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Literary Section

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In Defense of a Term

Joshua Kunitz

NEW MASSES has received from the poet, Walter Lowenfels, the following letter, which raises problems and reflects attitudes of peculiar importance to the left-wing literary movement.

May I suggest that the term "proletarian literature" be laid on the table for a while and the term "people's literature" be used instead? The fact is that a good part of what is called "proletarian verse" has in practice no working-class audience or basic working-class appeal.

On examination we find a class of writers (Auden, Spender, Rukeyser, MacLeish, etc.) who represent the people's struggles for an audience whose base is the middle class, particularly in the intellectual and literary fields. To this a class of critical writing corresponds. Is it not necessary to state that such literature, as a class, has not yet extended its *base* to a people's *front* where it has a fundamental appeal to workers as well as to the middle class? Naturally, all progressives welcome writers whose audience is essentially middle class. Their literature competes favorably with that of Eliot, Cummings, and others for middle-class readers and is of great value in this respect. The competition still takes place, however, in a field where few workers tread. It is not to underestimate the important role the middle class plays to state that this role, to succeed, is based fundamentally on a working-class lead. In this respect, we do have in Hughes, Gold, Sinclair, and the class of writers they represent, a welding of social content into contemporary forms which is directed, basically, to workers, is priced for them, and—as with several recent books—is published for them. Such literature tends to have a middle-class following, too.

Despite the difficulty of following Mr. Lowenfels' reasoning (the formulations are somewhat inexact and confusing), his central idea is clear: Since a good part of what is called "proletarian literature" has in practice "no working-class audience or working-class appeal," let us banish (temporarily) from the critic's lexicon the term "proletarian literature" and substitute instead the term "people's literature." The examples adduced are rather unfortunate. For even if poets like Auden, Spender, Rukeyser, and MacLeish were ever unqualifiedly placed in the proletarian category (which I doubt), it would simply illustrate the misapplication of a term, not its inadequacy. Furthermore, by the author's own admission, these poets constitute only a "good part." But how about the rest, the part that does have a working-class audience and appeal—Langston Hughes, Michael Gold, Upton Sinclair, *et al.*? Well, says Lowenfels, in addition to their working-class audience, these writers are also read by the middle class, hence they can very well fall under the general heading of "people's literature."

Mr. Lowenfels' suggestion is, I believe, symptomatic of an incipient tendency which merits examination. I do not doubt his motives—they are excellent, a turning away from sectarianism. But his argument stems, it seems, from a fundamental misconception not only of the nature and function of the term "proletarian literature," but also of the meaning and purpose of the "democratic front."

First, as to "proletarian literature." It must be remembered that

in all disciplines, including, of course, literary history and criticism, terms are adopted as aids toward observing, describing, classifying, and comprehending actual phenomena. The more nearly a term corresponds to reality the more useful it is as an instrument of knowledge. The question therefore is: Does the term "proletarian literature"—which posits the existence in this country of a proletariat, a proletarian attitude, and proletarian writers to express that attitude—describe a real phenomenon, or is it merely a product of the wishful thinking of a few leftist doctrinaires?

The facts are too obvious to need much elaboration. There certainly is in this country a class which, because of its distinctive origin, experience, and historical perspective—can be properly described as the proletariat. Its origin is contemporaneous with the birth of capitalism. Its experience includes collective work for wages in capitalistically owned plants, stark exploitation, fear of unemployment and actual unemployment, attempts at organization, winning and losing of strikes, poverty, hunger, lockouts, stool pigeons, picket lines, labor leaders and labor racketeers, etc. Its historical perspective is leadership in emancipating America from the throes of a decaying capitalism and the building in its stead of a cooperative Socialist commonwealth. That much most people on the left would agree on.

Unquestionably, too, this class, owing to its distinctive origin, experience, and historical perspective, is possessed of a distinctive, peculiarly working-class psychology and viewpoint. These, however, are rarely revealed in their fullest purity, except in periods of intensified class conflict. One reason is that the workers, in addition to being members of their class, are also many other things—they are, for instance, part of the animal kingdom, members of the human race, citizens of their country; and their psychology, therefore, is the resultant of many experiential elements of various degrees of universality. Another reason is that the workers, despite their unique class experience, are to a considerable extent under the psychological sway of social groups which are alien and even inimical to them, but which are in direct or indirect control of such agencies as the school, the press, the church, the theater, the cinema, the radio.

Still—and this is the point to remember in this connection—while proletarian psychology is the resultant of countless experiences and influences, sometimes conflicting and mutually exclusive, the distinctive proletarian character, the peculiar proletarian quality of the resultant is determined by the special experiences which are distinctive and peculiar to the working class. In the process of its development, through organization and struggle, the proletariat achieves ever greater psychological and ideological homogeneity within its ranks, and exerts increasing gravitational force on the progressive elements in other related classes—the impoverished farmers, the professionals, and the little-business men.

The proletariat is thus the backbone of what we call the "democratic" front.

We are now coming to the crux of the matter. Marxists have always held that writers express the moods, attitudes, ideas, and aspirations of definite classes, generally and most effectively of those classes from which they spring or with which they have been associated for a long time. *A priori*, one would say that the American working class, like the working class in other countries, has produced its exponents in the realm of literature. Our labor unions, the early Socialist movement, the IWW, and now the Communist Party have all had their songsters, fictionists, and dramatists. It was not an accident that as early as 1901, the *Comrade*, a Socialist publication, used the phrase "proletarian poet" to describe working-class writers of verse. Floyd Dell and Mike Gold, in the old *Masses*, continued the tradition. And by 1935, Joseph Freeman, in introducing the anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, could maintain without fear of serious contradiction that "In the past five years, American proletarian literature has made striking progress. The arguments against it are dying down in the fact of actual creative achievement. Life itself has settled the dispute for the most progressive minds of America."

In a sense, and rather contradictorily, Mr. Lowenfels himself admits all this when he refers to Hughes, Gold, Sinclair as "welding of new social content into contemporary forms which are directed, basically, to workers, is priced for them, and—as with several recent books—is published for them." One could mention dozens of American poets, novelists, dramatists, and short-story writers who, not less clearly than the authors mentioned by Mr. Lowenfels, charge their works with *specific* proletarian content. One might go all the way back to Jack London, Arturo Giovannitti, and John Reed. Moreover, as Freeman has pointed out, "the ideas and attitudes reflected in proletarian literature have already had a profound influence on American letters. The theater, the novel, poetry, and criticism have felt the impact of these invigorating ideas; even those writers who do not agree with us have abandoned the ivory tower and begun to grapple with basic American reality, with the social scene."

Obviously, then, the idea of applying the adjective "proletarian" to a special kind of literature arose not in response to a ukase from some extra-literary authority, but spontaneously, in the sphere of literature itself, in response to a keenly felt but not always clearly comprehended new creative trend. Some confusion, especially at first, was inevitable. The term was used loosely and indiscriminately. Some critics insisted that it applied only to such writing as dealt with the life of the working class. Others argued that this was too inclusive, for, conceivably, a novel about the working class might be written by someone from an inimical class with an inimical point of view—such a novel would not be expressing the attitude, experience, and aspiration of the working class—it would not be a proletarian novel. Though the subject matter would be the working class, the novel, properly speaking, would be the expression of the class to which the writer belonged or whose point of view he adopted. This led other critics to maintain that subject matter did not really count, that it was the point of view that was the ultimate criterion. A proletarian writer, it came generally to be accepted, was not restricted in his choice of subject matter: he might write about the workers, to be sure—indeed, he most likely would do just that—but he might also write about the bourgeoisie, or about the sixty families, or about love, or about the moon, or about anything at all in this vast universe. So long as he saw, felt, and treated those things as one whose ideology was proletarian and whose responses were of a proletarian conditioning, he was creating proletarian works.

But whichever view the reader takes, there is certainly no denying the fact that the term "proletarian literature" does describe a real phenomenon in contemporary American letters; that it does help the critic and literary scholar in their work of analysis, classification, and illumination; that it is consequently,

from the point of view of the critics' needs, as useful and exact as literary terms can be, and that there is no good reason for its being discarded.

The argument that proletarian literature has a small working-class audience holds no water. The Bolshevik Party in old Russia had at the beginning of this century a very small following among the Russian workers. That did not mean that it was not the vanguard of the workers and that it did not express the yearning of the more class-conscious elements among them. It was the nucleus around which, when the time came, the entire working class and all the allied classes gathered to struggle for a better world. That large sections of the working class in this country are still backward and subject to alien influences is admitted. But that is all the more reason for holding the fort.

The critic who is also a Marxist should be especially insistent on preserving the term "proletarian literature"; for his purpose is not only to know and describe the world, but also to change it. The class which is in the vanguard of those who are working for such a change, the class actually destined to lead in effecting that change is—in the light of Marxist science—the proletariat. This change, however, is contingent on the growth of proletarian class-consciousness, on the development of the proletariat from a class "by itself" into a class "for itself." In this development, proletarian literature and art have played and will continue to play an increasingly important role.

Ideology not only reflects the external world, but also affects and modifies it. In the proletariat's striving toward self-definition and self-assertion, the ideological disciplines, including all the arts, have a direct function to perform—the heightening and intensification of proletarian class consciousness. Even such a term as "proletarian literature" used in our critical writing, by accentuating proletarian qualities and values, contributes considerably toward proletarian self-definition and self-assertion. It organizes, molds, and directs proletarian consciousness toward the struggle for Socialism.

Mr. Lowenfels' suggestion to substitute the term "people's literature" for "proletarian literature" may be traced to a misconceived notion as to what is meant by the *democratic front*. Now, if there is one thing the democratic front does not mean, it is the surrender of any of the ideological positions the proletariat has won in many years of struggle. It took years of bitter controversy for the concept and term "proletarian literature" to win acceptance in literary discussion. And now that even reviewers in the capitalist press have learned to employ that term, along comes this liquidationist proposal. Does the author of this letter for a moment imagine that the proletariat, by calling for a democratic front, intends to dissolve itself in that democratic front? If he does, he is laboring under a grave misapprehension. Indeed, it is just at the very moment when the proletariat emerges from its political torpor and draws to itself other economic and social strata interested in preserving and extending the people's democratic rights that the proletariat must exercise the greatest care to maintain the purity of its revolutionary ideals and Socialist aims.

When, for example, the Communist Party which is in the van of the proletariat, proffers its cooperation to the Catholic masses in the common struggle for democracy and against fascism, it does so not by surrendering Marxist materialism and its well established attitude to religion and the church, but by emphasizing those objectives which all the popular masses, be they Catholic, Jewish, Communist, Republican, or whatnot, have in common. Marxist materialism is and will remain the foundation of Communist ideology. And the closer the contact and collaboration with non-Marxists, the greater the need within the Communist ranks and in Communist theoretical writing for Marxian emphases. The fact that the Communist Party has so far only 75,000 members, and those not all workers, does not alter the fact that ideologically it expresses the urge of the most advanced workers toward a social order which would be of

benefit to all. Would Mr. Lowenfels suggest that the Communist Party, because of its present relative numerical weakness, give up its claim to being the party of the proletariat? He positively would not. Why then does he deem the present numerical weakness of the working-class audience for its own writers as sufficient reason for liquidating its literature altogether? Proletarian literature is the expression of the proletarian vanguard on the cultural front. It should be cherished and fostered. This does not mean that a term like "people's literature," or democratic literature, or progressive literature, has nothing to recommend

it. On the contrary, there is a definite need for some such broad, inclusive term, which would be the literary analogue of the political people's front or democratic front. It would take in as wide a variety of progressive authors as is represented, say, in the League of American Writers. But the adoption of the broader designation does not in any way entail the rejection of the more specific one. The working class should relinquish nothing it has already won. To the broad stream of an American "people's" literature, the proletariat, openly and undisguisedly, will no doubt contribute a great and growing share of good works.

Pant Like a Dog

Harry Kapustin

"TOMORROW after work, positively," said Mike, "I'm going to see the doctor. These veins under my knees are swollen to beat the band."

"Have him look you all over," said Ada.

"What, pay him two bucks?"

"Certainly," said Ada.

"Holy mackerel," said Mike.

As soon as he got out he hurried over to the subway. The doctor certainly was funny, living up there around the hosiery and knitting mills. But he was a good doctor. None of those suckers. Mike used to see him once in a while when he came over to treat Ada's old lady for her practically permanent cough.

When Mike walked into the doctor's office, he saw three women sitting there.

"Boy," he thought, "three women, three hours." He picked up an old copy of the *Post*, looked at the ads, and threw it on the floor. His face got red and he put it back on the table. He hoped the women hadn't seen him making a fool of himself. A girl came out of the room and the three women went in at one crack. The doc took a peep out and saw Mike.

"You must be dying," he said, and closed the door.

About a half-hour later, the women came out. The one in the middle was crying.

After they were outside Mike thought he'd get even with the doctor. "What's the idea of hittin' a woman?" he said.

The doc didn't think he was funny.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

"Plenty," said Mike. "I got varicose veins." He started to roll up his pants leg.

"Never mind just yet," said the doc. "I'll give you a good once-over."

The doc put his head on Mike's chest and listened. He wrapped a sheet of rubber around Mike's arm and looked at the height of a fluid in a tube. He took a long look at Mike's throat.

"Your tonsils are diseased," he told Mike. "Let's see your legs now. Take off your pants."

Mike did. The doc looked.

"Stand on your feet much?" he asked.

"Nine hours a day," said Mike.

"Sit down once in a while," said the doc. "But that won't fix them. They need injections to close them up. But they can wait up to a year's time. The tonsils must come out."

"I don't like sitting on the floor," said Mike. But the doc wasn't listening.

"Shall I make an appointment for you with a good surgeon?" asked the doc.

"What's it gonna cost?" said Mike.

"Thirty-three to thirty-six dollars as far as I can make out."

"Goodby my suit and Ada's coat," said Mike.

"Well, you can have it done at a clinic for about six or seven dollars," said the doc, "but that would have to be on Wednesday only and I can make this for this or next Saturday so you'll have Sunday to rest over in."

"Yeh," said Mike. "Yeh."

"This looks like they broke down the walls between a lot of old houses and made a hospital of it," said Mike.

"Don't worry about that," said Ada as they went in.

"I'm Mike Phillips," said Mike to the girl at the desk.

"Who is your surgeon?" asked the girl.

"Snyder," said Mike.

"Well," said the girl, "I'll take you up to the room."

She took them up to the second floor and left them in a little room. Mike couldn't help giggling. Ada wanted to slap his face.

A nurse came in and said to Mike: "Take off your clothes." She came back in a few minutes and threw a pair of pajamas on the bed.

"They'll never fit me," said Mike. "I'm a big guy."

"Try them on," said the nurse.

Mike tried pulling the trousers on and they ripped. The nurse looked mad as hell. She brought him a slightly larger pair of pajamas.

"Be careful with these."

Mike slid them on gingerly. "How about bedroom slippers and a bathrobe?"

"We don't provide those," said the nurse.

"The doc told me not to bring anything," said Mike. He put his shoes on his bare feet. "Boy O Boy, the runaround is starting," he muttered.

"The doctor said to rest the hour before the operation is to begin," said Ada.

"Look," said Mike, "suppose you go home."

"No," said Ada.

"I feel like bustin' somebody in the nose."

"Forget it," said Ada.

"Well, will you go?" asked Mike.

Ada put on her coat. "Try to sleep a little," she said. She went out.

"I had to go to the doctor," muttered Mike. He soon fell asleep.

Somebody was shaking him. It was the doc.

"Ready?" asked the doc.

"No," said Mike, slipping into his shoes. "I feel like a cone of ice cream that fell down the sewer."

"Don't worry," said the doc. "You'll feel worse."