

Our Readers' Forum

Tagging Along with Kent

As one outcast American to another, let me tell you how much I enjoyed Rockwell Kent's "What Is an American?" Like Kent, I am in the position of a boycotted black sheep—the neighbors glare at me and make far from subtle remarks about my "anarchistic-commune-istic-bolshevistic opinions"—the postman throws the mail on the porch instead of in the mailbox where it belongs and members of the Black Legion (alias the Klan) hurl epithets at me (behind my back and for the benefit of my Jeffersonian friends).

For myself, a more or less isolated American youth, to read the words of Comrade Kent, a fine artist, a capable craftsman, a courageous American, a worker in every sense of the word—to hear author, and artist, and explorer say:

"To be a true American a man must have the will to right our social wrongs. *How*, is his own concern. For me, the way is Communism."

... Is to give one strength to face the problems and the struggle ahead.

In the South, as in the rest of America, our leaders have betrayed us. They make feudal slaves of us, they work us in their offices and factories, for barely enough to keep us alive. They tell us (the youth) to join the Young Republicans and the Young Democrats, and a thorough investigation of these two organizations convinces us that their only claim to posterity is their ability to dance and drink. Where then, can the youth of America turn? If we turn towards those who earnestly desire to improve conditions, we turn as Rockwell Kent turns ... LEFT, and since I am unable to accept the muddled-up theories of Allen Tate & Company, that motley group of pro-fascist agrarians and urban intellectuals, I intend to tag along with Rockwell Kent, Earl Browder, Granville Hicks, Mike Gold, and other Americans.

SOUTHERN WRITER.

Here's Another

We feel that the Rockwell Kent article in the last issue of *THE NEW MASSES*, entitled "What Is an American?" is so important and appealing that a reprint should be put into the hands of every single school teacher in America.

To effect this by time school reopens we suggest raising a fund for that purpose, and enclose herewith a dollar to start same.

Concord, Mass.

THE COOPERATIVE.

In Defense of Mayer's Engels

Isidor Schneider's comments on Gustav Mayer's biography of Engels do not maintain the political standard of the rest of the magazine.

Although he refers to Mayer's treatment of Engels' youth as a subject he had covered in a much larger work as yet untranslated, he does not seem to understand that the "much larger work" covers the entire life of Engels. The first volume, covering 1820-1851, was first published by Julius Springer in Berlin, 1920. This was revised when the second volume was issued some two years ago by Martinus Nijhoff in the Hague. It had been originally announced by the Berlin house of Ullstein, but the coming of the Nazis prevented its publication.

Together the two volumes include 978 pages of text, notes and indexes. It is obvious that the English version is only an abridgement, and the function of the reviewer, among other things, should have been to judge how faithfully the English editor performed his task. I think no one familiar with the original work can accuse the author of neglecting to treat the development of Engels' ideas, and it would have been of value had the review pointed out the principles on which the editor pruned

the original work. Apparently he worked on the principle that the English reading public is unable to handle ideas and insists on "human interest" in a biography. I notice that two entire chapters seem to have vanished in the English version, the one called "Philosophy," the other "Interpretation of history."

It is incorrect to say that "Mayer is a Social-Democrat"; Mayer has never belonged to any party. Obviously he is no Communist (despite the N. Y. Times reviewer), but one had better not employ tickets too freely. I might quote the following sentence, which follows his description of the official Social-Democratic falsification of the preface to the 1896 edition of *Class Struggles in France*: "The interpretation that Engels at the end of his life wanted to advise European Social-Democracy away from every use of violence belongs in the realm of legend," etc., etc.

Furthermore, Bernstein, under Engels' guidance, followed a correct revolutionary line, and only blossomed into the reformist after Engels' death. I might quote an early letter of Engels to Bebel, dated 25 August 1881: "Bernstein has made good past expectation [his articles on the 'Intellectuals,' for example, apart from trifles, were quite excellent and kept wholly to the correct line], so that we could hardly find a better man."

And the final "incredible valedictory paragraph" makes a good deal more sense in the original than in the mistranslation of the English version.

It seems to me quite correct to score the biography for its failure to relate Engels' life to the present, since even the original pussyfoots in this direction, but it would have been a great deal more to the point to recognize the biography as the work of a non-Communist, and to have directed the attention of readers to the brilliant speech of Manuilsky, or, for those who read German, to the translation of Soviet Encyclopedia articles published by the Ring Verlag, Zürich, 1933, under the title: "Friedrich Engels: Der Denker und Revolutionär."

HARRY MARKS.

For a Left-Wing Digest

More power to the idea of a left-wing People's Digest. [See *THE NEW MASSES*, June 23. "Our Readers' Forum.]"

Priced moderately it would reach a broad group, and would act as a stimulus to seek further knowledge on social and political ideas. It would also act as an introducer to progressive and radical publications.

It is a field that has been neglected. And I for one would like to see *THE NEW MASSES* take the lead in advancing this purpose.

PIERRE REY.

An Interesting Question

The impending labor sports carnival on Randall's Island this summer and the Workers' Olympiad scheduled to take place in Spain in the near future make me wonder whether the time isn't ripe to raise a question that has been lurking in the back of my head for a long time.

The question is: why doesn't the labor movement encourage the development of rifle shooting as a workers' sport (it is already so regarded by the American farmer, when and if he can find the money for cartridges, which isn't often, as a rule) instead of merely reviling the militaristic phases of it as expressed in the R.O.T.C. or in the Hearst Trophy award?

Tribute was paid to the development of civilian marksmanship in the Soviet Union in an article that appeared some months ago in the American Rifleman, the official organ of the National Rifle Association, the quasi-public body which works closely

with the War Department in the development of civilian marksmanship in this country. The author of the article, an American technician working in the U.S.S.R., had long been a rifleman for the fun of it, and looked into the situation in the Red republics. His account was a glowing one, and, incidentally, amusingly naïve when he pointed out that the Soviet rifle-team organization was based upon the group of workers in a given factory or mill. He thought that was a much better way than our hit-or-miss geographical system, and asked why we didn't base our civilian marksmanship on the much more handy and logical units of the workers in a given factory!

But to come back to my main point: there is a Director of Civilian Marksmanship set up under the War Department whose job it is to distribute arms and ammunition free or at reduced prices to individuals, clubs, or teams which are affiliated with the National Rifle Association. (There is, incidentally, a queerish arrangement in this hand-in-glove operation of what is, strictly speaking, a private association, with an official government agency. One way it works is that the private agency must o. k. a civilian marksman before he may buy the Service rifle the D.C.M. distributes to the citizenry.) This is the way the Black Legion thugs got free ammunition from the War Department. Why shouldn't workers' rifle clubs get some of it?

Moreover, there are now on the market cheaply made but excellently performing smallbore target rifles which bring the sport a little nearer to the worker's pocketbook. They can be had for around \$10.

What about it? Can't we have a little target competition this summer on Randall's Island? It's a sport that can be a lot of fun.

BULL'S-EYE.

RESORTS

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REVIEW AND COMMENT

Of Love and Other Things

IT WAS a Chinese friend who made me realize that "propaganda" might be discovered almost anywhere in literature. He had been reading one of the standard anthologies of English poetry, with an attention to meanings and ideas such as readers native to the language rarely give. He said: "Western people are not convinced that what happens between a man and woman is good?"

"Oh, no," I said, "we appreciate it as much as any race, maybe more."

"The poetry," he said, tapping the anthology, "makes me think you are not convinced. As Shakespeare says, 'it doth protest too much!'"

That the concern with love in Western poetry might seem unbalanced to anybody had never occurred to me. I realized, suddenly, how "impure" to my Chinese friend would seem George Moore's *Anthology of Pure Poetry* which had just been published at the time. Moore argued that ideas were the corruptible elements in poetry. They went out of date leaving a useless sediment in such poetry which has survived in spite of them. In Moore's anthology most of the work of the major poets, including Shakespeare and Milton, was barred out. The verses were chiefly celebrations of the joys of life. To my Chinese friend it would have sounded like a pamphlet on lovemaking.

Trying to puzzle out a reason for the emphasis on love in our poetry the only conclusion I could come to was that it had been a form of counter-propaganda to the propaganda against sexual love contained in Christianity. It has endured as a tradition just as the Christian agitation against sexual love continues as a latent force, reviving over issues like birth control and divorce.

This is only one instance of the propagandas latent in literature. By its very nature, as an art based on language, literature cannot escape George Moore's "element of corruption"—ideas. The important thing about a word is its meaning; rhythms and other sound values are concomitants; the inferior position in world literature of virtuosos like Swinburne and Gongora; the sense of disgust and despair that followed those final developments of the "cult of unintelligibility," the gibberish of "dadaism," indicate that literature based on other elements than meaning is felt to be abnormal. Today we recognize that the "cult of unintelligibility" was a reaction to a life which had ceased to have meaning or dignity; and it is significant that, today, the Old Guard of the cult have become mystics, that they now claim supermeanings for their mumbo-jumbo, the vocabulary of which is made up of amputated words linked together,

for which they now claim the power of sorcerer's spells.

If we agree that the important thing about a word is its meaning and go from that to an examination of those meanings we find ourselves on shifting ground. A meaning will vary according to our subjective use of it. A revolutionist speaking of the U.S.S.R. as a *rich* country will put a different shade of meaning in the word than when he speaks of the U.S.A. as a *rich* country. In the two uses of that one word, there will be qualitative judgments. Still more interesting is the fact that language has evolved what might be called a dual vocabulary in which a concept may be expressed in two connotations, one favorable, the other unfavorable. For example, we give a good opinion when we say *determination* about a quality we disapprove of when we say *obstinacy*. Two histories of England, one by a Catholic, the other by a Protestant, examined together, would strikingly show how identical words can carry different tones of meaning and how this dual vocabulary is used in describing the same events. This dualism is so developed as to make language serve as an instrument of controversy. Again, prestige words are levied upon for alien and frequently antithetical uses. An excellent example, pointed out by Kenneth Burke, is the use of the word *science* and its derivations. Science has won such standing that it is almost universally used as a term of approbation. As a consequence we find a form of faith-healing taking the name of *Christian Science* and spiritualism defining itself as *mental science*. In the very discussion of art and propaganda we fall into this dilemma, that the two words are weighted with subjective judgment—art as the good desired, propaganda as a danger.

These remarks are not offered as original observations. Other writers, Kenneth Burke especially, have pointed out this iridescence of language and have proposed a more conscious use of it both for the purposes of art and of propaganda. I give it this emphasis because it is so often lost sight of in discussions around propaganda and literature.

I remember how in the old days the arts used to be graded according to their "purity," music coming first, the plastic arts following, and literature, as the most exposed to the infections of meaning, last. Today numbers of composers and painters and sculptors who once were emphatic about the superiority of their arts to literature, speak enviously of literature as a medium in which artists can most effectively express themselves. So standards change as history alters values and emphases.

I know of no writing which, upon analysis,

will not yield some propaganda. George Moore's *Anthology of Pure Poetry* is eloquent on the pleasures of rural living and loving. Eliot's *Wasteland* makes a horror scene of the sterility of contemporary life. There can be little doubt that the unsatisfactory position of the artist in late capitalist society drove him to the left; and the signs of it could be seen in the literature of the preceding decade, the fiction of which was largely a bitter propaganda for the rights of the artist, whether negatively in the satire of Sinclair Lewis, or positively in the great stream of novels defending the sensitive artist against society. I think it is not far-fetched to say that the acceptance of Greenwich Village standards of militant individuality, and the establishment of foundations providing fellowships for scholars and artists were responses to this propaganda.

During the most esthetic period in recent literary history that I can remember, a critic could drive a writer to despair by asking, "Why did you write it?" That there must be purpose, even if the purpose cannot be articulated except in mystical terms, was assumed to be conclusive. The most successful answer to such a question was, "I had to write it." Such an answer could and was used to justify automatic writing. Nevertheless, the extent to which a writer could be said to have been possessed by his subject was a standard of judgment. Instinctively we feel that a writer should be possessed by his material which he masters in the act of literary creation. And because he is so mastered by it, it becomes inevitably a sort of propaganda.

What we specifically object to as propaganda, what makes us give it a weight of disfavor when we use the word, is when the writer uses material he is not actually possessed with, a body of doctrines extrinsic to his experience. Then dogma rather than his consciousness exerts the controls. Then the living quality of vision that should be born out of his own experience is lost as he tries to draw it from print and paper, from a system of ideas not truly his own. The fear of such an outcome is what has motivated the distrust of "propaganda."

The fear was justified. Much of our writing, particularly in poetry, was a transcript not of life but of dogma and functioned as inferior propaganda. But the condemnation was extended in hostile quarters to the good along with the bad. That an inept artistic use of revolutionary doctrine had been made was held to justify them in condemning its use altogether. It was forgotten that this body of doctrine had become more than mere texts. It was forgotten also that outright propaganda, like the *Communist Manifesto*, could, because it was the work of able writers possessed by