THE LITERARY CLASS WAR

In the capitalist countries proletarian literature has as yet not reached adulthood, its mature adult force being at present chiefly engaged in breaking ground for the sowing of the vital seed of Marxism. From the October Revolution it received a tremendous impetus, yet it is only with the late onset of economic catastrophe throughout the world that it began moving towards a determined extirpation of all liberal, reformistic elements within itself. Tearfully asunder the last vestigial piece of bourgeois-esthete fancy-drapery, it proclaimed its position to be that of irreconcilable class-antagonism. True, a literature of social protest against capitalism has always existed, but being based on the premises of Idealism—in the main without any overt awareness of its resultant anti-Marxist orientation—it failed to formulate a clear dialectical approach and objectively such expression can be placed under the category of proletarian literature only when that concept is apprehended in extremity general terms.

The urgent task of the Marxist critic today is manifest. He must carve out a road for the proletarian writer, who, living as he does under the constant pressure of the prevailing ideas derived from the property-relationships of existing society, is faced with immense obstacles in his struggle to liberate himself from various bourgeois preconceptions which he still unconsciously adheres to. It is the critic's task to indicate how the dynamics of dialectic materialism can vitalize the new proletarian expression, and what form their integration into the warp and woof of this expression should take. A more definite frontier between the proletarian and the bourgeois in letters should be established. This of course, necessitates a thorough critical scrutiny of bourgeois trends in this field; just as every discussion of socialism implies a corresponding discussion of capitalism, so every discussion of proletarian literature must be a corresponding discussion of bourgeois literature; the latter is the thesis, the former the antithesis, and it is the classless society of the future that will ultimately resolve the contradiction between the two by creating the economic basis for a new superstructural equilibrium.

Recognizing its present developmental stage as elementary, the critic who attempts to build a theoretical scaffolding for proletarian literature can but partially base his argument on what is actually being produced in capitalist countries at the present time. A theoretical formulation wholly based on actual proletarian practice would run contrary to dialectic because it would largely ignore the dynamic mobility of class-consciousness; hence, in writing of proletarian literature, the Marxist critic has his eye on the future as well as on the present, and the authenticity of his analysis cannot be invalidated by the examination of his statements in the light of present-day facts alone.

The Idea of Katherina Revitalized

The Greek idea of katherina in art is one of the most fertile conceptions ever derived. Literature, its classic formulation by Aristotle as a process effecting a proper purging of the emotions through pity and terror, is a static, passive conception quite in line with the needs of a slave-owning class endowed with a cultural and aesthetic but not truly artistic bent. Thus the “significant change” effected in the reader or spectator by the katherina leaves him limp and reconciled to the “immutable laws of life.” After the grand spectacle of a Sophoclean tragedy, the Greek gentleman went home to his slaves, stimulated indeed, but resigned to the whims of the gods and “human nature.” This form of katherina is merely a seemingly transcendentally mental laxative for a sedated leisure class.

Nevertheless, a consistent examination of the qualitative properties of artistic creation leaves one with the conviction that without katherina that creation loses all significance, loses that high gravity which is the most characteristic function of art. Without katherina literature one can discern the implicit form of a new katherina, likewise a purgation of the emotions, a cleansing, but altogether of a different genus: a cleansing through fire. Applying the dynamic viewpoint of dialectic, a synthesizing third factor is added to the Aristotelian pity and terror—and that is militancy, combative consciousness. The proletarian katherina seeks a release through action—something diametrically opposed to the philosophical resignation of the older idea. Audaciously breaking through the wall that separates literature from life, it impels the reader to a course of action, of militant struggle; it objects art to such a degree that it becomes instrumental in aiding to change the world. A proletarian drama, for instance, inspires the spectator with pity as he identifies himself with the characters on the stage; he is terror-stricken by the horror of workers’ existence under capitalism; but these two emotions finally fused in the white heat of battle into a revolutionary deed, with the weapon of proletarian class-war in the hands of the masses. This is the vital katherina by means of which the proletarian writer fecundates his art.

The impotence of bourgeois literature is best evidenced by the utter lack of katherina within it; it is no longer capable of its traditional static signification. In its place it substitutes disgust, or simply a series of shocks attendant upon the exhibition of various naturalia. The literature of the bourgeoisie when it was still a revolutionary class in society, was still capable of katherina. Now, however, in its stage of decline and imminent collapse, the signification of katherina is manifestly impossible, for the reason that the class of which this literature is a reflection has already lost all belief in itself. Thus the novels of a writer like William Faulkner leave the reader with nothing: it is merely stylized photography, the same old treadmill of naturalism, with the wheels going around a little faster—in the thickness twilight.

Commenting on Irving’s American Tragedy, Irving Babbitt writes: “He has succeeded in producing in this work something genuinely harrowing; but one is harrowed to no purpose. One has more than the full measure of tragic qualm but without the final relief and enlargement of spirit that true tragedy succeeds.
somewhere in giving, and that without resort to explicit moralizing. It is hardly worth while to struggles through eight hundred very pedestrian pages to be left at the end with a feeling of sheer oppression. Quite true. But of course such a confirmed Brahmin and arch-defender of the status quo as Prof. Rabbits cannot be expected to think anything out in its logical conclusion. The Back Bay aristocracy does not believe in thinking things out to their logical conclusion; but when the revolution produces it, the proletariat considers Nature as a philosopher in pursuit of an “inner check”—for the workers of course the greed of capitalism knows no check save the organized might of the exploited masses) it follows that if Mr. Dreiser has only seized he could have signified his material: hence the loud denunciation of deliberate willfulness.

The fact is, however, that no lack of will can be effected by a writer who is not consciously up in a war against capitalism, who does not visualize the free, rational society of the future. When he wrote The American Tragedy, Dreiser was still in his phase of darkest pessimism, reducing his phenomena to “physico-chemical terms;” the new of view is just as much a reflection of bourgeois civilization as the philosophy of Spencer, despite the fact that even then Dreiser was already pointed to: the moneyetiquette spirit of capitalism as the determining factor in the diminishing of American life—but lacking the dike revolutionary solution, he was incapable of handling his material in any other way than the way he did. Literature is the interaction of experience, but experience cannot be integrated when the human signification is lacking: and experience, signifying. Proletarian literature, on the other hand, supplies that want with its own form of katharsis. Every instance of a class-conscious worker gaining class-consciousness is katharsis, every strike, every militant action, every agitation on the part of the proletariat is katharsis. Proletarian literature is replete with human signification.

In defining tragedy (and this definition is generally applicable to all works of art) Aristotle stated: “It is an action that is complete and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude.” Here too we notice that the laborer has only seized he could have signified his material: hence the loud denunciation of deliberate willfulness, which is just as much a reflection of bourgeois civilization as the philosophy of Spencer, despite the fact that even then Dreiser was already pointed to: the moneyetiquette spirit of capitalism as the determining factor in the diminishing of American life—but lacking the dike revolutionary solution, he was incapable of handling his material in any other way than the way he did. Literature is the interaction of experience, but experience cannot be integrated when the human signification is lacking: and experience, signifying. Proletarian literature, on the other hand, supplies that want with its own form of katharsis. Every instance of a class-conscious worker gaining class-consciousness is katharsis, every strike, every militant action, every agitation on the part of the proletariat is katharsis. Proletarian literature is replete with human signification.

The highest degree of consciousness.

The prime-phenomenon of Marxian is intuitional consciousness—the highest degree of social consciousness as yet attained by man. Proletarian literature, partaking of this quality, should also be tested by this touchstone. However, a literature that is a ramshackle hodgepodge of mystic subjective introvert speculation, arbitrary and illustrative, is much better fitted to capitalist class purposes than one that is dominated by a high degree of consciousness. The proletariat is the most advanced class in society, the class destined to bring about the survival and the further development of western culture, and since consciousness points the way to the inevitable march of this class to power, it constitutes in itself the high secret of the proletarian advance. Not so the bourgeoisie: to its consciousness, which the objective circumstances inevitably for its own advantage, the process of revolutionary negation. It is the dystopian that could blow up its best cultivated illusions. Consequently bourgeois literature falls into a flight from consciousness, it finds a haven in the subconscious. Thus the Revolution of the Word can be exploited from a Marxist standpoint. The bourgeoisie ideologue would like to think that they too are revolutionists, as the collective, achieves that genuine katharsis which follows the Marxian comprehension of the historical process as a whole.

NEW MASSES

Infantile delusions. These experiments with word-dismembering are of no more value than the well-known experiments of children with flies, yet the bourgeois illuminatti take these word-revolutionaries seriously. In the ultimate analysis the Revolution of the Word is a pretest for indulging in psychopathological orgies; it represents a deep-seated craving for the prenatal stage, for non-being. The vagaries of Jolas & Co. and their revolutionary prophecies are merely evasions. The misconception of automatic writing are quite proper end Phenomena of a dying class, and of a crumbling hegemony.

Artificial Psychologies:

The psychology of the proletariat is in the very nature of its class existence a psychology of production, the idea of a monetary average is a healthy psychology, in profound harmony with the rhythms of nature. After a rapid process of development we observe in the bourgeoisie the post-war epoch the social psychology of the proletariat is consciousness of the proletariat. Finance capitalism —evidently the psychology of a cause. Finance capitalism creates a new psychology, whose psychology is that of coupon-cutters, of cutters, of people totally removed from the economic life.

In his book The Theory of the Leisure Class, N. I. Bukharin gives an illuminating portrayal of the role which this stratum of the bourgeoisie plays in society: “We have already seen,” he writes, “that the class of society here discussed is a product of the decline of the bourgeoisie. This decline is closely connected with the fact that the bourgeoisie has already lost its functions of social utility. This peculiar position of the class within the production process, or, to put it more correctly, without the production process, has led to the rise of a peculiar social type that is characterized particularly by its asociality. While the bourgeoisie as such is individualistic from its very cradle...the individualism in the case of the cutters becomes more and more pronounced...There disappears not only the interest in capitalist enterprise but any interest in the social utility. This peculiarity of the psychology of the class within the production process, or, to put it more correctly, without the production process, has led to the rise of a peculiar social type that is characterized particularly by its asociality. While the bourgeoisie as such is individualistic from its very cradle...the individualism in the case of the cutters becomes more and more pronounced...There disappears not only the interest in capitalist enterprise but any interest in the social utility. This peculiarity of the psychology of the class within the production process, or, to put it more correctly, without the production process, has led to the rise of a peculiar social type that is characterized particularly by its asociality. While the bourgeoisie as such is individualistic from its very cradle...the individualism in the case of the cutters becomes more and more pronounced...There disappears not only the interest in capitalist enterprise but any interest in the social utility.

In analyzing the bourgeoisie of his time, the American economist Thorstein Veblen concluded that theirs was a psychology of “conspicuous consumption.” American critics of the left have been strongly influenced by this thesis, which is undoubtedly true of the true bourgeoisie of the period. I think his thesis is no longer valid. The psychology of conspicuous consumption is chiefly characteristic of the bourgeoisie in its prime phase, when the industrial bourgeoisie begins to play a minor role in shaping the ideology of the class; the industrial bourgeoisie now forms the substantia of the capitalist class, and generally tries to appropriate the fact that the producer and the producer of capital are one and the same. The voice which speaks from the subconscious of the producer of capital is now replaced by the sophisticated vulgarity of idlers and possessors.

In the realm of superstructure this evolution widens of course a powerful influence in determining the metamorphosis of literary ideology, both in the sphere of form and in the sphere of content. The heroes of Frank Norris’ novels of industrial life are captains of industry, alive and loquacious with the optimist and vigorous of a class still relatively young; they are in constant touch with the social processes of production and consumption. They are no longer the “productive” or “production” people. The figures are now replaced by the “productive” or “production” people. They are no longer the “productive” or “production” people. The figures are now replaced by the “productive” or “production” people. They are no longer...
"GENTLEMEN, I FEEL BETTER ALREADY!"

a caste or of a party or of a cuterie, but simply and solely himself..." This statement offers us a concentrated expression of the ascetic psychology of pure consumption. Hitherto we see how the cultural representatives of the bourgeoisie irresistibly gravitate towards a complete acceptance of the ideology of that section of the dominating class which is furthest advanced on the road to extinction.

In American literature the transition from the psychology of conspicuous consumption to that of pure consumption took place during the twenties. H. L. Mencken concretely exemplifies this change. The ferocious warfare he waged against democracy, his extreme individualism, his organic inability to think in socio-economic terms—all are indications of the change. Sinclair Lewis immortalized against the "standardized philistinism" of George F. Babbitt and helped to bring about the individualistic philistinism of the people in The San Alex River. George F. Babbitt is a regimented bourgeoisie, a garrulous booster, social with the hypercritical sociality of industrial capitalism; the protagonists in Hemingway's novel are affable hypochondriacs, catalytic individualists—the human dust of finance capitalism. The writers of the early twenties fought for sophistication, i.e., for individualistic philistinism. (The Babbitts of the era of pure consumption are generally known as sophisticates.) Booth Tarkington could still describe the plutocrat with relish, with a certain amount of health, but the writers of the late twenties and the thirties, never. To them the plutocrat is a coarse animal; only when he spends his holidays in Southern France, patronizes the arts, and under the influence of numerous cocktails becomes capable of philosophic discourses on life, death, and the immortal soul is he worthy of respect.

Even in the commercial trash dumped by the tons on the market this transition is patent. In the thousands of novels turned out annually the heroes and heroines seem to exist in an economic vacuum—they all have money, they are all dressed up in the height of fashion, they are present at all the smart events—but where and how they amassed their fortunes is not mentioned. The assumption is that their fathers or grandfathers did well by their children, but this is not allowed to intrude into the texture of the not-otherwise.

In England the arrival of the historic moment of pure consumption for the bourgeoisie occurred much earlier, and aided by the nobility and other aristocratic feudal elements its assimilation into ideology was quickly effected. Aldous Huxley typifies in himself the position of a writer who has accepted this psychology in toto. The characters in his novels, psychic louts most of them, are constantly peregrinating from one country-house to another, forever talking, but under no circumstances concerned with productive work. In Antic Hay one of them, a female adventurer, is reclining on a couch and meditating in this profound fashion: "We on the sofas, ruthless, lovely and fastidious." Huxley was ironizing in this passage, but unconsciously he was formulating his own class-position. On the sofa, fabbric, inept, entangled in intellectual cobwebs, yet deeming himself exceedingly ruthless, and of course so esthetic (lovely) and sophisticated (fastidios). Nobody works except the lower classes (the servants). Mr. Huxley and his intellectual companions are all coupons-cutters, hence it is not hard to understand why he wrote Brave New World. The civilization of the coupon-cutters is in jeopardy, the Nirvana of pure consumption is threatened, and Mr. Huxley, like the good ideologue of his class that he is, hastens to the rescue.

The economies and sociology of the capitalists are Ptolemaic in nature. Once man regarded the earth as the fixed center of the universe, now the bourgeoisie regards capitalism as the fixed center of economic life for all eternity. Therefore, having accepted this position, the bourgeois littérateur feels free to relegate it to the
A Writer's Notes

When I was recently in New York the New York papers were playing up a phrase of Waldo Frank's new book on Russia that speaks of the difficulty the artist must meet in a civilization devoted to giving new life and health to workers. I haven't read Mr. Frank's book yet but I intend to. He would agree with me in this—that anything the artist or prose man may meet in a civilization under the dictatorship of workers could easily be tapped in any money civilization.

One of the saddest experiences to be had by any writer in America now is to go into the office of almost any American book or magazine publishing house. What, Lord, what gloats, what deep despair.

"Why? No advertisements, book sales dropping off, subscriptions to magazines almost impossible to get."

I went about the city, stopping often to listen to young Communist men and women speaking on street corners, and was a bit ashamed of my own white suit, my Panama hat, my walking stick. A little girl Communist speaker at Ninth Street and Second Avenue came to me and stood listening. Then at night, "Are you a comet out of work?" she asked with charming innocence. I swear to God I was ashamed.

The white linen suit, the Panama hat, the swagger walking stick.

"My dear child, not out of work are not rigged out like this."

As for American writers—God help the new man out now with a new book having poetic strength. He'll find restrictions enough, God knows.

Among the young fighting Communists I found youth, poverty, no gloats.

My own feeling now is that if it be necessary, in order to bring about the end of a money civilization and set up something new, healthy and strong, we of the so-called artist class have to be submerged, let us be submerged. Down with us. A little poverty and shucking down won't hurt us and I believe in my own class, the artists' class. I believe in our ability to survive. The world is big. Changes have swept over the world before. If now, worthwhile and significant men are to arise now in America the chances are a hundred to one that they will in any event come out of the masses. It's in the air.

If the movement to free all men from the rule of money means the submerging of our class, let us be submerged. Down with us. Let's have no starving workers to save us. We'll survive. We'll swim. We will in the long run be healthier and better if we get it in the neck now along with the workers.

"HE WANTED A BONUS."  Herbert Kruckelmann