

READERS' FORUM

Not a "Writers' Writer"

TO THE NEW MASSES:

IN the event that the matter is still of interest, I'd like to comment on L. A. Lauer's letter of March 22, in which he suggests that we need "a field of creativity which goes beyond 'a writer writing for writers.'" Mr. Lauer's letter makes a central point, one that Mike Gold has been hammering away at for years, that in the field of pulps more "left" competition is needed—that in this field labor formulas are better than reactionary formulas. Nobody is likely to disagree with Mr. Lauer on that point. But after having made the point, he goes on to make his statement that we need "a field of creativity which goes beyond 'a writer writing for writers'" and singles out *The Outward Room* as a writers' book. Here is the kind of unfair general attack on writing that is made again and again, and always with the same result. Pulp magazines thrive and—as a Soviet critic has recently pointed out—satisfy a legitimate demand for "action"; on the other hand they omit almost everything else, omit craftsmanship, honesty, the burning and unshakable conviction that writing is an art. Marx wrote that a writer must believe so much in his writing that he "sacrifices his existence to its existence" when necessary. Those writers whom Mr. Lauer attacks are the writers who feel that way, who are willing to sacrifice themselves in the interest of good work. Are they writing just for writers? *The Outward Room*, which he implies no worker reads, is being dramatized for the I.L.G.W.U. Labor Stage. *The Outward Room*, which he considers a writers' book, was published at half-price in order to get a large audience and was read—if he will grant three or four readers a copy—by half a million people. Mr. Lauer denies something that already exists; he denies the "field of creativity" which honest writers are working hard to extend. To attack us is objectively to attack the human beings who turn to us to express their lives, their dignity, their struggle, who want to come to us and should be encouraged and not prevented from coming.

Forest Hills, N. Y.

MILLEN BRAND.

Praise and Otherwise

TO THE NEW MASSES:

I'VE been praising and damning NEW MASSES and its predecessors for seventeen years, so don't pay too much attention to this.

About three months ago you were being, on the whole, a little dull; and I decided that when Sam the magazine man came around Thursday I'd look over the *Nation* and the *New Republic* as well as NEW MASSES before handing him my weekly fifteen cents. Once or twice, I believe, I bought one of the others; but when I did I felt I was missing what I needed—call it guidance, or the straight dope—and now I'm regular again.

This literary section is very excellent. Not Freeman's piece—he's a writer I like, but his forte is personal experience and slambang; this article is just too heavy and graceless to plow through to the end. Nor Carmer's—I'm sick of articles about myths; much better print a myth. But Bruen's gets across, and Hicks' rhyme is wonderful. You ought to have led the supplement with it; it's a classic. And Wall's story is extraordinary, too. He's a new name to me; keep right on his tail; there's a talent; make him work for you.

In the main section North is good, but Cohen is

splendid—one of those things that throw a white glare on the mysteries. Reading it has made me resolve to write to Hull and F. D. Another fine dope editorial on Aylesworth. Glad to see you giving Ickes his due. Tell us more—all you can—about Ken. (I bought the first issue, glanced through it, and began telling people "This looks great, but wait till I read it." Reading lowered my opinion, of course, and now maybe its honest editors are going to resign. But why worry much over the "Ultimate Winners" cartoon? Deal with it as with Ickes' anti-Red blasts. The point is that Communists want allies against fascism, and those desired allies are nearly all anti-Communist too. You have to avoid all avoidable quarrels with them; overlook everything you can, deal gently and calmly with what you can't overlook, encourage by praise wherever possible.)

The foregoing applies to Bliven's letter. "And is this not 'advocating rapprochement with Hitler without political conditions?'" I said right out loud in the train, "It is not." Bet most of your readers did. You know damn well trade arrangements do not constitute rapprochement. Conceivably, Browder himself could have justified his assertion, though I doubt it; you certainly failed. A note of regret and correction, coupled with a new and solidly founded attack, was in order—and would have been much stronger. Incidentally, Browder's series was fine; it weaned me pretty thoroughly from the tempting isolation pap.

Here are two dollars toward the \$20,000. With all best wishes,

New York City.

J. P.

Peace-Strike Message

FOLLOWING is a greeting from Rockwell Kent, forwarded to NEW MASSES by a University of Chicago student, to be read at the April 27 peace strike at that university.

"I must be under no illusion as to why I have been asked to send this greeting to you. I am old enough to have what all your lives you'll hear called 'common sense'; but I haven't it. I am experienced enough to have become 'prudent'; but I'm not prudent. I have responsibilities enough, God knows, to have learned to be 'practical'; and I haven't learned to be practical. I just haven't learned.

"I still believe, as you do, that it's wrong for a few people to be rich at the cost of millions being poor; that starvation in a land of plenty is outrageous; that lack of opportunity to work is preposterous; that war is murder. I still don't like bankers, gamblers, exploiters, politicians, and gangsters. I still believe that people—all people, everywhere—should be free and prosperous and happy. I haven't learned—I should confess it now with shame—that human nature can't be changed. Because I haven't learned that, I am greeting you today.

"But is there nothing I can bring to you but what all youth already knows? Have I learned nothing? Yes, I have learned. I've learned that the idealism of youth is nearer to the truth than anything we'll ever know. That it's better for a man to lose his life than his belief in life. And that if youth keeps its belief—keeps its belief in what seems true to youth—it will become a power that will change the world.

"It's time to change the world: let's change it.

"Faithfully yours,

"ROCKWELL KENT."

Artists in Jersey City

TO THE NEW MASSES:

WE all know of methods of fascist countries in their dealings with creative artists—writers, actors, artists. Until last week we did not know that such conditions could exist in a free democracy.

Several of us in search of first-hand material showing slum-housing went to Jersey City and quite naturally started to make drawings of the Sixth Street tenement districts. We worked inconspicu-

ously from an automobile, and were amazed when we were accosted by the police, ordered to drive to the Second Precinct station house, and held for some time in the guardroom without any charges being placed against us.

We were informed by the police that some citizen had complained—at least that was the explanation of the station commander. What the nature of the complaint was is still a mystery to us. The only thing the police did say was that we were "frightening decent persons."

How in the world artists could be frightening decent people by making drawings of slum tenements is something we cannot comprehend, but perhaps fascists can. When the police learned that these drawings were to be part of the exhibition on housing, "Roofs for Forty Million," now on view in the seventh-floor galleries of La Maison Française, Rockefeller Center, sponsored by An American Group, Inc., they took instant action.

The sketch books of the artists were scanned closely. Our car was searched while we were in the guardroom. When the police found that we were artists and that the drawings accurately showed housing conditions in Jersey City, they held a long conference—went into a huddle to decide what to do with us. This, too, was after they had found that the exhibition was to be held at Rockefeller Center.

Repeated demands to the police that we be told why we had been detained, and on what charge, brought only the reply, "You'll find out soon enough." Asking if it was against the law in Jersey City for artists to draw, we were told, "You have to come to the police before you can draw anything in this town."

Apparently because they had found no pistols, revolvers, blackjacks, dirks, or nitroglycerine on us or in our car, the police decided to let us go. In the meantime police officers of the guardroom had been looking over the sketch books with avid interest, asking us how artists worked, and about the mechanical details of painting. As the captain came into the guardroom one patrolman was saying, "You'd never miss this picture for being anything but Sixth Street. That's Sixth Street just as it is."

This infuriated the captain. He shouted: "You can get out now, but don't ever come back to Jersey City or New Jersey. Stay in New York where you belong."

Not content with detaining us and depriving us of our liberty without charge, and destroying our work, the police of Jersey City followed our car to the Hoboken ferry to see that we did leave New Jersey, as they had ordered.

This sort of treatment could and does happen in fascist countries. Now it has happened here!

PHILIP EVERGOOD,
BRUCE MITCHELL,
LOUIS RIBAK.

Letters in Brief

ELIZABETH LAWSON of the Workers' School, informs us of a new departure in Marxist education. A full-time summer day-school will be held in New York from July 5 to August 12. Classes will be held from Monday through Thursday, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. The fee is \$25, and courses will be offered in political economy, Marxism-Leninism, and American history. Those interested may communicate with the Summer Day School at 35 E. 12th St., New York City. . . . Congressman Jerry O'Connell, of Montana, will address the members of the Book and Magazine Guild and the general public on "Civil Liberties and the American People," on Friday, April 22, at 8 p.m., at the Central Industrial High School, 42nd St., between Second and Third Aves., New York City. . . . The Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade will sponsor a meeting for Spain at the New York Hippodrome on Saturday night, April 23. Members of the Group Theatre, Ed Wynn, Paul Draper, Molly Picon, Marc Blitzstein, Duke Ellington, Will Geer, and others will entertain.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Moods and Tenses of John Dos Passos

U.S.A., by John Dos Passos. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$3.

JOURNEYS BETWEEN WARS, by John Dos Passos. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$3.

JOHN DOS PASSOS' publishers are wisely doing their part to make the country conscious of him as a major literary figure, and they have accordingly issued two omnibus volumes of his work. *U. S. A.* is, of course, his famous trilogy: *The 42nd Parallel*, 1919, and *The Big Money*. *Journeys Between Wars* is made up of his travel books: much of *Rosinante to the Road Again* (1922), almost the whole of *Orient Express* (1927), and most of those sections of *In All Countries* (1934) that deal with foreign lands. It also contains some sixty pages on Dos Passos' visit to Spain a year ago.

Comparison of the two books makes it quite clear that Dos Passos' deeper experiences go into his novels, leaving his more casual impressions to be recorded in the travel essays. *Journeys Between Wars* shows that he is at his best when he is describing the persons he meets or recording his own moods. The *padrone* in the Spanish restaurant, the Sayid on the Orient express, the Danish accountant on his way home from America—these are effectively drawn. And the journal of the camel ride from Bagdad to Dasmascus is as pleasant a personal record as can be found in modern literature. But there is not much—and I have now read most of these essays twice—that the mind holds onto. Other novelists—Gide, Lawrence, Huxley—have written travel books that belong with their major works, but not Dos Passos.

The explanation, which has some importance for the understanding of Dos Passos as a writer, seems to me fairly clear. He deals, consistently and no doubt deliberately, with impressions—the specific scene, the precise emotions, the exact conversation. The seeing eye—even “the camera eye”—is admittedly the first virtue of the travel writer. But it is equally certain that the memorable travel writers have not been afraid to draw conclusions from what they saw. Dos Passos is afraid: no milder word will do. What one feels in *Journeys Between Wars* is neither a casual holiday from the job of thinking nor a conscientious elimination of ideas for some literary purpose but a deep emotional unwillingness to face the intellectual implications of things seen and heard.

And the extraordinary thing is that this shrinking from conclusions is to be found even in the last section, the section dealing with Spain in 1937. Dos Passos tells of crossing the border from France, of a night on the

road, of executions in Valencia, of a bombardment of Madrid, of a fiesta of the Fifteenth Brigade, of a trip through some villages, and of an interview with officials of the P.O.U.M. But there is not a word about the issues between the loyalists and the fascists, not a word about the differences between the loyalist government and the P.O.U.M. It seems incredible that any author, considering all that is involved in Spain today, could keep such silence. Do not suppose that Dos Passos is merely maintaining an artistic objectivity, holding back his own opinions so that the reader can arrive unhampered at the truth. He simply has refused to think his way through to clear convictions. He has sympathies—with the loyalists as against the fascists and apparently with the P.O.U.M. as against the government. But even the Spanish crisis cannot shake him into thought.

The only approximation to a conclusion comes as Dos Passos is leaving Spain, and, characteristically, it is in the form of a question: “How can they win, I was thinking? How can the new world of confusion and crosspurposes and illusions and dazzled by the mirage of idealistic phrases win against the iron combination of men accustomed to run things who have only one idea binding them together, to hold on to what they've got?” This passage has been quoted by almost every conservative reviewer of the book, and quoted with undisguised satisfaction. “We told you so,” one could hear them saying. “There's no sense in trying to help Spain. It's all foolishness to hope for social justice anywhere. Let's make the best of things as they are.”

The truth is that it is impossible to avoid having opinions, and the only question is whether or not they are based on adequate information and clear thinking. If Dos Passos had faced the responsibility of the writer, and especially the radical writer, to use his intellect as well as his eyes, if he had been concerned, not with avoiding conclusions, but with arriving at sound ones, I think he would have come out of Spain with something more to say than these faltering words of despair.

Afraid to think, he has yielded to a mood, and the reactionaries are delighted with his surrender. Both that surrender and his flirtation with the P.O.U.M. are results of an essential irresponsibility.

Dos Passos' irresponsibility takes two forms: unwillingness to think and unwillingness to act. Several years ago, I remember, at the time when he was perhaps closest to the Communist Party, he said something to the effect that he was merely a camp-follower. In *Journeys Between Wars* there is a revealing passage. (It is, of course, creditably characteristic of Dos Passos to reveal himself.) When he was leaving the Soviet Union in 1928, the director and the actors of the Sanitary Propaganda Theatre came to see him off. The director said, “They want to know. They like you very much, but they want to ask you one question. They want you to show your face. They want to know where you stand politically. Are you with us?” Dos Passos continues: “The iron twilight dims, the steam swirls round us, we are muddled by the delicate crinkly steam of our breath, the iron crown tightens on the head, throbbing with too many men, too many women, too many youngsters seen, talked to, asked questions of, too many hands shaken, too many foreign languages badly understood. ‘But let me see. . . . But maybe I can explain. . . . But in so short a time . . . there's not time.’ The train is moving. I have to run and jump for it.”

The passage, so palpably sincere and so pleasant, reminds us that, even in a broader sense, Dos Passos has always been uncommonly detached. Indeed, detachment is almost the keynote of *Journeys Between Wars*. In the extracts from *Rosinante* Dos Passos is “the traveler”; in *Orient Express* he is “the east-bound American”; in the Russian section he is “the American Peesatyel.” Perhaps it is no wonder that in writing about Spain in 1937 he is still merely an observer. It is no wonder that he has seldom tried to write about the revolutionary movement from inside, and, when he has tried, has failed. It is no wonder that he has never communicated the sense of the reality of comradeship, as Malraux, for example, communicates it in *Days of Wrath*.

Yet there was a time when Dos Passos seemed willing to try to think clearly and to feel deeply. His second play, *Airways, Inc.*, was bad dramatically, but in it Dos Passos at least made an attempt to be clear. There was a sharp difference between that play and *The Garbage Man*, and an even greater difference between *The 42nd Parallel*, first novel of his trilogy, and *Manhattan Transfer*. In *The 42nd Parallel* Dos Passos seemed for the first time to have mastered the American scene. The technical devices used in this novel and 1919 perplexed some readers, but Dos Passos himself appeared to be relatively clear about what he was trying to do.



Tom Funk