PROLETARIAN FICTION IN THE UNITED STATES

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IT is a serious portent that so many writers, both in Europe and in America, have gone left. Whether they profess communism or some other form of economic salvation, their political radicalism is a significant indication of a changing social consciousness. Writers are no longer regarded as prophets, but they are still, in a true sense, the barometers of social thought. Is it not a symptom to make one pause that such an arch-cynic as Anatole France, witty apostle of futilitarianism and temperamental caprice in a world of anarchic flux, accepted in his old age the teachings of socialism as a way out? An increasing number of writers—André Gide, Ramon Fernandez, and André Malraux in France, John Middleton Murry and Bernard Shaw in England, Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley and V. F. Calverton in the United States—have embraced the truth that society must cast out the old devils of individualism, that it must be organized on a base of economic justice. That truth, it seems, is increasingly making headway.

At no time has the significance of social thought and vision been more strongly emphasized. This virtual obsession with social forces springs partly from an historical situation which has given rise to the perception that man is inextricably bound up with the greater social whole. This is not a new discovery by any means. It was formulated with challenging distinctness by Karl Marx, but he merely made explicit and central what was the common property of many thinkers before him. He formulated into a "law", a "science", what was until then a matter of conscience. The theory of economic determinism is now in the saddle and can no longer be ignored.

With the ascendancy of this theory, a marked change has taken place ideologically in the attitude of the writer towards his work and of the public towards the writer. The established values and verities of the past have been subjected to a severe critical scrutiny; many have gone by the board; many have been drastically revised. Certainly the romantic notions once held about genius and the creative life, about the mystery of art and the hallowed, indefinable nature of beauty—these generalizations have been thoroughly

"debunked." Critics have grown realistic in their approach; that is, they have begun to seek out concrete aspects of a work, they have tried to write with precision and restraint, they have endeavored to gauge the significance of a book in its social as well as aesthetic implications.

In response to the urgent ideological demand made upon them, the writers have fashioned a new synthesis, they have evolved a new conception of their rôle in society. Say what one will about the autonomy of art and the independence of the artist, it cannot be denied that he is in more senses than one the product of multiple influences, social, educational, psychological, economic and political, that are dominant in his age. These influences may operate consciously and directly or unconsciously and by indirection, but in the long run they do colour and shape the landscape of his vision. The more sensitive he is to surrounding impressions, the more closely will his material germinate from the soil of immanent experience; the more surely will he react to what has been loosely called the *Zeitgeist*. Hence the sudden and pronounced shift of writers from purely aesthetic problems—form *versus* content, the dilemma of the expatriate, the secret of style—to problems predominantly social, economic, and political in content.

This shift of interest and stress had important consequences. Gone was the cult of the lonely, introspective, and heroic individual, the type of character who is exquisitely sensitive to the nuances of sound and scent and colour, the brooding, misunderstood genius, ill at ease in a world that is hostile to his strange quest for beauty. Ended, too, in the field of fiction was the vogue of the touching tale of star-crossed love with its heart-rending complications, its tragic background and happy culmination. More and more the individual was portrayed not as alone but as an organic unit in a vast social organism which moulded his character and fate. Individual lineaments, quirks of temperament, peculiarities of mind and will and behaviour, these, of course, were still essential to realistic characterization, but they were properly subordinated to a creative presentation of the total environment which moves the mainsprings of character.

From this it was but a step to the creation of "proletarian literature." Many writers, blinded by the light of the new vision, came to look upon the working class as the salvation of the novel. Though they had grown class-conscious, most of these novelists were interested, at first, not so much in the ideology and ultimate triumph of the proletariat as in the character and psychology of the people engaged in the class struggle. They sympathized with

the poor, the millions hemmed round with spears and poverty, but they were not militant agitators or soapbox orators. What they were primarily concerned with as writers was neither Marxist economics—though they may have studied it—nor trade unionism. Fundamentally they were attracted to the workers as a class, their problems and hopes, their ideals and aspirations and way of life, because these seemed to offer a new and relatively unexplored field for literary development. By identifying themselves imaginatively with this class, they acquired an augmented sense of power, the conviction that they were fighting for justice in a righteous cause. Their creative faith was restored and intensified. Now they spoke, not for individuals, but for a class, in behalf of a classless, regenerated society. They thus gained a feeling of solidarity with the audience for which, presumably, they were writing. They touched reality at first hand. Their work mattered vitally since it shaped the very substance of life.

What an intoxicating evangel this was, after the miasmal despair of the twenties! Then the novelists—writers like Ernest Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson—had dwelt in a choking atmosphere of introspection and nihilistic confusion. Impotence had seized hold of them; the ground was sinking beneath their feet. When they had exhausted the realm of subjectivity, there was nothing left for them to say. They had no storehouse of belief, no commonly accepted stock of tradition to fall back upon. It was to escape from this pit of sterility into which individualism had plunged them, that writers hastily adopted a new social philosophy, and added a new dimension to the world of fiction.

This new element, no larger in the beginning than a cloud the size of a man's hand, swelled and spread until it covered the whole sky of contemporary thought. The belief that literature needed clarification was entirely too vague and all-inclusive to be useful as a functional formula. For the purpose of criticism it was transformed into a curiously different but more precise equation. Literature was economics or, differently expressed, since economic forces are the foundation of mental no less than physical existence, literature is conditioned by the material structure of society.

This is the economic interpretation of history boldly appropriated and applied to literature. Now, dialectical materialism may be cogently defended as a theory, but it does not stand the test as a critical method. It admits numerous contradictions which are the parent of confusion.

The conflict may best be stated as follows: the Marxist critics demand not only that writers, be they poets or novelists, provide

a solution for the ills and evils of society, but that the solution be a correct one, i. e., one in conformity with Marxist doctrine. The theory of ivory-tower isolation gives way to one of strenuous and selfless participation. The writer must do more than set down exquisite sensations; he must think out problems of social significance, he must be versed in economics and sociology, he must know the life of the working class, and finally, he must be ready to engage actively in the revolutionary movement. It was assumed that the social and political views of the writer are bound to affect profoundly the nature of his work. His beliefs will inevitably condition his delineation of people and the fate they suffer. This, it was argued, must follow logically, for the writer's mind is the stage on which the characters move and have their being.

II

At the present time, criticism suffers strikingly from confusion because it is divorced from any discipline of formal logic. Terminological exactitude, definition of terms, the reduction of every statement to its major premise, would make unnecessary many a critical controversy that is almost entirely a battle of sound and fury. The campaign waged by the proletarian critics can best be understood by calmly examining the fundamental issues on which it is based.

The leading tenets of their critical theory may be briefly summed up, though there can be little agreement in this matter, since the Marxist doctors disagree among themselves. Founded on the broad base of economic determinism, the demand for proletarian fiction implies, first of all, that the writer be a realist; secondly, that he concern himself with the problems peculiar to the working class—union organization, strikes, picketing, hunger marches, sabotage, political consciousness, class solidarity; thirdly, that he adopt the philosophy and faith of that class—a philosophy that is identical with Marxism, a faith that announces the eventual triumph of the proletariat.

Consider these streams of thought in order, and it will be seen that the first one is in no sense a separate and distinctive category. Stendal and Dostoyevski were psychological realists; Zola and Dreiser, Howells and Sinclair Lewis may be classified as social realists. Realism as a method is compatible with the delineation of any class. Now, what distinguishes the realist who simply strives for solidity and objectivity of delineation from the proletarian novelist who aims to arrange his material in such a way that the

ultimate triumph of the working class will be assured? To do what the proletarian novelist apparently aims to do—consistently to load the dice—is the very negation of realism. Logically executed, such a method makes for a falsification and distortion of material; it presupposes that the writer must behold his characters through doctrinal spectacles and shape his plot to fit within a prescribed ideological framework. In its extreme form it degenerates into propaganda—that is, politically conditioned art; art with a message that is no whit different from the moral tagged on to the old didactic novel; art which manipulates the infinite variety of human nature and circumstance in the interest of some special cause. The argument that the reconstruction of society is more important than literature does not, however, mean that literature must subserve and conform to socialism. Nor does the dialectic which portrays art as a superstructure signify that art is a direct derivative. While it is undeniable that the social philosophy of a writer will decisively influence the nature and atmosphere of his work, it does not follow that art must overtly preach the Revolution. The convictions of the writer, to be effectively communicated, must be implicit in the texture of the tale, they must find their objective embodiment in terms of action and characterization.

The novelist—to consider the second point—has an indisputable right in the democracy of letters to deal with strikes and lockouts, conflicts between employers and employees, the grievances of labor, the theme of an awakened and aspiring class, just as he has the right to deal with old wives and spinsters, neurasthenics, financiers, schoolmasters, and gallant adventurers. Furthermore, it is obvious that the treatment of such subjects will be largely affected by the initial political beliefs of the writer. In *Breadwinners*, John Hay produced a distinctively different kind of social novel from Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* or Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* or Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty*. Two assumptions, however, are tied up with the conception of proletarian fiction, which call for some analysis. First, it is assumed that since the laborers form the preponderant majority of the world's population and since the earth will ultimately belong to them, such a literature is bound to grow. This assumption is questionable for a number of reasons. To begin with, it is a mistake to define literature in the terms not only of a class but of the subsistence occupation of that class. Of course, the dialectic teaches that the means whereby a man earns his bread determines his consciousness, and so on, but literature cannot depend for nourishment on the dialectic. It existed before Marxism was born. The labor

situation forms but one sector of a large inclusive whole. To say that for the worker his job is paramount is true, but it is also a subtle distortion of the truth. It is equivalent to arguing that for every individual the proper action of his lungs and heart is essential and that these should therefore be his primary and exclusive interest in life.

The emphasis on class consciousness is deliberate. Its object is to make the worker realize that he is no more than a worker. Laborers are portrayed as being without capacity for love, crushed in the mire, brutally exploited, but with glimpses in moment of crisis of the emancipating truth that if they band together in the class war they will recover their dignity as human beings and achieve their full rights as men. What is left out of this picture is the relation of this class to other classes in the community; the relation of members of laboring class to others within the same class is not realistically presented. In the effort to have all effects converge towards some socially significant climax—the revolt of labor, the destruction of a factory, the uprising against oppression—the human and universal aspects of character are often neglected. Not only that, but the concentration on class consciousness, class conflicts, results in a schematic disposal of material. Black is counterposed against white, good against evil, boss against wage slave. Many of these proletarian novels conform to a prescribed pattern. There is an ideological uniformity about them, as if they were made to order. If, for example, the worker is distrustful of unionism, if he is eager to rise in the ranks, he is condemned as a traitor, as one infected with the bourgeois mania of success. It is conveniently forgotten that the individual in his daily struggle for bread is not concerned with the manifest destiny towards which the forces of history dialectically tend. He has not been subjected to the pressure-propaganda of labor organizers. His daily intellectual food is summed up in the sporting page of the tabloid and in the melodrama of silken sirens and wealthy racketeers shown on the screen. He is selfishly interested in getting his share of the sunshine and cake and wine of life; he is not class conscious. On the contrary, he resents, especially in the United States, the idea of a class struggle, since it is his greatest desire to rise out of his class. He craves a portion of property and wealth so that he may hold up his head in the community and gain some security and leisure for himself in old age. There is no sense in arguing with him that these desires are bound to be defeated, that the odds are heavily against him, that capitalism must inevitably perish and that he is the member of a historically chosen class. He hates communism be-

cause it represents a levelling process to which he is opposed; all his life he has been indoctrinated against it. Whether or not the ambition of the American worker to rise in the world be the stuff of illusion, the fact remains that he takes this ambition seriously, and the realistic writer, if he is faithful to his first principles, will have to report the truth aright.

As for the third category, the philosophy of the working class—that is a nebulous abstraction which is of small value to the critic. What exactly does it signify? The imminence of the social revolution, the inevitability of a collectivistic society? But the writer as writer has no stake in that consummation. His task is to observe the world about him, to assemble its various elements into some significant and emotionally convincing pattern. His object is to perceive and express and interpret, not to argue and reform. What Marxist critics apparently mean by a social philosophy is not a philosophy but a faith—a faith that will animate and suffuse the creative product. There can be no debate in the kingdom of desire. It is a moot question, however, whether such a faith is necessarily a fruitful one for the writer who embraces it. Whether it is or not can be determined in only one way—by the books proletarian novelists turn out. So far the literature of the left has brought forth but a few writers of commanding stature—a John Dos Passos, an Erskine Caldwell.

III

A number of significant novels have appeared that deal with the labor struggle. Not all are of equal value or vitality. But the need for solidarity on the cultural as well as political front has led to extravagant puffs of praise on the part of left-wing critics. The nature of the theme, the ordering of the material, above all, the obviously radical or revolutionary sympathies displayed—these, aside from the aesthetic merit of the novel, its communicative efficacy, have been hailed as singular triumphs. As a rule, the only negative criticism penned by the Marxists is concerned not with form or style or truth of presentation, but with the political orientation of the novel, its revolutionary implications, its economic orthodoxy or lack of it.

Novels like Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart*, Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread*, Rollin's *The Shadow Before*, Edward Newhouse's *You Can't Sleep Here*, Dahlberg's *From Flushing to Calvary*, and Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* have been lavishly decorated with panegyrics. While these works are promising, they are also crude, uneven in execution and power. They cannot for

a moment compare in sheer achievement and scope of canvas with a "bourgeois"—though liberal—writer's work like *The American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser. They cannot compare in talent and fidelity of observation with a work like *Union Square* or *The Foundry*, by Albert Halper, both of which have been severely attacked because the workers, it was alleged, were imbued with a middle-class mentality, and because the Marxist thesis was not sufficiently accentuated. What the Marxist critics want and praise is the kind of fiction provided with the best of intentions by a Grace Lumpkin, who pictures the Southern people of the hills dispossessed of their land and driven to the city factories where suffering and starvation, and experiences while on strike, fire them with a sense of class solidarity and make them militantly class conscious. Now while this is a moving indictment of the capitalistic system which drives people to the extremes of poverty and physical degradation, it is psychologically false because it invests illiterate workers with a political consciousness that they do not possess and could not so quickly acquire.

The Shadow Before, a powerful proletarian novel, strikes on occasion a note of authentic individuality. Yet even this novel suffers from the same defect that besets the general run of proletarian fiction: an exalted and persistent lyricism distorts and vitiates the organic integrity of the story. The author takes sides. It is not here a question of overt political propaganda or outright partisanship. Rollins is too much of an artist for that kind of crude blundering. His trespass is perhaps not intentional, and occurs in spite of himself, but it serves to destroy the honesty of his portraiture. The workers are invested with many noble virtues; they are loyal, self-sacrificing, heroic. The members of the propertied class and their paid henchmen are limned as a group apart—the enemy. They are greedy, vicious, unscrupulous. They are not only the victims of the lust for power and wealth; their humanity has been poisoned, their lives infected with a sense of waste and futility. Such a contrast is untrue to fact, and therefore aesthetically unconvincing. Had the owner and the manager been viewed through the hate-distorted, class-conscious eyes of the strikers, there might have been some justification for such passages. But the incidents of the wrecking of the strikers' building, the killing, the railroading to jail, the travesty of justice, the violence—these are important elements of the plot. Such incidents, no doubt, are possible, but in the context of the story they do not achieve aesthetic truth. The black-and-white arrangement is too obvious. Wish-fulfilment, the desire to intensify and simplify the class struggle,

have betrayed the author into unconsciously tampering with the self-contained flow of the narrative.

This forcing of the creative process has resulted in great harm. *The Shadow Before* is symptomatic of the plight in which a number of proletarian novelists find themselves. The insistence on hewing to the party line, on compelling novelists accustomed to different methods to manipulate their material according to orthodox Marxist patterns, effectually silenced some writers, drove others out of the ranks, while a few manfully strove to brew the broth of fiction according to the officially approved recipe. From the start, when John Dos Passos published *Manhattan Transfer* and *1919*, the aim of the proletarian novelists was confused. While John Dos Passos was impelled by revolutionary sympathies, his artistic instincts did not permit him to construct a tale that followed any formula. For the most part, he confined himself to describing the tragic waste, the futility, and nightmarish inner conflicts of bourgeois existence. He did not preach or rhapsodize about the worker. But his technique, which began from the work of James Joyce and the experimental school, was "arty" in the worst sense of the term. By no stretch of the imagination could the workers identify themselves with the proletarian characters he created.

The assumption that it is a revolutionary dialectical outlook which is the basic characteristic of proletarian fiction, is largely erroneous. It would change an art form into an instrument in the class struggle This is precisely what some extremists demand. At the American Writers' Congress, Edwin Seaver, novelist and critic, declared that it is "exactly this concern with political orientation, with economic interpretation, with a certain historical perspective, with the materialist dialectic that is the basic distinction of the proletarian novel." These, we are told, are the qualities which are "the collective responsibility of the proletarian novelist, and not the aesthetic problem, which is, and always was, an individual concern." This is confusion worse confounded. If the aesthetic problem is a personal problem, then art too is a personal problem. And yet Seaver will argue, and he is fairly representative of a whole school of thought, that in the last analysis "it is not style, not form, not plot, not even characters, not even the class portrayed that are fundamental in differentiating the proletarian form from the bourgeois novel." One is totally at a loss to understand what the distinction does involve. Is the materialist dialectic the basis distinction? But the political factor is not only an invariant, it is an incommensurable quality. It is implicit in the

work as a whole. It cannot be separated from form and plot and character and class, for it is through these alone that it achieves its effects and becomes a work of art. Were this not so, then *The Communist Manifesto* and Lenin's *State and Revolution* would be more important art products than the finest specimen of the proletarian novel. Surely a proletarian novel does not consist solely of isolated passages of exposition and argumentation, brilliant interpretations of Marxist doctrine. The secret of its power resides essentially in the marshaling of the material in accordance with the intentions and point of view of the author and with the requirements of the material employed. Only in this way, if at all, can the economic interpretation, the historical perspective, the Marxist imperative, be made manifest. But if that is so, we return to the aesthetic problem.

It is a confessed sign of weakness on the part of Marxist critics that in their preoccupation with ultimate aims and functional values they have overlooked the practical means by which these aims and values were to be realized. This is especially evident in their fanatical and fantastic pronouncements on the art of the novel. Granted that the novel is to be bottomed on the dialectical materialism of Marx and Lenin, the fundamental critical problem still remains: How is this to be achieved? What material and what methods will best secure the desired effect? What changes in form, style, and the communicative process in general will have to be made? Questions like these cannot be ignored. It is because they have been ignored that so much confusion, so much hair-splitting, so much futile debating and vain defining of words, so much waste of energy and effort have resulted. What proletarian writers badly need at present is the discipline and restraint imposed by a group of critics who, while agreed on political issues, will endeavor to formulate specific canons of value. Let them do for proletarian literature, if they can, what I. A. Richards has done for poetry. It would be well if they paid heed to the advice and contribution of critics like Kenneth Burke and John Chamberlain and Max Eastman and Joseph Wood Krutch who, regardless of party affiliations, insist on definition, on examining the content of vague emotional terms and on building up valid critical armory. Once the ideological soil is prepared, once writers as well as critics are agreed not only on what should be done but within reason on how it should be done, proletarian literature, if it is destined to live, will gain a new lease of life. It will cease fulminating, prophesying, and attacking. It will get down to work. It will gain in confidence and in clarity of purpose. It will then be perceived that it is not

the class loyalties nor a Marxist background of a writer which can equip him for the difficult task of writing; he must possess the indispensable talent, command of his material, technical mastery. The writer is primarily a craftsman.

The proletarian writer, it is urged, benefits in many ways by his association with the revolutionary movement. He can see the world from consistently and coherently. His work is shaped by a unifying principle. He has found—or thinks he has found—an answer for many of the puzzling questions of life—war, injustice, failure, poverty, greed, cruelty, the exploitation of man by man. He feels, too, that he is serving a righteous cause, and this fills him with zeal, with the conviction, so stimulating to the creative mind, that his work counts, that he is addressing the tribunal of the future in behalf of humanity. He believes that ultimately the proletariat will achieve their goal.

But the advantages of being a part of this movement are, for the artist, outweighed by many decided drawbacks. One must obey party discipline. One must develop into a propagandist with a rigid doctrine, a fixed formula, at the expense of originality, freedom of thought, aesthetic values and aesthetic truth. Proletarian fiction will come into its own when it will break away from the taboos and inhibitions of Marxism. Creative passion transcends doctrinaire barriers. The lives of men and women are far more complex than dialectical materialism would make them out to be.