

Poetry and Democracy

SELDEN RODMAN

LONG before Hitler's armies knocked the last defensive props from under the old order in France, artists in every country had given their warning. More sensitive than most to the creeping paralysis of laissez-faire, the irresponsible individualism that was beginning to atomize society from the top down, they gave their readers a rather terrifying series of pictures of the breakdown of Western civilization. Eliot in "The Wasteland," Joyce in "Ulysses," Pound in his "Cantos," Thomas Mann in "The Magic Mountain," Picasso in his dissociated abstractions and concretions—to mention a few of the major figures—all testified to the same impending catastrophe. The curious fact, and the question we must now ask ourselves, is: Why were the prophets not listened to in their own countries? Why, in most cases, were the poets not even read?

The answer would seem to lie in two directions. In the first place these great artists, and the lesser ones who voiced the same warning, for the most part spoke the language and used the symbolism of the declining order itself. The language had become so refined that few outside the circle of the artists any longer understood what it meant. The symbols, mostly biblical or classical in their origin, if grasped at all, were assumed to refer to a kind of isolated literary world that didn't have any connection with the common man's life. There was nothing in any of these works about tractors, baseball, pool rooms, political meetings, offices, filling stations, roller-coasters, or taxes. If the works alluded to "life" and "death," thought the reader, it certainly couldn't be *his* life or death.

The second factor was that the testimony of the poets was negative. The common man, certainly the average intelligent reader in these depressed nations, agreed, however subconsciously, that old values and old institutions were passing into their decline. Did the new art throw any light into this darkness? Did the new artists proclaim new values? Was their world more inspiring than his? On the contrary. They were experts in despair, these artists: Molly Bloom might say Yes to her own redeeming sensuality; Hans Castorp might finally stumble singing toward the bursting shell;

Eliot might conclude his masterpiece with the word "peace" in Sanskrit; but the total picture was of a gloom more unrelieved and a doom more final than even life, with its vague hopes and occasional triumphs, its work that could be meaningful in itself, its vilified "escapes."

There were exceptions, of course. Fascism was an answer to this kind of world; a brutal answer, but still an answer. And the prophets of fascism, speaking in a language that could be understood, came well in advance of the Leaders. Wagner, through his writing as well as his music, gave every level of several generations of Germans something to think about. D'Annunzio, years before the March on Rome, was probably the most widely-read Italian since Dante. Knut Hamsun's later works were familiar to the Norwegian peasantry long before Quisling spiked their guns. Even so ambiguous and sophisticated a prophet of "dark gods" as D. H. Lawrence was so anxious to win converts to his ideas that he finally resorted to writing a popular "shocker." The aged Yeats, though too great an artist ever to so debase his art, was obsessed enough with the need for violence to find a language of "public speech" in which to convey it.

Marxism was another kind of answer. Since Marxism has dominated not only the new poets of the past decade but most of the new novelists as well, certain spiteful critics are rather nettled to find small enthu-

siasm for the coalition of Red and Brown dictatorships among the writers. The reason for this, of course, is that communism with a small "c," the classless society, was—and is—a noble ideal. Social planning, which Russia for a number of years scouted alone, was—and is—an economic necessity. The writers, though not many of them inquired into the effect which the means-employed were bound to have on the desired-end, sensed this. However similar the goals might be to which the fascists were travelling, it was perfectly clear in the case of fascism, and from the beginning, that the means were corrupt and corrupting. The Nazi-Soviet Pact, and the unprovoked assault upon one of the most progressive democratic states, therefore, was enough to convince all but the most thick-skinned Marxists that their premises must be re-examined.

THE MARXIST influence, especially on the modern poets, was both a positive and a negative one. In my opinion the negative outweighed the positive. On the positive side, the range of the poet's interest was broadened to include a class. Hitherto he had spoken vaguely for a nation, or, if discriminating, for an intellectual clique. Now, at least, he looked critically at the rulers and made an effort to identify himself with the "workers." At his side was a philosophic weapon, an impressive and comprehensive literature of social ac-

Now in the Night

By Joseph Auslander

NOW in the night when men and cannon roar
Tumultuous carnage, and the heart turns cold,
I think of poets piping Lochinvar,
The lies they tell, the bitter truths untold;
Here howls the Teuton, there he runs amok,
As in the time of Roman Tacitus,
The dying Gaul, the Briton like a rock,
Their dead heaped high between the Hun and us.

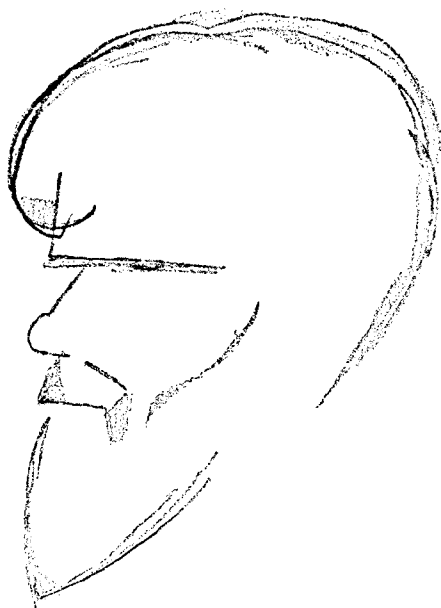
How Caesar's pride would writhe in shame to see
The haughty eagles of his legions claw
At carrion like buzzards: Italy
Sold by a strutting traitor stuffed with straw! . . .
Now in the night we wake from fitful sleep:
What have we lost? What have we left to keep?

tion which, though it could apparently predict nothing, could explain everything. The new writer travelled extensively, perhaps attended meetings, and took part in strikes as a "sympathizer," documenting his work with evidence as well as feeling. "Tristram," "Renaissance," and "Streets in the Moon" gave way to "The Dance of Death," "US 1," "Frescoes for Mr. Rockefeller's City."

On the negative side, most of this Marxist-inspired writing was full of a sophistication, a privacy, and a downright snobbism that by comparison made the frank escapism of the Ivory Tower at least look intellectually honest. The phoney Hegelian metaphysics of Marxism was translated into an even phonier poetic gibberish.

The "capitalist" and the "worker," those nineteenth century abstractions which had already made a shambles of the progressive movement in post-war Europe, took their sentimental places as Devil and Saint. The technique of symbolism, already a sign-language between converts, was taken over bodily by most of the poets and made into an instrument so oblique that even the poets couldn't agree what it meant. The "worker" was spoken for, never to. And the poets were so drugged by their political mentors that even as late as 1938 a first-rank poet like W. H. Auden could write an absurd play ("On the Frontier") which, he admitted almost as soon as it was published, was based upon a complete misunderstanding of the character of the system that was shaking the world.

TO come back to Hitler and the fall of France, what have we learned? What, as poets, are we prepared to do? (It would be arrogant and futile to "demand" that anything be done; nothing that each individual does not decide for himself to do is worth much.) We are on the way to learning that democracy-without-socialism (or, if you like, democracy-plus-laissez-faire capitalism) is a weaker thing than socialism-without-democracy. Yet all but a very few of us would rather die than live under either of the prevailing forms that socialism-without-democracy has taken in Europe. Both as human beings and as writers, then, one opportunity remains open for us: we can bend our efforts to achieving socialism-plus-democracy. ("Socialism" is admittedly a bad word, but no other, not even "coöperation," has yet been invented to include the classless social order and the full utilization of productive forces which we mean.) It is my absolute conviction that no dictatorship in the world today, however mechanically "efficient," could long survive the example and



Drawing by Knud Merrild

D. H. Lawrence

the strength of such a social order.

In America there is still time, and in fact a unique opportunity, to achieve such a social order. Saluting the symbol but not the reality of democracy, legislating against obscure religious sects like Jehovah's Witnesses, deporting scape-goat labor leaders, capitulating in panic to any one of the currently fashionable and irrational mystiques of "action"—is certainly not the way. Nor is it enough merely to conscript an army, or to outmechanize the enemy. Those to whom democracy is a living and necessary thing will be willing to make sacrifices for it. If Plattsburg is filled with successful young business men, while labor, youth, and the unemployed are full of cynicism about the slogans that would enlist them as volunteers or conscript them as mercenaries—there is a reason for that. It is not enough, as Archibald MacLeish has been urging, that we renew our faith in the slogans. Faith will renew itself when democracy is meaningful for all of us. Neither slogans, nor acting upon slogans, saved France. There is no more magic in the words "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" than there was in "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." There is as much in each slogan as there is truth behind it.

WHAT can we do, then, as writers and poets, to make democracy a dynamic and irresistible force again?

Once more let us look at the condition of modern poetry. Is there a tradition of socialized democracy on which we can build? If there is not, we will have to get to work like the prophets and poets of "bourgeois democracy"—Voltaire and Rousseau, Shelley and Byron, Hugo and Foscolo, Franklin and Whitman—and create

one. The first democratic revolution was not created by politicians; the second will not be either.

Not everything in the past is dead. It never is. The ideals of the old democracy as ideals are a rich heritage. Jefferson and Lincoln have much to teach us: the destination toward which they travelled is indestructible and timeless. Whitman and Sandburg, though both are too subjective and discursive to speak "universally," nourished that heritage. Whitman's optimism and Sandburg's humility are great. From the Marxists we learn that labor (if not Labor) is sacred; that so long as any people work without dignity, to that extent all of us work without dignity; that until we live with work and among those who work, documenting our emotion with evidence, our vision can never be more than a personal one. Christianity, if stripped of the wraps of respectability and theology that insulate its revolutionary core, might teach us these things even more intensely. Symbolism, if we use it as a means and not as an end, teaches us that there is more evocative power in a word with several associations than in a word with only one. Even Jeffers, if we can read his narrative poems without succumbing to his nihilism, teaches us that a story told with pow-



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er is more powerful than the most powerful didactic statement.

Our first aim should be clarity. Poetry by "dissociation," the stream of consciousness, "surrealism," may still find a few devotees, but these can never provide the basis for a poetry of democracy. Few of us, even with long familiarity, "get" everything that Shakespeare put into "Hamlet," but anybody can get enough out of even a single showing to want to see it or read it again. Better for poetry, and possibly even for the poets, to fall short of perfection in essaying an ambitious theme, than to refine a cameo. The forms of narrative and dramatic poetry, whether for the stage, the screen, the airways, or the bedchamber, must be mastered. On one level at least—the level of the story, the action, the general purpose—the poem or play must be perfectly clear to anyone with normal intelligence.

But writing lucidly, ambitiously, and dramatically will only be a beginning; they are not enough in themselves. An objective, supra-personal poetry can only be written by poets with deep roots in the material and way of life they are celebrating. We should know our folkways, but we cannot write folk poetry. It is too late. Those who try to be "naive" will

be "quaint"; those who strain after ancient virtues will succeed only in being antique. Neither "regionalism" nor "nationalism" will be sufficient. The modern world is too interdependent; poetry can have no Maginot Line. To know oneself, one must know one's family. To know one's family, one must know one's region. To know one's region, one must know one's country. And to know one's country, one must know the world.

Poets who have succeeded in speaking for their time, and to the world, have been more than poets. Aeschylus was a soldier. Dante and Milton were statesmen. Shakespeare was an actor and stage-manager. Goethe, among many professions, was a biologist. Donne wrote his greatest poetry after he became Dean of St. Paul's. It was with Alexander Pope that literature for the first time became a profession; with the romantics and symbolists a hundred years later it was on the way to becoming a vice. Rimbaud, who gave up a promising career as a poet for East African trade and gun-smuggling in 1875, was the first to rebel against this ingrown preciousness. But he was too unbalanced by the tension of his conflict to go on writing.

There is none of this conflict between action and contemplation in sculpture. A good architect knows every inch of the ground before he retires to his drafting board. Painting is hard work. Even composing demands mastery—physical mastery—of one or more instruments. Is there any conceivable reason why writing, which takes in more territory than any of the other arts, should be confined to pushing a pen? Would Thomas Wolfe, if he had had any other outlet for his vast energy, have filled shelves of notebooks, not to mention his novels, with such a furious formless outpouring?

But there are other reasons why the poet should be a specialist in something beside his poetry. A Virgil, a Dante, even a Goethe could understand the work of his world as a whole. Today the world is too com-

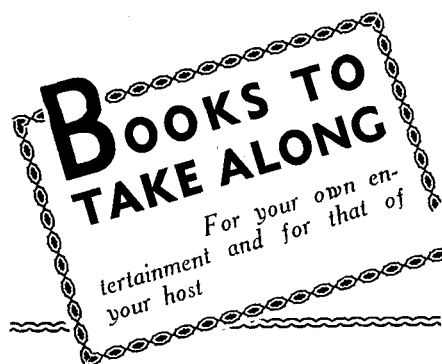
plex. The attempt to understand it, as it were from the top down, can only lead to confusion, to further "dissociation" in the mind of the artist. The poet must understand some part of his world well. He must be of his world in order to speak compellingly either for it or to it.

There is a hint of it in Eliot's plays, though Eliot can never belong to our world. There is more than a hint of it in MacLeish's epoch-making radio scripts. It is suggested in the method of Louis MacNeice's "Autumn Journal": the parts about his work in the Greek classroom and his trip to Spain are the best parts. I see it in the unpublished poetry of A. Fleming MacLiesh. I see it in James Agee's tremendous "Three Tenant Families," to be published this fall.

What I am here trying to formulate as a theory, I have myself endeavored to practise. I have been working on a narrative poem, "The Airmen," for some time. Its value, I feel, will depend to no small extent on how well my understanding of history, my ability to report, and my instruction in flying have equipped me for the job. I know it would be better if I were a better social philosopher, a better reporter, and a better flyer.

Antoine de St. Exupéry, whose life and writings are the living record of our search for a new world, loved the earth but was far enough removed from it to speak with complete integrity. The message he flashed may be capable of guiding us out of the Cone of Silence:

Moral greatness consists in responsibility. . . . To feel ashamed at the sight of what seems unmerited misery. . . . To take pride in victory won by comrades. . . . To feel one is contributing to the building of a world. If death comes, hooked by a cliff, it will not be for the tradesman but in obedience which enobles sacks of mail once stowed. . . . Loving not danger but life, renouncing the "choice" of what night club to visit. . . . Love is not in gazing at each other but outward together in the same direction.



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Lines for a Little House

By Thomas Caldecot Chubb

HERE where the clean and salty strong sea breeze
Blows steadily and sure, day-long, night-long,
Making, in feathery, gale-wrenched tamarisk trees
Slow tranquil speaking, slow and soothing song;
Here under the white and healing Bermudian sun,
Here in the warm and soft Bermudian rain,
Ease dwelleth; calm a fine abode hath won;
Life is excellent; life is whole and sane.
And hospitality and warm-hearted grace
The guardians are of this Hesperides.
O ye great gods, be good to this good place.
Grant it prosperity. Grant it ever peace.