

REVIEW AND COMMENT

Revolutionary Literature of 1934

IT HAS been a good year, an exceptionally good year, a year to put the Menckens, Hazlitts and Soskins on the defensive. Before 1934 it required some understanding of literary and social processes to recognize the promise of revolutionary literature, but now even a daily book reviewer has to blindfold his eyes to ignore its achievements and its potentialities.

The drama has made the most startling advance. The amorphous rebelliousness of the New Playwrights has yielded to the strong, clear-cut, revolutionary intelligence and discipline of the Theatre Union, depending for its support not on the whims of dilettantes but on the eager enthusiasm of workers and their organizations. Founded in 1933, the Theatre Union not merely achieved popular backing in 1934, but demonstrated maturity in authorship, directing, and acting. The eloquent but confused *Peace on Earth* was followed by *Stevedore*, rich in its conception of character, firmly integrated in construction and method, and revolutionary in its understanding of social forces. Melodrama the bourgeois critics called it, unable to deny the effectiveness of Peters' and Sklar's writing and Blankfort's directing, but they could point to no distortion of character or event for the sake of sensation. The term was their unconscious tribute to an alive and exciting play.

Aside from the Theatre Union plays, we have John Wexley's *They Shall Not Die*, a kind of experiment in dramatic journalism, most effective when it follows most closely the actual events of the Scottsboro case, least effective in its invented scenes. It might have been a better play if it had been written for the Theatre Union rather than the Theatre Guild. A dramatist cannot rise very far above the intellectual level of his audience, and the Guild audience is, in matters such as the Scottsboro case, singularly ignorant. Yet Wexley made it a moving play, and the enlightened spectators knew that he understood the true issues.

Nineteen thirty-four has also brought the publication of books of plays by John Dos Passos and John Howard Lawson. Neither author has wholly escaped from the mannerisms of the New Playwrights era, but the former's *Fortune Heights* and the latter's *Gentlewoman* show not only talent but growing clarity. Melvin Levy's *Gold Eagle Guy*, which I have not seen, has divided critical opinion. Samuel Ornitz's *In New Kentucky*, soon to be produced, is, if one can judge from the first act published in THE NEW MASSES last spring, a forceful and authentic portrayal

of working-class life. Finally, we must note the activity of the workers' theatres and the progress of dramatic criticism in the thriving magazine, *New Theatre*.

The poets, I think, are getting away from the kind of obscurity that marred the work of so many of them. Robert Gessner's *Up-surge* is direct enough, and taken as a whole it gives a sense of the urgency and irresistibility of the revolutionary movement, though taken line by line it is disappointingly diffuse. Isidor Schneider's poems in *Comrade-Mister*, on the other hand, are firm and strong, and a second reading finds them more impressive than a first. He has sacrificed none of the originality and profundity that distinguished his earlier work, and he has added to them strength and clarity.

It is impossible, of course, to mention all the poetry, even all the good poetry, that has appeared in the periodicals. I remember particularly Alfred Hayes' *Van der Lubbe's Head* and his *May Day Poem*, Alfred Kreyborg's *America, America*, Stanley Burnshaw's parody of T. S. Eliot, and Kenneth Patchen's poem on Joe Hill.

Two revolutionary poets that seem to me to have developed materially in 1934 are Kenneth Fearing and Edwin Rolfe. The latter's *Unit Assignment* in *The New Republic*, is an excellent example of clarity achieved not by oversimplification but by the extension and integration of the poet's experience. It is richly personal and full of sharp poetic perception and at the same time broad in appeal and free from literary echoes.

A definitive list of good short stories is as impossible as a definitive list of good poems. The work of Meridel Le Sueur, Louis Mamet, Erskine Caldwell, Alfred Morang, Fred Miller, and William Carlos Williams is particularly memorable, but there are many others whose stories deserve examination. My general criticism of proletarian short story writers is that they limit themselves too persistently to incidents of suffering or frustration. These are well adapted, of course, to the short story form, and there is every reason for portraying the cruelty and barrenness of life under capitalism, but there are other subjects as worthy of attention, and the danger of monotony could easily be avoided.

Two collections of short stories deserve at least a word. James Farrell's *Calico Shoes and Other Stories* is open to the same general criticism as his *Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, of which I shall speak later. No one, however, can deny the gruesome horror of such stories as *The Scarecrow* and *Just Boys* or the pathos of *Honey, We'll Be Brave*.

Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* was more disappointing than *Calico Shoes* because I had expected more. After the militant clarity of some of Hughes' poems, the confusion of most of his stories—his emphasis on situations and events that the revolutionary must regard as of only secondary importance—was something of a shock.

Criticism has to be discussed in terms of the revolutionary journals. Week after week THE NEW MASSES has reviewed books in all fields written from all points of view. Often the reviews have not been so good as they should be, but on the whole they have cogently and intelligently applied Marxist principles. The reviews here and in other revolutionary periodicals have made Marxist criticism a force in the literary world. It is worth observing also that the best reviews that have appeared in any non-revolutionary publication in 1934 have been written by a fellow-traveler, Malcolm Cowley.

The revolutionary novels deserve detailed consideration, because they have attracted so much attention, and they lend themselves to it. Here are the novels published in 1934 by avowed revolutionaries or close sympathizers: *Parched Earth*, by Arnold B. Armstrong; *The Shadow Before*, by William Rollins, Jr. *The Last Pioneers*, by Melvin Levy; *The Land of Plenty*, by Robert Cantwell; *The Great One*, by Henry Hart; *The Death Ship*, by B. Traven; *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, by James Farrell; *Slow Vision*, by Maxwell Bodenheim; *A House on a Street*, by Dale Curran; *The Foundry*, by Albert Halper; *Those Who Perish*, by Edward Dahlberg; *The Death and Birth of David Markand*, by Waldo Frank; *Babouk*, by Guy Endore; *The Executioner Waits*, by Josephine Herbst; and *You Can't Sleep Here*, by Edward Newhouse.

Some of the novels are revolutionary only in a rather broad sense of the word. Tess Slesinger recognizes the sterility of bourgeois culture, apparently sympathizes with the revolutionary movement, and has sense enough to prefer real revolutionaries, or doesn't know any well enough to put them in her book, *The Unpossessed*. She is herself rather too close to the futile chattering about revolution she satirizes, and her New Yorkerish wise-cracking becomes tiresome. Like Albert Halper, when he wrote *Union Square*, she tries to satirize the neurotic fringe before she has acquired the knowledge of the essential revolutionary movement that would make it possible to see the fringe in true perspective. Yet her talent is unmistakable, and even though her novel is as much a symptom as it is a portrayal of the fringe psychosis, sincerity manifests itself above the wise-cracking. One can hope she will follow the path of Halper.

novels for me. I agree with James Farrell that one of the principal duties of the revolutionary writer is to break through bourgeois clichés, the persistence of which inhibit the functioning of a new kind of sensibility, and perhaps it is inevitable that a pioneer in this task should give an impression of artificiality and strain. But I believe that Dahlberg, even now, occasionally makes the mistake of measuring the effectiveness of metaphors by their difference from conventional figures of speech, not by their precision in terms of his sensibility.

Important as the point is, I do not want to dwell on it too much, lest I give a false impression of *Those Who Perish*. As a matter of fact, the reader is only rarely bothered by inept figures of speech and most of the time is held fast by the devastating accuracy of Dahlberg's revelation.

But both Dahlberg's book and Curran's seem limited in comparison with Josephine Herbst's *The Executioner Waits*, the best, I think, of all revolutionary novels dealing with the middle class. The flaws I found in its predecessor, *Pity Is Not Enough*, do not exist in this book. Those of us who come from the middle class can see ourselves and our fathers and mothers in Miss Herbst's novel. The people in *The Executioner Waits* are representative of millions of Americans, and yet they are sharply and unmistakably individuals. They are living human beings, eagerly pursuing their own ends, and yet they are the instruments of great impersonal forces. The reader never thinks of Miss Herbst as imposing Marxist conceptions on the material of the novel; these conceptions inevitably emerge from the substance of her story. She has almost perfectly integrated her intimate knowledge of the kind of person with whom her life has been spent with the broader insight given by the study of economic change and by familiarity with other classes. Her style, though growing naturally out of the careful commonplaceness of the prose of her early work, has become beautifully flexible. When we are asked what we mean by talking about Marxist novels of the middle class, we can now point to *The Executioner Waits*.

What Josephine Herbst has succeeded in doing is what Arnold B. Armstrong failed to achieve in *Parched Earth*. There is a certain disparity between Armstrong's knowledge of social tendencies and his understanding of human beings, and as a result his novel is at times schematic. This effect is heightened, I am now inclined to think, by his attempt to make his characters symbolic. Fortunately, the symbolism, though it provided hostile critics with a point of attack, is less important than the straightforward portrayal of life in a representative American town, with its workers, its business men, and the boss. Only at the end is the symbolism prominent, and there it is justified by the dramatic impressiveness of the idea of revolution that is portrayed. Aside from the symbolism, however, the novel is marred by the author's reliance on superficial details for the charac-



Crockett Johnson

"Was it Marx, Lenin, or Gen. Johnson who said: 'The general strike is quite another matter?'"

terization of minor persons in the story. This weakness is made particularly palpable when Armstrong's methods are contrasted with Miss Herbst's complete and unfailing insight into even the least of her characters.

Maxwell Bodenheim's *Slow Vision* also suffers from superficiality. There is a mass of details here, but many of these details do not serve to bring us any closer to the hero and heroine. Moreover, the novel is weakened—and this is strange in view of Bodenheim's long experience as a writer—by a great deal of direct exposition. To some extent these defects are offset by the author's intimate knowledge of the kind of lives he is describing, and there are many authentic episodes, but on the whole the book is disappointing.

Both Bodenheim and Edward Newhouse have written about the direct effects of the depression, and it seems to me that the younger author has done much the better job. *You Can't Sleep Here* is a slighter book than *The Executioner Waits*, but it has the same firmness of touch. The hard-boiled journalistic style falters now and then and becomes a mere mannerism, but for the most part it is admirably sustained. And it does what Newhouse wants it to do. He knows how to use understatement, and the last scene, when the dwellers in Hooverville are defending their homes, is, for all its simplicity, shot through with revolutionary implications. Newhouse is completely free from the kind of self-consciousness that so often enters into revolutionary writing. His heroine, as several critics have pointed out, is an idea rather than a person, but his hero is entirely real, and the hero's development from passive sympathy with the revolutionary cause to active Communism is flawlessly natural.

I have left to the next-to-the-last the most difficult book on the list to talk about, Waldo

Frank's *Death and Birth of David Markand*. The emphasis Frank places in this book on personal salvation seems to me both historically and psychologically false. That is, I do not believe that such experiences as Markand's are in any sense representative, nor can I believe that they are necessary either for the individual's development or for the growth of the revolutionary movement. Yet I regard *The Death and Birth of David Markand* as an important book, and I think it has been given singularly shoddy treatment by the reviewers in the capitalist press. For one thing, even if what goes on inside Markand's mind seems unreal, what goes on in the world about him is real enough. I am not impressed by the scenes in which Markand alternately finds and loses his soul, but I am impressed by such scenes as those in the Kansas speakeasy, the offices of the Farmers' Guild paper, and the Kentucky mining town. And even at its worst, the novel is significant as the expression of Frank's mind. Wrong-headed as he seems to me to be, I honor him for his persistence and his honesty. *The Death and Birth of David Markand* is a novel into which a man has, with infinite pains, poured the whole of himself. Novels of that sort are too rare to be ignored.

Frank dedicates the book to "the American worker who will understand." My pedagogical training makes me wonder if the absence of a comma after "worker" is intentional. I doubt if many American workers will understand the book—or read it, for that matter. If Frank is interested in the kind of novel workers do understand and read, I recommend B. Traven's *The Death Ship* to him. For a good many reasons American workers have never heard of Traven, but hundreds of thousands of European workers read his novels. For all that he is better known abroad than in this country, he is an American, and I think we should hasten to claim his work as an important addition to our proletarian literature. Traven is unspoiled; he is a worker first of all and only incidentally a writer. His book does not hew to the Party line, but he knows what the class struggle is because he has fought in it. I hope we are going to have more of his books in this country.

It has been a year of enormous gains. New writers have appeared. Sympathizers have drawn closer to the movement. Accepted revolutionary writers have surpassed themselves. Despite the dread terrors of the American RAPP (which can be discovered only in certain Times Square imaginations), there is variety here, in theme and method, as well as vitality. Such vitality can be found nowhere else in American literature in 1934. It has not been a good year for the enemies of the revolutionary movement. If the works I have discussed were left out of account, it would prove a singularly empty year for American letters. And novels by Thomas Boyd, Myra Page, James Steele, and Tillie Lerner are already announced for 1935!

GRANVILLE HICKS.