



PROBING WRITERS' PROBLEMS

A discussion article by ISIDOR SCHNEIDER

DURING the past months the staff of *NEW MASSES*, together with contributors and friends, have been meeting to discuss the work of the magazine. Three such sessions were held on culture. Most of the participants being writers, these sessions became, in effect, writers' meetings. Many divergent views were expressed. Here, in a necessarily condensed form, I present my views, which had the support of most of those present. I hope that articles presenting all viewpoints, and in greater detail than is possible in this summary, will emerge from the discussion. They will be offered to our readers as they reach us.

The discussion could be listed under three general heads: The State of Marxist Criticism; Contributions of the Left to American Criticism; and The Relation of the Socially Conscious Writer to the Labor Movement.

THE STATE OF MARXIST CRITICISM

IT WAS the reluctant general conclusion that no formulated Marxist criticism exists, serving, as do Marx's *Capital*, Lenin's *State and Revolution* or Stalin's *On the National Question* in their fields. (It should be added that no general, non-Marxist canon of critical principles exists either.) The best esteemed, formal Marxist critical writings are those of Plekhanov and Mehring. But even Plekhanov's are meager and mainly useful as examples of method, and Mehring's are not available in English translation. As for the comments on culture by Marx and Engels, they are fragmentary and incidental, and of value chiefly as cautions against rigid and schematic formulations.

Other countries are perhaps somewhat better served than ours. England, for example, in Christopher Caudwell's *Illusion and Reality*, integrating recent advances in the social sciences, to establish the social role of literature. Such works as the fiction of Aragon, with its mature understanding of the inter-functioning of the individual and society and its secure Marxist sense of history, might imply a comparatively advanced French

criticism. And, by report, Germany before the Nazi eclipse had a well developed Marxist criticism.

Because of its socialist nature, Soviet criticism will inevitably have much to contribute, but from what has reached us, not immediately. Much of its content has been polemics on issues too localized in Soviet trends to establish general principles, and too little applicable to our current problems to be helpful as method. Better suited to us would be the work of the great pre-revolutionary Russian social critics like Byelinsky, Chernychevsky and Pissarev whose work was done in a comparable period of social ferment.

There is a need for a closer interaction of these separate developments. American Marxists can strive, without feeling undue handicaps, to win a socialist competition in the creation of a Marxist criticism.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE LEFT

WHEN Marxist principles have been established in criticism it is likely to turn out that their main lines were already drawn in the social criticism of the Left. The impact of this criticism in its most influential period, the middle thirties, did not come from original contributions. For the criticism was, essentially, a restatement in more accurate, Marxist terms, of the effects of the social environment, upon culture, already observed by such great nineteenth-century critics as Taine, Georg Brandes and the American, Vernon Parrington (*Main Currents in American Thought*).

What gave the work of the Left critics of the thirties its impact was their enthusiasm, tenacity and their boldness in applying social criticism to current work. With these they won a major intellectual victory. To place a work within its social frame has now become an obligation of the critic. Indeed, it is the only, so far, established critical principle that I know of. Even critics on the Right are compelled to use it and only renegades vainly seek to discredit it.

However, in the course of their cam-

paign, critics of the Left used a number of incidental concepts which have since lost their value. For some time they have merely served as epithets and no longer as critical instruments. Among them are terms like "escapism," the "ivory tower" and "decadence."

"ESCAPISM"

IN OCTOBER 1930, when Mike Gold first made use of the idea of literary "escape" in reviewing the books of Thornton Wilder, it was succinct, apt and electrifying. It challenged the assumptions of the "esthetic" criticisms of the time, exposing its evasions of reality. It was a well-timed battle cry, and it directed the militant, social consciousness of the period. But it was hardly a critical instrument, hardly a measure of literary values. From the first it rendered moral rather than esthetic judgments.

For that reason it became, for both sides, a device for moral pressure. Reactionaries in Hollywood, for example, defend the world of "escapism" as a world of beauty and virtue opposed to evil and ugly reality. Thereby they seek to detour criticism of the shallowness, hypocrisy, dullness, and confusion of their work.

But prudery crept into the other side as well. I can illustrate with an anecdote. A friend seeing me with a volume of poems, wisecracked, "Escapist!" Later, seeing him with a mystery story, I wisecracked back, "Escapist!" "No," rationalized my friend, "I read this to know how to meet plots against the Party."

Thus the concept was blunted into a club against imagination and relaxation, against the satisfaction of human needs, properly among the functions of culture. As a critical tool, "escapism" thus became too misshapen from its overload of marginal associations for any precise use.

THE IVORY TOWER AND DECADENCE

SIMILAR histories lie behind the "ivory tower" and "decadence." From critical instruments these terms too have

been dulled into epithets. Through their misuse mistakes have been made in the evaluations of masters as well as of current writers. The misevaluation of Henry James is a case in point.

In such misuses Left criticism has sometimes been diverted from its main direction into culturally reactionary by-paths. Thus, as moral pressures were substituted, in these terms, for critical analysis, important functions in the creative process were misunderstood and even denied. There was a tendency to use them to restrict the area of experiment in form and exploration into states of consciousness. But that area is as vital to the arts as the corresponding area of "pure science" is vital to the sciences. It would surely be unwise to continue on ways of thinking that have led us to confine the brilliant work of a Kenneth Burke into an "ivory tower" not of Burke's construction but a mirage of our own; or to dispose of the vast contribution of James Joyce on the "dung heap of decadence" to which some over-literal left-wing critics have consigned him along with other important writers of our age.

ON "OFFICIAL ART"

RECOGNITION of the social role of the writer involves a recognition of his social responsibility. This is acknowledged, now, on the Right as well as the Left. Since T. S. Eliot's public affiliation to the church and the crown, the Left writer's affiliation, formal or informal, to organizations of the labor movement is no longer a phenomenon.

But where is the Left writer to look for authority? There was a suggestion that the NEW MASSES constitute itself the cultural authority for the Left on the grounds that, in any event, what appears in the magazine is presumed to be "official." All the editors of the magazine concur in rejecting such a role, and readers will be mistaken if they regard opinions in the cultural section of NEW MASSES as "official" pronouncements. There were many citations from experience given at the meeting to show the dangers of such a role.

In particular the Soviet experience was pointed to. It was recalled that, for a period of about three years, ending in 1932, the RAPP (Association of Revolutionary Writers), in collaboration with similar organizations in the other arts, secured virtual control of Soviet culture. Their "official," leftist program brought the arts to a standstill, and Soviet culture did not pick up momentum again until the government intervened, dissolved RAPP and its allied

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THE WRITER AND THE LABOR
MOVEMENT

IT WAS the sense of the meetings that the safest authority, as yet, is the writer's own experience. Through the reactions of labor audiences and the organizational or agitational work that he does, the writer gradually defines his responsibilities to the labor movement.

These experiences, as I have observed them, involved a complex interaction. The writer who took his stand with the labor movement necessarily made sacrifices. To begin with, he took risks in his career. His writing for the needy "Left" publications was done without payment. Impressed by the great and urgent needs of the labor movement he sometimes assumed disproportionate obligations to the neglect of his writing. The sense of emergency even led him at times to subordinate artistic values in his work to what he felt to be pressing political need. Projecting inner pressures outward, he imagined appeals and reproaches that were never made, and often took the description of a crisis as a hinted demand.

On the other hand the political people he was in contact with were overburdened men and women trying to manage a continuing emergency with a chronic manpower shortage. However sensitive and broad visioned they might be, immediate need often led them to take advantage of what appeared to be willingly offered services.

Writers sometimes showed manuscripts to labor leaders on the assumption that that was expected of them. On similar assumptions they sometimes took an adverse review of their work in the Left press, as an official repudiation. In both cases, of course, the assumptions were wrong.

Such mistaken assumptions are less likely now. The atmosphere of the labor movement that made them possible has changed. Fifteen years of intensive experience with thousands of writers, painters, musicians and other cultural workers have had their influence.

In effect the experience of the Left writer has oscillated between two poles. At one the writer obliterates his literary self in the role of organizer. This of course is no solution of the general problem, however, it may serve the individual as a personal solution. At the other is the obliteration of his labor affiliations with the writer withdrawing more and more until his participation is restricted to the occasional contribution of his sig-

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nature. However this may satisfy his self opinion, it has proved of little value to the labor movement.

TIME AND THE MOMENT

VIRTUALLY all writers think in terms of work they hope will endure. They also expect it of their work in the labor movement. But in actual practice they often find themselves writing for the moment — to report immediate events or to propagandize for immediate objectives.

This is an honorable as well as useful function. Similarly it is a useful as well as honorable function to produce lasting works. Such works, reflecting reality from a Marxist focus, are of fundamental value to the labor movement.

The harm is in confusing the two. However good reporting and immediate propaganda may be (and in the work of writers like John Reed, Mayakovsky and Ehrenburg it reaches classic stature) the writing done for the moment seldom serves beyond the moment.

Some writers have sought to solve a conflict of conscience by trying to do the two in one. They have written books in such a way as also to serve immediate political expediencies. The results showed either in weakened and schematic writing—or wasted writing. For too often a new emergency contradicted the one the work was to meet.

No writer need worry about being politically correct if his work is faithful to reality. One important aspect of Marxism is its facing up to reality in everything. And the classics are eternally "correct" because they are representations of reality. And that is why the socialist Soviet Union is preeminently the country in which the classics live. The Marxist writer adds this to his advantages: his Marxist understanding enlarges his capacity to understand reality. Let him use it!

Morgenthau on Germany
(Continued from page 14)

be too difficult to find common solutions with him if he can be convinced that other solutions may better or more quickly achieve his basic aims.

Mr. Morgenthau has called his book *Germany Is Our Problem*. Perhaps the book should have another title: *American Policy Towards Germany Is Our Problem*. And this "our"—as the book proves—does not mean only Americans, it means the whole world. For American policy towards Germany is a world problem and the key to many questions that are knotty and full of dangers.

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