

# Politics Catches Up with the Writer

By Cedric Belfrage

[The following speech was delivered by Mr. Belfrage at a recent Hollywood symposium on the subject, "Should Writers Mix in Politics?"—Eds.]

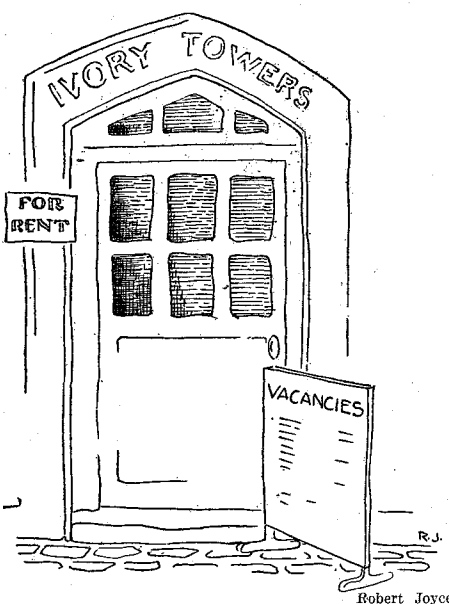
"I AM of those whose indignation against injustice and misery is great enough to make them an infernal nuisance to everybody in their immediate neighborhood. My anger that so few people can enjoy the view from my study and the cool scents from my garden is such that it very nearly destroys my own appreciation of them. Very nearly, but not—thank God—quite. Possibly in time I shall become wise enough—or callous enough—to cease to care.

"After all, what have I got to do with world affairs? How grand it would be if I could learn to mind my own business—to work just hard enough to give my wife and boys a few luxuries with their necessities and myself an occasional glass of beer. . . .

"Yet I know that my peace of mind is a sham, that my old brick and timber house, much as I love it, will never be a sanctuary from the prison of the outside world. . . .

"And I know that I admire British conservatives for their patriarchal and often entirely disinterested social service. That I admire British supporters of the Labor Party for their sturdy common sense and good humor. That I admire British liberals for their belief in principles. And I know that I belong to none of those parties. Had it not been for the Moscow trials I might have become a Communist. Were it not for the trade-union influence I might join the Labor Party. Were it not for their strange blending of bloodlessness and sentimentality I might belong to the liberals. Had the Tories not been so selfish and short-sighted about Spain I might have become one of them. But I see nothing to choose between the conservative and the communist types of class warfare, and I care for neither."

I'm glad that recitative is over because if it had gone on much longer I would probably have been thrown out of here and I would have deserved it. You could not see the quotes on the paper from which I am reading. The quotation is from the final, summing-up section of one of the three thousand confessional, self-searching autobiographies published in English last month. The author is a man whose "occasional glass of beer" has quite often been consumed in my company, in the Café Royal and in Fleet Street pubs in London. His name is Vernon Bartlett and he is a charming fellow to drink beer with. The conclusions which I have just read were formed by him as a result of forty-three years on our planet. Forty-three most unusual and crowded years—for he is a political and diplo-



matic correspondent of one of the principal London dailies; he has met and talked with practically all the key men and women of our time, has twice sat in the awesome presence of Mussolini, and has been shouted at by Hitler in a private interview. He reached these final conclusions regarding his world-philosophy upon his return from war-torn Spain.

I have quoted from Bartlett's book because it will give me a chance to compare myself with him to what I hope is my own advantage, and because his line seems to me to typify that super-liberalism which is the latest and perhaps most dangerous form of literary escapology. It has become trite to rail against writers for sitting in ivory towers. Bombs have by now been dropped on most of the more select ivory towers, and those that still stand are covered by long-range guns awaiting the order to fire. Few of the old occupants are still in possession of enough cotton to keep out of their ears the din that is going on outside. It has become necessary for every writer with faculties half intact to take some sort of definite line about the present state of human society. Even poor, tortured Aldous Huxley, the great brain almost completely surrounded by earmuffs, has had to step out on a platform of neo-pacifism, thereby putting himself right in the line of fire of those hecklers who, during the World War, asked conscientious objectors what they would do if a German raped their sister.

The super-liberalism with which Bartlett consoles himself is liberalism taken to the point where it becomes a definite, positive creed—the belief that everybody is more wrong than right: not only Tories and communists, but liberals too, with what he calls "their strange blending of bloodlessness and sentimentality." Liberalism is a fence for es-

capologists to sit on, but this super-liberalism, this determined resistance to the idea of anything being true at all, is a platform. A small and crowded platform, and not a very comfortable one. Poor Bartlett keeps wriggling restlessly on it. In Spain, for example, we find him "desperately sorry" for the aristocrat refugees and the common people, and at the same time torn by wondering "why the cruel and unjust treatment of individuals in the fascist countries affected my whole judgment of their systems of government."

I don't have to apologize for talking so much about an Englishman, because this super-liberalism is not a national disease. All of us here can look around and see plenty of similar cases in the vicinity of our own backyards. In my book *Away from It All* I quoted this statement by Sir Samuel Hoare, the celebrated English would-be carver-up of Ethiopia, with regard to British foreign policy: "It is a realistic outlook upon affairs, combined with an idealistic belief in human progress . . . a sound instinct upon the big issues. It is difficult to be more precise. For, like an English gentleman, you cannot define him but you know one when you see one." I made the observation there that an English gentleman could be defined as the perfect flowering of the escapologist—the man who does not even need eau-de-cologne to drown a bad smell under his nose, but can imagine it out of existence. I hope Americans don't take that hardly. There are plenty of fine gentlemen and super-liberals this side of the Atlantic.

Now in opening this forum about the connection between writers and politics, I am not going to bore you with the story of my life. I am only going to say that my roots were very similar to Vernon Bartlett's, and then to state at what conclusions I have arrived after the most exhaustive attempts to find an ivory tower and shut myself up in it. I started out as a gentleman, and heaven alone knows what I am now, but in any event I am not up there with Vernon on the super-liberal platform. I am not so childlike as to have blind faith in any dogma, any cure-all, but I do believe in the fundamental truth of certain things. I have had a hundred times as much evidence as I needed to know what fascism is, and why, with absolutely any weapons that may be necessary and at the risk of everything up to life itself, I must fight against it. Fascism is not an abstract idea, a word bandied about by phrasemongers. It is a reality in several countries, a murderous threat in all others. There may be room for argument about certain features of fascism, but certain things we do know definitely about it from empirical observation. It is the burner of books, the prisoner of free minds, the throttler of culture, the regimenter of ideas.



If a fascist society has produced any first or even second-rate work of art, if fascism can boast one single book, play, movie, or even newspaper that can be admired by international standards, I haven't heard of it. If then, a writer believes that the purpose of literature is to enrich the cultural tradition and by spreading ideas to widen mental horizons—and I don't mean political propagandist ideas, but every kind of idea that freely functioning minds may want to express—then fascism must by definition be his enemy. That is reducing the situation to its simplest terms.

And surely events in fascist countries have demonstrated clearly enough that the writer, the artist, the man of science does not in the last analysis have the choice between opposing fascism and not opposing it. Rather the choice is between life and death. One can, of course, choose the path of the necrophile and woo death like a lover, as a few writers are actually doing. But to this the great majority of us are not attracted. We have to choose life—and when we have chosen, we are borne forward, powerless to resist, on the tide of the implications of our choice. We find that fascism is not something that can be argued or reasoned with. Its basic weapons are deliber-

ate demagoguery and lies, and if those who care for culture and human progress do not fight back courageously and self-sacrificingly at that stage, they will soon find themselves with their backs to a wall, fighting with steel and guns. History has certainly shown that. And the tide of his choice of life will carry the writer still further, if he lets himself be carried by it. "He will see, for instance," as Professor Harold Laski says, "that the expulsion from Germany of its outstanding men of letters is only the ultimate frustration in a series of frustrations imposed by inadequate values arising from inadequate institutions; and he will find that the inadequacy of those institutions always is related, directly or indirectly, to the property-system and its results. . . . It is an insistence that inconvenient experience may be denied by those who hold the keys of power. But there comes a point where the denial of experience becomes the decision to destroy civilization."

Hollywood is perhaps the biggest nest of writers in the world today. It has a militant anti-fascist movement growing with commendable speed and enthusiasm. It also has a body of writers who, clinging to their ivory towers in Beverly Hills or to the super-liberal plat-

form, declare themselves to be outside the battle. That is, of course, an illusion, because no one is outside it. Fascism is a creeping disease and by inactivity and super-liberalism one fights just as effectively for fascism as by militant action one can fight against it. Many of these self-deluding writers are people who wield a typewriter simply and solely to make money, for in Hollywood there is, of course, a carefully nurtured school of thought that regards any talk of "culture" or "art" or "ideas" as the raving of pompous hypocrites. I am a hack myself, and I would voluntarily enter a Nazi nunnery before I would seek to fill up these my brothers with lofty cultural thoughts. But I think that the parlous condition under fascism of Germany's once-flourishing film, newspaper, and magazine industries should be called to their attention. Whether they like it or not, even movies and slick magazines are vehicles for some sort of ideas, and a glance at the present state of fascist film industries, at the rapid decline in circulation of fascist papers, magazines, and books shows that fascism promises slim pickings for people involved in producing those things. Obviously a system that makes all ideas illegal is bound to have this result; instead of going to the



*Flight*

Painting by Eitaro Ishigaki (American Artists' Congress)



movies, the public will prefer to go fishing, for even if a trout were to orate about the racial impurity of its neighbor the salmon, one could talk back to it with little fear that it would turn out to be a Gestapo agent.

Then we have the *It Can't Happen Here* school of escapologists, also very numerous in our writers' community. I think it was Ralph Bates who told the story, last time he was in Hollywood, of the people on one fringe of Madrid who, with the fascists within a mile of their city, were still intoning "It can't happen here," because it was the other side of the city that Franco was within a mile of. There are people who, placed in the classic predicament of the pacifist whose sister is being raped, will still keep smiling by hurriedly figuring out that after all the sister was probably illegitimate. To such people I would like to present this thought: that the very existence of a large school of escapologists in a community is evidence enough of the reality of the fascist menace in that community. Bore into the timbers of a community where such slogans as "art for art's sake" are freely bandied about, and you will find the fascist termite at work.

It takes most of us hacks years to bring ourselves to face squarely up to these realities about our times. We are natural egotists, we regard the destiny of our souls and minds as tremendously important, and we endure agonies of a rather theatrical sort in the course of the struggle to decide. No Angelus Temple convert goes through such rolling of eyes and gnashing of teeth in accepting Aimee's God as does your writer in accepting the necessity of organized, disciplined struggle to preserve anything of the artistic liberty he treasures. He thumps himself on the chest to keep up his rugged individualist's courage, and cries, "I am an artist, I am above these vulgar brawls"—but the words ring hollow. He works through the catalogue of alibis one by one. They all leave him uneasy. He rails against fate for having put him on earth at a time when a writer has such responsibilities, has to make such decisions. What worries him most is the thought that he is losing his sense of humor.

Well, maybe a temporary loss in that quarter is necessary. But there is this consolation. Fascism is death to a lot of things but to humor more than to anything else. One cannot speak of what might happen if

Hitler and Mussolini had a sense of humor, because they and it are a basic contradiction in terms. And on the other hand, it is of great significance that nearly all the leading humorists in still-democratic countries are to be found somewhere near the front of the militant anti-fascist struggle. A humorist is a person who sticks pins into human balloons to see if they burst, who uses a scalpel on flowery rhetoric and on motivations. It is a fact that high-class humorous magazines today, the ones that are supported by big reactionary advertisers, hardly know where to look for contributors of the right kind—for the simple reason that the humorists, both pictorial and literary, are moving to the left almost in a solid body.

One might explain that by saying that a good humorist has to know not only where humor begins but where it ends. And just as humor ends on the borders of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, it ends too at Madrid and Shanghai. Dorothy Parker is the latest to testify, on returning from Spain, that there is nothing funny about the struggle of the plain Spanish people against those who would dictate to them how they should live, by whom they should be governed and judged. But if there is nothing funny about it, there is something heroic, something which, while it horrifies, also uplifts and elates those who love liberty. It fills a writer with a new sensation, the sensation of humility; and suddenly he may find himself accepting gladly this burden which seemed so forbidding, the burden of

burying to that extent his individualism and artistic snobbery and enlisting in the people's army of liberty, side by side with factory workers and peasants.

And if he is willing to accept this role, he is apt to find that the weight of the new burden is a minus quantity. The old burden has indeed been lightened, and he can actually function better as a writer because he now has a positive, hopeful world-view instead of a negative and hopeless one. If he is lucky enough to live in a country that is still democratic and at peace, he is no longer now morbidly sitting in his sanctum, biting his fingernails and wondering whether he has to wait six months or five years for fascism to obliterate him as an artist, or for war to obliterate him as a person. He cannot be disheartened by the official reactionary view—I quote from a New York *Herald Tribune* editorial of last month—that "certainly the great war is inevitable, of course, but not now." He faces the situation realistically, and he knows that death and taxes may be inevitable but war and fascism are not. He knows that the road is a hard one, that it may involve great sacrifices, but he has a solid belief in the ability of mankind to overcome reaction and to progress. There is no heroic posturing in that position. It is not an act of faith. It is merely the belief that reason, though it must be fought for, will finally triumph. And from the purely selfish point of view, that belief is the most valuable possession the average hack can have.



Another Job for the Trotsky Defense Committee

# Mr. Dewey Stakes His Reputation

By Stanley Randolph

**W**HEN the meeting of the Trotsky Defense Committee was formally opened in New York on December 12 under the obviously impartial chairmanship of George Novack, member of the Trotskyist center in the United States, three main points were stressed: (1) that the committee existed only for the purpose of finding facts, and anyone who had come to hear anything else had better leave the hall at once; (2) that the commissioners themselves were impartial, and if anything, sinned in the direction of prejudice against Trotsky and Trotskyism; and (3) that the committee was motivated only by the search for truth and justice, and absolutely abjured any interest in political questions.

The first to speak was Suzanne LaFollette, secretary of the committee. It did not fall to Miss LaFollette's lot to reveal any of the facts unearthed by the committee's nine months of investigation. She confined herself to relating the exact number of documents, letters, telegrams, and verbal depositions in the possession of the committee. Hers was also to establish the impartiality of the witnesses testifying. Miss LaFollette hotly denied that only Trotskyites were called to testify. The European branch of the committee had interviewed five people: Sedov (Trotsky's son) Victor Serge, refugee from Soviet justice; and "three who knew Sedov in Germany." The eleven witnesses examined by the American group had an even clearer record: three of them were definitely not Trotskyites. Two of these three were merely "personal friends of Trotsky, having no political views." The third, indeed, had been a Trotskyite but had "definitely broken" with Trotsky.

The character of the witnesses being thus established, the chairman introduced Benjamin Stolberg to attest the commissioners' impartiality. Wendelin Thomas had been a member of the Communist Party, which he quit in 1923, and therefore he could not be a Trotskyite; Suzanne LaFollette was a relative of the governor and senator from Wisconsin, and therefore she could not be a Trotskyite; John Chamberlain was an editor of *Fortune*, and therefore he could not be a Trotskyite, etc., etc. And as for himself, Stolberg, everybody knew he was not Trotskyite; and if there were still room for doubt, he took the opportunity of stating then and there, that in his opinion "all dictatorships are of, by, and for the dictators" and any regime which begins, as did the Soviet regime in 1917, by dealing forcefully with its enemies in the camp of reaction would inevitably wind up by killing off its own sons later. Thus was proved beyond a shadow of doubt the impartiality of the commission.

By way of conclusion, and just to prove the committee's complete unconcern with political matters, Mr. Stolberg declared that the

Comintern is responsible for opening the road to fascism in Germany and China; that the Stalinists have killed off the best of the working-class leaders in Spain; and that they are trying to break up the United Automobile Workers in the United States.

Following an address in German by Wendelin Thomas, the floor was given to John Chamberlain, who contented himself with explaining that he had joined the committee out of "curiosity" and because some of his radical friends had begun to "look shamefaced" when the Zinoviev-Kamenev trial began.

By this time a worried look had come over many faces in the audience. Already four of the "commissioners" had spoken, and nary a "fact" bearing on the case of Leon Trotsky had put in an appearance. The committee must have anticipated some restiveness at this time, because they now introduced some comic relief in the person of the venerable Italian anarchist, Carlo Tresca.

Mr. Tresca exemplified his libertarian principles from the outset by refusing to walk over to the microphone, thus forcing Mr. Novack, the chairman, to move the instrument over to him. Having registered this initial victory over the forces of law and order, Mr. Tresca proceeded to relate that he had joined the committee hoping to find Trotsky guilty. Since he, Tresca, had been a life-long advocate of sabotage and, assassination, he had hoped to find in Trotsky a new, if belated, convert. But he was disappointed. In fact, he was certain of Trotsky's innocence even before joining the committee. And although his principles did not permit him to judge other men, he decided, after much thought, to make an exception in this case, because the cause of truth was involved. He also wanted to take this occasion to explain why he had not as yet gone to Italy to assassinate Mussolini. Which reminded him of one time down in Philadelphia, during the war, etc., etc.

The revelations of fact were now interrupted to allow the chairman to take up a collection, for the double purpose of publishing the eighty-thousand-word report of the commission and to finance Miss LaFollette, who had run into considerable personal debt as a result of her work as secretary of the commission. The chairman called for two thousand dollars for the first of these purposes alone, but the collection netted only six hundred dollars, half cash.

Mr. Novak now brought into play the first piece of his heavy artillery, John Finerty, counsel for the committee.

Mr. Finerty admitted that his mind was all made up about Trotsky's innocence before he conducted the "inquiry" in Mexico, let alone inspected the rest of the "evidence" gathered by the committee since. Mr. Finerty's

contribution to the enlightenment of the audience was to read with a great show of learning some passages from a book on Soviet civil and criminal procedure, and then to show that the procedure adopted by the court martial which tried the treason cases was different in some respects from that laid down for ordinary civil and criminal cases.

Everyone who really came with the object of hearing the report of a "fact-finding commission" had by this time (almost eleven o'clock) been entirely disabused. But the audience stayed wearily on, for the last act of the travesty, the last performer, John Dewey. The chairman made an effort to revive the waning spirits of the crowd with an elaborate sentimental introduction. Dewey was the Voltaire, the Zola of the present day. An attempt to get the audience to rise in honor of Professor Dewey failed.

Dewey did a reprise on the records of the individual members of the commission and their impartiality.

It was indeed a moment of tragedy for those who had some respect for Dewey's work in fields in which he is competent to hear him say: "I stake my reputation on the truth of the findings of this commission." Fortunately for Professor Dewey, men's reputations are not altogether theirs to gamble away.

Since time did not permit reviewing *all* the evidence gathered by the commission, Dewey would give only some examples. Here they are, taken from the official proceedings of the Moscow trials themselves. It seems that two of the witnesses disagreed by several months as to the date of the formation of the Zinoviev center. And it seems that "divergent" and "contradictory" reasons were given for the formation of the second center. One witness said that it was merely a reserve, pure and simple, in case the first center were exposed. Another witness said that it was also a reserve in another sense; in the sense that the Trotskyites did not trust the Zinoviev group and wanted a separate center of their own.

"I want to emphasize," said Dewey, "that this is crucial. The whole case centers around the formation and purpose of the two centers. With these centers, the whole case against Trotsky and the other accused collapses."

Yes, that is the sum total of the "findings" of the commission. Nine months of "work," thousands of dollars spent, flying trips to Mexico, France, and other countries, lawyers retained, books published and more to come, radio broadcasts, mass meetings, conferences, Miss LaFollette deep in debt—and for what? To "reveal" what any schoolboy could have found by buying the official proceedings for one dollar, plus a discovery that Soviet procedure in treason cases differs from Soviet procedure in regular statutory cases.