The Proletarian Novel In America

1900 - 1940

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Preface

In this thesis I have tried to give what I think is an accurate picture of the proletarian novel. I have tried to trace the origins, motives and developments of this form in the years from 1900 to 1940. It has been necessary for me to consult a great deal of secondary source material in order to trace down material on novels which are either no longer published or inaccessible to me.

I do not claim to have considered all of the novels written within the forty-year period that this thesis covers, for I believe that many books thought to be "radical literature" do not fall under my definition of proletarian literature. I have used some of the non-proletarian novels as examples of the development of the proletarian form of novel.

In certain cases I have discussed matters that do not lie entirely within my forty-year boundary, but I have tried to restrict this overlapping to matters of the utmost importance.

What is the importance of this topic when the attempt to form a "proletarian literature" was a failure in America? I believe that in the future we may see a revival of this form. Certainly that the attempt failed once does not mean that another attempt will necessarily fail.

Furthermore, I believe that this movement affected American literature in many ways which are not immediately noticeable.

Why have I chosen the novel and excluded the other forms of potentially didactic literature? Here the answer is a rather simple one. I had to limit my consideration somewhere, and so I chose what I considered the most important medium of Socialist and Communist literature. Curiously enough, the Marxist critics seemed to concur with me in my belief that the novel was the most important form, for they repeatedly placed greater stress on the novel than on any other form of art.

My reason for cutting off this consideration at 1940 is also quite simple. In the Thirties there was a strong resurgence of this form of novel; but in the closing years of this decade there occurred a slackening off, and by 1940 most of the American leftists, fellow-travelers, and Socialists had broken with Russia. One reason for this break was the discovery that the Communists were more interested in practical politics than they were in ethics. In the years that followed, there was really only one American writer of note who still followed the Communist ideology openly. This man was Howard Fast, and his novels, which feature a slanted historical method, are a departure from the proletarian form.

Marx Migrates To America

WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE. These words were to usher into the world a universal form of government, a government which would replace the existing systems of Democracy and Fascism. Karl Marx's revolution was to entail more than a mere political system of control; it was to be a way of life, and as such would reach into all phases of life. Certainly the Marxian Socialist movement did have a startling influence on literature. In fact, there was a type of literary revolution whose consequences are still with us today.

Years after Marx had passed away, it was claimed that he had had definite ideas about the uses of art, and especially literature, in his plans to transform the world. This has been proven to be a common misconception, or deliberate oversight, by the "propagandists of the revolution." Marx and Friedrich Engels often argued against the use of political theories as a means of literary critical analysis. Edmund Wilson points this out in The Triple Thinkers:

> With both Marx and Engels there is not yet any tendency to specialize art as a "weapon." They were both too much under the influence of the many-sided man of the Renaissance, of the complete man.[1]

Nikolai Lenin presented another point of view for consideration. He was more practical as a propagandist and argued that certain uses of literature would help "the cause."

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[1] Edmund Wilson, The Triple Thinkers, New York: Oxford University Press, 1948, p. 199.

Lenin realized that they had to reach the masses of the proletariat for their doctrines to achieve success, and with this idea in mind he proposed the use of a didactic type of literature which would embody Socialistic theories as an integral part of the work.

> "The socialist proletariat" - Lenin wrote in 1905 - "must establish the principle of party literature; it must develop this literature and realize it in actual life in the clearest and most concrete form...Literature must become a part of the general proletarian movement."[2]

Leon Trotsky took a vacillating position on this question by arguing that a Socialist literature would come, but that it would rise with its roots in the "literature produced during the domination of the bourgeoisie."[3] Considering that the leading Socialist thinkers were undecided about the future use of literature, is it any wonder that American Socialists were also perturbed about the future of American "protest literature"?

The Communist Manifesto, written for the International Communist League, brought the ideas of Marx and his followers to the world's attention in 1848.[4] Still it took until the 1890's for The Manifesto to be interpreted and translated for American publication; however, the first all-English translation had appeared in the United States in 1872.[5] It is signi-

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[2] Proletarian Literature in the United States, New York: International Publishers, 1935, p. 362.

[3] Wilson, The Triple Thinkers, p. 203

[4] Edmund Wilson, To the Finland Station, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940, p. 157.

[5] Walter B. Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, pp. 6-8.

ficant that the Socialist Labor Party was founded in America in 1877, long before most of the American Socialists had actually read Marx's works.

Ten years later, the most important American Socialist book before the 1900's, Looking Backward, appeared. Written by Edward Bellamy, this utopian romance tells the story of Julian West, " time traveler." West goes to sleep in 1887 and awakes to find himself in the year 2000. His world has completely changed, and all around him he finds the signs of an era of progress caused by socialism, which has swept away the evils of capitalism. Considered by many as one of the most influential books on social reform ever to be written in America, this novel helped to convert many intellectuals to socialism.

Despite Bellamy's romance and such early efforts as Amanda Douglas' Hope Mills (1880), H.F.Keenan's The Money Makers (1885), and Ignatius Donnelly's futuristic Caesar's Column (1890), the output of Marxist-motivated novels was poor, and as late as 1902 there were complaints about the lack of Marxist literature. Of course it should be noted that Hope Mills, The Money Makers, and Caesar's Column fall more into the category of nineteenth-century social-protest novels than into the classification of socialist literature.[6]

The Comrade, a new radical monthly, made its first appearance in 1901. This magazine pledged itself to the following promises:

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[6] Rideout, pp. 8 - 12.

> The Comrade will endeavor to mirror Socialist thought as it finds expression in Art and Literature. Its function will be to develop the aesthetic impulse in the Socialist movement, to utilize the talent we already have, and to quicken into being the aspirations that are latent.[7]

While this magazine's influence and circulation were far from staggering, The Comrade was important, for it indicated the trend of Socialist literature and criticism in the future.

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[7] Proletarian Literature, p. 24.

The Proletarian and Socialist Trends in Twentieth Century Literature

It is important to keep in mind that there have been two definite and distinct trends in radical literature during the Twentieth century. The Socialist critics led the way in radical intellectual circles in the United States until the 1930's when the Communist influence became dominant. As Walter Rideout points out, the wave of Communist criticism tried consciously to cut itself off from its predecessors, but both movements had one thing in common -- they were each attempting to give a Marxist view of society in their writing.[8]

In 1929 the shift from Socialistic to Communistic criticism became more noticeable with the development of the John Reed Clubs. These clubs announced that they were attempting to "clarify the principles and purposes of revolutionary art and literature, to propagate them, to practice them."[9] The New Masses magazine, which had been relatively inactive in the thirties, was re-vitalized and led a search for proletarian literature. Perhaps the clearest sign of the changing trend was the critics' repudiation of Upton Sinclair's writing by condemning him for the "unimaginative application of Socialist dogmas."[10]

It has been remarked that one of the great differences between proletarian and Socialist literature was the attitude

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8 Rideout, pp. 2,3.

9 Ibid. , p. 144.

10 Proletarian Literature, p. 357.

of the writers toward reform. The Socialist writers argued for the reform of the American system. This was one reason why they fit in so well with the muckraking movement. On the other hand, the Communist-motivated, "proletarian" writers argued that the American system could not be reformed but had to be destroyed. The means by which the destruction would come was relatively undecided, as some argued for revolution or violent overthrow of the government, while others said that the capitalist system would destroy itself.

This second movement was infused with a spirit of optimism. The Sacco-Vanzetti case in 1927 had brought over many American liberals to the Communist side, and the depression of 1929-9 seemed to be a confirmation of the weakness of the capitalist system. By 1931 V. F. Calverton was writing:

> The decay of the old spirit of the Twenties is present on every side, and the early signs of a new era are to be seen in various forms and along many fronts.[11]

Nor was this spirit of optimism diminished for several years. Calverton went on making predictions:

> a proletarian ideology has begun to grow in America...In time it will succeed the petty bourgeoisie in political and economic importance, and carve a new destiny for itself -- and the nation.[12]

The second, Communistic, trend in American radical literature had another distinction from the older Socialist

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[11] V. F. Calverton, American Literature at the Crossroads, Seattle: University of Washington Book Store; 1931, p. 9.

[12] V. F. Calverton, The Liberation of American Literature, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932, p. 375.

movement, manifested in the closeness between the American movement and the Russian. In the magazines and essays of the proletarian writers there are constant references to the literary developments in Russia. At the American Writers' Congress held in April, 1935, Earl Browder, Secretary of the Communist Party, told how the Communists had given their financial aid to the New Masses because the party felt that the New Masses was fulfilling its role as an organ of the party.[13] At this same Congress, another speaker said:

> The experience of the Soviet writers is for all true writers a fundamental experience for the literature of tomorrow...Our comrades in the Soviet Union have defined its method - socialist realism. Why should we hesitate to work with this new weapon?[14]

It is interesting to note how closely, at times, the American Communists aped the directives delivered from the official Russian literary Conference in May, 1924. Soon after this Conference came out in favor of literary competition and argued that "Such a thing as neutral art in a class society does not and cannot exist,"[15] the American Communists began to argue that "the class concept of literature antedates Stalin, Lenin, and even Marx."[16] The Communist writers also criticized the New Masses and the I.W.W. for their endorsement of novels for political reasons alone.[17]

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[13] Henry Hart, editor, American Writer's Congress, New York: International Publishers, 1935, p. 13.

[14] Ibid., p. 36.

[15] J. Freeman, J. Kunitz, L. Lozowick, Voices of October, New York: The World Publishing Company, 1946, p. 33.

[16] Proletarian Literature, p. 21.

[17] Calverton, Liberation, p. 458.

On the surface, the question of what exactly is a proletarian novel would seem to be a simple one to answer, and yet it is surprising how complex this question really is. It certainly must have seemed complex to the Socialist and Leftist critics who were constantly fighting over the form that the radical Socialist novel was to take, and the Communist critics also had a difficult time with their definitions. In fact, this was one reason why, despite the optimism of this movement, as late as 1932 a critic was able to write in the New Masses that the radical literary movement "in this country is at present very weak."[18] Before attempting to offer a definition, it will be valuable to investigate some of the radical critics' definitions.

In 1919 Floyd Dell, in the Masses, gave an excellent definition of what the proletarian novel was striving to accomplish. He said that these new stories should give the worker the courage and confidence necessary to scorn the ideals of the capitalist society in which he found himself. Dell also stressed the idea that these novels should help the proletarian to see his community with his fellow workers and to face the future with courage.[19]

Walter Rideout contends that Michael Gold's article "Toward Proletarian Art," which appeared in The Liberator in 1921, was the first attempt to formulate a definition of the

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[18] Rideout, p. 170.

[19] Hart, American Writer's Congress, p. 55.

term "proletarian literature." In this article, Gold argued that the writers had maintained an attitude of contempt for the masses and this feeling had rendered them "spiritually sterile." He said the new group of writers that were just developing would learn of life from the masses, and he argued that

> the revolution, in its secular manifestations of strike, boycott, mass-meeting, imprisonment, sacrifice, agitation, martyrdom, organization, is thereby worthy of the religious devotion of the artist.[20]

In 1930, Gold enumerated the characteristics of proletarian literature in his article "Proletarian Realism." Here he stated that the novel should deal with working-class characters, describe precisely the natural and technical skill of their work, embody a social theme, be filled with revolutionary "elan," and use unadorned language.[21]

At this point, it might be valuable to make note of the directive issued by a group of Soviet writers in the 1920's. This group, which called itself the Smithy, stated:

> Art is the medium of its class. Proletarian art is art which covers the triple surface of creative material of the working class in a clear, concise and synthetic form, which conveys the line of struggle for the final aims of the proletariat.[22]

In February, 1933, Granville Hicks, an outstanding "leftist critic," listed his considerations of the proletarian

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[20] Rideout, pp. 123-128.

[21] Ibid., p. 153.

[22] Freeman, p. 33

novel on the page of the New Masses. Hicks stated that the purpose of this form of novel was "to lead the proletarian reader to recognize his role in the class struggle." His ideas on the form and content of the novel were as follows: it should show the effects of the class struggle, have as its point of view "that of the vanguard of the proletariat." The reader should get a feeling of participation in the lives being described, and the author should be, or try to make himself, a member of the working class.[23]

One of the least exacting definitions of this form, a definition to which Waldo Frank subscribed, came from V. F. Calverton. Calverton wrote that the author did not have to be a member of the proletariat so long as he had adopted their ideology and reflected this ideology in his work. He also placed stress on the revolutionary aspects of literature, as his statement that "Proletarian writers, then, are more interested in social revolt than literary revolt" attests.[24]

Another critic, Edwin Seaver, stressed the prophetic qualities of this type of novel in his speech before the American Writers Congress. He contended that the proletarian novel "must deal not only with present reality, but with reality in the process of becoming."[25]

Other critics, such as Martin Russak, argued that the

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[23] Wilson, Triple Thinkers, p. 207

[24] Calverton, Liberation, p. 460.

[25] Proletarian Literature, p. 98.

proletarian novel is simply a novel which deals with the working class.[26] He was opposed to the great restrictions which were being placed on the form, and wanted to eliminate those radical novels which did not deal with the proletariat.

Finally, Joseph Freeman's definition appears to be one of the more inclusive attempts which came out of this great controversy. At one point Freeman says, "They write from the viewpoint of the revolutionary proletariat; they create what is called proletarian literature."[27] But he goes on to enumerate the characteristics of this novel. He states that the writer should have an awareness of the strata in his audience, that he should foster the development of Marxist standards in literature, and that he should imaginatively assimilate political contents in his writing.

It is quite obvious that there was a great deal of diversity among the critics' definitions of proletarian literature. One critic argued for a rather loose definition, and another sought for a narrow interpretation of the form. Some critics argued that the author had to be a member of the proletariat, and this theory was opposed by others who believed that the author's allegiance alone had to be with the proletariat. It would seem that there was a great deal of foolish argument, but was this debating so wasteful? It must be remembered that these critics did not have the value of hindsight; they were not able to see the form as it finally evolved, and they were attempting to decide what the form ought to be.

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[26] Hart, American Writer's Congress, p. 165.

[27] Proletarian Literature, p. 13.

The proletarian novel has been called a radical novel and its radical nature is undeniable. However, it goes beyond classification as a radical novel in its emphasis on revolution over reform.

The proletarian novel, as it finally developed, did achieve a fairly definite form which often led to the writing of patterned novels by the poorer writers. This type of novel dealt with the workers, from whom it derived its name. While the author did not have to be born a member of the proletariat, he did have to believe in the ideologies of this group and write his stories from their point of view. These novels all aimed at realism, for this was their best medium for success. While a few romances and utopian novels were attempted, they were generally unsuccessful. The proletarian novel, as it evolved, was written with the Marxist political slant in mind, and it usually contained arguments for the Communist belief. It was often the handling of this didactic material that meant the difference between a successful or unsuccessful novel. The better novelists were able to infuse into their work their beliefs without making them too obvious or overpowering. There were, of course, variations from this form, but, on the whole, this was the form which the proletarian novelists finally followed.

The Socialist Novelists

We have seen how Marxist influences and ideas gained an early foothold in America, but somehow the literature was slow to follow suit and soon the cry throughout rad - ical circles was for a true socialist literature. During the first years of the twentieth century, there appeared two books which were indicative of things to come in the future.

Isaac Kahn Friedman's novel By Bread Alone (1901) dealt with the themes of conversion and strike, and his techniques and ideas later became almost commonplaces in socialist literature. The main characters in By Bread Alone is Blair Carrhart, a son of the middle class. Blair is converted from the ministry to socialism and goes to work in a steel town which is soon afterwards torn by a strike . Friedman's realistic picture of the strike and the poverty of the workers reflects a trend away from the romantic and utopian novels of the nineteenth century.

This developing style of realism was even more directly reflected in the novel, The Walking Delegate (1905), writ - by Leroy Scott. This book deals with the problem of union corruption, and the author's careful descriptions of and interest in the common people reflect the growing realism. However, it must also be noted that this novel is mainly concerned with union affairs, and there is no mention made of socialism. The Walking Delegate is also indicative of another development, namely, the Era of the Muckrakers.

Before going into the influences of the Muckrakers, some mention should be made of the developing naturalism which was exhibited by Frank Norris. While Norris cannot be considered one of the Socialist novelists, his writing does exhibit some of their attitudes. In The Octopus and The Pit, the first two books of Norris' unfinished trilogy, there are several criticisms of big business and capitalism as it existed. The reader is presented with a picture of the anarchistic Socialist, Caraher, in The Octopus. The young poet, Presley, is converted to Socialism before he really knows what it is, and in the end he is a liberal and not a Socialist. Norris' interest is centered primarily in forces, and the reader cannot find any of his characters who really have the answers to happiness in life. Norris seems to say that the world is mainly composed of change and forces; this is his naturalism, and it is this which prevents his writing from being considered within the Socialist realm in literature.

The rise of the Muckrakers has been considered by some to be a cultural phenomenon of the United States. V. F. Calverton called this movement "a direct outgrowth of the desperate form which the conflict between the petty bourgeoisie and the upper bourgeoisie had taken at the turn of the century."[28] Now this statement, while it does reflect one cause of the movement, is far too simple and underestimates the political significance of muckraking.

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[28] Calverton, Liberation, p. 390.

The Muckrakers did come about as a part of the middle class movement for reform, and their influence was strongest in the literary field. The popularity of this movement is indicated by the number of fine authors and popular magazines that joined in the scandal-searching. This development also had a strong appeal to the young intellectuals and students of the second decade of the twentieth century.[29] In fact, the opinion is held by some critics that the Muckrakers' greatest achievement was the fact that many of America's fine young novelists were started on their way to fame through muckraking.

Upton Sinclair presents an interesting case for study. Considered by some Communist critics as "the novelist of the American scene,"[30] he has been strongly condemned by others as "unimaginative" and lacking the real proletarian touch.[31] Still another critic applauds Sinclair by saying:

> In the lonely twenties he almost was radical American literature... Few American novelists have done more to make their fellow citizens conscious of the society, all of it, in which they live.[32]

Sinclair came from a Southern middle class family, which was hard hit financially after the Civil War. He earned his way through Columbia by manufacturing jokes and selling cheap stories, which he wrote daily. His first book in the muckraking

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[29] Rideout, pp. 12-17.

[30] Granville Hicks, The Great Tradition, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933.

[31] Proletarian Literature, p. 357.

[32] Rideout, p. 38.

field, The Jungle (1905), established his reputation and solidified his financial position. Even before the publication of this novel, Sinclair had been converted to the cause and had joined the Socialist Party.[33]

The Jungle, considered by many critics as Sinclair's best novel, is the story of Jurgis Rudkus and his family. The Rudkus family, Lithuanian immigrants, are cheated by a broker upon their arrival in Chicago. At first Jurgis holds a fairly good job in the stockyards, but a sprained ankle forces him to take employment in a fertilizer factory. Jurgis' wife Ona, afraid that the family will starve if she loses her job, submits to her boss's demands and begins the real disintegration of the family. When Jurgis attacks the boss, he is thrown into jail, and when he gets out he discovers that his wife and child are dead. After trying several jobs, Jurgis is forced to turn to robbery in order to live. The turning point is his life comes when he hears a Socialist speaker and suddenly realizes that this is the "beginning of a new life...the rebirth of hope and faith."

Because of his middle class background, tremendous research was necessary in order for Sinclair to prepare his novels. As a result, one of the main faults of these novels is their overdocumentation. King Coal, the story of a Colorado strike, and Boston reflect his socialistic leanings, but are not as successful as his first muckraking effort.

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[33] Rideout, pp. 31-33.

Boston is a novel which deals with the Sacco-Vanzetti case in an interesting manner. Sinclair tells the story through the eyes of Cornelia "the runaway grandmother" of a very wealthy family. She leaves her home and position to live with the Vanzetti family. During her stay with these "Dago Reds" she learns the truth about the American system of poverty and wealth. The reader follows with Cornelia the accounts of the murder trial of Sacco and Vanzetti and witnesses an extreme breach of justice. Sinclair also lashes out at the upper class through his pictures of Rupert Alvin, the millionare banker, and Henry Cabot Winters, the wealthy lawyer.

Upton Sinclair, admittedly a member of the Socialist Party, was definitely sympathetic with the worker's position and critical of the evils found in American life; but his was a plea for reform rather than a demand for a new political system in America. His writing was aimed primarily at the middle class, and this, coupled with his pleas for reform and liberalism that we find in The Goose Step and The Brass Check, has made him unacceptable to many critics of the second, Communistic, trend.

Another of the leading writers of the early twentieth century was Jack London. His writings help to point out some of the failures of the early Socialist trend in American literature, for some of his weaknesses were common to many of the party writers of his day.

London, called "a child of the working class," was born in San Francisco. For a while he was forced to live as an oyster pirate to keep from starving. He was in the main a self-educated man, and the ideas of the German philosophers, especially Nietzsche, greatly influenced his thought.[34]

While he was personally a Socialist, London's novels reflect the influence of Nietzsche's "superman" theory, far more than they do Karl Marx's influence. In fact, one critic has written that "his socialism scarcely entered into the conception of his fiction."[35]

The Iron Heel, which does contain London's arguments for Socialism, has in it several departures from the general form of the radical socialist novel. Everhard is a superman in the best Nietzschian tradition, and the revolution, or "Second Revolt," which takes place against the Capitalist oligarchy, is not a Marxian revolution even though its leaders are socialists.

London actually joined the Socialist Party and was an active member. In fact, his resignation in 1916 came because that he felt the party wasn't doing enough for the workers.[36] Despite his avid political beliefs his works are at best poor propaganda. Often his political views seem to be merely a sidelight, as in The Sea-Wolf. This novel con-

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[34] Hicks, pp. 188-192.

[35] Ibid., p. 195.

[36] Ibid., p. 194.

tains, once again, the superman personified in Wolf Larson. Moreover, the book deals with the struggle between Larson and an alien world, and the political realm is left relatively untouched. Another variation from the Socialist trend is the romantic style in which The Sea-Wolf and The Iron Heel are written. These faults were not present only in London's writing. Many other socialists failed to inject their political beliefs into their writing.

One great exception to this group of non-preaching Socialists was Ernest Poole, whose book, The Harbor, is one of the finest of the socialist novels. In The Harbor, the main character, Billy, tells of his experiences with the harbor from the time he is a small boy to the time he becomes a mature man. At first he sees the harbor as a place of adventure, then as an ugly horror, then as a symbol of change. He is torn between the opposite positions of his love for a wealthy girl and belief in business, and his natural feeling for the workers in the harbor. Finally, through the guidance of his friend, Joe Kramer, he comes to accept a position which is socialist but not revolutionary. It is important to note that Billy is a middle-class person who in the end remains with his wife to write his saga of the harbor. He does not run off with his friend Joe to aid the revolution.

Another book which had a great part in the development of the socialist form of novel was Arthur Bullard's Comrade Yetta. This novel contains a picture of the I.W.W. in action,

and it is one of the first portraits of this radical group in socialist literature. Yetta is a girl of the lower classes who is forced to work in the garment trades. She becomes the leader of a strike, encounters police brutality, and eventually marries another socialist. After a great deal of soul searching, Yetta rejects the Wobbly ideology and turns to a more "conservative" Socialist position, a position which reflects her belief in constitutional reform and change.

John Dos Passos has often been tied in with the different groups of radical writers in American literature. In fact, Edmund Wilson accurately wrote:

> The Communist critical movement in America ...tended to identify their ideal with the work of John Dos Passos.[37]

Paradoxically, this is the same Dos Passos who in 1930 announced himself to be a middle-class liberal.[38] Perhaps an investigation of his life and some of his works will make clear what made this apparent incongruity understandable.

Dos Passos was born into the upper middle- class. His parents enjoyed travel, and while he was still very young, John had visited Europe and Mexico. He received an excellent education, which culminated with his graduation from Harvard, where he had been very much impressed by the works of Whitman and Gibbon. Soon after his graduation in 1916, World War I broke out, and he served as a driver and private in the Medical Corps.

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[37] Wilson, The Triple Thinkers, p. 208.

[38] Ibid., pp. 209-211.

The things that he encountered in the war left him, as it did many of our young intellectuals, embittered and disillusioned.[39]

In his early novels, One Man's Initiation, Three Soldiers, and Rosinante to the Road Again, Dos Passos shows his obvious sympathy for the destitute and downtrodden,[40] but his writing is still far from the Socialist position. With Manhattan Transfer, many critics believed that he announced his allegiance to the Socialist position, if not to the Socialist cause. While many of the scenes and lives in this novel are disconnected and complex, Dos Passos' theme of the corruption and decay of New York City life is apparent throughout. And yet, while the corruption of the wealthy classes in New York is a theme, the radicals and anarchists seem unable to offer any solutions, for they too are trapped. The end of the novel finds Jimmy Herf leaving the city optimistically, but it is important to note that he is "going it alone."

Dos Passos' trilogy, U.S.A., and especially its first book, The 42nd Parallel, seemed to many critics to be just what the Socialists had ordered. Many felt that The 42nd Parallel furnished proof that an author could "go left" without sacrificing his art.[41] In Webb Cruthers, Dos Passos drew

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39 George Snell, The Shapers of American Fiction, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1947, pp. 249, 250.

40 Hicks, p. 287.

41 Rideout, p. 155.

one of the finest portraits of the Anarchist, and in 'Mac' we have one of the first pictures of the Wobbly in American literature. The themes of this trilogy seem to cover a great cross-section of America, but it should be noted that almost all of the characters are of the middle class, and Socialism is not proposed as a cure-all though it is treated sympathetically. In the portraits of Ford, Debs, Edison and Steinmetz Dos Passos achieves his greatest success. The novels which Dos Passos later produced were a great disappointment to Communist literary circles. In fact, in a recent preface to one of his novels, Most Likely To Succeed, we can see a bitter excoriation of the Communist position.

Dos Passos, writing in 1940, said that if he were a young man again "there would be a number of differences." He emphasized the impact of the war on the young writers in the twenties, but he says, "It was only later that some of us came to understand that when you threw out King Log you were like as not to get King Storck in his place."[42]

Taking into consideration the fact that prosperity leads to conservativism, it still must be recognized that Dos Passos was never quite the man that the Socialists made him out to be. Certainly he was sympathetic with the poor and helpless, but even in his most radical books his individualistic conception of reform shows through. Furthermore, his middle class char-

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[42] John Dos Passos, First Encounter, New York: Philosophical Library, 1920, pp. i-iii.

acters and his lack of "party propaganda" would seem to disqualify him as a proletarian novelist. Edmund Wilson's complete statement points out:

> The Communist critical movement in America... tended to identify their ideal with the work of John Dos Passos. In order to make this possible it was necessary to invent an imaginary Dos Passos.[43]

Theodore Dreiser, who has been called "the father of candid realism,"[44] carried on the tradition which had been so greatly advanced by Frank Norris. Dreiser was also interested in forces, and most of his novels display the hopelessness of man in the face of these forces. It was this mood, found in his novels, which had led critics to call his ideas the "futilitarian philosophy."[45]

Dreiser came from a poverty-stricken home in the West. He traveled extensively all over the United States, and the things he saw led him over to the side of the oppressed. While his books generally dealt with upper class characters, Dreiser's views of these people were far from sympathetic. In The Titan and The Financier we are given a picture of the lives of the wealthy and the hopelessness of their existence. An American Tragedy contains a strong indictment of the American economic system. The destruction of Clyde Griffiths because of his desire for wealth and position points out one of the evils in our country. It is in Sister Carrie, Dreiser's first novel,

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[43] Wilson, The Triple Thinkers, p. 208.

[44] Calverton, Liberation, p. 407.

[45] Calverton, American Literature, p. 33.

that we see his finest picture of the tragic existence of the poor, and the comparisons between the forces of wealth and poverty are very vivid. Later in his life Dreiser became a professing Communist, and in his book Tragic America he proposes Communism as a solution. However, it is interesting to note that in one of his last books, America Is Worth Saving, he negates this previous argument.

While he did turn to Communism during one point in his career, Dreiser's greatest contribution to the radical literary movement was his achievement in the realistic mode and his critical pictures of the wealthy.

Sherwood Anderson was also one of the pioneers in the school of realism. His life and works bear other similarities to Dreiser's. He too was a professed communist, and while he lacked Dreiser's objectivity in his realism, he did share with Dreiser a feeling for the proletariat.

Winesburg, Ohio, Anderson's collection of stories about a typical American town, fails to present any of the really important radical political views that he professed. It is little wonder that one critic said of Anderson:

> His approach to communism is almost purely personal...The economic and philosophical implications of communism mean little to him.[46]

The middle class characters who are the key to Winesburg, Ohio are another variation from the socialist theory that the novel

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[46] Hicks, p. 233.

should be focused on the proletariat. This failure of Anderson's, in the socialists' eyes, caused V. F. Calverton to write in 1932 that "To this day he still remains isolated from the proletarian ideology and its revolutionary logic."[47]

The last writer worthy of consideration in the first trend of radical literature is Sinclair Lewis. Famous for his satiric pictures of common American life, Lewis never actively joined the Communist party as had Anderson and Dreiser. His approach was that of the reporter, and this helped him in his realism. Lewis was interested in socialism, and spent some time in a socialist colony with Upton Sinclair. [48] He wrote from the middle-class point of view and his characters were almost all middle-class people. In Main Street he condemns the narrowness of the life of the small town, and he does criticize the similar narrowness of the American business man in Babbitt, but on the whole his contribution to the radical cause was negligible.

The years from 1900 to 1930 were witness to great developments in radical literature. The literary trend throughout America was toward realism, and there had been several attempts to write the "model" Socialist novel. Nevertheless, with the exception of a few books like The Harbor and Comrade Yetta, the

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[47] Calverton, Liberation, p. 427.

[48] The World Book Encyclopedia, Chicago: The Quarrie Corporation, 1947, p. 4392.

Socialists failed to achieve success in their attempts to make a distinctive radical novel.

In the twenties, the writing of Upton Sinclair barely kept the radical novel alive, and the influence of Sinclair cannot be over-emphasized. However, it must also be kept in mind that the new trend of radical literature that was developing quickly went far beyond Sinclair, and in the end the Communist critics rrepudiated his influence.

The Radical Magazines

One of the reasons why the radical novel made such important strides during the twentieth century was the strong support which young writers received from magazines such as The Comrade, The Masses, The Liberator, and The New Masses.

The first of these magazines to appear was The Comrade, which was active in the first years of the twentieth century. A radical monthly, it mirrored the trend of the novel's development by constantly encouraging young writers and crying out for more young men to join the ranks.[49]

Perhaps the leading radical magazine of the early century was The Masses, which first appeared in 1911. A cooperative nonprofit magazine, it prided itself on its iconoclasm and humor, and said in its headnote:

> A revolutionary and not a reform magazine; a magazine with a sense of humor and no respect for the respectable...a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found.[50]

After folding in August, 1912, The Masses was revived in December under the editorship of Max Eastman. This magazine clearly was a result of the socialist movement, and the two great causes that it fought for were socialism and realism in art,[51] The Masses also fought against a partisan press, what

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[49] Proletarian Literature, p. 24.

[50] Rideout, pp. 99-102.

[51] Hart, American Writer's Congress, p. 54.

it termed the hypocrisy of the Christian Church, and the entry of America into the first World War. It was the last cause that signaled the death toll of this magazine, for the Post Office first refused it mailing privileges and the editors were brought to trial on charges of obstructing the draft.[52] While The Masses did greatly encourage young socialist writers, "it must be admitted...its literary output on the whole fell far short of its aim."[53]

The immediate successor to The Masses was the periodical The Liberator, which first appeared in 1918. What actually happened was that the editors of The Masses had simply switched magazines, and aside from their retreat on the war issue, they continued their socialist policies in this new magazine.[54] In fact, The Liberator was even more radical than its successor. It was this magazine that published in 1921 the article "Towards Proletarian Art," by Michael Gold, which was the first attempt to define this new type of literature.[55] In October, 1924, The Liberator published its last issue before it succumbed to the financial pressures which defeated most of the radical magazines.

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[52] Rideout, p. 104.

[53] Calverton, Liberation, p. 451.

[54] Rideout, pp. 104-105.

[55] Ibid., pp. 123-128.

The New Masses filled the void which had been left by the demise of The Liberator. Founded in 1926, this magazine boasted as its editors Joseph Freeman and Michael Gold. It quickly proved that it was a part of the new trend in radical literature as it led a search for proletarian literature by featuring articles by Gold, Farrell and Hicks on the definition of what this form of literature was to be.[56] Another sign of the difference between this magazine and its predecessors was its relationship to Communism. Whereas the other magazines had pro-socialist policies and had argued along a socialistic slant, The New Masses was openly supported financially by the Communist Party and therefore lost some degree of its intellectual freedom.[57] This might have been one reason for its overly biased critical opinions, which even led one of the Communist critics to complain:

> Unfortunately, in its zeal for things proletarian, it too often fails to realize that proletarian art as well as bourgeois art has to be art before it is significant.[58]

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[56] Rideout, pp. 128-130.

[57] Hart, American Writer's Congress, p. 70.

[58] Calverton, Liberation, p. 458.

A New Renaissance

The years from 1930 to 1940 were witness to a resurgence of the radical novel. Strongly supported by the American Communist Party, guided by the radical magazines, and highly conscious of the forms laid down by both the radical critics at home and the Party critics in Soviet Russia, the American radicals produced some of the best radical literature seen in America. The Sacco-Vanzetti trial and the depression appeared to many Communists as the confirmation of what they had been saying all along; i.e., that the American system was unjust and doomed.

The thirties opened auspiciously with the publication of two fairly successful radical novels, Jews Without Money and Strike!.

Jews Without Money, written by Michael Gold, is, as its title implies, a story of Jewish poverty in New York. Structurally a rather rambling series of tales, this story gives detailed accounts of the filth and misery of the lives of the poor. The reader is shocked by the spectacles of brother killing brother over a card game and the commonness of the prostitution caused by economic necessity. On the whole, the book's relation to the Communist movement is very scanty, with the love affair between the narrator's Aunt Lena and the agitator the only realistic propaganda present. We do have the narrator's conversion by listening to a radical on a soap box, but the author goes even further by having his character utter

sentimentally, "O' worker's Revolution, you brought hope to me."[59]

Mary Heaton Vorse's novel Strike! deals with the typical injustices which the proletarian novels abound, but the details and the pictures that the author draws are so graphic that the reader cannot help being held by the book until its conclusion. The story is told through the eyes of Roger Hewlett, a Northern reporter who has come to Stonerton to cover a strike in the Basil-Schenk Manufacturing Company. Through the teachings and example set by "Fer" Deane, a Communist agitator who is later shot and killed, Roger is slowly drawn over to the workers' side and converted to the proletariat ideology. This novel points out the inequality of the police and the towns' courts as well as the unpunished brutality of the Committee of One Hundred. The vividness of description coupled with the author's true feeling and skill make this one of the more successful proletarian novels.

While the year 1931 saw nothing of note published in the radical field, in the following year there appeared two novels which provide excellent examples of the proletarian novel's style.

To Make My Bread, by Grace Lumpkin, follows very closely the "pattern" of the new radical novel. It is the story of poor workers and how they are affected by a strike. The

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[59] Michael Gold, Jews Without Money, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1930, p. 309.

novel opens with a picture of the McClure family suffering from poverty during a terrible winter at Swain's Crossing. Then they receive what seems to be wonderful offer to come to Leesville and work in the factory as spoolers. The disintegration of the family that follows their decision to live in the factory town is appalling. Granpap Kirk loses all of his love for life, Emma dies of Pellagra, "a poor man's disease," and their friend Minnie Hawkins turns to prostitution. It is through the character of John Stevens that Miss Lumpkin displays her political views, for we see the conversion of John to Communism as he becomes one of the leaders in a strike. Once again the pattern of the union, the scabs, and the brutality of the company's hired killers, establishes itself, and the strike is broken. To Make My Bread is a typical proletarian novel in its realism and its emphasis on the conversion, strike, proletariat poverty, and legal injustice themes. While not one of the best proletarian novels, this book is effective in portions, but it is hurt most by its overly-obvious attempts at propagandizing.

Scott Nearing's Free Born is one of the few successful novels about the Negro written during the thirties. Subtitled, "An Unpublishable Novel," this book gives a picture of racial brutality which is thought-provoking and stunning. The novel follows the life of Jim, a "free born" Negro who as a young boy watches his father and brother burned to death and

his sweetheart raped by white men. Jim travels to Chicago, where he studies to be an artist, only to be thwarted once again by the color of his skin. An encounter with a Negro Communist opens up new realms of thought for Jim, and encouraged by his girl friend he reads Lenin's works and Sinclair's The Jungle. After an attempt to join a union, an attempt which fails because he is "a nigger," he finally realizes that Communism is the only answer. Brought to trial for owning seditious material, he pleads eloquently in defense of himself and his fellows, but the judge sentences him to five years in the Penitentiary. Scott Nearing has in Free Born delivered against the American system a charge that has not yet been answered successfully. Jim sums up his own position when he says:

> What's all this talk about a free country anyhow? Ah ain't never been free. Ah was free to be born; yet--to be born free in a white man's country, but what's that for freedom?[60]

The period from 1932 to 1936 has been considered a high point in the development and publication of the proletarian novel. Previous to 1932 the output of proletarian literature was surprisingly meager, and after 1936 the form suffered a severe decline.

The depression, which lasted from 1929 to 1933, came as a severe blow to the country. Almost overnight it seemed that

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[60] Scott Nearing, Free Born, New York: Uquhard Press, 1935, p. 336.

layoffs, unemployment, and bread-lines had become the common thing. But the depression meant more than just these economic hardships to some people; to the Communists it was the proof that Karl Marx's theories were correct. Thus to the Communists the depression was almost a period of elation, and this mood can be seen in the increased publication of their radical literature.

Many critics pointed to the American Writers Congress that met in April, 1935, as the proof of what could be accomplished by the American radical critics. This Congress, which had delegates from all over the world, did show the spirit of optimism that was prevalent throughout the Communist ranks at this time. The delegates that assembled at this series of meetings discussed at length the ramifications and problems of the proletarian novel's form and design. There were also long discussions on the developments in Soviet Russia.[61]

The Wobbly movement had not been successful in its revolutionary and literary functions, but it had succeeded in spreading throughout the country the gospel of Karl Marx. Henry Hart commented that wherever they went in the Mid-West, they "brought countless thumbed copies of Marx."[62]

Finally, the Second American Writers Congress, which took place in June, 1937, was a proof of the continued efforts of the American Communists and radicals. While this Congress

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[61] Hart, American Writer's Congress.

[62] Ibid., pp. 136-137.

was not as successful as its predecessor, there was still an air of optimism present at the meetings. However, this Congress also demonstrated the trend away from the radical position, for many of the previous Congress' delegates were not present. Furthermore, the Second Congress seemed to spend less time in useful considerations than in bickering.[63]

The radical American in the early thirties had a great many things that he could look at as encouraging. He could point with pride to the achievements of the First American Writers' Congress, or at the economic developments in Russia, where Russian prosperity seemed to be paralleling the American depression. The critic could show the development of the proletarian novel, and argue that its realism was attaining new heights. Finally, he could argue that the depression showed capitalism defeating itself, and say that this was the first step toward an American "October Revolution."

The year 1934 provided readers with three of the finer examples of proletarian novels. Jack Conroy's The Disinherited, Robert Cantwell's The Land of Plenty , and William Rollins' The Shadow Before, have been considered by some critics as a high water mark of the proletarian novel's development.

Conroy's book, The Disinherited, which was dedicated to "the disinherited and dispossessed of the world,"[64] tells the

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[63] Henry Hart, editor, The Writer in a Changing World, New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937.

[64] Rideout, p. 183.

story of Larry Donovan, a poor worker. The novel opens with an account of the miners' hardships in Monkey Nest Camp. Larry sees his father and two of his brothers die in the mine, and when the miners strike, they are quickly beaten. After leaving Monkey Nest, Larry works on a railroad, he moves on to a Rubber Heel plant, where the dust affects his lungs, and tries a job loading sacks of Jute. During his travels he comes to Detroit, where, while working in a car plant, he is introduced to the Communist party by a girl. Gradually he is converted, until, when he has returned to his home town, he leads some opposition against the dispossession of some farmers. Conroy concludes his story with Larry continuing his travels with the organizer, German Hans.

William Rollins' novel deals with a contrasting picture of the extremely wealthy and the poor factory workers. The Shadow Before opens with a picture of some immigrants coming to America, "a country of gold and glittering marvels." The reader is witness to the development of Harry Baumann, son of the factory owner who ultimately comes over to the side of the proletariat. Paralleling his development is the decay of Ramon, a poor worker, who sells out his friends to the factory owner's money. Rollins deals with the usual themes of the wage cuts and the ultimate strike. Once again the One Hundred makes its appearance, and the weaponless workers are slaughtered. When Marvin and Doucet, the Communist agitators, attempt

to prevent an armed attack against the strike headquarters they kill a few of the One Hundred and are brought up on trial. Doucet, badly wounded, dies before he can be sentenced, but the others are found guilty by a prejudiced court. Weaponless, with their leaders gone, the workers are forced to return to work, and the strike is broken.

Robert Cantwell's The Land of Plenty was one of the most popular proletarian novels. This popularity was reflected by the fact that this book was by far the biggest selling radical novel in its day.[65] For his subject, Cantwell chose the "old reliable" topic of the strike. Naturally the workers are receiving starvation wages, and the boss, MacMahon, is quite unsympathetic. But there is another development, for Cantwell introduces the efficiency expert who is only interested in the "speed up." The book's conflict arises between Carl, the efficiency expert, and Hagan, the head electrician. After several accidents occur under strange circumstances, Carl is convinced that Hagan is guilty and attempts to have him fired. This attempt, added to the terribly low wage scale, causes the workers to walk out, and the strike begins. During the strike there are the usual picket lines, police brutality, riots, and false newspaper coverage. The author also lashes out at bourgeois morality in his picture of Rose, MacMahon's immoral daughter. The novel ends on a sad and quiet note with Vin Garl, the

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[65] Rideout, p. 235.

ex-Wobbly trying to soothe Hagan's son Johnny, Hagan has been killed and once again the strike is broken.

The Land of Plenty is a very ably and forcibly written novel. Cantwell has succeeded in bringing the class struggle to life in a manner superior to that of most of his fellow radicals. His use of symbols and realism make this work something above the ordinary proletarian form of novel.

During the thirties, one of the outstanding Communist critics was J. T. Farrell. Many of the radical publications contained articles by him, and his criticism was instrumental in the final development of the form of the proletarian novel.

Farrell's contributions to the novel were far from minor. During the years from 1932 to 1935 he published his Studs Lonigan trilogy, which he based on his personal experiences among the South-Side Irish of Chicago. He held a variety of jobs in order to help put himself through Chicago University, and he also draws on these experiences in his writing.[66]

In the Lonigan trilogy, Farrell, using what he called his "social realism" technique, draws for the reader a picture of the decaying lower middle class. Starting with Young Lonigan, written in 1932, and concluding with Judgment Day (1935), these novels follow the life and career of Studs Lonigan as he attempts to find himself amid poverty and disease in Chicago. Studs' failure is the failure of most of his class, as

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[66] World Book, p. 2492

the economic and social pressures are too great to bear.[67] Throughout these novels, Farrell makes use of a "constant reiteration of the trivial and the vulgar"[68] as a stylistic device, for he is attempting to imitate the language and life of the lower class as closely as possible. The theme that he is trying to emphasize is his idea that "the middle class is decaying, the power of the proletariat is being born."[69]

A Note On Literary Criticism, one of Farrell's many critical essays, is important, for it shows his strong Marxist feelings. In this article, he wages a strong campaign against "leftism," condemning Gold for his "revolutionary sentimentalism" and Hicks for his "mechanical Marxism."[70]

It is important to recognize that Farrell continued writing his Marxist slanted novels on into the forties, and his Danny O'Neill tetralogy contains instances of the old conversion theme as well as the Marxist slant.[71]

Was Farrell then one of the truly constant Communist critics, one who did not finally "turn"? The evidence seems to point to the fact that this was not true. By the time he

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67 Frederick J. Hoffman, The Modern Novel in America, Chicago: Henry Rennery Company, 1951, p. 137.

68 Ibid., p. 144.

69 Rideout, p. 190.

70 Ibid., p. 232.

71 Snell, pp. 294-296.

wrote The Road Between (1949) and Yet Other Waters (1952) his viewpoint had changed so much that these works "belong in outlook to the growing body of anti-Communist fiction.[72] In another article, Farrell showed his development away from the strict control of the Party. "Truth and Myth About America" contained a very revealing masthead, which said:

> A statement against dictatorship of, or over the proletariat, and offering a democratic change for social progress.[73]

Apparently Farrell now believed that Democracy could be reformed; this idea, we must remember, is incompatible with the view of proletarian literature. The words of one critic seem to sum up the final liberal belief of Farrell. He called Farrell:

> The independent radical, affected by radical ideology, but not committed to the party as the sole repository of the faith.[74]

The year 1935 was a productive one from the point of view of the proletarian novel. Besides Farrell's Judgment Day, which was published in this year, two other excellent radical novels made their appearance.

Nelson Algren's interesting study, Somebody in Boots, succeeds in capturing the reader's attention with his use of some fairly original techniques. Algren highlights the sections of his novels by introducing them with quotations from

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[72] Rideout, p. 323.

[73] Ibid., p. 236.

[74] Ibid., p. 270.

Marx's Manifesto. The actual story revolves around Cass McKay, a poor lower middle-class boy whose father is a murderer. Homeless and without money, Cass becomes a hobo, and the novel deals with the things he sees and the adventures he encounters on his travels. After helping a woman give birth to a still-born child in a dirty shanty and barely escaping starvation on the road, Cass at last comes to Chicago, where he becomes a thief until caught by the police when his girl runs out on him. His introduction to Communism is quite conventional; hearing a Negro agitator speaking in a park, he becomes interested. But, strangely enough, Algren does not conclude with his character a confirmed Communist. Rather Cass has been started on his way, but he is still not completely convinced.

Another outstanding novel that was published in 1935 was Clara Weatherwax's prizewinning work, Marching! Marching! . This book was awarded the prize in the New Masses' contest for a novel on an American proletarian theme.

This story contains many of the devices common to all of these form novels.[75] The themes of strike, injustice, bourgeois brutality, and the prejudiced press, are all present in this book. Miss Weatherwax also sprinkles liberally throughout this novel,

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[75] By the phrase "form novel," I mean a novel which attempts to conform to the outlines which the Communist or Leftist critics laid down.

bits of Party propaganda, such as "Only the workers stand by the workers,"[76] and "No matter what they do – beat us! kill us! jail us! – they can't stop the working class."[77]

Despite such weaknesses as her over-obvious attempts at propaganda and her use of the traditional themes, Miss Weatherwax does achieve a measure of success in this novel through her technical skill in handling the material she wishes to emphasize. The use that the author makes of newspaper clippings to highlight issues and her use of contrasts, as in the final scene where the reader is exposed to the antithetical specter of the workers marching together down the road with the national guard and police setting up machine guns along the road side, do make this book interesting reading. It is easy to understand why Marching! Marching! won the New Masses award, for this novel contains the ingredients of almost all proletarian novels, but it unfortunately also contains all of the faults of the form.

While Granville Hicks was not an outstanding proletarian novelist, he was one of the leading leftist critics in the thirties, and his writings did a great deal to help the evolution of the form. Furthermore, a study of Hicks will be valuable, for his life shows clearly the trends that took place in radical circles.

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[76] Clara Weatherwax, Marching! Marching!, New York: The John Day Company, 1935, p. 235.

[77] Ibid., p. 245.

Though he was criticized for "mechanical marxism," Hicks' Communist affiliation was undeniable. In the New Masses issue of September, 1932, he wrote an article under the subtitle "How I Came to Communism."[78]

Perhaps Hicks' most celebrated work was The Great Tradition. This book attempted to argue the point that the proletarian novel was a natural and inevitable development out of the American tradition of radical protest literature. The Great Tradition, despite its length, is a very interesting work in which Hicks convincingly defends his contention even though he overbalances the evidence to suit his thesis.

In 1934, Hicks took over the editorship of the New Masses magazine, and this afforded him an opportunity to play an even a greater role as a Marxist critic. While in this position, he did a great deal to encourage young radical writers and to further "the cause."[79]

Hicks' publication I Like America, which first appeared in 1938, is an interesting study of the terrible conditions prevalent in some sections of this country. Hicks presents his case to the middle class and openly admits that he is arguing for the class struggle. He further admits that he is a Communist, and he states that he became a Communist after his discovery of terrible conditions in this country and the failure of the government to do anything to remedy these situations.

Now it would seem that in Hicks we have found at least

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[78] Rideout, p. 142.

[79] Ibid., p. 150.

one Communist critic who did not recant his faith, but this was not the case! In some of his most recent writings, Hicks has gone almost completely over to the other pole of criticism, and Where We Came Out (1954) can even be considered as an anti-Communist work. It is interesting to note that Hicks, along with so many other radical critics, renounced his Communist faith at the beginning of the forties. One of our modern critics commented on this switch, saying;

> It was Hicks, once the sternest of Marxist critics, who in 1940 repudiated years of effort with the statement..."I think a great deal, though by no means all, of left criticism has been invalidated by the events of the past year."[80]

By the year 1936, the proletarian novel had reached its climax and was beginning to decline. The number of radical novels that were being published had diminished, and the quality of the writing was also declining. In 1936 and 1937, there were only two radical novels of any note that were published, and in the decade's last two years the output of proletarian novels decreased to a mere trickle.

Thomas Bell's novel All Brides Are Beautiful is an unusually pleasant book. Bell has approached his Marxist position from an entirely new direction. All Brides Are Beautiful is the story of Susan and Peter Cummings, a young married couple facing their first years of marriage during the depression. Peter is unemployed, and so Susan works as a clerk in order to help support them. The reader follows this couple

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[80] Rideout, p. 254.

through their period of trouble and learns how two young people can achieve happiness and true unity despite the economic hardships they are forced to face.[81]

Bell does include in this novel such common proletarian data as the strikes and demonstrations that the Cummings encounter, but he has also included another fairly new idea. Peter is a Communist when the novel opens; his conversion, therefore, is not to Communism, but rather to action. We can see this in his eventual realization that his new job will afford him the opportunity to organize.[82]

The author works into this novel his themes of the strike and demonstration, and he also includes technical details about the workers' jobs, but he never allows these themes to become anything more than sidelights. It is Bell's careful control that makes this novel one of the most interesting of its type.

The only other proletarian novel of the late thirties worthy of consideration is Edward Newhouse's work This Is Your Day, which was published in 1937.

The first radical book to deal with the actual workings of the Communist party in the 1930's,[83] This Is Your Day tells the story of Gene Marsay, a Communist agitator. The parallel which the author draws between Gene and his brother-in-law, Harold, is one of the only skillful parts of the book. Harold,

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[81] Rideout, pp. 209, 210, 217.

[82] Ibid., pp. 209, 210, 313.

[83] Ibid., p. 198.

who is supposed to be working for the Communists, is actually just an opportunist, and we are shown how low a character he really is through his affair with his pupil, Dorothy.

This novel shows how far the proletarian form had declined by 1937. The book is shallow, dull, and lacks the energy of its predecessors. While Newhouse's belief in Communism was probably sincere, This Is Your Day would fail to convince the most gullible fool that Communism is something to be desired.

The decade of the thirties was definitely a period of renaissance for the proletarian novel. In the first place, it was a period of rebirth although the form in this decade soon went beyond the radical novels that had been seen in the twenties. Unfortunately, for the proletarian novel, this rebirth apparently was too sudden, for the form soon declined and almost disappeared almost as rapidly as it had come.

The Ultimate Defeat

In the preceding chapters I have attempted to trace the evolution of the proletarian form of novel in America. From its humble origin in the early radical attempts at realism during the first decade of the twentieth century to its period of flowering in the 1930's, this type of novel has had behind it many critics who were consciously attempting to develop a new form of radical literature. The fact that a proletarian novel, of sorts, was finally developed cannot be contested; however, the question of what value, if any, this form had in the development of America is a valid one.

One of the great achievements of the proletarian novel was the way that its development paralleled and helped further the development of American realism. From the beginning to the twentieth-century radical novel, it has been clear that the only really successful medium for this form would be realism. Therefore, as the proletarian novel progressed and critics attempted to define what the main ingredients of these form novels should be, the most consistently repeated requirement for these novels was that they be true to life and realistic. The constant stress of realism on the part of the radicals was reflected in the work of other novelists and eventually the use of realism became widespread throughout the United States.[84]

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[84] I do not contend that the radical writers originated the use of the realistic technique in America. Nor do I believe that they were the only writers who aided the development of realism. My only argument here is that the radical writers did much to further the development of realism in America.

The influence of the proletarian novelists on other American writers is pointed out by one radical critic:

> Moreover, the literary movement...has already had a profound influence on American letters... even those writers who do not agree with us have abandoned the ivory tower and begun to grapple with basic American reality.[85]

Another influence that the proletarian novelists had on America's development was their championship of women's rights. Such novels as Conrade Yetta and The Shadow Before contain explicit pictures of the "new woman," the truly emancipated female. The works of feminine novelists were encouraged in Socialist and Communist literary circles, and the woman's part in the strikes and labor protests was emphasized in many of the proletarian novels.

Still another positive influence of these novels was their attempt to bring a culture to the workers. While the success of this attempt has been exaggerated, the fact remains that for many workers new vistas of thought and reading were opened up by these books—many of which were written in the vernacular of the lower classes. Surveys were taken to determine what the workers read, and some attempts were made to adapt the novels to the proletariat's desires.

Finally, the proletarian novels did help to bring to the public's attention some of the evils of the capitalist system, and with time many of these abuses have been remedied. The

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[85] Proletarian Literature, p. 27.

radical and proletarian novelists have also helped to spread throughout America the ideas of Karl Marx and the methods of Marxian criticism; and while Marx's ideas are contrary to the American system of life and government, still the interests of true education insist that these ideas be aired before the reading public.

With the great amount of publicity that this form of novel has received in the critical essays, magazine articles, and anthologies that have been published, it is easy to get the misconception that this movement produced a great many novels in the thirties and that their publications constituted a large percentage of all of the novels written in this period. This presupposition is absolutely groundless. The truth of the matter is that during the 1930's, which was the proletarian novelist's busiest period, there were only seventy novels of this type published. Furthermore, it is even more interesting to note that fifty of these novels were published during the first five years of the thirties.[86] It is clear, first of all, that the publicaction of seventy novels cannot be considered a major movement in American letters; and secondly, that somewhere along the line the proletarian novel fell short of its ambitious designs.

To some readers, a statement that the proletarian novel in American literature was a failure will come as a surprise, but the evidence is incontestable.

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[86] Rideout, p. 171.

I have already pointed out that in the thirties, the proletarian writer's period of greatest activity, there were only seventy proletarian novels published, and fifty of these were printed in the early years of the decade. This fact cannot be explained away by saying that the bourgeois printers were refusing to publish these novels, for this was not the case. In fact, the generous publication of the radical novels was surprising when it is realized that by 1935 Cantwell's novel The Land of Plenty, which was the largest seller in this group of novels, had sold only 3000 copies. In the early thirties, the critics were clearly worried about the effect of the poor sales upon the publication of these radical novels,[87] and there were some publishers who refused to print these novels because they were unprofitable. However, it must also be realized that in the thirties many radical publishing firms, such as the Vanguard Press, Modern Age Books, and the Urquhard Press, were established and took up the slack in publication. No, the failure was not due to a lack of novels printed; the failure was due to the poor sales, which pointed out that these novels were not reaching the wide reading public to which they were being directed.

It is clear that the proletarian novel's impact on the American reading public was not nearly so great as the critics would have us believe. Furthermore, it has been proved that

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[87] Rideout, pp. 234, 235.

many of the readers of these novels were not members of the lower classes. This fact is a surprising one, for the proletarian novels were reputedly written for, and directed towards, the proletariat. The failure of these novelists to develop adequate symbols of the proletariat class, combined with their failure to reach this class, was the proletarian novel's ultimate failure. For, in their failure to communicate with the masses, these novelists had failed in their primary purpose, which was "to work out a sensibility and set of symbols unifying the responses and experiences...even while he strives to raise the cultural level of the masses."[88]

Now to argue that there was never a truly proletarian novel would also be incorrect. During the thirties such writers as Rollins, Vorse, Cantwell and Lumpkin all produced novels that followed the proletarian pattern and still were successful. Their novels dealt with the lower classes, and told the story of the strike, demonstration, conversion, and middle-class decay. These novelists made a definite effort to identify themselves with the proletariat, and to a certain degree they were successful. However, it is not the quality of the proletarian novels, though some were very poor, that marks the movement a failure; the failure was in the inability of this movement to produce a sizable number of novels which had an impact on the masses.

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88 Proletarian Literature, p. 372.

In the New Masses of February 1929, Robert Wolf attempted to justify the failure of proletarian literature with two explanations. He argued that in America there was lacking a revolutionary situation comparable to the one once in Russia and also that most of the Communist Party members didn't speak English.[89] Wolf's first argument is certainly true now and was partially true in his day, but I find fault with his second premise. This argument ignores the fact that many of the American communists were intellectuals. It is true that there were many non-English-speaking communists in America, but to assume that they outnumbered the English-speaking members is very doubtful. Where Wolf stressed the latter of his arguments, I would place the stress on the former, namely that America lacked a revolutionary situation comparable to the one in Russia. In the depression years, there was a revival of interest in radical literature, but, on the whole, the American people were content and uninterested in the really radical propaganda.

Robert Frost seems to have expressed this viewpoint when he wryly commented, "How are we to write the Russian novel in America, as long as life goes so unterribly?"[90]

Another reason for the proletarian novel's failure was the fact that almost as soon as the form seemed finally established, many of the finer Communist writers recanted their faith in Soviet Marxism and stopped their writing in this

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[89] Rideout, p. 170.

[90] Hicks, p. 214.

medium. The examples of J.T.Farrell and Granville Hicks are typical of the American radicals in their day. For a time the progress of Soviet Russia seemed to be the living proof that Marx's theories could be and were being prac - ticed. However, the Russians lost the faith of most of their American friends when the signed the Non-Aggression Pact with Hitler on August 24, 1939. This act proved to the people of the world that Communism was practical and unconcerned with ethics. While some of the radicals did not completely give up their Marxism, they did tend to water it down with the obvious result that their beliefs became more liberal than radical.

These renunciations by the American critics do not explain why, even when the proletarian writers were happy and writing freely, the form novel was not popular or successful. The answer to this question is a lesson which should be learned by all literary groups. The proletarian critics believed that they could develop formulas which, if followed, would lead the novelist to success. This assumption is basically incorrect, and yet it was an assumption directly in keeping with the Communist ideology. To assume that fine novels can be produced merely by following formulas is a bad mistake. Formulas can guide, but only slightly -- it is the individual genius that makes a work a success or a failure. Looking back on the first forty years of the twentieth century, we can see that those radical writers who expressed their personal originality, such men as Sinclair, Dreiser, Anderson, and Dos Passos, were also the most successful radical novelists . While the Commu -

nist critics did not intend that the young proletarian novelists should follow "the hothouse school of literature,"[91] the young writers did follow the patterns set down for them by the radical critics, with the obvious results — their writing was dull, lifeless, and filled with Communist commonplaces. This kind of writing does not make interesting reading, and this is the major reason why the proletarian novels were not popular even to the masses.

There was one other reason for the failure of the proletarian novelists and this was their obvious propagandist intent. Too often the poorer novels degenerated into mere polemics, and this made them unpalatable for the non-Party reader. There is nothing wrong with didactic literature so long as the reader feels that the didacticism is not the author's only interest. But once the reader recognizes that he is being faced with a series of arguments designed to convince him of something, the natural thing for him to do is to think up counter-arguments. A writer cannot produce form novels which use stock arguments and expect intelligent readers to accept his premises. Perhaps fools will accept the premises, but fools don't often take the time to read.

The proletarian novel was a bold attempt but it fell very short of its grand plans to educate and elevate the masses. In the first place, the masses of the proletariat did not read most of these novels, and the novels generally lacked the polish

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[91] Freeman, pp. 53-56.

and style to make them attractive to the middle class reader. While this movement did produce some very excellent novels, on the whole its output consisted of form-fitted polemics. The ultimate defeat of this movement in literature was caused by its guiding masters the Communists, whose actions in 1939 and 1940 knocked the ethical props out of the proletarian movement. The failure of the proletarian novel proves once again that when men are writing of their fears, doubts, and ambitions, they write real literature. When they are writing books to fit forms and to propagandize the public, they have to be more than skillful; they must be brilliant in order to achieve success. The proletarian novelists were just not brilliant enough.

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