

Of Communists and Marxists

Maurice Isserman: *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War*; Wesleyan University Press; Middletown, CT.

William Barrett: *The Truants: Adventures Among the Intellectuals*; Anchor Press/Doubleday; New York.

by Lee Congdon

Maurice Isserman is one of the more resilient members of the radical generation that came of age during the 1960's. Although his apocalyptic ambitions were frustrated, he refused to succumb to gloom, setting out instead in search of a "tradition that could serve as both a source of political reference and an inspiration in what now was clearly to be a prolonged struggle." Under the academic tutelage of Eugene Genovese, he began to explore the history of the American Communist Party, particularly during World War II, a time when American and Russian interests temporarily converged. The result is *Which Side Were You On?*, which examines the party's naturalization and rehabilitation. It is nothing short of slander, according to Isserman, to view the party as a subversive and conspiratorial organization slavishly subservient to the dictates of Moscow. Zealots such as William Z. Foster notwithstanding, American communism has exhibited scant interest in violent revolution, concentrating its efforts instead on such eminently respectable and unexceptionable aims as the extension of civil liberty and the initiation of democratic reform. Isserman is at pains to point out, however, how often the party allied itself with FDR's New Deal and how it advanced the causes of women and blacks.

This revisionist thesis is far more chari-

table than that defended by Theodore Draper in his pioneering *Roots of American Communism*, where he adopted the commonsense view that during the years of Stalin's rule any Americanization of the CPUSA was simply a "response to a Russian stimulus." In order to counter this charge, Isserman has chosen to focus his attention on Earl Browder, an unlikely hero, who led the party until his fall from grace in 1945 and who, we are informed, was an Americocommunist long before the Eurocommunists appeared on the scene. Granted, he lacked the élan and celebrity of more recent radicals, but Isserman claims that he possessed an instinctive understanding of American conditions that gave a prophetic air to his pronouncements, however pedestrian they might once have seemed to a younger revolutionary generation infatuated with its own extravagant rhetoric. If he appeared to be unimaginative during the years when Hitler and Stalin were allies, he was vouchsafed a new vision after the Man of Steel met with Roosevelt and Churchill at Teheran in 1943. If Uncle Joe was willing to cooperate with

capitalist leaders, so was Browder, and, by the end of the war, this rather unassuming man had convinced himself that God—or rather History—had called him to lead the party "away from revolution" and toward a policy of reform that would flow gently into the mainstream of American political life. Isserman interprets this adaptation of the contemporary and temporary Soviet line as evidence of Browder's peculiar genius for perceiving that in America communism could only mean democratic socialism. Had he not been stripped of authority, Browder might even have become the "American Tito," leading his countrymen down the "American Road to Socialism." It is safe to say, I think, that Earl never had a greater admirer than Maurice.

All in all, this book is properly read as the thinly disguised autobiography of an aging and chastened radical who has renounced apocalypse now in favor of a less-hurried regeneration. Presently a word-processor operator and a dues-paying member of the United Auto Workers, Isserman is less interested in the past than in the future, for by reinterpreting the American Communist Party's dogged adherence to every shift in the Moscow line, he hopes to lay the foundation for a radical, but reformist, tradition of dissent that will no longer bear the stigma of treason. Communists, he insists, "felt no clash between their ties with the Soviet Union and their loyalty to the United States," an assertion that may be true of the brief period when the two great powers were engaged in a common struggle against nazi Germany, but one that will not wash for the years after 1945, when the Cold War obliged one to choose sides. In his eagerness to identify a native radical tradition that would refocus his own shattered vision, Isserman has contrived to portray American communism as little more than a benign trade-union movement committed to democratic goals and pro-



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cesses. That he now favors a more moderate course of action is his own affair, but I doubt that party regulars will be content to be co-opted by the left wing of the Democratic Party.

William Barrett's story takes up where Isserman's leaves off—at the end of World War II, when, as a young man home from the European theater, he was introduced into the *Partisan Review* circle and soon joined the journal's editorial staff. From the first, he was impressed by the chief editors, William Phillips and Philip Rahv, and by the imposing list of contributors from both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, as a Marxist he shared the *Review's* radical but decidedly anti-Soviet sympathies. Both Phillips and Rahv were outspoken critics of official communism, sophisticated intellectuals for whom the likes of Earl Browder simply did not exist. Yet if the Soviet Union was anathema and the American Communist Party beneath contempt, Phillips and Rahv proclaimed their allegiance to a "pure" Marxism in politics and to modernism in art, an explosive mixture that continues to possess a wide appeal, however problematic it may be.

As the years passed, Barrett's initial enthusiasm for the journal's ideology began to wane as his suspicion grew that parlor Marxism was self-deceptive and dishonestly detached. Sometime during the early 1950's, therefore, he resigned and began to fashion a distinguished career as a professor of philosophy and an intelligent interpreter of European existentialism, a tradition of thought that is uncongenial to the analytic philosophers who populate American departments of philosophy. With uncommon insight, Barrett recognized that Jean-Paul Sartre, the most famous of the existentialists, was not to be taken seriously as a philosopher and early on he turned his attention to Martin Heidegger, the single most influential thinker of the 20th century. In splendid works such as *Time of Need* and *The Illusion of Technique*, Barrett explored such famous Heideggerian

themes as the problematic nature of technology and the quest of Being. Above all, however, he has pursued Heidegger's—and Nietzsche's and Dostoevski's—insight that the greatest problem confronting our age is that of nihilism, the paralyzing conviction that life is without meaning.

Anyone as familiar with modern literature as Barrett is must have peered again and again into the abyss of Nothingness, for at the heart of modernism there lies the conviction, or at least the abiding suspicion, that ours is an absurd world. Thus, in an otherwise affectionate chapter, Barrett takes the late Lionel Trilling to task for having preferred E. M. Forster and Jane Austen to Dostoevski, Kafka, Joyce, and Proust. Without denying the merits of the more conventional novelists, he knows that Dostoevski "reaches into regions of the human spirit that are not to be found in Jane Austen." *The Possessed* and *Crime and Punishment* belong to our world, one in which naked souls search for each other and hunger for some meaning beyond the conventionalities of civilized behavior, however vital to public order they may be. In part, of course, it is the breakdown of manners and morals in the age of democracy that has brought us face to face with the Void. As Barrett points out in *Time of Need*, we are akin to Hemingway's characters, for whom social conventions scarcely exist; thus left to our own devices, we too can be brought to utter that blasphemous parody of the Lord's Prayer that Hemingway wrote for "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place": "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name."

It is against the background of Barrett's searching philosophic and human concerns that one should read *The Truants*, for the book is in essence a quiet meditation on the nihilistic mind of our century. Looking back on Rahv and other members of the old *Partisan Review* circle, Barrett is now particularly struck by the "negative" or nihilistic character of their thinking. Like so many intellectuals

of our time, their intelligence was largely destructive and their capacity for infectious enthusiasm and joyous affirmation exceedingly limited. Though never fully conscious of their spiritual emptiness, they were sensitive enough to know that they suffered from a profound and by no means purely personal malaise.

In his effort to provide a phenomenological description of this malaise, Barrett rightly emphasizes the disappearance of God and the attendant secularization of our culture. As Ivan Karamazov confided to his brothers, if God is dead, everything is permitted; with that recognition, according to Camus, the moral and intellectual history of our time begins. Barrett has always been fascinated by the question of faith, and he is impatient with Heidegger's well-known reluctance to consider moral and religious questions. While the great German thinker meditated in majestic solitude, Barrett saw that "the number who suffocate from the sense of meaninglessness increases day by day." Increasingly, therefore, Barrett read and pondered the peculiarly contemporary work of William James, for the American philosopher was alive to the peril of nihilism and to the consequent importance of religion. Like James, Barrett is possessed of a genuine will to believe and is persuaded that the path to personal and public renewal must finally lead back to the holy and the sacred. To be sure, his is a dim religious vision colored by, but quite distinct from, his Christian heritage. With Yeats, he believes that some rough beast "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born," that some new revelation is at hand, but he insists that the Word cannot be received until we achieve a preparatory reconciliation with nature, from which we have become alienated by technology and by our profane and instrumental obsession with manipulation and exploitation. In the final analysis, he wrote in *The Illusion of Technique*, "we shall have to find ourselves within nature before God is able to find us."

It is a beginning and by no means a

bad one, but Barrett may be excessively pessimistic about the possibilities of a more-traditional religious experience in the modern world. He himself reports that whenever he enters his study, he makes the sign of the cross, the familiar symbol of sacrifice and redemption. Although he is not quite certain why he performs this daily ritual, it might not be too much to suggest that for him and not a few others the symbols of Christianity are not yet completely dead and that the ancient faith may still offer a more authentic life than any adumbrated by some vague, hoped-for revelation. As Dostoevski, Eliot, and others have already demonstrated, modernism and Christianity are not necessarily incompatible and, if the Messiah has come, there is no good reason to continue to wait for Godot. At the end, even Heidegger asked for and received a Christian burial.

In any event, Barrett is certainly right

when he maintains that man "is the religious animal" and when he suggests that the notorious appeal of social revolution to modern intellectuals is very often in compensation for their loss of faith. Haunted by the specter of nihilism, they invest everything in the quixotic effort to achieve a total regeneration of society. Barrett witnessed this transference when he worked for the *Partisan Review*, and years of reflection have only strengthened his conviction that his fellow intellectuals "aspire to bring about heaven on earth for the dream of heaven they have lost." It is not, to be sure, a novel insight, but it is one that Barrett has purchased at some cost, having once been mesmerized by what Michael Polanyi called the magic of Marxism. In his ongoing personal and philosophic search for a renewal of faith, Barrett has been a particularly thoughtful and courageous example to modern secular intellectuals. □

variegated and protean, but if it is a conscious design, as it must be if it is to be art, then the critic, working from an established base, should be able to find and describe the arrangement; he or she can order the text. The cardinal virtue of a critic is coherence; conversely, the mortal sin is intellectual tumult.

Annie Dillard would, in light of her approach to criticism in *Living by Fiction*, write an incomprehensible instruction manual in lucid prose. In her essays there is no fidelity to anything save wobbling. Basically, in this work Ms. Dillard is promoting those who she terms "contemporary modernists." Not one to limit herself, she includes Borges, Nabokov, Beckett, Coover, Barth, Hawkes, Burroughs, Barthelme, Pynchon, Wurlitzer, Disch, Robbe-Grillet, Baumbach, Hjorstberg, O'Brien, Calvino, Landolfi, Cortázar, Puig, Canetti, and Fuentes in her initial list of who's who. Although Ms. Dillard feels that it is her task as an author to oppose the deleterious effects of entropy as described in the Second Law of Thermodynamics (i.e., she believes, with R. Buckminster Fuller, that people order things—build bridges and write novels—and so counteract the falling apart of everything else), she contributes to it by willy-nilly adding to her list: Grass, Simmons, Ondaatje, etc. Soon it's unclear who *isn't* a contemporary modernist. And nothing ties the group together, except for her lists.

However, one way to understand what she thinks this assortment of writers has in common is to see what she opposes it to. The following passage includes a most-clear statement of her stance.

In the traditional novel, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European novel, 'character' means man or woman in society. Central characters in the Stendhal novel, the Dickens novel, the James novel, interest themselves in blood, money, and advancement to an extent that is simply staggering to anyone who approaches literature through formal methods appropriate to modernism. Where is

Sighting Sylphs and Stalking Sense

Annie Dillard: *Living by Fiction*; Harper & Row; New York.

Leon Edel: *Stuff of Sleep and Dreams: Experiments in Literary Psychology*; Harper & Row; New York.

by Gary S. Vasilash

One of the primary functions of literary criticism is to impose a certain order on the subject, the text. In a very basic sense, it can be thought of as a set of instructions for the reader of the text, not unlike those packed along with a dishwasher or a swing set. However, there is a significant difference in that there are several ways to come at a text and only one way to screw part A into part C. Still,

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a reader goes to a critic for some insight or for an aid to understanding about what something means or how it works. Trust is implied in the relationship between reader and critic, just as it is in the case of the owner of a new product and the technical writer who wrote the instructions. Should the owner find that a part can't be manipulated as described (or should a part be missing), he is angered, not so much out of frustration as betrayal. Similarly, the same sort of thing is sought in a critic. If the critic is a structuralist, then the critical work should be entirely in that mode; he or she should remain within the parameters imposed. The set must be intact, which means that the critic, from the start, must have certain values upon which to construct the interpretation. Without this foundation, there is nothing but foundering. The literary text itself may seem totally