

Book Supplement

AUTHORS' FIELD DAY

A Symposium on Marxist Criticism

The editors of THE NEW MASSES wrote more than thirty authors whose books had been reviewed in the magazine asking them whether the criticism of their work in THE NEW MASSES has helped them and also what they expected from Marxist criticism. We print below all the answers received in time for publication. Some of them, however, which exceeded the number of words assigned, have been abridged. At the conclusion of the symposium there is a general editorial comment, together with replies from two reviewers.

Erskine Caldwell

IN SO many words, my complaint against criticism, both revolutionary and static, is that it is about 90 percent soap-suds. All reviewers, as a body, tend to soft-soap the reader, the author, or themselves. The result is a bowlful of lather as full of air, hot or cold according to their political status, as the great out-of-doors. Reading is an experience. I don't see how in the long run anything else can be claimed for it. And if reading is an experience, then it seems to me that the reviewer should report its effect upon him and its probable effect upon the average reader. If a book fails to create an experience, its failure lies not in its technical form, but in its emotional appeal.

It may seem that this is exactly what reviewers are doing. But as a hardened reviewer, I don't think so. My mouth is full of suds and my head swims in a sea of soap-bubbles. A Marxist critic can work up just as much lather from a cake of soap as a capitalist reviewer.

THE NEW MASSES reviewers are already two steps ahead of the field, in that they have achieved a clear-cut view of economic life and that they have at their finger-tips the inspired power to give old words new meanings. Let all of us, critics and would-be critics, throw away the cake of soft-soap. If the book is fine, let's not shampoo the author, but give his creation its due; and likewise if it is terrible, let's not fill our own ears with lather, but bury the book so deep even the worms can't reach it.

Robert Cantwell

I HAVEN'T been conscious of any great assistance from the criticism of my work in THE NEW MASSES. Nor from the criticism of the work of other writers. I was disappointed in the review of *The Land of Plenty*; I had expected a political analysis of the book and the comments made on it were distinguished by their vagueness. *The Land of Plenty* is, quite simply, a work of propaganda. Some of the problems raised in it seem to me to deserve a critical discussion. In one section of the story, for instance, the workers take possession of the factory in spite of a police guard thrown around it. It seemed to me that this seizure of the factory developed naturally out of the situation that had been built up to that point. But when I came to write of the actual details of the seizure I ran into some new problems I had not thought of before—I tried to imagine what would actually happen, in the sort of community I pictured, when the workers entered the factories, what new factors entered a strike situation, what advantages were gained, what new hazards were encountered. It seemed to me too that the problem was important, one the working-class of this country must some day face. When I came to write this, as I say, I was stopped; I couldn't imagine clearly what would happen, and the novel suffers as a result. But I wanted at least to state the problem, in the hope that it might be discussed, critically, that the imaginations of others might be directed to envisioning it more clearly than I could. Perhaps this answers your question of what I expect from the critics. If the limitations of my picture of this event were clearly established, somebody else might be helped to imagine comparable events more concretely. And that seems to me to be a great part of our task as novelists and critics: we can work out, in our own imaginations, some of the problems the working-class must face in actuality; we can fight out on paper some of the real battles that are coming, and so be a little better prepared for them. If we can visualize them concretely, in detail, the terrible costs of progress may be a little reduced.

Why not? Does this kind of criticism seem too detailed and technical? If it seems so, think of the space you wasted in those prolonged, careful, elaborate—and absolutely meaningless—discussions of the difference between the "simple" and the "collective" novel—for instance. If necessary, let the organizers review the strike novels occasionally, and give them space to say what they really think. Let the revolutionary poets, once in awhile, review books on international politics; let the Marxian economists review books of revolutionary verse. But above all stop those hair-splitting analyses of problems that nobody but the critic ever worries about, and get the discussions down to earth.

Jack Conroy

I HAVE been asked to say what I think of the critical policy of THE NEW MASSES and specifically what I think of the criticism of *The Disinherited*. There were minor points in Mike Gold's review that struck me as fallacious, but I am sure that I have been helped by the criticism. I have a sensitive nose for malicious carping, but I could find none of it in Mike's review. Mike was re-affirming that faith in proletarian writers which he held steadfastly when proletarian literature was a laughing stock for all the Olympian critics who have at last been forced to recognize its existence. Max Eastman, in the course of a diatribe against THE NEW MASSES in the current *Modern Monthly*, indignantly cries: "Gold believes that anything written by a ditch-digger or an elevator boy has some inherent excellence, whether the man happens to be able to write or not. He agrees with the Russian, Pletnev, who wanted to base the Institute of Proletarian Culture on the proposition that 'the proletarian artist will be at once an artist and a worker.'"

Horrors! How could anybody be a *bona fide*, 18 carat "artist" and at the same time a worker? We are seeing a re-evaluation of artistic values, and the conception of an "artist" as an exotic creature remote from the everyday affairs of the working class is one illusion THE NEW MASSES is effectually shattering, and this accounts for the singular

fury with which the magazine is being attacked by "artists" unwilling to descend from their lofty pedestals atop the Sacred Grove to mingle with the sweaty, vulgar workers. If Mike Gold never writes another word of criticism, he has earned the gratitude of proletarian writers and readers for his dogged insistence that there is an "inherent excellence" in the writing of workers who feel deeply and portray as best they can, even if crudely, the vital things about their existence. The stale Bohemian writer, recognizing the vigor of the new proletarian literature, sadly contemplates his own wilted creative phallus, and howls that the Goddess of Pure Art is being raped by a barbarian.

Margaret Cheney Dawson

I CAN definitely say that the criticism of my book in *THE NEW MASSES* has helped me, though perhaps less by convincing me of the particular point it attacked than by suggesting a fundamental lack in the whole school of writing to which the book belonged. Your critic complained that, whereas I had done a fair enough job in depicting the futility of the sexual mores of bourgeois intellectuals, I had not shown any connection between this side of their lives and the confusion, emptiness and essential vulgarity of their professional activities. At first it seemed to me that the critic was making the mistake (a frequent one, I believe, in Marxian criticism) of trying to force all materials into a certain mould, and of insisting that every social issue be made explicit to an artificial degree. However, I agree that an author who touches a social question at any angle must have a lively awareness, and must make his readers aware, of the related angles. For failure to do this, the whole school of introspective writing may be fairly indicted. I should not again attempt to draw any scene or tackle any problem without giving my work more body, making it in itself a more coherent statement, and trying to give it a valid relation to its chosen background.

From the Marxian critics, I should want a criticism on just such points. My idea of the function of Marxian criticism is that it should separate the organic from the inorganic in literature—i.e. that it should examine all kinds of writing to discover which elements in it have a life nourished by vital forces, which are sterile repetitions of stuff that once was significant but has now reached the limit of its development, and which are simply devoid of roots, native or borrowed. A number of extraordinarily stupid judgments come from the confusion of these categories, I feel, as when a work that was a healthy growth in a previous period is criticised for its limitations in regard to our own age; or when a book is taken to have no roots, and no serious implications, because these are not exposed in a certain dogmatically defined manner. The opposite seems also to be true of many critics who believe themselves to be literary Marxists—the material counts with them for every-

thing. Such critics do not admit that good material badly handled is dead matter, a piece of pedantry that brings the functioning of the critical intelligence to a dead stop right there.

Obviously these stupidities are not inherent in the Marxian approach, and at their worst, they are a hundred times outweighed by the senselessness of the art for art's sake school, or the no-propaganda-in-art cry. I believe that Marxian criticism is that to which we must turn for any comment that has more validity than the expression of a mere personal preference.

Edward Dahlberg

IN 1926 Mike Gold listed a number of Marxist critics who had the insight and the equipment to examine and evaluate revolutionary novels and poems, but who, up till then, had made no marked impression upon readers or writers. Among them were Max Eastman and Joe Freeman. It is 1934 and what Mike Gold said then still holds. Max Eastman is a renegade; Joe Freeman is a brilliant raconteur and rewrite man. The business of Marxist criticism has fallen into other hands. Joshua Kunitz, our most able critic, who has genuine warmth and sympathy with the problems of the revolutionary writer, has, unfortunately, confined himself to Soviet literature. Granville Hicks has done some pioneering work, but he promiscuously lumps names together, and makes no graduated distinctions between writers, except political ones.

The problems confronting the poet and the novelist, the creative dilemma and the very processes involved in writing, he is either not interested in or does not comprehend. There is still much of the humanist and the theocratic New Englander in his temper. Sometimes one actually gets the impression that Hicks dislikes good writing, and that the nuances and pigments of prose are, if not offensive to him, altogether baroque. Often the reader feels that Hicks would like to annihilate several centuries of sensibilities and start anew. Some of our other critics are vivisectionists and internes who use poems and novels as cadavers. They recall the incident of the comrade who was constantly repeating, "I am only a simple worker, I don't understand literature," but who immediately proceeded to slay every writer, poet and book in sight.

Aside from this our movement should have the greatest culture of our times and the services of the most brilliant pens. And we should therefore be exceedingly wary of "comradely criticism" of writers sympathetic to the revolution and a too devastating analysis of those novelists who are beginning to cast oblique glances at the Communist Party. Unfortunately, five hundred words can in no sense be more than a fractional statement of Marxist criticism. And this should be accepted as an epistle and not as a picture of the entire scene. Doubtless the cumulative effect of all the statements in the symposium will be much nearer the truth than this.

Vardis Fisher

ANY author must discover, it seems to me, that his point of view, as well as the points of view of those who praise him, rests chiefly on prejudice. Reading what critics have to say of my books becomes for me a study in distortions and an attempt to see my own more clearly as they antagonize those of another. With the Marxian point of view, nevertheless, I have a deep but quite unreasonable sympathy; for I see our present difficulties not as class struggle at all but that combination of greed, superstition and fear which still bedevils us. My sympathy is further unreasonable because I object to Marxian criticism for precisely the same reasons that I object to any doctrine that refuses to see in rapacity and exploitation a vicious and inevitable result of that superficial idealism which it supports. The self-defeated ideology of Trotsky shows at its most hopeless extreme the notion that a social state can be founded upon principles to which humanity has never in any degree been educated; and all the more when, as now, we make progress more difficult by investing ourselves with virtues which in fact we do not possess and which history nowhere affirms. I should like a body of criticism, both social and literary, which would make self-knowledge and not self-evasion its bedrock and that would find anyone both deluded and dangerous who attacks persons instead of traditions and ideas. We need to make ruthless application of the scientific point of view to ourselves. But Marxian criticism as I see it still descends to the childishness of personal attack; still clings to a body of stupid tradition concerning heroes and villains; and still rests its whole ideology upon the assumption that human beings are what most unmistakably they are not. And while I am not sure that its adolescent idealism does me any good, I do find in it both earnestness and vitality; and that is hell of a lot more than I can say for certain Olympian and empty aestheticism that still endures in and around New York.

James T. Farrell

NEW MASSES criticisms of my work have never raised challenging issues that warrant reply. I think that *THE NEW MASSES* can be most serviceable to writers by presenting a continuous body of soundly conceived reviews and criticisms which will see both to enlarge the public for relevant work of merit, and to develop in this public an increasingly more exacting and critical set of reading habits.

Critics face the primary task of clarifying their orientation. This problem can be generalized in the statement that critics must organize and inter-relate their conceptions of literature, both as an art and as an instrument of social control. Such an exercise would permit them to formulate a cohesive foundation of principles and hypotheses, and there would be less irrationalism in their work.

he still feels that they often blindly snatch explanations and reasons to explain their appreciations. Likewise, there have been occasions where critics, intending to offer an interpretation of the social backgrounds of American literature have recited a few sociological and economic commonplaces, married to the commonplaces to literary works, and reduced pieces on the intellectual level of the newspapers and popular histories. Likewise, they solved gratuitous problems. Thus, they have illustrated what themes that generalization, "the proletarian author," may utilize, what books will or will not stimulate. They bid fair to endow "the proletarian author" with the same kind of irrelevancy that now enshrouds "the economic man" of the capitalist economy. Although critics have been kinder in their appreciations since the inauguration of the weekly *NEW MASSES*, they are not free from the vice of revolutionary dogmatism. This vice is largely the product of a hypostasized conception of social classes, based upon the obvious of definitions and the abstractions of the most unmistakably and fully revealed phenomena of class struggle. In freeing themselves from this vice, and by reviewing gratuities, they can concentrate on some of their most important problems. Literary traditions, no more than the principles of science, are the property of one class. One of the main problems is that of perceiving qualities of human use and worth in books and literary conditions which can be carried over into a new class system without any essential loss of their worth and use.

Critics have praised dreary writing, largely because of the author's revolutionary subject matter or his good intentions. If authors must be praised for their revolutionary intentions, I would suggest a division of sections. Besides reviews and criticisms, let there be a new department created under the name of Department of Professional Encouragement.

Virgil Geddes

Literary critics, of course, are notoriously neglectful of books of plays and dramatic criticism. They know practically nothing of what goes on in the theatre and for the most part are unable to judge a play in print from the level of literature. They will review a volume like Dos Passos's *Three Plays*, to be sure, but because Dos Passos is a novelist, not because his plays are or are not important. Scores of inferior novels, books of poetry, etc., are reviewed each week in our journals, but plays have to make three times as much noise in the world even to be considered on their merits.

The dramatist, then, as far as criticism on his work is concerned, is neither helped nor hindered from the critical and literary press. He is simply left in the dark and neglected. This is less true of our revolutionary magazines, because revolutionaries have a higher regard for the theatre as a social value. But in here this condition has not been entirely

remedied. The superior attitude toward dramatic writing has not yet been overcome.

I suggest, then, a consideration of playwrights as writers. On the revolutionary side during the past year there has been, I believe, as much good work done in the play form as in the novel and in poetry. Its quality, its reach and its contemporary interest compare well with the work of other writers.

You ask: "What do you expect from Marxian critics?"

So far, Marxian analysis has been valuable to me in a broad and general way rather than in any specific sense. It has given me a broader historical consciousness, without which no writer can develop and mature. There has been little change in my writings since the recent and more concentrated spread of the Marxian viewpoint in America. A look at my past work shows me that for many years it has been developing in the direction which Marxian analysis stands for and encourages.

I am for criticism with virus and a revolutionary bias: they give it effect, value and result. The application of strict Marxian criticism to literature, however, tends to be more of a criticism on a work rather than of it. There should be more interest in men and their work for what they are than for what they are not.

Robert Gessner

I HAVE not thought it the function of a writer to pen elaborate criticisms to his critics, a "bourgeois habit" which creates and maintains the circulation of those incestuous organs you see in the Greenwich Village bookshops. Why then am I as a revolutionary writer criticizing a revolutionary critic? Because we revolutionaries have in common an interest which transcends any aesthetic quibbling; we are interested, or should be if we are at all revolutionary, in perfecting our writing as a force aiding the proletariat in a Communist revolution.

What kind of criticism then should a revolutionary writer expect from a revolutionary magazine? His work should be given the closest scrutiny from the point of view of Marxism-Leninism as to its value for the proletariat in formulating and intensifying their movement toward rebellion. What criticism did my poem *Upsurge* get from one of the editors of *THE NEW MASSES*? Simply an aesthetic analysis. This revolutionary critic concerned himself solely with image and diction, complaining that "the imagery lacks inevitability; sometimes it is frankly questionable . . . occasionally . . . unpleasantly superfluous . . . overlong stretches of violent language." Such phrases are more at home in a Village sheet, or in company with the aesthetic critic of the Nation, who was so "astonished" that *Upsurge* was a "book," "not a poem or a series of poems." Aesthetics may be important, but the editor of the revolutionary *NEW MASSES* should not give only aesthetic criticism; and from that standard alone take a superior attitude of condemnation through faint praise,

labeling *Upsurge* "a valiant attempt." The same holds for Alfred Hayes' review in the *Daily Worker*, when he complained of my violent language, punctuation and reference to lice. Lice, as Michael Gold long pointed out, means poverty; it may be too bad for aesthetic reasons, but in proletarian poetry poverty cannot be ignored. However, no so-called revolutionary critic has yet criticized *Upsurge* as to its revolutionary intent.

Consequently I can't say that the criticisms to date of my work in *THE NEW MASSES* has helped me (letters from unaesthetic, class-conscious workers have), because it has not been revolutionary criticism based on Marxism-Leninism. Instead it has been superficial aestheticism derived from bourgeois hang-overs. Earl Browder in the first quarterly issue called attention to such treatment of Gellert's lithographs. For how much longer will such criticism continue to contradict the columns of a revolutionary magazine devoted to the proletarian revolution?

Lauren Gilfillan

THE review in *THE NEW MASSES* helped—but slightly. I sense a one-sided understanding.

I am glad when people say my book has significance, but the book is printed and past mending.

Adverse criticism and comparison should be stimulating. But I was disappointed. However: the reviewer explains my position relative to a "cutie" hanging about the outskirts of strike activities. I had hoped that the intelligent reader would be aware of my awareness, i. e., that I was treating myself objectively as a "Smith College girl." Personalities should be left out of literary criticisms. I had thought the reader would realize and accept the conscious limitations of my book. There were not to be "further steps." The book stops at a certain point and there it is. Books should be taken for what they are and judged for their worth. In this book my only thesis was humanity itself—the incredible conditions under which humans can still exist.

I want to understand and consider Marxian critics as I wish them to understand and consider me. I am American bourgeois, traditionally white-collar, not a foreigner.

I feel, as Mr. Kallet says, that "Marxists have never mastered the mechanics of American mass opinion." I feel that perhaps I am more in sympathy with the masses than Marxists I have met. I am even better able perhaps to speak the language of the American masses than my comrade associates. Therefore I reject their ignorant patronage as they resent mine.

I believe in the "predestined victory of the proletariat," but I feel that America will not soon call itself proletariat. It is a foreign word.

Marxism to me is one of a group of philosophies with the same ultimate end. But it

seems most workable and practical for the masses, and therefore I prefer it. I do not feel myself "above the battle." I am fighting for life itself. Why should I "come humbly?" I prefer pride—mankind's rightful heritage, and I will fight for it. I will not "try hard to be revolutionary." I am revolutionary. But Communism is not the only kind of revolution. Have you ever read Bellamy? He shows how the masses can rise without conventional revolution.

What was it Lenin said about "the infantile sickness of left Communism?" I should recommend for the Marxists less awkwardness, more manners—more polishing of the diamond. The good things of the past should not be thrown away. To be steely-strong and steely-flexible.

Also don't despise humor. You know, laughter is next to still waters.

Josephine Herbst

THE first half of Granville Hicks' review of *Pity Is Not Enough* was taken up with a discussion of the probable conflicts in my different personal attitudes in writing the book. Its purpose was apparently to show that the material was not relevant. All this labor was given to attack one of the first historical native novels that attempted a realistic portrayal of the past. For James T. Farrell, Horace Gregory and Edwin Seaver, to mention only three left-wing critics who reviewed the book in other places, *Pity Is Not Enough* was obviously written to explain our American present. Nowhere in Hicks' review does he seem to gather the significance of this story that deals with the defeat of rugged individualism at the hands of the capitalistic system. The story is about one of the thousands of eager men who did not succeed in our era of expansion that piled up the great fortunes. That the system, not color blindness, or frustrated love or inherited syphilis is the cause of the failure is clear on every page. To whom is such a book not relevant? Has that class completely disappeared like the dodo bird or is it still with us convinced that "a little capital" may even get it out of the depression. They are still with us or the Communist Party would be millions strong. Their fate still needs interpretation.

But my chief shaft against the type of criticism my book has drawn upon it in THE NEW MASSES refers to a later article dealing with the historical novel in which *Pity Is Not Enough* is given one disparaging line. Here was a book that in the earlier review Granville Hicks even, termed important and resourceful and rich and yet such are the exigencies of the critical life that nothing survives but the faint words that the book is not relevant. The old bogey raises its head and it is all that it does raise. In that article, only the negative phases of historical treatment are presented with any conviction. Cather and Wilder are dragged in for what they are not, but where is Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? Where is Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of*

Courage. And if I may say so modestly, where is my own book that does not present a flattering dreamlike picture of the past which the critic so lustily deploras. I have been left out in very good company. But what is important to point out is the contradiction in Granville Hicks' assigning me to the irrelevant heap at the same time that he makes continual references to novelists who can have no importance to any vital writer today. Cather and Wilder merely clutter up the picture, what they have to give can be gotten from better sources, and in fact Hicks only refers to them for what they cannot give. As for Henry James, the mere mention of his name assumes the presence and importance of a class for whom *Pity Is Not Enough* cannot possibly be irrelevant. And we come to the chief contradiction in Hicks' critical method. Hicks might assume that only an audience strictly proletarian was of value. He does not so assume as he quite obviously writes for the same people as I, those border people who are falling by the wayside and whose tragic background *Pity Is Not Enough* took such pains to reveal. He is directing his energies, as his references imply, to the middle class, the lower middle class, the intellectuals, those people so beautifully designated as swamp people who in the final disintegration have no place of their own, who must throw their forces with the proletariat or perish. The question simply is, are these people worth writing about and for? Hicks thinks so, for himself; for me, a creative writer, apparently there is another measuring rod.

Granville Hicks' attitude toward the historical novel as revealed in his article shows he knows too little about it. No one can hand out themes for any creative writing but to hand out the Chartist Revolt, the French Revolution and the Paris Commune to writers in this country who have marvelous material like gold nuggets lying all around them, is the most completely revealing irrelevancy I ever saw and it makes me wonder if Hicks and I understand the same thing by that word.

Criticism should broaden the base of creative writing, not narrow it. It is a pretty general flaw with NEW MASSES criticism, and Hicks is by no means the only one guilty, that it is niggardly and patronizing. I want robust enjoyment of writing again.

John Howard Lawson

I HAVE already expressed rather fully my own specific reaction to a review of my work in THE NEW MASSES. When I objected to Mike Gold's critique of my plays on the ground that it was an "unbalanced attack and failure to weigh tendencies," some of my friends wrongly assumed that I expected Marxian criticism to be mild, tepid and unemotional—to maintain the sort of fake-alloofness which is one of the pretenses of liberals! Obviously, such a notion would be completely alien to the nature of proletarian criticism, which must be alive with the passion of genuine partisanship.

My special interest lies in the field of theater. In looking over THE NEW MASSES since January, I find the dramatic reviews have been somewhat irregular, and neither incisive nor as scientific as one might wish. By far the best theatrical review is Mike Gold's brilliant write-up of "Stevenson" which combines great and stirring enthusiasm with a clear study of the play. The intensity of the critic's feeling, the fullness and depth of the emotion aroused, add to the awareness of faults.

In the field of book-reviews (and particularly in dealing with the bourgeois novel), I find a tendency toward vagueness and lack of punch. Most of the bourgeois novels published at the present time are rather alike in the quality of frustration, cynicism and aesthetic smartness. However, I think our critics have a way of being too conventional and general in describing this frustration. For instance, the reviews of *Out of Life* by Myron Brin and *An Altar in the Fields* by Ludwig Lewisohn and *Tender is the Night* by Scott Fitzgerald, *The Unpossessed* by Tess Slesinger—these reviews, and those of other novels of the same style, are completely sound—but the news that another writer of fiction has written another story of middle class decay is not especially revealing or important. If these books are worth reviewing at all, it seems to me necessary to go a little deeper into the particular content of the author's point of view—to isolate the particular germ of frustration, to show the author's special relation to bourgeois currents of thought. Such an analysis (of novels which have enough stuff in them to be worth analysing) might be of considerable historical value.

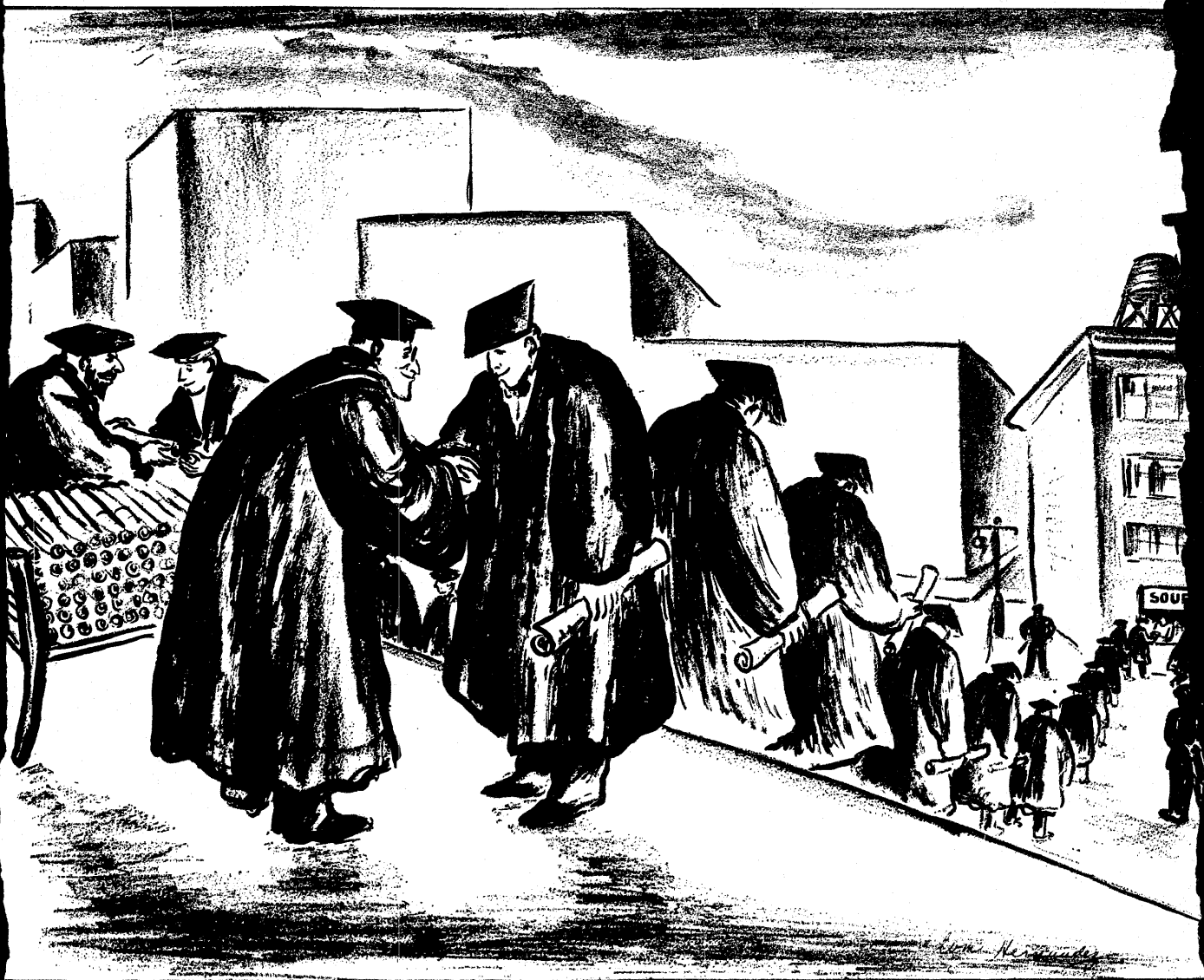
Henry Hart

I ASSUME this discussion is to be confined to what an author thinks of the critic who reviewed his book in THE NEW MASSES.

Anyone who believes capitalism is criminal and anti-social and can be extirpated only by revolution, is *ipso facto* obligated to bury personal irritation for the good of the cause. Bury it, perhaps all it is humanly possible to do, though, is, of course, if your book got a sock in the eye or a tap on the nose.

The latter, I think (Mr. Seaver may have intended otherwise), is all my book got, and my irritation undoubtedly has its inception in my pathetic wish that Mr. Seaver had urged every comrade to read it and treasure it as classic. My rationalization of the irritation, however, took the following form.

I felt it was irrelevant to deplore my not having dealt with the class struggle *per se* when my theme was the depiction of the fertility of the individual will to power in a corrupt society. I felt that my book, in illuminating the mechanism by which democracy was transformed into a plutocracy that has become fascist since the Civil War, had considerable social significance and a whole lot to say to the readers of THE NEW MASSES could read with profit and, I would like to believe, with enjoyment.



William Hernandez

My rationalized irritation, therefore, assumes the guise of an attack on the method, the tactic, of book reviewing in a radical periodical. I arrive at this contention: that the anti-Revolution struggle must be conducted on all fronts and converts won by many means, and that all honest books presenting life as it actually is (to do this the author must necessarily be aware of and concern himself with the all-pervasive corruption of capitalism) should not be indicted under the blanket diagnosis of class-consciousness deficiency. Blanket diagnoses are always lazy.

On the general thesis of social versus aesthetic criticism, I think there can no longer be disagreement. Everyone believes, or should, that such archetypal concepts as pure beauty and similar frames of reference are adolescent and unworthy of anyone who loves life. The value of the kind of criticism THE NEW MASSES prints is to be found chiefly, I think, in its influence upon critics in the capitalist press and upon the capitalist publishers. With both of these animals I have had, and have, considerable to do, and I think I can testify that day-dreaming and romancing in both re-

viewing and publishing are perceptibly decreasing with an ever increasing velocity. To have instilled *any* awareness of the actual world into some critics and some publishers justifies any moment of uncompromising insistence upon the class aspects of literature.

In the end, I think, it comes down to this: it is better to be brave and overemphatic than to be safe and on-the-other-hand. So my deepest feeling is that THE NEW MASSES critics should hew to the Party line and let the chips fall where they may.

Myra Page

I'VE no interest in putting our critics on the spot. My quarrel is, we're getting too little of the real stuff.

Most writers feel as I do—our revolutionary literature is in need of a mature, well-grounded criticism. We want the help in mastering our craft which this could give. But standards come high. For critics, as writers. From a Marxian critic I expect some measure at least of what I found in Luna-

charsky's articles on Gorky, in Lenin's "Tolstoy as a Mirror of the Revolution." The literary method Marx and Engels developed in their correspondence with LaSalle, Minnie Kautsky, and other writers.

We can't expect our critics to be Marx or Lenin (nor writers, Shakespeare). We can expect a firm grasp on the method they use. That our critic knows his stuff. Literature and what makes literature. This means in the first place, socially estimating a writer and his work. Placing both in dynamic and class perspective. And a critical dialectical analysis of his images, methods, composition.

This social and class approach is what differentiates Marxian from bourgeois critics. Many of our critics, however, have freed themselves only in part from the old bourgeois methods and approach in which they've been schooled. (Like to illustrate. Can't. That outrageous 500 word limit.) "Art is a Weapon," they repeat, but in practice, forget. That they're not in the classroom or salon, but speaking for and to a class fighting to destroy and rebuild the world. A class for whom books are necessarily a weapon. In-

their first concern remains (as with the critic's) "What's wrong with this piece?" "Is it really good art?"—and some, with spleen-venting, strutting their stuff, pettifog, get things out of focus. The series on "Revolution and the Novel!" a pioneering attempt. Stimulating in its approach, but a strange mixture of English Literary Studies and Marxian treatment.

In Reply to Authors

WE BELIEVE that these letters will interest readers of the magazine, and trust that they will prove of value to its writers. We do wish, however, that we had set beside them the dozens of letters that we have received from readers in appreciation and praise of particular reviews and of the magazine section in general. We are glad that we decided to give the authors their day in court, but we are not convinced that they have said the final word.

It will be observed that most of the contributors to this symposium have paid more attention to the first question that was asked than they have to the second. This is not natural, but it is not precisely fair, for it seems that the critic's primary aim is to help the author. But the critic is, after all, chiefly responsible to the readers, and his influence on writers is often most effective when it is indirect. His function is much more nearly defined in a sentence in James T. Farrell's preface: "I think that THE NEW MASSES can be most serviceable to writers by presenting a continuous body of soundly conceived reviews and criticisms which will seek both to enlarge the public for relevant works of merit, and to develop in this public an increasingly more discriminating and critical set of reading habits." But Farrell—not surprisingly, of course, in view of the limitations on his space—does not explain what he means by "soundly conceived" or "relevant works of merit," nor does he name the particular public for which THE NEW MASSES reviewers are trying to write. And it is precisely on these points that difficulties arise. The kind of impressionism that W. D. Howells and Skelton Caldwell demands is not enough. On the contrary, the great strength of NEW MASSES criticism is, as Margaret Cheney Lawson says, that it "has more validity than the expression of a mere personal responsibility." After all, revolutionary criticism, quite as much as revolutionary fiction, is a weapon of the class struggle, and every reviewer must take this into consideration, not only in estimating the particular book he happens to be criticizing, but also in planning the effect his review is to make on readers of THE NEW MASSES. He is speaking for a class and in the interests of a class, and there is no place in his work for irresponsible individualism.

Obviously the task of THE NEW MASSES critics is difficult. We know how often reviewers—our reviewers included—give the impression that they regard themselves as the

I'm for stiff criticism. Stiff self-criticism, too. We writers can take it. Even like it. We want to master our job, grow. But we expect our critics to draw us nearer to our readers, not the reverse—and to approach us with that warm acceptance of "Ours," criticizing in a spirit and manner that will send us back to our desks, eager to tackle our next and bigger job.

sacred priests of some mystic cult and that they look upon their dicta as inspired and unquestionable. It will, we believe, do them good to learn what the authors they criticize think about them. But it occurs to us that the authors, when they turn critics, as most of them at some time or other do, prove no more satisfactory to their victims, and we wonder why they do not learn from this. Moreover, as an examination of the letters shows, writers want very different things from critics, and it would be altogether impossible to satisfy them all. There are more and greater problems than some of these writers realize, and they can be solved only if authors and critics work together.

If time had permitted, we should have turned each letter over to the reviewer concerned. As it is, we have only been able to invite replies from the two members of our own staff who happen to be named, and these replies are printed below. If other reviewers wish to make some response, our columns are, of course, open to them. And we should be very glad to hear what the Average Reader thinks of both our authors and our critics.

THE EDITORS.

Since several of the foregoing letters refer explicitly to reviews I wrote, and since some of the references seem to me unfair, I am glad to have this occasion to reply. Robert Cantwell says that "*The Land of Plenty* is, quite simply, a work of propaganda." I do not know what he means, and I doubt if he does. I reviewed it as a serious attempt to portray the lives of representative factory workers. For what seemed to me good reasons, I had to review it briefly. I indicated Cantwell's success in describing factory life and the states of mind it breeds, and I spoke of the conclusion as weak. That this defect is due to a breakdown of imagination, in itself the result of inexperience, Cantwell correctly realizes. But it does not seem to me that he raises the problem cogently enough for his novel to deserve the political discussion he demands. It strikes me, indeed, that to publish what one recognizes as a faulty novel in order to stimulate political discussion is a curious procedure, and I wonder if it is not an idea that has occurred to Cantwell after the event. If Cantwell saw so clearly that he needed that sort of criticism, I do not see why he did not turn over the draft of his book to one of the experts of the T.U.U.L. A

reviewer naturally has to select among many comments that he might make. Under some circumstances he might well find himself compelled to treat strike strategy. But *The Land of Plenty* seems to me so remote from fundamental issues in its portrayal of the strike that almost any critic would find that there were much more important points for him to treat even if he had considerably more space at his disposal than I did.

As for Josephine Herbst, it seems to me that she completely distorts the issue. I do not say that the material of her novel is irrelevant; that would be foolish. I said that she very imperfectly perceives and conveys its relevance. I may be wrong, but that is my issue, and on that issue she says nothing new.

Edward Dahlberg's statements that I make "no graduated distinctions between writers except political ones," and that "one actual gets the impression that Hicks dislikes good writing," are as ridiculous as they are baited and deserve no comment. I am, however, genuinely sorry that some of the writers found nothing of value in my series on *Revolution and the Novel*. It was frankly experimental and, I had thought, judging from a certain number of letters, not wholly unsuccessful. That my approach was rather artificial and schematic I knew, and I regretted that it had to be, but I thought I had qualified my categories strongly enough and explained my method clearly enough to offset this fault. It occurs to me that authors might approach the reading of critical articles with the same patience and attention and willingness to cope with difficulties that they demand from the reviewers of their books.

GRANVILLE HICKS.

Upon rereading my review of *Upsurge*, I find Gessner's complaints are based on a hypothesis grievously removed from the facts. He claims that I offered "simply an aesthetic analysis." An examination shows that less than half of my review was devoted to aesthetic analysis, the rest to the book's revolutionary content and "revolutionary intent"—all of which Gessner claims I did not do.

A revolutionary critic faced with a book like *Upsurge* neglects his duty if he does not try to analyze its failings. The denigration of aesthetic analysis as "superficial aestheticism derived from bourgeois hang-overs" and the implication that aesthetic analysis contradicts the growth of revolutionary literature are not merely absurdities but dangers. Fortunately most American revolutionary writers appreciate the importance of aesthetic problems "in perfecting our writing as a force aiding the proletariat in a Communist revolution." Indeed, the revolutionary movement has a right to demand the highest standards of art. It is hard to believe, therefore, that Gessner's comment raises any real problem of Marxist criticism—particularly in view of his having written me that my criticism of *Upsurge* was "the most intelligent" which he had seen.

STANLEY BURNSHAW.