

READERS' FORUM

A letter to Norman Thomas from a youth leader, resigning from the Socialist Party

[In publishing this letter from a youth leader, we do so with his permission, and because we believe it to be significant of a current movement in the Socialist Party. We do not necessarily agree with certain statements concerning the Communist Party. The writer was editor of the undergraduate newspaper at the University of Cincinnati last year, was associate editor of the *Student Outlook* (publication of the Student League for Industrial Democracy) and a member of the National Executive Committee of that organization. He is at present associate editor of the *Student Advocate* (publication of the American Student Union), a member of the National Executive Committee of that body, and its Ohio organizer stationed at Cleveland.—THE EDITORS.]

● MY DEAR COMRADE THOMAS: Unknown to you, perhaps, but one of the most important events in my life, was an interview I had with you in the Sinton Hotel at Cincinnati when a freshman in college. What was important in that interview was not so much what you said for publication nor the questions I asked of you, but the questions you put to me. Out of that meeting grew my interest in the League for Industrial Democracy, my activities in the student movement, and ultimately my signing a membership card in the Socialist Party.

Therefore, what I write in this letter I do with personal regret. But my personal feelings are unimportant, except as they revolve around particular social conditions and an attitude towards them which is both unrealistic and dangerous. I shall not labor you with unnecessary language; let me, therefore, come directly to the point.

Two years after joining the Socialist Party I find myself wondering what its *raison d'être* is today? Is it merely to serve as organized opposition to the Communists? How long will it be possible for the Socialist Party to exist without a program and without any understanding of the flexible tactics necessary to the establishment of a socialist society? I fear not much longer.

When I signed a membership card, I did so because I believed the Socialist Party platform, of all party platforms, was the best. I recognized its inadequacies as we all did. I objected to certain of its reformist tendencies. I felt that our attitude towards the Communists was objectionable, despite the incorrectness of their program.

But the lessons from Germany always terrified me. They taught me that the left-wing parties in America must be unified in their opposition to the capitalists. Two years ago, we felt that the Communists were "too Red." Our view was that joining with them would alienate our liberals and progressive friends.

Despite this view, the European tragedies burned too deeply. In the student field, we came to realize that the price of disunity was high, whatever might be the lesser difference amongst the left-wing parties. Acting on that belief, I fought, as a member of the National Executive Committee of the Student L.I.D., for unity. Our membership forced those other members of the N.E.C. to join with the National Student League. From the dissolution of the S.L.I.D. and the N.S.L. there grew up the American Student Union. Almost simultaneously, there grew up the united Workers' Alliance of America. These were two progressive steps. American radicals moved forward!

At the same time an epoch-making event was taking place, the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International. It was pleasant to witness the alteration in Communist tactics. After analyzing social conditions, the Communists changed from what many regarded as distasteful, disruptive, and general obstreperousness in their program. Despite the difficulties of sectarianism, the Communists have

made an honest effort and to a large measure have been successful. I believe this was a wholesome change.

But I can well recall the reaction of certain comrades as they read the daily reports of the Seventh Congress. "We can't trust the Communists. They'll have to prove they are not up to their old tricks." I recall that you wrote and uttered similar words. For two years the Communists have proved their good faith. I wish that I could say as much for my own colleagues.

Something else took place. Our comrades suddenly came to realize that they were philosophically unconscious. In such a state of anæsthesia, we admitted into our company that group who followed the tenets of Leon Trotsky. Just as Trotsky founded a movement built upon personal animus rather than social reality, so most of these original Trotskyites cloaked their personal experience with a social philosophy. Into the S.P. and Yipsels ("Trotskyites" would be a better name) came these elements—the driftwood, the cast-offs, the putrescent odor of the radical movement, madly and wildly shouting slogans and doing little else.

You know as well as I the increasing predominance of the Trotskyist influence in our actions. Under the name of the Socialist Party, *Labor Action* published a cartoon prominently on its first page picturing "Stalinism" and "Reaction," two dogs! Is that the Socialist viewpoint? For six months what was the attitude of the *Call* on Spain? Where was the *Call* during this time? Why does the *Call* continue to devote column inch after inch to attacks on the comrades in the radical movement? Who is the enemy: the Communists or the capitalists? In Cleveland, a Trotskyist, disguised as a Socialist, wrote a blistering attack on the people's government of Spain—in the capitalist press. He was not disciplined. In the *Flame*, a publication of the Yipsels at Akron, there appeared a cartoon showing the hand of the Popular Front in Spain stabbing the Spanish

workers in the back. Could Hearst have done worse?

I could go on listing incidents of their action. But what is the use? You were on a platform when Max Eastman called for revolution against the Soviet Union. Have the Socialists attacked this treachery except in a brief *Call* editorial? He urged revolution against the Soviet government, Comrade Thomas. Do we still speak about "defense of the Soviet Union" or does our silence give consent to this traitor's attitude?

Now our comrades are repeating the canned phrases. Suddenly there has come into being a "real" basis for opposing the Communists! I can well remember when you once warned me of "romantic notions about revolution" before the right-wing split in our party. Today we find the Trotskyist element growing increasingly dominant in the party. Today we find them driving the real Socialists outside the fold. Today we find the party a disruptive, unrealistic, redder-than-the-rose sect, insulting those who should be our friends and generally entering upon a program of self-strangulation. We keep moving backward. Our prestige is waning. We have little influence. Yet you remain silent as these weeds grow within our field. Why?

The Socialist Party, as such, is not important. But the ideals to which we have dedicated our lives are. That the present "program" has driven many persons from the party is self-evident. I could begin to list the names of our best people, but the election figures tell the story more forcefully. The mealy-mouthed explanations of the party's 75 percent election loss have been sickening. Our isolation from organized labor and its leaders makes one wonder with whose aid we will pull this "revolution"?

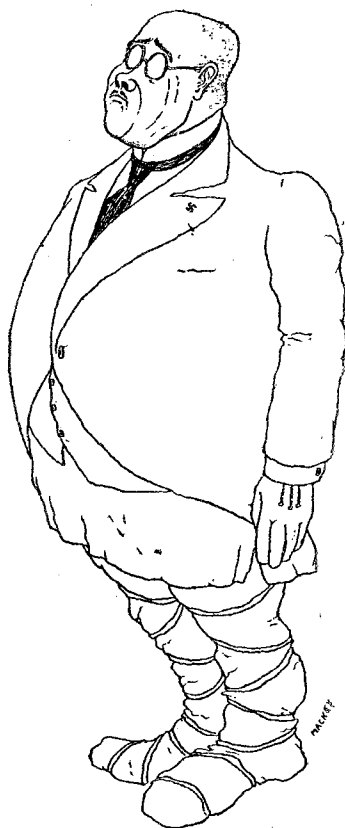
Frankly, I feel that those who want unity of all progressive elements in American society are wasting their time and dissipating their energies by trying argumentatively to convince the "new" Socialist Party. There is one acid test: What are the effects upon the large mass of working people? That they are rejecting the S.P. in larger proportions needs no further proof.

These being the conditions, it is no longer possible to be a Socialist and affiliated with the Socialist Party. I, therefore, write you (as I have written to Alvaine Hollister) this letter of severance. If I felt that it was still worthwhile, I would stay in and fight against the parasites within the party. But it is more important to fight against the more important enemies of the working class. The Trotskyists can be counted upon to liquidate themselves—and the party.

I cannot write such a letter with a light heart. Yet I know that I bespeak the opinions of many another student, who once idealized you, personally, and the Socialist Party as representative of an ideal. Today is it no longer possible to conceal our disappointment and disgust. That the fault belongs to all of us I readily concede.

But I feel that a loyalty to the scientific analysis of today's social circumstances and a loyalty to the socialist ideal loom larger than allegiance to the present Socialist Party. The American Student Union, the Workers' Alliance, and the other united, constructive efforts in the radical movement must, and will, go forward despite obstructions and disrupters. The next step is to work in the building of a political party of farmers and laborers, along the lines that we desire, in order to stem the fascist reaction and to lead to the formation of a socialist society. That is the job for today. It is with the forces who see these needs that I shall devote my energies in the future.

ROBERT G. SPIVACK.



John Mackey

100-percent Aryan

P. S. I am sending copies of this letter to several friends and to the left-wing press, including the *Call*.

REVIEW AND COMMENT

The poetic technique of W. H. Auden—Small stockholders and unemployment—America in prints

ON *THIS ISLAND*, like other books by W. H. Auden, is bound to seem difficult to one who has lived in America all his life and never set foot off his native continent. For that matter, even persons inured by long residence in Oxford have been heard to declare that they would sooner spend the rest of their days among the melons of Persia than be confronted by a portent like this fellow, whose presence they cannot abide. Auden does mystify and frighten; he likes to: his work's exciting character, which critics have sufficiently noticed, derives partly from his admitted fondness for playing boggy-man games. If he is not, at thirty, a strict and adult writer, he has arrived at a position which forbids patronizing remarks about his promise and probabilities. Any literary act, whereby he indicates the progress of his career, commands our almost microscopic interest.*

As we read *On This Island*, the focus of the attention is insularity, in several aspects. More than a reference to English geography and politics is meant by Auden's title; he is also touching upon the more basic solitudes of personality. Does the sense of solidarity, however active its force, ever entirely preclude the sense of isolation? In Auden's present collection, the personal poetry is more important than the political, the difference being a matter of quality rather than quantity. The best lyrics are less susceptible of fault, and better wrought, than the best satires. The best poem in the book, "Fish in the Unruffled Lakes," is a lyric; in the second best, "Casino," two voices, the lyrical and satiric, excellently blend. Auden continues to submit his adroit and accurate reports of case histories, analysis of the pathology of the British upper class, as in the catalogue of poem XIV, or this summary—

Unable to endure ourselves, we sought relief
In the insouciance of the soldier, the heroic sexual
pose
Playing at fathers to amuse the little ladies,

Call us not tragic: falseness made farcical our death;
Nor brave; ours was the will of the insane to suffer
By which since we could not live we gladly die:
And now we have gone for ever to our foolish
graves.

But a minor plangency of tone here and there, an occasional whiff of nostalgia, takes the edge, sometimes, off the zest and bite.

The more a poet consents to publication, the more he is liable to become indulgent toward his lesser vices. The unassimilated literary influence is more apparent in this book than in the days when Auden was backing into literature, as they said, from his study of mathematics, engineering, aeronautics, or what not. There is evidence that he has been pay-

ing attention to contemporaries as well as to his earlier spiritual ancestors.

And the nightingale is dumb,
And the angel will not come

certainly suggests Housman, as the following certainly suggests Yeats:

We till shadowed days are done,
We must weep and sing
Duty's conscious wrong,
The devil in the clock,
The Goodness carefully worn
For atonement or for luck;
We must lose our loves,
On each beast and bird that moves
Turn an envious look.

The difficulties and obscurities that beset Auden's work and interfere with it, emerge, like groundhogs into sunlight, more clearly when he is writing unblessed by the shadow of Isherwood, his occasional collaborator. Auden should come to understand that some of his troubles (or our troubles with him) derive from careless attention to matters of grammar and syntax, and not only from a deliberate cultivation of the seven types of ambiguity catalogued by Mr. Empson. For instance, in

As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned voice of his parents rise
In unlamenting song—

rise should undoubtedly be a singular verb, whose subject is *voice*, and not be attracted into the plural by its nearness to *parents*; nor is the requirement of the rhyme so inexorable that the difficulty might not be resolved. Likewise, in

Dare-devil mystic who bears the scars
Of many spiritual wars
And smoothly tell
The starving that their one starvation [sic—salvation,]
Is personal regeneration [etc.],

it is careless work to hook up by the coordinating conjunction *and* the verbs *bears* (in the third person because it is not yet apparent that *mystic* is a vocative) and *tell*, which is definitely second person. If this sounds like capacious pedagogical niggling, consider

Far-sighted as falcons, they looked down another
future;
For the seed in their loins were hostile, though
afraid of their pride,
And, tall with a shadow now, inertly wait.

(The reader who wants to be perfectly fair should consult the eight preceding stanzas of the *Prologue*.) This poses several questions: Is *for* conjunction or preposition? Is *seed* object of *for*, or subject of *were*? If the latter, why not *was*? Do the two *theirs* in the second line have the same antecedent, or is the second supposed to refer to *seed*? If neither *seed*, nor, of course, *loins* is the subject



"Improve my mind! Young man, I'm the boss here!"

of *were*, what is,—*they*, understood? What does *and* connect? (To say nothing of the abrupt succession and incongruity of the metaphors.)

On the other hand, there is an entirely legitimate use of ambiguity, which is well illustrated (never ruling out entirely the possibility of a misprint) by the following:

May with its light behaving
Stirs vessel, eye, and limb;
The singular and sad
Are willing to recover,
And to the swan-delighting river
The careless picnics come,
The living white and red.

Here, by writing *behaving* for *behavior*, Auden has given up an assonance, and sacrificed explicitness of meaning; on the other hand he has gained by permitting the hint of the assonance, and by the several possible meanings that can now be read into the line, or at least present themselves as nuances of the thought: the ambiguity as to whether *behaving* is noun or adjective, and, if the latter, whether it modifies *May* or *light*; the ambiguity as to whether *light* is adjective modifying *behaving*, or noun modified by *behaving*, or unmodified noun. The fact that we finally decide on one or the other intellectual solution does not rule out as discordant the various other poetic impressions.

Another injunction which the remarkable technical virtuosity of a writer like Auden imposes on its possessor is that of curbing extravagance. One as tough as Auden would be bound, sooner or later, to tackle the sestina: it is good practice, but there could be no more hideous circle of a poet's hell than that occupied by organized throngs of sestina-fanciers.

* *On This Island*, by W. H. Auden. Random House. \$1.50.