

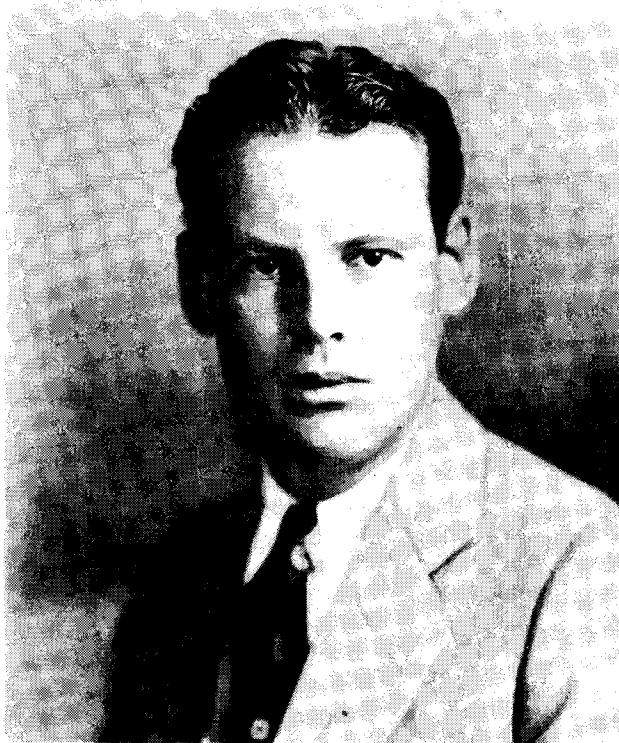
The Literary Left Grows Up

BY JOHN CHAMBERLAIN

THE First American Writers' Congress, held recently in New York City, was a very agreeable surprise. I had gone expecting a lot of dismal and empty talk about "art as a class weapon," with the clichés of Marxism beating a rat-tat-tat upon the tympani, but it was apparent from the start that the RAPP period in American literary communism has been liquidated. A year ago *The New Masses* was being very solemn and superior and self-righteous when John Dos Passos, for instance, failed to see eye to eye with the pundits of the literary "party line"; and in *The Daily Worker* Heywood Broun, the moving spirit in the Newspaper Guild, was a "scabby rat" because of his unwillingness to glorify the role of the communists in the Toledo strike. Sec-tarianism was written all over most "left" literary criticism, and the occasional sane voice of a Joseph Freeman sounded forlorn and plaintive amid the hoarse shouts of the more Pauline Marxists.

Since last Autumn, however, the literary "line" has changed; the threat of war and reaction has had its effect. Exposed on the extreme Left, the communists, and the writers sympathetic to communism, have sensed the need of making common cause against the forces of reaction with all who more or less agree with them that war and fascism are terrible things, and that even bourgeois democracy is to be preferred to a "naked" dictatorship of the Right. A defensive battle is being fought at the moment, both on the political and on the literary fronts, and all that is needed for a "united front" in a defensive period is that soldiers should agree on the negative proposition of what constitutes the enemy.

As one who thinks the political battle in America is bound to be fought out on parliamentary lines, for reasons that cannot be adequately explained in this essay, I felt more at home in conversation with Left writers than at any time since 1932. The appeal to authority ("Marx said . . .," "Lenin said . . .," "Stalin says . . .") was not in evidence; writers were no longer "good" or "bad" according to their poli-



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tics; there was little disposition to dictate either subject material or schematic approach. Mike Gold actually shocked me when he said: "We have no blue-print for the proletarian novel." (I remember the time when he had.)

In his speech at Mecca Temple, Earl Browder, secretary of the American Communist Party, made a few sarcastic references to the now liquidated period when the "infantile disease of leftism" raged in communist literary publications; he warned against the zeal of new converts; he lamented the fact that "bourgeois" accessions to the communists often feel they must "do penance" for their birth and early circumstances. As far as I can make out, this right-about-face in the communist ranks is due to men like Henry Hart and Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley, new "fellow travellers" who still prefer Henry James and Proust and Joyce to communist authors who happen to be ungifted.

A year ago Robert Cantwell was being chastised in *The New Masses* because his final pages held out no irrevocable and inevitable hope that the proletariat will triumph; the fact that Cantwell was doing his best to make literature out

of confusion, out of a situation which may, very possibly, result in defeat for the working class, was blithely overlooked. The writer, in general, was being urged to serve as "comfort bringer" (Pollyanna on the barricades), without regard to psychological realities. This point of view was drowned at the Congress by James T. Farrell and Josephine Herbst, not in explicit statement, but by implication. Miss Herbst was rather non-plussed by young authors who had come to the Congress seeking proletarian Horatio Alger rules for literary success; she kept saying that the writer must wrest his literature from his material, from the life in which he has, willy nilly, been immersed. Malcolm Cowley was interested in showing what the "revolution can bring to the writer"; it can, he said, bring him energy and a working direction, but it cannot "save his soul," nor can it make him into a first-rate literary

artist if he lacks the native skill. Farrell explained that "bourgeois" and "proletarian" literature were "not cultural standards *per se*," but "categories to be investigated." And Edwin Seaver took the eminently common-sensical position that it is the point of view latent in a novel that should count for purposes of "revolutionary" or "non-revolutionary" classification, and not the subject material. In other words, if Proust or Joyce, for instance, serve to make a reader thoroughly dissatisfied with our civilization, and willing to explore the communist or socialist proposals for a way out, Proust or Joyce is functioning on a "revolutionary" level to a certain extent. Of course this has nothing to do with the question of style.

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Next  Week

WRITING BY MAIL ORDER
By JONATHAN NORTON LEONARD
YOUNG RENNY
By MAZO DE LA ROCHE
Reviewed by Allan Nevins



WALDO FRANK AND MALCOLM COWLEY

Photographed at the American Writers' Congress by Robert Disraeli.

ing to do with literature *per se*, as Max Eastman could have told the Congress, but Seaver could very reasonably reply that he was not, in the specific essay he read at the New School for Social Research sessions, interested in purely literary values.

A point I wanted to raise at the Congress concerned the dramatic novel, which demands ethical "absolutes" for its axes. Most of us, in our pragmatism, can't decide very easily between "good" and "bad"; the result is that, when we serve as fictional protagonists, we move erratically through novels of sensibility. We are Eugene Gants, biting off experience, but not agonizing over specifically moral decisions. There are no Alyosha Karamazoffs or Raskolnikoffs among us. The revolutionary movement, with its more or less strict schematization of values, would seemingly offer the absolutes so dear to the heart of the dramatic writer. Take, for example, the theme of a labor leader torn between his desire to serve the long-term philosophy of Marx and Lenin and the practical demands of his A. F. of L. union. Or agitated over the possibility that his wife and children may starve if he gets blacklisted for union activity. Here are two themes which offer possibilities for the restoration of the dramatic novel, which has fallen on evil days since the erosion of the Victorian scheme of bourgeois virtues. I had not seen "Black Pit" on the stage when I suggested, tentatively, that radical novelists take the dramatic approach to literature. But I notice that "Black Pit" corresponds, more or less, to the sort of thing I was asking for in the novel.

And I also notice that "Black Pit" has stirred up a bitter (and healthy) fight over what constitutes "defeatism" in lit-

erature (which, by the way, has nothing whatsoever to do with literary values *per se*). Genevieve Taggard is inclined to bemoan "Black Pit" because it is "defeatist." Well, what is "defeatist" and what is not? Can anyone prescribe in these matters? James T. Farrell's "Judgment Day" may be considered "defeatist"; it may also be taken as a promise of socialist victory. It all depends on whether the reader is more impressed with the sodden hopelessness of the multiplied Studs Lonigans of the United States, or with the rapture on the faces of the men who march in the parade against war and fascism in the chapter which takes Old Man Lonigan on his drunken way to his son's death bed. A novel or a play, it cannot be too often emphasized, has many different readers. To

me, the Russian novelists of the "die-for-the-dear-old-steel-mill" variety are profoundly defeatist. They make me say, "If socialism means that we must be infantile over the means of life, then why fight for it?" I would be far more impressed by a communist novel that neglected to glorify toil as toil and concentrated, rather, on the satisfaction in increased leisure to be derived from the completed industrial machine. A novel that has the Red Dawn on the ultimate page may be so obviously the product of wish-fulfillment as to have a defeatist effect. One's reaction to this sort of novel may be, "This guy doesn't know anything; if all communists are as unrealistic, then what chance have they of plotting the correct strategy for victory?"

The fact that there can be a legitimate difference of opinion within communist ranks over a play like "Black Pit" is encouraging; it means a diminishing of the terrorist spirit on the literary left. Evidently the toleration of differences has been extended to philosophical matters, as well. For both Waldo Frank and Kenneth Burke made speeches at the Congress that smacked to me of the heresy that led to the spiritual blacklisting of Sidney Hook two or three years ago. Marxism is, notoriously, "materialist." That is, it turns the idealist Hegel "upside down"; it sees men as inevitably "conditioned" by the relations of production at any given time in history; it tends to give a Calvinistic, determinist logic to events. Sidney Hook, a Deweyan instrumentalist, denied the "inevitability" of communism; he said it must be fought for by men who were subjectively convinced of its desirability. The tactics of the "class struggle" were his pragmatist's "instruments" for the attaining of the socialist

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Bailey's Hands

By MARK VAN DOREN

THERE was no need of questions,
Or queer, down-dropping looks.
A blind man could have read them
Like weather-beaten books:

Each one of them more ancient,
Each one of them more plain
Than any rag or parchment
Alcoved from the rain.

The right one that he gave me—
I could have shut my eyes
And heard all seventy summers
Rasping at their scythes;

The left one that he lifted,
Tightening his hat—
I could have seen the cut groves
Lie fallen, green and flat;

Or seen a row of handles,
Ash-white and knuckle-worn,
Run back as far as boyhood
And the first field of thorn:

The two-edged axe and sickle,
The pick, the bar, the spade,
The adze, and the long shovel—
Their heads in order laid,

Extending many an autumn
And whitening into bone,
As if the past were marching,
Stone after stone.

So by his hands' good hardness,
And the slow way they waved,
I understood the story:
Snath-written, helve-engraved.

Road to Fascism

FORERUNNERS OF AMERICAN FASCISM. By Raymond Gram Swing. New York: Julian Messner. 1935. \$1.75.

Reviewed by WALTER MILLIS

THIS is the case for believing that fascism lies ahead of us—a case put compactly, readably, and intelligently. It is particularly intelligent in the method adopted. Mr. Swing skilfully embodies his argument in a series of portrait sketches of five figures—Coughlin, Long, Bilbo, Townsend, and Hearst—who are either potential American Hitlers or else express the confused popular emotions which lie ready to be exploited by an American Hitler as his means to power. There is a shrewd introductory analysis of the essential nature of fascism (Mr. Swing defines it as “an attempt to maintain economic inequality at the cost of democratic liberty”) and a concluding section on the concerted assault upon civil rights now being launched, for the second time in eighteen years, by the patriotic and veterans’ societies, chambers of commerce, vigilance committees, and other forces of “anti-intellectual” nationalist repression. But the disturbing force of the demonstration is found in the character studies of the type demagogues—men already numbering their followers by the million, who in their origins, their ideas, their methods, the crazy secrets of their influence, so exactly parallel the Mussolinis, Hitlers, and Starhembergs of Europe.

The well-meaning Catholic priest, suddenly taken up into a high place by the demonic magic of radio, and shown a temptation of personal power to which he has yielded by launching a “program” almost identical with the Nazi party pro-

gram of 1920; the homespun, the vindictive, and extraordinarily able dictator of Louisiana, who is dangerous precisely because he has brought real benefits to the neglected and exploited common men of his state; the sincerely utopian Townsend, who has blundered into national eminence by his good-hearted simplicity; and the aging Hearst, the impish people’s advocate of thirty years ago, now chivvying college professors, waving the Red menace, and suppressing labor “agitators”—these make an appalling gallery as Mr. Swing sketches their characters and relates them to the broader economic and political setting of today. Mr. Swing sees Hearst as an expression of American lower middle class mentality, and so finds in the publisher’s changing mood a special significance. The man who once, in the role of Jeffersonian democrat, published the Archbold letters, is now damning politicians for interfering with business men. It means, says Mr. Swing, that the lower middle class “is going fascist; a generation ago it was Jeffersonian.” It means that the nation will go fascist, too, unless it honestly “makes democracy work” (of which Mr. Swing sees little hope), or unless there comes a real business recovery. The latter would end the fascist menace—but as to its likelihood, Mr. Swing makes no prediction.

Walter Millis, author of “The Martial Spirit,” a study of the Spanish War period, has just published a new book, “Road to War,” an analysis of the means that carried the United States into the world struggle.

Critical Moments in the Radio Shack

SOS TO THE RESCUE. By Karl Baarslag. New York: Oxford University Press. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ARCHIE BINNS

IN his excellent preface, Captain Felix Riesenbergs characterizes this book as a definitely new and important contribution to the lore of the sea, a judgment which this reviewer feels is not likely to be challenged. The major part of the book is a study, from the angle of the radio shack, of the outstanding marine disasters from the collision of the *Florida* and *Republic* in 1909, to the burning of the *Morro Castle* in 1934. Of such material any journalist could make an exciting book. Fortunately Karl Baarslag is not a journalist, but an experienced marine radio operator with a scholarly bent and the ability to get people to talk. Also, he writes well.

“SOS to the Rescue” is new for the reason that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Many of us are reasonably well acquainted with the principal facts of the major disasters in which radio played a part. But when those disasters



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On board the S. S. Washington.

are studied in sequence and historical perspective they acquire a new, cumulative meaning.

Anyone who may some time be a passenger on a steamship is advised to read “SOS to the Rescue.” And this may mean you. It is one of those books which leave the reader with mixed emotions, inspired by human daring, cowardice, unselfish heroism, and greed. More practically, the future passengers will be encouraged by the steady decline in loss of tonnage since the introduction of marine radio. A decline, in American tonnage lost, from 1.20 to .21. Balancing these heartening statistics there will be some aftertaste of frustration; a flavor popular in fiction. But in this book it isn’t just life. The sense of frustration comes from the inescapable fact that steamships are run for profit, and in the pursuit of profits steamship companies sometimes gamble with the lives of their passengers. And sometimes lose. Also, a steamship is not necessarily commanded by her captain. She may be commanded from shore by hard-headed business men who have impressed upon her captain the extreme desirability, in case of disaster, of limping into port somehow and escaping a salvage claim. The heart of the frustration motif is the fact that while marine radio advances swiftly, the profit element is static and gambling in human lives has not been reduced to an exact science.

Rounding out its historical implications, “SOS to the Rescue” devotes chapters to Pioneer Wirelessnessmen, Girl Marine Radio Operators, and the stories behind the Memorial in Battery Park, New York, erected to the memory of radio operators lost at their posts. The book is illustrated with excellent photographs.

Archie Binns is the author of “Lightship,” a novel which met with a favorable reception when it was published last fall. His cousin, Jack Binns, was radio operator of the *Republic* at the time of the 1909 disaster referred to in this review.



Elliott & Fry

RAYMOND GRAM SWING