

Poetry: Red-baiting Victim

By Isidor Schneider

A POWERFUL mood for change marked the first years of the century in America. It culminated in the 1912 presidential elections with Woodrow Wilson campaigning under the slogan of the New Freedom; Theodore Roosevelt, as a Progressive splitting the Republican Party; and Eugene Debs polling a million votes in a pre-women's suffrage electorate of less than half the present voting population.

Every ferment of the time billed itself as insurgence and advance. The sifting of time has compelled a different labelling for some. Theodore Roosevelt as a "progressive" now seems grotesque. There were equally mistaken identities in the literary "upsurge."

It would take too much space here to attempt to separate out all the tendencies confused together in the literature of that period and particularly in the enormous stop-over camp of the "new poetry." There were, however, two main trends. One moved toward the centers of life and the poets following it, not always consciously, strove to become people's poets. The others edged toward the periphery, toward the isolate; or: seeking to express and appeal to the perceptions of the exquisite individual. They became, deliberately or involuntarily, coterie poets.

Both broke from the old forms; but where the first made the break for the sake of more immediate and wider communication and experimented, to that end, with the free rhythms of conversation and with recitable ballad forms, the second subtilized and restricted communication and cultivated form as a content in itself. The formalists, as we now call them, whatever they have called themselves, considered art an "autonomous" function only temporarily, if at all, connected with society. Few of them have changed. In a recent issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature* the imagist John Gould Fletcher echoed himself in a new call for "the autonomy of art."

Had the momentum of 1912 continued, the first rather than the second trend might have won dominance. But the World War detoured the insurgent drives. Then the postwar let-down drained energies off into the disillusionment which expressed itself in cynicism (or faith in nothing), and its tangent, psychism (or faith in the impossible). Both were to be seen in the victorious formalist poetry of the twenties. The psychism was there, not so much as a content as a sacramental attitude, the presumption of a special, innate spiritual function.

In the victory of formalism, poetry as a social life-force was enfeebled. The poets

attained their "autonomy"; but it was autonomy on an ice-floe, dissolving wherever it approached populated shores.

The arrogant, distilled work of American formalists, for all the distinction of their best examples, never won popular acceptance or became an influence in American life. Most of them repudiated such a prospect and in some the repudiation took the form of sheer physical separation. They became expatriates, and one has carried the separation to the extreme of political treachery to his people.

In contrast, as an example of the part poetry might have played had the first trend won, we may recall the social sense as well as popular success of the poetry of Edgar Lee Masters and Stephen Vincent Benet, some of whose volumes competed with best selling novels; or of Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg, whose poems gave a literary satisfaction so spontaneous that they reached masses of people in vaudeville recitations.

WHEN the foundationless Coolidge "prosperity," which the "great engineer" Hoover had been elected to perpetuate, caved in, there was a taking stock and re-evaluation all over America. Poetry, seemingly most remote, was among the first sections in American culture to be affected.

The consciousness of human fellowship evoked by common suffering and fears, and the indignation over the injustices and incompetence of a way of life that was so disastrously discrediting itself, provided a new content in poetry. Ironically enough it was then that the completeness of the formalists' triumph became clear. Poets could find no better container for the new content than the old formalist molds.

The new poetry that appeared during the depression years has been variously termed "social," "social-conscious," "Marxist," "left," "protest," "revolution," etc. Since in my opinion the term social poetry is the most inclusive and convenient, it is the one I use throughout this article.

Though it has been the fashion to picture it as having had an almost absolute and, by enemies, despotic reign, the successes of social poetry were limited and brief. The leading formalist poets held aloof or launched savage polemics against it. Even in its most triumphant period its enemies had access as poets and critics to the bigger magazines, receiving ardent respect rather than grudging acknowledgements in the chief review mediums; and, as lecturers, were admitted to the bigger circuits and the larger universities. It is sufficient to recall the heavily subsidized and elaborately organized Humanist move-

ment launched as a counter-revolutionary intellectualism which developed the small American fascist intelligentsia.

The social poets reached any audience beyond the small left press only by grace of a few stunned rather than acquiescent editors on liberal journals and in publishing houses. And even on the liberal journals, the stunned editors soon recovered their subsidized poise.

The real power of social poetry was in its appeal to the younger writer. Had it had anything like a fair field it would unquestionably have won over quite completely the new literary generation. A fair field, however, is precisely what it cannot expect.

For its new tasks the social poetry of the depression years was cramped by the strained forms it was using. The results were often incongruous, like beer served in liqueur glasses; and sometimes they were destroyed by the forms, like something contained in a medium with which it has a destructive chemical reaction.

The question of form, however, I will return to at another time. Here I am concerned with the eclipse that social poetry, never permitted to cast its full light, soon suffered. This eclipse, it is important to note, was not the consequence of a change of taste. The taste for this poetry, like the poetry itself, was not permitted any kind of organic development. It was simply cut off.

The eclipse was nothing else than political repression. It was part of the reaction that, on the very day after the establishment of such agencies as the WPA, planned their destruction. The terrorism that has driven progressives out of government bureaus, teaching posts, etc., replaced an atmosphere of hope with that of fear. Physically and psychologically the reaction closed over social poetry. Shut out of all but the harried left press, there its appearance meant inclusion in the index of repression.

ONE has only to examine the poetry written since the reaction set in, sometime in 1936, to see that it was not social poetry alone but all poetry that had become the victim of Red-baiting. Thereby a long development was cut short.

In the post-World War disillusionment, when poetry was detoured into formalism, even then its protesting cynicism and aloofness had been an implicit social criticism. In its demand for autonomy it set up at the same time the spiritual and self-sufficient values of art as against the philistine and parasitic values of the "Coolidge prosperity."

In the next phase, as the Coolidge pros-

perity collapsed, poetry went from implicit to explicit social criticism. Important changes such as this occur, usually by way of a succession of literary generations. Social poetry was the contribution, primarily, of the young poets of the "depression generation," though an impressive minority of the older and established poets joined them.

This development in poetry was organic in relation to American literary evolution, and organic also in its response to events. The repression arrested the development of American poetry and frustrated a whole American literary generation. Let us examine some of the consequences.

In some case the consequence was sheer physical extinction. The tragically premature death of young poets like Sol Funaroff and Alexander Bergman, can quite directly be laid to the repression. In the case of Funaroff his expulsion from the WPA Writers' Project and the general blacklist of the literary left kept from him the means to secure adequate medical treatment for his "poverty heart."

In the case of others, the consequence was extinction as poets. Discouraged by the shut doors and the Red smears in the review columns a number of poets stopped writing. Some may resume in freer times but the literary death of a number of talented social poets may be added to the victories of the repression.

Other poets attenuated their poetry production turning chiefly to the, as yet,

dilute form of the radio verse play and the satirical song lyric.

In radio, because the medium is still comparatively new and because the war has imposed a minimum standard for social content, there have been some opportunities for the social poet. To place any reliance in it would be delusion. Something so sold to the big advertiser offers no more future to the social poet than the *Saturday Evening Post*. The only hope is that organized listener demand may force some allotment of time to poetry in radio, for which it is the best public medium yet devised.

In the satirical song lyric the social poet has somewhat securer prospects. Satire enjoys a tolerance extended to no other literary form. But, at best, the musical comedy stage can be a market for only a minute part of the potential output of social poetry.

Other social poets, in despair or opportunism, have turned renegade and are producing a sort of parody of the twenties. With the return of some gilded youth as subsidizers of the arts which they hastily abandoned during the depression years, a new era of little magazines, patronage, and cult snobbery has come in.

But it is all reduced in scale and altered in outlook. Formerly even the esthetes were rebels of a sort. Now they are conscious reactionaries. Now it is not the materialism of the philistines that they rage at but "Marxist materialism" knowing that

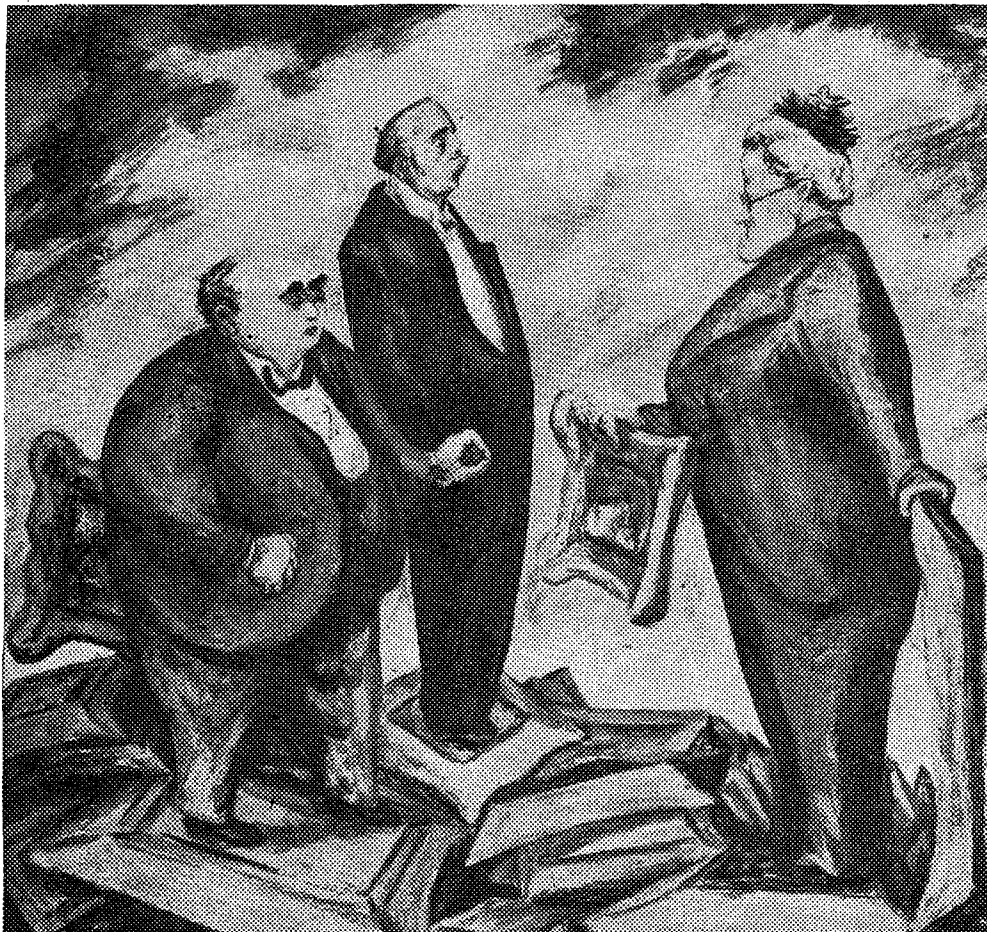
the literary future belongs to the left and that this heritage cannot long be withheld from it.

In the new esthete circles the substitutes for the jeered social content are things too far gone in decomposition to be named a decadence. The substitutes include a mysticism sunk to incantations, a cynicism that despairs even of the refuge of hedonism, and an increasingly frantic perversity. I have read young poets of these circles who wish to be taken for old men, even for impotent men, even for evil men.

This need not surprise us. Morality by its nature is social. It cannot even be conceived of except as a *social* relationship. Consequently poets who abjure social function and social responsibility, who press to the limits of individualism, must come, in time, to think like little Neros.

Nevertheless it is not to be denied that these circles exert influence. Frustrated of social participation, denied effective and honorable function, poets again stake out their "autonomy," seek any realm, however insubstantial, in which they count. Here they swell beyond morals or sense; but as they swell they feel big. It is no wonder that some promising poets have been enticed and that some are attempting an eerie synthesis of their past and their present, posing their own "revision" of surrealism as a super-Marxism.

The social poets who continue stubbornly writing their poetry are left with NEW MASSES as virtually their sole medium. This, unfortunately, means a space ration insufficient for literary subsistence.



"The Dealers," by Mervin Jules

WHAT can social poets do? Obviously it is to their interest to aid every force that combats the repression. At this moment it means to give their energies to combating its world form, fascism. Fortunately in that battle, there is every prospect of victory.

After the war any reaction that may have to be faced will best be fought again in association with the labor movement at home. In that case poets, if they hope for a free development, will have to do more. They will probably have to make sacrifices of time, energy and personal means, as in the past, to establish magazines of their own, to organize readings, to perform the difficult but necessary and productive labors by which social poetry, even in its most active days in the early thirties, maintained itself.

For me, the most hopeful though, unfortunately, still the most distant prospect is the development of a mature trade union press. This is the one secure basis for itself that social poetry can look forward to. Ordinary editorial doors have swept open and shut in the seesaw of American political life. But with a trade-union press social poetry can retain a base through most shifts and changes. Then social poetry may have the opportunity so far denied to it, the opportunity to complete its develop-

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Isidor Schneider is the author of "The Temptation of Anthony, and Other Poems," "Comrade Mister," "From the Kingdom of Necessity."

**Poems from
South America**

TWELVE SPANISH AMERICAN POETS. Edited by H. R. Hays. Yale University Press. \$3.50.

THERE will soon be no excuse—there is, as a matter of fact, no excuse now—for English language readers remaining unacquainted with the stimulating body of verse that is being produced in the Latin American, and in particular the Spanish-speaking, countries. Last year we had Dudley Fitts' excellent *Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry*, published by New Directions; and now Mr. H. R. Hays, who had a considerable hand in the Fitts volume, comes forward with what might be looked upon as a highly personalized addendum to this collection.

Mr. Hays gives us a garnering which obviously represents his own preferences and criteria of importance. His object, he tells us, has been to provide "a bird's-eye view of contemporary Spanish-American poetry"; but while he does afford us some fascinating glimpses, in his skillfully and conscientiously translated English versions alongside the original texts, he hardly can be said to have achieved his professed purpose. There are too many omissions of important social-minded and esthetically mature poets, especially from the neighborhood of Argentina, who for one reason or another do not happen to fit in with Mr. Hays' scheme. In other words, this reviewer finds the collection lacking in that critical objectivity which would justify the "bird's-eye view."

Nor is this merely that question of ultimate selection or rejection which always comes up—so harrowingly, not to say heart-breakingly—in connection with any anthology. Whatever one personally may think of his work, one simply cannot omit a poet like the Argentinian Raul Gonzalez Tunon (who has failed to find a place with Mr. Fitts). As for Mr. Hays, I cannot help feeling that he is still, lingeringly, oversold on modern isms, those isms which I myself reported, with extensive samples, in *The European Caravan* of a dozen years ago. He is still worrying about Cocteau and his *Le Potomak* of 1914, Guillaume Apollinaire and the "poetic cubists," the Dadaists, surrealists, ultraists, creationists, or what have you, and their influence upon, and representatives in, the field of Spanish American verse. He devotes a section of his introduction to a none too exact reportage of the European, chiefly the French, movements.

Now it is unquestionably true, as any-

one possessed of a bowing acquaintance with Latin American culture is aware, that the literature and above all the poetry of these peoples, for the past century and more, have been tremendously influenced by Gallic models (rather than by Spanish or Portuguese); but ever since French symbolism left its profound imprint on Spanish-American *modernismo*, through the great Ruben Dario, who died in 1916, that influence has been discernibly on the wane, as is apparent in the personal-poetic evolution of Pablo Neruda. Indeed, the turn in Spanish-American verse is, I believe, most sharply marked by the change of direction which Neruda made about 1925, a direction that found its conscious goal with the Spanish people's struggle, in 1937. This was distinctly a turn toward a poetry of social content, toward a people's poetry.

It is perhaps significant that, in his note on Neruda, Mr. Hays, who in his note in the Fitts volume had ignored the social change in the poet's work, is now forced to recognize it, but with a certain timid reluctance, as the possible beginning of a new phase, although this new period has already been signalized by the magnificent songs for Stalingrad and other poems to the Red Army and the Soviet Union, poems which are not included here.

In short, and to repeat, Mr. Hays is loath to part with his isms, even though he is by no means without a social consciousness that is close to Marxism. He likes this kind of verse, and he gives you what he likes. In his translations, where a poet of another kind is concerned, he does not, as I felt he sometimes did in the Fitts anthology, touch up the originals, but renders them with fidelity.

The thing is—and this is the basic criticism—that most of these post-symbolist Spanish-American imitators of the European modernist schools have a mystic or pseudo-mystic muddled content, and stand, in reality, beside the swelling stream of the new poetry, which is rapidly becoming a torrent. Many of them, including some in this volume, are, I am convinced, destined to be swept away by that torrent. They will not last. Others, like Neruda, have taken what they wanted (which is not too much) from the techniques of modernism and have put it at the service of a people's art. Occasionally, and even Neruda is not to be excepted here, these carry-overs are an encumbrance rather than an asset.

For your information, the poets included in this collection are: Ramon Lopez Velarde, Luis Carlos Lopez, Vicente Huidobro (the Chilean creationist, who is given a disproportionate stress), Eugenio Florit, Jorge Luis Borges, Jorge Carrera Andrade (an important, socially conscious poet), Jose Gorostiza, Pablo de Rokha, Nicolas Guillen (the great West Indian Negro singer), Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, and Jacinto Fombona Pachano.