Lovett. What drew this diverse company leftward was the persecution of liberals and radicals alike under the notorious Attorney-General Palmer; disgust with the deep corruption of American life which the scandals of the Harding administration revealed; the frustration which all of them suffered at the time of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti; later on, the spectacle, in 1930, of a nation on the brink of ruin; then the fear of fascism and another "imperialist war."

But by far the strongest reason for the turn to the left which the writers made was the fact of the Russian Revolution and the consequent triumph of communism in the Soviet state. Before these events took place writers who believed in socialism could only hope for the time when it would be put into practice. Now the great day had arrived. Socialism was no longer a theory; for millions of people it had become a way of life. From 1919 until Trotsky was expelled from Russia in 1929, international communism was the bright dream. The Russian Revolution was only the beginning; the other revolutions would follow soon, and for America, the day was not far off. Those who believed in the Marxist gospel saw clearly the signs of disintegration as one congressional investigation after another laid bare the venality of American capitalism.

In the early twenties Lenin was revered by American radicals as a kind of Washington of his people, and Marx was studied religiously, but Trotsky was the best known of the communists. He embodied the vigor and eloquence of the ideal revolutionary and he was, as well, the articulate apostle, polemician, and historian of the Revolution. The hero worship
accorded Trotsky accounts for much of the early enthusiasm of the leftist writers in America and for the strength of the lost cause of which he became the center between 1929 and 1940, the year of his death. Trotsky's expulsion from Russia, consequent upon Stalin's capture of the Communist Party, split the writers on the left in every country, but nowhere more than in America. Of the scores of quarrels and issues which all along disturbed the leftist movement none was so devastating.

II. Problems of the Leftist Writers

For the leftist writer during these years there was a constant guide in what was called "the party line." One's orthodoxy was determined by the zeal and consistency with which one bent a novel or a play to this line. In times when the Communist Party was eager to have a legion of "fellow travelers" the party line was not much in evidence. When the cycle revolved, and orthodoxy rather than wide support was desired, writers were told firmly in the pages of the New Masses what was required of them in ideology and in technique. To ascertain precisely how the party line for America was determined in any given week, whether in the Kremlin or by the Comintern or by party headquarters in New York, would be beyond the detective prowess of any scholar. But the fact remains that often the first question asked about a writer in these years was how near or how far from the party line he stood at the moment. In their enthusiasm as converts, writers began, as converts do, with a brave show of orthodoxy. Some contrived, year in and year out, to follow the sinuous changes of party doctrine, political and aesthetic; others, and this was the usual case, fell from grace, suddenly or gradually. If a writer's lapse was notorious, there was a whole vocabulary of abuse available to those who wished to punish him. He would be told that he had become, overnight, a "Bohemian" or a petty bourgeois or a Trotskyite or a wrecker or a revisionist or a formalist or that he was guilty of sectarianism or leftism—whatever the words for heretic and heresy were at the moment.

Thus there was a constant coming and going, shifting and changing; there wereasseverations of zeal for the revolution followed by recantations; there were letters full of accusation or of a sweet reasonableness designed to bring the erring one back into the fold. Farthest from the lengthening, twisting line were writers like Hemingway and MacLeish though their political sympathies were at one particular time close enough to current orthodoxy to make them willing to publish in leftist magazines or cooperate in the Popular Front in Spain. Probably the interval during which the largest number of American writers were in some degree sympathetic with the Left was the year 1936. Early in that year Moscow officially recognized demonstrations in behalf of the Spanish

Loyalists and it sent military aid to them after the outbreak of war in July. A mere listing of the names of contributors to the New Masses between March 1936 and February 1937 will show how eager it was to include any degree of politically conscious writing. Among the poets are Genevieve Taggard, Marguerite Young, Kenneth Fearing, Rolfe Humphries, Archibald MacLeish, Edna Millay, Muriel Rukeyser, James Agee, Paul Engle, W. R. Benét, Horace Gregory, and Malcolm Brinnin. Among the novelists one finds Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst, and Edward Newhouse. The dramatists include Paul Peters, George Sklar, Albert Maltz, and John Howard Lawson. Of the journalists one notes also several who could not and certainly would not appear today in Masses & Mainstream, Herbert Agar, for instance, Joseph Freeman, and Vincent Sheean.

It is difficult to discover even a handful of writers who have followed the party line from the twenties down to the present time. To do so required an ideological and technical agility which only Marxist athletes like Michael Gold and Istodor Schneider have been able to maintain year after year. Schneider was contributing to the New Masses in the early thirties and is in mid-1951 an editor of Masses & Mainstream. Gold, who seems still to be in favor, was one of the original editors of the New Masses when it was founded in 1926.

The political hazards in this obstacle course have been many. The first, on which a number of stalwarts stumbled, was the expulsion of Trotsky from Russia. Those who left the cause when their hero fell continued to hope, with a lessening fervor, for revolution and a revolutionary literature, but they believed that in Russia Stalin had betrayed the revolution; there the cause was utterly lost. Among the writers who dropped away at this juncture Max Eastman was probably the most eminent.

The next great obstacle was the series of trials of the "Old Bolsheviks" which began in August 1936 and lasted on into 1938. Among the leaders then tried for a variety of crimes against the Soviet state were men who had become minor heroes to the leftist writers in America. The methods employed in the trials, particularly the mystifying (and suspect) confessions of the accused, disturbed Americans to whom this kind of undemocratic procedure in the courtroom was both strange and shocking.

A blow with even greater consequences was delivered by the Russo-German nonaggression pact of August 1939. From the beginning of Hitler's rise to power in Germany the Communist Party in America had forewarned of the consequences which would follow—an imperialistic war against Russia, in which the American Fascists might succeed in involving this country. Many writers had become fellow travelers at the
time of Russia’s intervention in the Spanish War, while the United States stood aloof watching German and Italian planes bomb into submission a people struggling to maintain a republican form of government. Then, only two years later, Russia reversed her policy and shook hands with the devil himself, Adolf Hitler. This incredible act could not be explained away. From this point on, American leftist writers began to realize how difficult, if not impossible, it was going to be to accommodate Stalinism to the individualistic and moralistic traditions of American democracy. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the Russo-German pact all but destroyed the literary front which the Communist Party had so carefully labored to build up in America.

During these politically difficult years there were, as well, difficult literary issues to argue about. “Incorrect” decisions in these matters were more easily atoned for than political deviations, but many a writer grew weary of the constant theorizing and broke away, to pursue his own course, guided by his own aesthetic. The primary question was what a Marxist analysis of literature might establish as the aims and duties of the writer. Some of the more individualistic spirits attempted to argue that Marx and Engels had said little about literature or art which could serve as a guide to communist aestheticians. They maintained, moreover, that Lenin and Trotsky did not require the regimentation of writers who wished to be revolutionaries. Such heretical talk became serious when Trotsky was branded as a traitor.

Even for those who took Marxism-Leninism as their constant guide in literary theory there were questions which needed intensive study. Must a writer also be a party worker? How “political” must he be? To what audience should the leftist writer in America attempt to appeal? Some replied that the workers alone were to be kept in mind by novelists and poets because the workers would in time accomplish the revolution and their education through art and literature was a matter of paramount importance. Others maintained that before the revolution could take place the petty bourgeoisie would have to be won over to the cause. Since most American leftist writers came from that class they would be, by nature, particularly averse to challenging it and winning it to the revolution.

A further question of great moment was whether the idea of the revolution should dominate a writer’s work. How much attention could one give to the individual, his private woes and domestic life, when eventually all individuals would have to submerge themselves in the revolutionary cause? Some believed that since the revolution had been accomplished in Russia, Russian writers could be permitted more freedom in their choice of subjects than their American colleagues. They were able to depict the glorious results of a revolution in fact, the changes it had wrought in men’s lives, the hopes it had aroused for an abundantly satisfying life. But in America life was still grim and the strategies required for bringing on the revolutionary situation must be ever in the minds of those whose writing served as guide and consolation to the proletariat.2

Critics and literary historians in the leftward movement were eager to rewrite the history of American literature. They wanted to claim for their cause Tom Paine and Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Howells, Bellamy, Jack London, and Dreiser. No one was more zealous in this reassessment than Granville Hicks, whose The Great Tradition: an Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War (1933; rev. ed., 1935) was the most successful effort to provide a Marxist analysis of our literary heritage. Beside it one can put Bernard Smith’s Forces in American Criticism (1939). By the time V. F. Calverton published his Liberation of American Literature (1932) he had lost his standing as an orthodox Marxist though he still maintained that his particular heresy was the true Marxist approach to literature and society.3 This effort to bring the liberal and radical writers of the American past into the Marxist camp still goes on. Samuel Sillen, editor of Masses & Mainstream, has, for example, in two recent books, acclaimed Bryant and Whitman as men who carried forward the revolutionary tradition.4

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1 Of the scores of attempts to develop a Marxist aesthetic one of the most thorough was Philip Rahv’s “The Literary Class War,” in the New Masses for August 1932. Rahv has long since left the Stalinist camp, and the theories set forth in this article would be repugnant to him now. See below, p. 612ff., for a discussion of Rahv’s apostasy.

2 In this connection see an illuminating article by Charles Humboldt, “Communists in Novels,” Masses & Mainstream, 1 (June 1949), pp. 12-31, and n. (July 1949), pp. 44-65. From this article one gathers that at least until that time (1949) an ideal American communist had to be a tough fighter, able to stand alone without family or the too frequent consolations of sex, patient under discipline, a good representative of the working classes, tactful in dealing with potential supporters, tolerant with slower thinkers than himself. Errors of which writers depicting communists have been guilty are: passing off idealized labor leaders or anarcho-syndicalists as good party workers; failure to show how thoroughly a communist is tested in his activities; “glorification of free-wheeling will power” (Richard Wright’s Native Son); conjuring up a “super-revolutionary mystique of violence to frighten the bourgeoisie”; and displays of “individual opportunism and tastelessness.”

3 Early in 1933, Calverton was given a most thorough going-over, with this book as the initial point of attack, in a long article by David Ramsey and Alan Calmer (“The Marxism of V. F. Calverton,” New Masses, Jan. 1933, pp. 9-27). Calverton’s accumulated sins were many, chief among them being his adherence to Trotsky and to the American renegades from true communism, Lovestone. It is interesting to note that as late as 1929-1930 Calverton was a contributor to the New Masses and that his books were favorably reviewed there during those years.

4 Walt Whitman: Poet of American Democracy (New York, 1944), and William Cullen Bryant (New York, 1945).
Of all the literary issues we have been discussing, none has been more disputed than the degree of freedom to be accorded the writer in the selection and treatment of his materials. In times of greatest party leniency the writer was told that it was enough if he exposed the evils of a decadent capitalist society and showed that there was at least a little revolutionary idealism fermenting in the hearts of the workers and the intelligentsia. When the turn came and discipline was again to be enforced, the prescriptions became very specific indeed. The issue was always a touchy one, for even the most doctrinaire member of the Communist Party has been bound to maintain that artists in Russia are freer than artists anywhere else—because, of their own volition, they write as the needs of the Soviet state inspire them to write. This is why, presumably, Max Eastman's _Artists in Uniform_ (1934) has been so much reviled by Stalinists. In that work Eastman set out to show not only that orthodox Stalinist aesthetics were an absurd set of abstractions but also that in Soviet Russia excellent writers had been silenced, humiliated, driven to ridiculous recantations, and even to suicide. The title of the book became a slogan for those who believed, as Eastman by that time did, that a communized literature in any country would be a dismal failure.

### III. Four Typical Leftists

The tribulations of the leftist writer who attempted to stay close to the party line or who had to make the great decision to abandon it entirely are well illustrated in four typical careers, those of Max Eastman, Joseph Freeman, Philip Rahv, and Isidor Schneider.

Mr. Eastman from 1913 to 1917 was editor of the socialist _Masses_; today he is a “roving editor” of the _Reader's Digest_. The long and rambling route he traveled between these two extremes is the easiest of the four careers to follow because he has put his signature to at least thirty books. With John Reed and others Eastman founded the _Masses_ and endured the two trials—for opposition to World War I—to which the magazine was subjected. (The first ended in a jury disagreement; the second, in acquittal.) From 1918 to 1922 he edited the _Masses'_ successor, the _Liberator_. When the _New Masses_ was founded in 1926 his name was on the masthead as a contributing editor, yet his thinking and writing about Russia and Marxism were already leading him into the company of the recusants on whom the party has conferred, as one critic of Stalinism said, the “Order of Enemies of Mankind.” In 1925 Eastman published _Since Lenin Died_, a book which was both a defense of Trotsky, then in trouble with the central committee of the Communist Party, and an attack on the maneuvers of Stalin to secure the power of the state for himself. As time went on Eastman became more and more skeptical of present-day Marxism as a “science” (a serious heresy); he held that Lenin, the true empiricist, was actually in rebellion against Marxism. In the September 1933 issue of the _New Masses_ Joshua Kunitz read Eastman out of the company of revolutionary writers. “Max Eastman’s _Hot Unnecessary Tears_” presented him as typical of “the tired petty-bourgeois radical who stands bewildered amidst the deafening clashes of two opposing worlds.”

In book after book Eastman continued his crusade to vindicate Trotsky and vilify Stalin, but his position was not static. By the decade of the forties he began to look more like a champion of free enterprise than a “petty-bourgeois radical.” In _Russia and the Crisis in Socialism_ (1940), he asked socialists for answers to two questions: Is it not free enterprise under capitalism which has made our democratic freedom possible? and Is not a state bureaucracy in the classless society of a socialist state certain to exploit the working class “more efficiently than the private capitalist can”? The preservation of the status quo was now the first of all issues to the one-time editor of three magazines which looked forward to the coming revolution.

Joseph Freeman, one of the founders of the _New Masses_, has also been since 1939 inscribed among the “Enemies of Mankind.” Yet his _An American Testament_ (1936) seemed orthodox enough at the time it appeared. R. M. Lovett reviewed it with high praise in the _New Masses_ for October 27, 1936. It was also favorably noticed in the New York and the London _Daily Worker_. Whatever Stalinists have subsequently said about this work, it stands as a valuable record of how a young man of Russian background, growing up in New York in the days just before World War I, moved farther and farther to the left and became eventually one of the leading spokesmen for communism. No other autobiography we have gives so clear a picture of the bewildering shifts and changes

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6 The contortionist's skill required of critics on the far left is well illustrated by the varying treatments given John Steinbeck's _In Dubious Battle_ when it appeared in 1936 (he was then in favor) and in an article thirteen years later. Walter Battis's review of the _New Masses_ (Feb. 18, 1936) was wholly laudatory. Steinbeck's novel had been “properly hailed as an important addition to the American proletarian novel,” and John Chamberlain was wrong in querying whether the “organizers [in the novel] use the workers as 'just so much revolutionary clay.'” By 1949 _In Dubious Battle_ had become, in the view of Charles Hulmboldt (Masses & Mainstream, June, p. 18), a mere political travesty in which “the action staggers from incident to incident like a desperate comic strip.” Mac is no communist at all but an anarcho-syndicalist, an old “Wobbly” in disguise, and Jim's “revolutionary authority” has the “face of a storntrooper.”


7 Mr. Eastman's most succinct repudiation of his Marxist past will be found in his foreword to Benjamin Gitlow's _The Whole of Their Lives: Communism in America; a Personal History and Intimate Portrayal of Its Leaders_ (New York, 1948).
among the leftist writers from 1917 to 1927, at which point the narrative ends.

Schooled at Columbia, working for a time for capitalist newspapers, the young Freeman had one foot in Bohemia and the other in the revolutionary camp. He experienced, like many of his generation, the dualism which impelled a writer simultaneously toward Beauty (which meant pure art) and toward Justice (which meant the revolution). In Russia, which he visited in 1926-1927, enraptured with what he saw, Freeman learned how to resolve this dualism. There could hardly have been in 1933-1934, when he was writing An American Testament, a more devoted young American leftist, and so he continued to believe himself to be until 1939. In the August issue of the Communist International of that year there appeared a devastating attack on Freeman by P. Dengel in an article entitled “Book Reviewing Is a Serious Matter.” He began by reprimanding communist publications for the harm they had done to the cause in recommending books which “pretend to be pro-labor and even ‘revolutionary’ but which in reality contain more or less doses of disruptive poison in more or less concealed form.” The only such work which Dengel cites is An American Testament. Thus his article was in reality an attack on Freeman only. Freeman, so he says, had been conditioned by his association with Greenwich Village intellectuals and by the problems of his petty-bourgeois youth. Even in his years in Russia, furthermore, he showed himself to be an underhanded defender of the Trotskyites.

Evidently Dengel’s attack was the signal for the dropping of Freeman by the Stalinists. The New Masses continued to list him as a contributing editor until October 24, 1939, but no writing of his appeared in the magazine after July 18. At the time of the publication of his novel Never Call Retreat (1943) Samuel Sillen placed him beyond the pale among the renegades—Sillen, Koestler, Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, and Louis Fischer. Young writers once looked up to Freeman; now, wrote Sillen, he is saying to them in effect, “Citizens, I lied.” His novel is dominated by the image of the revolution turning against itself. In it one finds “another anti-Red Testament by an ex-Red.” Freeman’s latest novel, The Long Pursuit (1947), would indicate that he has put his radical past entirely behind him and closed it off. The book is concerned solely with the bickerings and lecheries of a group of U.S. performers on the European front during World War II.

Philip Rahv lingered for a much shorter time than Freeman close to the party line. At present, as one of the editors of Partisan Review (with which he has been associated since its founding in 1934) he is about as far from Communist Party orthodoxy as one can imagine. Eastman and Freeman continued, after their apostasies, to call themselves leftists but

Rahv is not so much above the battle as far removed from its heat and noise. In his recent collection of critical essays, Image and Idea (1949), there is scarcely a political opinion to be found.

“The Literary Class War,” Rahv’s “diploma piece” for the New Masses (August 1932) was a determined attempt to define the function of the Marxist critic and to demonstrate how Marxism might be applied to such traditional concepts of aestheticians as the Aristotelian doctrine of katharsis. With the expected zeal of a convert Rahv was very strict with deviationists and said sternly that the fellow traveler should, of course, be assimilated into the revolutionary movement if possible, but that if his bourgeois roots are too strong, “he should be neatly and rapidly dispatched on the road back.” This pronouncement was severely dealt with by A. B. Magil in the New Masses four months later. Comrade Rahv’s piece, he said, was a “weird compound of truth, half-truth and pure rubbish.” He had failed to recognize the importance of some of the experimental movements in the literature of the time, even though the Kharkov congress of revolutionary writers (held late in 1930) admitted their value. Furthermore, Comrade Rahv needed to be censored for being so rough with fellow travelers. But his greatest error was in making demands of leftist writers which not even the Communist Party in America imposed on its members.

Magil’s attack had little apparent effect on Rahv’s standing as a revolutionary writer. He continued to contribute to the New Masses and his Partisan Review was for a time sufficiently orthodox. The Review in its inception (1934) carried the legend “A Bi-monthly of Revolutionary Literature / Published by the John Reed Club of New York.” After its early issues it moved away from the extreme left, and it is significant that in the second stage of its evolution, beginning with the issue of February 1936, the designation “A Bi-monthly of Revolutionary Literature” was dropped from the masthead. Stage three begins in December 1937 after a period of suspended publication lasting from October 1936. A marked change in policy had taken place.

With a little knowledge of what had been going on behind the scenes, one can understand what caused this change. The editors, William Phillips and Philip Rahv, had grown increasingly restive under the “Communist attempt to set up a monopoly of radical ideas.” They deprecated the way in which the New Masses ignored the “difference between good and bad writing.” But it was the Moscow trials which finally convinced them that Stalinism was “not the agent but the enemy of democratic socialism.”

At the second congress of American writers (held in the summer of 1937) Rahv and Phillips, together with Fred Dupee, who had once been on the staff of the New Masses, announced their break with the policies of


9 December 1932. The title of Magil’s article is “Pity and Terror.”

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the Communist Party. In the session on criticism, aided by Mary McCarthy and Dwight Macdonald, they attacked the Stalinist domination of the group. The record of this attack, as reported in the official account of the congress, is so cryptic that it is no record at all: ‘The notes on the critics’ session indicated that none of the topics proposed for discussion was discussed, but that the time was consumed in an attack upon the congress by a small group of six which culminated in Dwight Macdonald’s remark that he was against the united front and ‘for Trotsky.’ These attacks were, of course, attacked, and the meeting seems to be typified by the answer of Mr. Hicks to Joseph Freeman’s question, ‘Can I say one word about criticism?’ ‘No, Joe,’ replied Mr. Hicks, ‘that’s one thing we can’t discuss.’”

To those in the know, therefore, the editorial statement in the first issue of the revived *Partisan Review* came as no surprise. It declared the magazine’s responsibility to the revolutionary movement in general, but disclaimed its obligation to any of the movement’s organized political expressions. The tendency of social writers in America to identify themselves with the Communist Party was deplored. The *Partisan Review* would henceforth be independent, for its editors had learned that the totalitarian trend in the leftist movement could not be combated from within. From this point on the magazine was open to contributors whom the Stalinists despised, and, after the departure of Dwight Macdonald from its councils in the summer of 1943, it retained scarcely any political content whatsoever.

As Rahv moved to the right he became increasingly disillusioned about the whole American literary tradition. *Image and Idea* shows that he can find little to praise among past or present American writers. He turns increasingly to European writers who have been able, as the Americans have not, to convert a wide range of experience into conscious thought. Whereas in the past the national life largely determined the nature of our literature (in which Rahv finds little that is good), international forces have now begun to exert a dominant and beneficent influence. Only by submission to them will American writers cure themselves of such sins as amateurishness, obscurity, irresponsibility, swollen rhetoric, and self-parody. Inevitably, Rahv compiled his *Discovery of Europe* (1937), an anthology of selections from the record left by various American writers who felt profoundly the experience of Europe. It is in Europe, he believes, that the background and quality of an American writer are tested as they are tested nowhere else; “going to Europe thus becomes a cogitative act, an act of re-discovery and re-possessing one’s heritage.” But there is, evidently, no need for these pilgrims to visit Mother Russia.

Most of the writers of any stature who moved to the left eventually committed some heresy and took themselves out of the movement, but Isidor Schneider, our fourth typical case, has stayed in favor with the Stalinists from the early thirties at least until mid-1951. It is instructive to study the career of such a faithful defender of the cause, a career probably unique in the annals of the literary movement on the left.

Schneider contributed, during the past sixteen years, almost 250 reviews, poems, lead articles, and special columns to the *New Masses* and *Masses & Mainstream*. As the handiest man among the magazine’s handymen he took on a wide variety of assignments: the telling off of such deserters from the cause as Edmund Wilson, Waldo Frank, Arthur Koestler, and Lewis Mumford; the reviewing of all kinds of literary works, from the reactionary to the avowedly party-line. He was always considered a learned man by his colleagues, and his reviews do indeed show an unusual degree of information and are markedly conscientious.

In surveying his career, one notices that—wisely, one supposes—he never indulged in the elaborate theorizing about the Marxist approach to literature which was so often fatal to leftist writers when the party line changed abruptly and they found themselves caught with dangerous heresies in their possession. Instead, Schneider propagated continuously for such general, and therefore safe, ideas as the decadence of modern capitalist literature, the demand that the leftist writer understand what is required of him, the wide opportunity offered the literary artist who embraces Marxism. Even when he felt called on, as a practicing novelist and poet, to praise older masters like Henry James, Schneider was careful to point out their errors and the waste of talents devoted to a dying society. It would seem that he has been happy in the movement and that he has suffered no doubts when political events here or in Russia demanded an about face. His recent novel, *The Judas Time* (1946), deals with American Marxists who fail to measure up to the discipline which is required of them: the unsure, the venal, the Judases who turn renegade and learn how to make a good living from the business of betrayal. In two critiques of this novel Charles Humboldt registered his regret that Schneider took a negative approach and did not depict even one communist with the virtues he would, by nature, possess. One can imagine that for Schneider security in the cause was surer just because he was not too positive and assertive. It was never possible for

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12 See particularly “The Cult of Experience in American Writing.”

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any of his fellows to accuse him of petty-bourgeois individualism or sectarianism or leftist. His errors were those of the most cautious of his colleagues and were quickly dropped and forgotten as soon as they were pointed out by the highest authority.14

IV. What Three Writers’ Congresses Reveal

The rapidity with which dogma could become error for the writer on the left may be realized by examining what was said and what went on in three writers’ congresses held in New York in the thirties. The first two were fully reported in books edited by Henry Hart: American Writers’ Congress (1935) and The Writer in a Changing World (1937). The completion of the second work differs markedly from that of the first.

The general tenor of the sessions in the first congress was the necessity for writers to ally themselves with the workers and to play their part in bringing on the revolution. Greetings were presented from revolutionary writers abroad. Louis Aragon described the peace of mind which had come to him in moving from dada to the Red Front. Matthew Josephson reported that Moscow had become an oasis of culture and that for Russian writers the “march of the social revolution in their country has been associated with the highest romance and a kind of modern heroism.” Moissaye J. Olgin presented a glowing account of the first all-Union congress of Soviet writers, inspired by Stalin and chaired by Gorky. He wished his speech to constitute a message to this first congress of American revolutionary writers from their comrades abroad. Earl Browder assured the members of the group, the majority of whom were not communists, that the Communist Party had no desire to control writers, to put them “in uniform.” “We are all soldiers,” he said at the conclusion of his speech, “each in our own place, in a common cause. Let our efforts be united in fraternal solidarity.”

Although some of the speakers, Malcolm Cowley for example, took care to point out that they were not, and probably never would be proletarian writers, and Dos Passos, in his piece on “The Writer as

14 In the Partisan Review for March 1938, Mr. Herbert Solow (who has been editor of Fortune since 1945) made a revealing study of the three congresses. The theme was “The New Masses.” The title of his study is “Minutiae of Left-Wing Literary History.” His figures show that the more articles one contributed and the more influence one exerted in the magazine the greater were his chances of becoming sooner or later one of the “Enemies of Man.” Of the 106 writers who contributed only one article during these two years only six were, in 1938, so branded. Of the ten who contributed five or more articles, three were later in disfavor. Of the six editors, two were in 1938 in outer darkness. The article is especially interesting in what it reveals about the shifting attitude of the New Masses toward such writers as Hemingway, Sandburg, MacLeish, Thomas Mann, and Gide, whose eminence the editors of the magazine respected and whom they wished to claim for the cause whenever it was possible to do so.
“question of socialism has neither been shelved nor abandoned.” Workers and farmers, liberals and progressives, communists, socialists, and all others must now unite in a “People’s Front against fascism and for the defense of democracy and culture.” Freeman’s words must have caught the sense of the meeting, for it is recorded that “the applause was overwhelming.”

The literary Popular Front had shown few premonitory signs of its imminent disintegration when the third American Writers’ Congress convened at the New School for Social Research, June 2-4, 1939. Babette Deutsch, Frances Winwar, and some others had resigned from the organization, “protesting communist domination,” but the roster of important figures in the literary world who sponsored or spoke at the congress was impressive. Dreiser, Hemingway, and Kenneth Burke contributed articles to the official program. Dr. Eduard Beneš, Thomas Mann, Louis Aragon, Leland Stowe, Langston Hughes, and Vincent Sheean appeared and spoke. According to the record, “the complete unity of the Congress on the question of democratic culture versus fascist reaction made it possible for the delegates to devote their principal efforts toward improving their creative work and widening their spheres of influence.”

This harmony was not to persist for long. Even as the congress was listening to exiled German writers speak of the terrors of the Nazi regime, negotiations were under way for the Russo-German pact, which was signed barely three months later. The Popular Front for writers could not survive this blow. Many members of the League of American Writers who had maintained, like Van Wyck Brooks, that Russia, despite errors, had made “a valiant effort to bring about a just social order,” now found themselves trapped. The communists, they saw, were running the League. There was nothing for them to do but resign. During the week in which the official record of the third congress, Fighting Words (1940), was published half a dozen members withdrew from the League’s executive board. There had been a series of resignations before this, including those of the honorary president Thomas Mann and four of the ten vice-presidents. When Malcolm Cowley reviewed Fighting Words for the New Republic (August 12, 1940) he took that occasion to make public his own letter of resignation from the League. Of the 800 members, 100, including a third or more of the elected officers, sent formal resignations and many others quit by the simple process of not paying their dues.

V. Evaluations

It has not been the concern of this chapter to survey the full extent of American leftist writing or to assess its achievement. The aim has been, rather, to show how writers were drawn into the leftward movement, especially in the years between 1920 and 1940, to see what the problems were which concerned them there, and what effect the constantly changing political situation had upon authors who were trying to be, in some sense of the word, “revolutionary.” But what has been said will present a distorted picture unless there is some evaluation of the contribution to American culture made by the thousands of novels, plays, poems, short stories, and critical articles, by the attacks and counter-attacks which constitute the record of this unique episode in American literary history.

In the first place it should be remembered that the movement was extensive and pervasive. It would be difficult indeed to name a writer who was not affected by it. Even a negative response did not mean indifference. Those who resisted and refused to be drawn in—Robert Frost and the Southern Agrarians, for example—spoke up against it in anger or dismay.

In noting the positive effects one should put first the documentary

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16 On June 6-8, 1941 (two weeks before Germany invaded Russia), a fourth congress—an Artists’ and Writers’ Congress—met in New York under the auspices of the League of American Writers, the American Artists’ Congress, and the United American Artists (C.I.O.). The names of the speakers (among them Alva Bessie, Samuel Sillen, and Representative Vito Marcantonio) indicate that the Popular Front no longer existed. The delegates passed a resolution against the European war as “a brutal, shameless struggle for the redvelion of empires—for profits, territories, markets.” By August the League had deserted this stand and was calling for the utmost aid for Great Britain and the Soviet Union. Only two of the speeches made at the congress were printed in the New Masses, though it had planned to present several of them. One can imagine that their tone would not have been in harmony with the new tune the magazine was required to sing after Hitler struck at Mother Russia.

17 See Robert Frost’s “Build Soil—a Political Pastoral,” and Lyle H. Lanier’s “A Critique of the Philosophy of Progress,” in I’ll Take My Stand (1930).
value of even the least considerable, artistically speaking, of the proletarian plays and novels of the thirties. In them one discovers social attitudes which were new among American writers. Occasionally, too, one stumbles on valuable accounts of segments of American society which no other writing has attempted to record. Some of the novels of this kind rise above the level of documentation and may survive as literature—such novels, for instance, as Michael Gold’s Jews without Money (1930), Grace Lumpkin’s To Make My Bread (1932), and Robert Cantwell’s The Land of Plenty (1934).

And the positive achievements at still higher levels of writing were not inconsiderable. If their authors had not at some time in their careers taken their stand on the left, we should not have had Steinbeck’s In Dubious Battle (1936) and The Grapes of Wrath (1940), Dos Passos’ USA (1937), Farrell’s Studs Lonigan (1938), Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), Odets’ Waiting for Lefty (1935), and Lillian Hellman’s Watch on the Rhine (1941). The “revolutionary” writing of the thirties was the matrix which shaped the early poetry of Kenneth Fearing and Muriel Rukeyser. One of Archibald MacLeish’s finest volumes of verse, Public Speech (1936), indicates in its title alone his desire to bring poetry to a wide audience and to make it, in his meaning of the word, “responsible.”

A few writers who came to repent them of their leftist literary sins have never recovered from the disillusionment and bitterness of that recantation. In their writing they persist in refighting old wars, and one often catches a tone of vindictiveness which betrays the fact that the break was not so clean and final as they supposed. On the other hand there are several writers—the names of Malcolm Cowley and Newton Arvin come readily to mind—who are able and wiser critics for having journeyed to the left and come home again. They have still a sense of the writer’s responsibilities to more than his art. They reject the new-modish belief that the artist in America is a pathetic alien in an irredeemably materialistic society. They do not indulge in any neo-Freudian nonsense about the morbid origins of artistic creation and the fruitful sickness of the artist.

To those who once used, without prostituting, their art in the cause of the miners of Harlan County, of Sacco and Vanzetti, of the Loyalists in Spain such perverse theories of the artistic process are of little moment—no matter how far from the party line they may have now decamped.

CHAPTER 14
Socialism and American Art
BY DONALD DREW EGBERT