

REVIEW AND COMMENT

The essays of Waldo Frank—Edgar Lee Masters on Walt Whitman—Vida D. Scudder's autobiography

IN his foreword to this collection of his miscellaneous essays,* Waldo Frank says Harold Clurman of the Group Theater, who undertook the editing, found a natural unity, even a plot, emerging from the material. It would be more accurate to call the entire book the third act of a four-act play. Plot of a kind *In the American Jungle* contains, but only those acquainted with Mr. Frank's earlier work will do justice to it. *Salvos* presented Frank's critical writings from 1915 to 1924. *The Re-discovery of America* carried the account forward to 1929. But this present volume, though it brings the narrative down to 1936, goes as far back as 1925. It begins with a series of sketches of American life during the boom years and appraisals of the writers in the liberal tradition to which Mr. Frank then belonged. The style of these sketches is abrupt and falsetto, as though Frank were finding old attachments difficult to maintain in changing circumstances. He is obviously breaking away from a former orientation. Yet one has to return to the *Re-discovery* to find out what the orientation has been, and to read well into the new volume before it becomes clear that the progress to which Mr. Clurman alludes has led Mr. Frank from Spinoza with a dash of Marx to Marx with vestigial remnants of Spinoza.

This change in point of view had become, I think, necessary for Mr. Frank's peace of mind. For he was never altogether successful as a partisan of Spinoza on the American scene. As a young man he had tried Paris, and had rejected alliance with the American expatriates. His consciousness of the destiny of America led him to join the group of writers who had stayed at home and who, under the hegemony of Van Wyck Brooks, were already celebrating our coming of age. The period was still dominated by the new liberalism in politics of Herbert Croly and the new adoration of sex in Sherwood Anderson. In literary criticism the program was less clearly enunciated. It was a deduction from the critical warfare of Stuart Sherman and H. L. Mencken; Mencken's emancipation from puritanism fused with Sherman's belief in the achieved unity of the national spirit. As one of the younger members of this movement, Frank was able to do little or nothing to further its aims. A curious dualism permeated his writings, for which his interest in Spinoza was responsible. Spinoza permitted him to preach the new gospel with unusual fervor, to accept the rhapsodic generalization that the triumph of a progressive America was at hand. But at the same time, the mysticism which Frank drew from this alien philosopher forced him continually to raise the doubt—in the face of increasing material prosperity, to

accept this glorious future as possible only in case the materialism of the industrial machine were controlled. Perhaps also Frank came a little too late for the new liberalism to appear altogether plausible. Too much of it had been associated with the career of Woodrow Wilson. By the mid-twenties, the war had cast doubt on man's capacity to control the machines of his creation, and attention had begun to turn from the expansion of the individual spirit to social and economic problems. But these practical problems, of which his mysticism had made Frank cognizant, served only to make the mysticism itself appear the more out of date. His demand that men become aware of "the whole," if it was too robust to be compared with Emerson's absorption in the over-soul, was, after all, closer to Whitman's humanism than Croly's cheerful pragmatism. Meanwhile, the movement was turning out to be little more than evidence of the well-fed literary stomach, the genial reflection of our temporary prosperity on the literary sky. Its optimism, which had been from the start philosophically lackadaisical, came in due time to change its direction into the subtle distortions of democratic theory in the more recent writings of Walter Lippmann.

Frank rejected the distortion, and continued to grapple with the problem which his superior philosophical insight kept before him. His best essays in this volume represent his projection of this struggle to reconcile the industrialization of the country with its democratic tradition. He praises *The Bridge* by Hart Crane in the best criticism that has been written on the poem, but for reasons that at bottom are purely personal: the Brooklyn Bridge symbolizes to him matter made into human action. And his enthusiasm leads him to ignore Crane's obliqueness of expression through the prediction that a collectivist society alone will be able to understand the poem. Then, as though putting aside a personal temptation, he proceeds to reject the points of views of T. S. Eliot and Spengler. Eliot, he finds, manages to live in his world by reducing it to a fragment. In a careful, detailed analysis of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, he shows him to have neglected

the Hebraic contribution to world culture and the philosophical implications of Darwinism. Thus he paves the way for his own escape from the jungle, and discovers that he can preserve his own "consciousness of the whole" by predicating its attainment in the classless society through the intercession of the democratized masses of mankind. Marxism has succeeded in breaking his dilemma. In the *Re-discovery*, Frank was tolerant of the Soviet Union, but an intransigent opponent of Marxism as a dogmatic system. Now he has found out that Marxism is not, as its enemies maintained, a "closed" philosophy like mediæval scholasticism. In his addresses as first president of the League of American Writers, he gives most positive expression to his new orientation. And it is doubtless true that his immediate concern with the reality of fascism and its corroding of all that Mr. Frank has long held dear in his ideal of the "wholeness" of life, has made possible this fuller understanding of that wholeness as Marxism defines it.

At the same time, it is only proper to add that Mr. Frank does not believe that he has now rejected Spinoza entirely. He still looks upon the good life as a mystical-religious participation by the individual in the sensory experience of material life. To many of his readers he must seem to retain certain ambiguities more peculiar to nineteenth-century romanticism than to Spinoza, vestiges of Rossetti, of Musset, indeed of the Savoyard Vicar whom Frank continues to respect. But it will do no harm, certainly, to his audience at the present time if Frank somewhat extremely counteracts the confusion between mechanical materialism and dialectic.

EDWIN BERRY BURGUM.

The Man of Paumonok

WHITMAN, by Edgar Lee Masters. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$3.50.

EDGAR LEE MASTERS comes to a study of Whitman with a mind seeking desperately for some certitudes in a world that appears to him to be going to the dogs. But Masters's own perceptions are so crude, and his general level of consciousness so embogged in a poorly liberated provincialism, that he cannot give us any analysis of Whitman or his significance for our times. Instead he gives us all the well-known facts about Whitman's life, relying on copious quotations from other sources, a method not at all objectionable in itself, but which, in his hands, tends to take the place of original criticism. So that the general reader who is unacquainted with the Whitman literature may get something out of the book, but the reader looking for fresh evaluations in the light of modern awareness will get only some dubious psychiatric specu-



A. AJAY

*IN *THE AMERICAN JUNGLE*, by Waldo Frank. Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.50.

lations on Whitman's libido. In the end, Masters concludes that the fate of Whitman's literary achievement will depend on the fate of the democracy of which he sang in his huge hymns. This conclusion gives us the heart of Masters's inadequacy. For if this were so, Whitman would today be a dead dog, which he decidedly is not. Whitman's democracy was practically dead when *Leaves of Grass* made its appearance.

The rejection of Europe as a concept in favor of America as a concept could have something of glorious validity in the brief dawn of bourgeois democracy in this land unmoored in a feudal past. It reminds me of the mystical exceptionalism of the Irish "emerald isle and pixie" cult upon which Engels turned his scorn. But Whitman lived to see the day when the federal troops, formerly at one with the "free mechanics," became an alien body of violence, shooting the strikers of 1877 and of 1886. The *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 was catching up with the *Leaves of Grass* of 1855. When will its corresponding complex sensibility make itself felt in our literature?

The truth of the matter is that Masters cannot weigh Whitman for us because he himself cannot transcend Whitman's values and inevitable historic limitations. Masters yearns with a too-bitter nostalgia for Whitman's prairie democracy to be able to view his subject with modern eyes. He is himself too ridden with the obsessions of mystical American destiny and too raw with the gaucherie of an anti-puritanism whose very hatred of its enemy bears the tragic marks of its enemy's influence. I cannot but respect the desperation of search which I feel in Masters's prowlings about the serene figure of Whitman. But I cannot at the same time help feeling the doom which pervades Masters's preoccupations simply because he is attempting to operate with a critical apparatus rooted in an American petty-bourgeois outlook darkened with shadows of horror at the remorseless advance of twentieth-century monopolism. For this reason, Masters makes of Whitman something perilously close to a lost cause, a vanishing dream. Because he expects too much of Whitman, expects that he will in fact be the prophet of a divine America, he ends by placing him in a false position where we must either reject or accept him completely. The genius of Whitman for us does not at all lie in such a quandary. He is with us. But we go beyond him.

Whitman wrote in his exaltation: "I reject nothing—I accept the master as well as the slave." The slave cannot be grateful to him for it. But neither can the master breathe easily in the storms of his social and natural pantheism. He wrote: "My call is the call of battle, I nourish active rebellion." But he also wrote:

I hear it was charged against me that I sought to
destroy institutions,
But really I am neither for nor against institutions,
(What have I in common with them? Or what with
the destruction of them?)

Has anyone ever explored the organic lack of discipline and responsibility which is coiled secretly within Whitman's all-encompassing embrace of nature and society? Is it this, as well as his problem of rendering vastness, which conditioned the form of his verse? Is that why, with all his tireless apostrophe to masses, he was unable to give living form to dramatic or even lyrical conflict of individuals? And the problem of Whitman's sexuality, its quality and its sources, still needs, after Masters's book, modern critical examination. Greatness of spirit was needed to affirm it in a country dominated by New England. Does it need the foil of puritanism for its effectiveness? Generally, his sexuality remains at the level of discovery (there are, of course, some remarkable exceptions, as in the beautiful image which closes the fifth section of the *Children of Adam* poems). But what have we to learn from a comparison of Whitman's sexuality with the subtleties of daring eroticism which irradiate the texture of Elizabethan intellectuality in Shakespeare's day?

The problem of Whitman's genius as a critic needs (Masters does express his opinion on this

point) more study. Whitman, like T. S. Eliot, who has never thought fit to expose Whitman to his researches, preferred the leanness of Dante to the torrential abundance of Shakespeare. There were in him, the man who "sent his barbaric yawp across the rooftops of the world," many elements of modern critical awareness. Like Milton, Blake, Shelley, and others, Whitman was trying to affirm some aspect of the spiritual realities which accompanied the anti-feudal revolution. For the modern poet who has gone beyond that restricted affirmation, Whitman, like the others, is a proper subject for "critical assimilation." But Masters's book is evidence that the job remains to be done.

MILTON HOWARD.

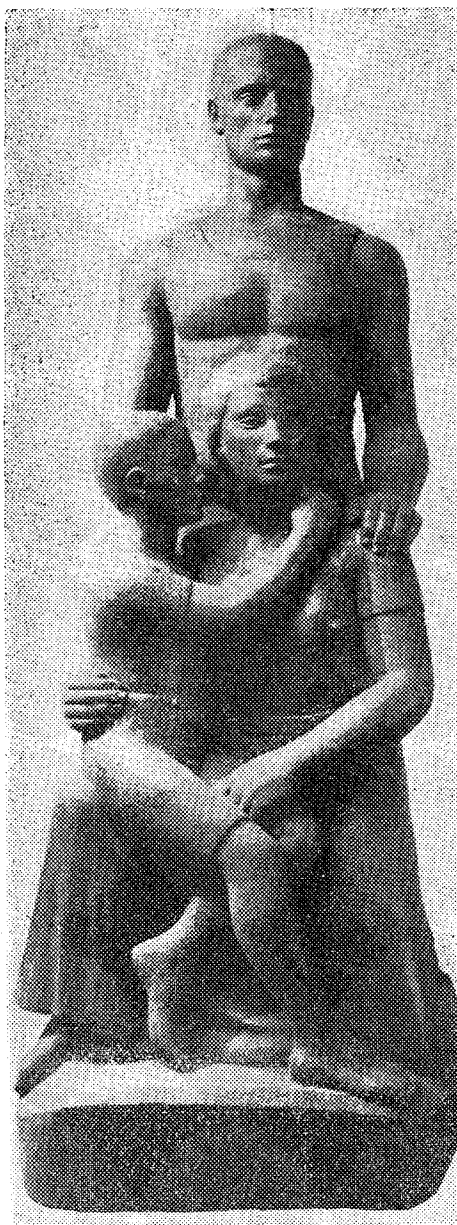
Magnissima Charta

THE NEW SOVIET CONSTITUTION, by Anna Louise Strong. Henry Holt & Co. \$1.50

IN this compact little volume, Anna Louise Strong continues her brilliant and invaluable role of interpreting Soviet Russia to the outside world. Starting with an analysis of the present sad state of democracy in capitalist countries, she goes on to give the background of the new Soviet constitution in the evolution of the U.S.S.R. This approach shows clearly that the new constitution is not something strange and unexpected, but a natural outgrowth of those democratic principles and processes which were inherent in the first workers' republic from the day of its establishment. The very manner in which the new constitution was adopted demonstrates this point. Surely no other document of its kind in history was ever discussed before enactment so thoroughly, so democratically, and by so large a proportion of a nation's population.

Miss Strong proceeds to explain the political provisions of the constitution. The creation of a second chamber, the Soviet of Nationalities, in addition to the Soviet of the Union, is due, she points out, to the fact that "the U.S.S.R. is a multi-national state" in which it is only just that the particular interests of the minority national and racial groups should be protected. If the British empire, the author intriguingly suggests, had a similar constitution, it would mean that "all imperial laws had to be passed both by a majority of the total population—with India outvoting the rest of the empire combined—and also by a majority of the constituent nations, in a second chamber which would restore to England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales a certain equality of rights!"

Quite fittingly Miss Strong concludes her book with a chapter on the "New Rights of Man" embodied in the Soviet constitution. Outstanding among these provisions are those guaranteeing the right to work, the right to rest, the right to material security in old age and in case of sickness or other incapacity, the right to education, the right of women to full equality with men, and the right of freedom from all racial discrimination. These constitutional guarantees are so extraordinary and



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Asturian Miner and Family