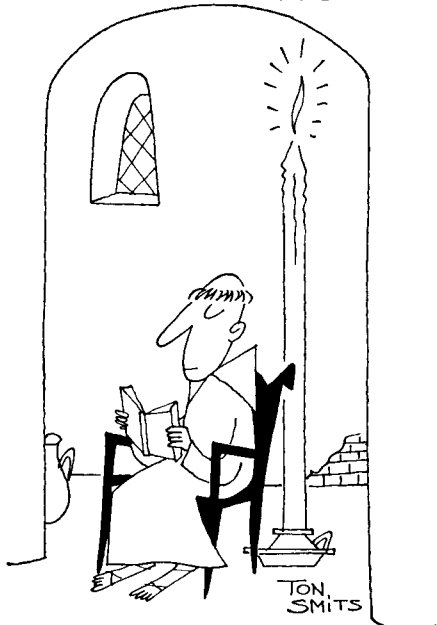


shocked by the blood dripping from her chin and call her a witch.

As Professor Keene points out, many major works of Japanese literature are by women, the most famous of them being Lady Murasaki's "The Tale of Genji." "Ohan" (the second story in this book) is by Chiyo Uno, considered the most accomplished woman writer in Japan today. In this story an abandoned wife hesitates to resume cohabitation with her husband because she fears he will not be happy after seven years with his geisha mistress. Actually Ohan, the wife, is a shadowy character—made deliberately so, perhaps, since she embodies the submissive, inarticulate, self-sacrificing virtues of the old-fashioned Japanese woman. Her husband, weak, dependent, vacillating, self-accusing, and self-pitying, is hardly a hero, but he is a fully believable character.

The story "Asters," by Jun Ishikawa, requires a suspension of disbelief in the miraculous. Set in the more distant past than the previous two (at least seven centuries ago, rather than a few generations), it reflects the twilight period of an aristocracy. Its callous brutality is tempered by the revelation that a beautiful young woman is really a fox and that the youthful governor's wanton destruction of life is partly mysterious. Birds and beasts vanish without a trace, arrows are caught in mid-air, and the governor discovers a Shangri-La of happy people on the other side of the mountain. Still, his taste for blood, human as well as animal, is a disconcertingly realistic note in what most of us may take for a fantasy.

If the difference in style of these three stories is any proof, Donald Keene has performed remarkably the superhuman task of translating Japanese.



IDEAS

Ideological Hay Ride

"Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism," by Daniel Aaron (Harcourt, Brace & World. 396 pp. \$7.50), discusses the political rather than the literary effects of U.S. authors' response to Marxism in the first half of this century. David Dempsey has frequently written on America's cultural past.

By David Dempsey

THE HAPPIEST excitement in life is to be convinced that one is fighting for all one is worth on behalf of some clearly seen and deeply felt good and against some greatly scorned evil," wrote Van Wyck Brooks in "America's Coming of Age." No statement better explains the leftward drift of American intellectuals since the second decade of this century, a period comprising two world wars, ten years of irresponsible prosperity, the Great Depression, and the beginning of the Cold War. "Writers on the Left" deals with this drift as a political rather than a literary movement. It is, among other things, a coroner's report on the "radical" writer by a marvelously objective student of the period. I cannot imagine any account of this difficult subject being written with more sympathetic insight into an era that "turned college professors into union leaders, philosophers into politicians, novelists into agitators, poets into public speakers." Moreover, it is a rare example of a book whose appendicized footnotes generously supplement rather than distract from the text.

This is one of the Fund for the Republic's series on Communism in American Life. Mr. Aaron explores the response of the writer to the Communist (for the pre-1918 years, read Socialist) idea, and the image he leaves with us is that of an ideological hayride—sometimes reckless, often exciting—through recent history. Horse-drawn in the early days, after the crash of '29 the vehicle was equipped with an internal combustion engine and a dual exhaust. Out of one (the noisiest) came that unending succession of bleats and manifestoes that characterized the trained Party hack, the man who, most

of the time, was at the wheel. From the other (equipped with a muffler) emanated the sympathetic but largely independent purr of the responsible writer. Unfortunately, he spent most of the ride as a fellow-traveler. If he got off when the car slowed down, there was usually someone else to take his seat. The synchronization between driver and passenger was faulty, but both were going in the same direction and not until the machine fell apart in the early Forties did the absurdity of the arrangement become fully apparent.

This, if I am allowed a rather oversimplified metaphor, is the substance of Mr. Aaron's book. Even so, it is somewhat incomplete, for three vital decades of American literature are discussed without mention of the vital books, even when (as with "The Grapes of Wrath" and "It Can't Happen Here") it is difficult to imagine the books getting written without the "Left" pull of the times. There are many discussions of Dos Passos, but no critique of the trilogy "U.S.A.," which crystalized out of his Marxist period. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" series is unmentioned, although Farrell at that time was deeply committed to the Left.

These are intentional omissions, since the framework of the study has been fitted to the writer rather than his work; one feels, nevertheless, that this is a limitation. "Writers on the Left" shows us how American writers flirted with Marx (sometimes marrying into the family), yet fails to show us how this flirtation affected their work.

It is easy now, looking back in affluence, to forget that writers once wrote in anger, although it is not so easy to forget that there was much to be angry about. Few serious authors escaped the call to arms, and even those who declined—as Distributists, perhaps, or Humanists—took part in the Marxist "dialogue" (as it would now be called). Dreiser and Dos Passos, among others, could invade Harlan County, Kentucky, to test "free speech" and to see the condition of the unemployed miners. The Scottsboro Boys were not to be hanged without protest. Hemingway, who was soon to return to Spain and "For Whom the Bell Tolls," appeared as star performer at the Left-wing Second American Writers Congress in 1937. True, the Communists had a habit of pre-

emptying these causes, but could one "pass by" simply because of this? The Depression demanded that intellectuals take a stand. "Yet for the majority of writers who were associated in some way or another with the movement, it was the times, not the party, that made them radicals," Mr. Aaron states.

At the core of the movement was Marxism, a magnet around which these men arranged and rearranged themselves like iron filings. There was an inner ring of dedicated revolutionaries, Communists like Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman; a series of outer rings that embraced such independents as Max Eastman and V. F. Calverton; and, farther out, liberal-Left sympathizers of the Sherwood Anderson, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, Archibald MacLeish variety. Even Sinclair Lewis, who preferred to hack at American institutions from a penthouse, wrote letters to the *New Masses*.

As Mr. Aaron makes clear, not all of these men really knew their Marx, and few were members of the Party. Their motive was the feeling for humanity that drives men to be writers in the first place, so that to deny the challenge posed by the Thirties appeared to be a choking-off of the creative spirit itself. It has been fashionable to say that the whole Left orientation of the Thirties made bad writers look better than they were, and lured good writers into doing bad work; but this is not wholly true. Many of the younger men—Farrell, Erskine Caldwell, Dos Passos, Steinbeck—wrote their most memorable works during this period. It was a good age in which to cut one's literary teeth. The writers who suffer in retrospect are those tiresome Party propagandists and "proletarian" novelists whose talent lagged hopelessly behind their revolutionary zeal.

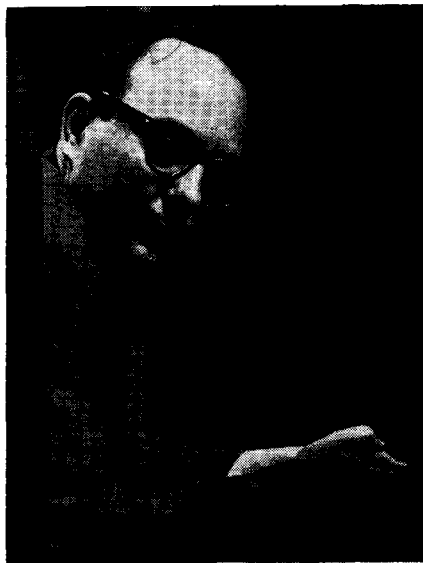
The striking thing is not that the Party attracted so many writers, but that it held so few. In a sense, Communism was a whetstone on which the intellectual and the artist sharpened their own developing points of view. It was necessary to make contact with the stone, but fatal to remain so, and at its best the Marxist temper gave writers an opportunity for toughening up, a milieu in which to function. The times imposed a condition on writing that is largely missing today: a unifying theme, material, a common cause, a vitality out of which a literary ethic—if not always an esthetic—could emerge. The fact is that the best writers used Marx almost as selfishly as the Marxists used them, and we are all heirs of the exchange.

To show how this curious dialectic came about is the achievement of Mr. Aaron's study. How it ended is revealed,

in a few typical cases, in what he sees as the dénouement of the play. "In act three, the movement declines, for literary radicalism never seems to be sustained over a long period, and the writer is gradually absorbed again into the society he has rejected." The curtain falls so rapidly on this scene that we are left dangling, until we realize that it is really the curtain of charity. Some of these "reabsorbed" men were to become blatant apologists for the system they once so violently con-

demned. Religion claimed one or two, the universities many. Others simply got a good paying job, while not a few became "best-selling" authors. Rare was the radical who was allowed to withdraw gracefully and go his own way without public recantation. Mr. Aaron dwells not at all on this unhappy postlude to the age, and perhaps it is just as well. In Malraux's phrase, "The road from political idealism to political reality is strewn with the corpses of our dead selves."

Afflicted Man on Terra Firma



Peter Ritner — "would break the social lock step."

"The Society of Space," by Peter Ritner (Macmillan, 144 pp. \$3.75), probes most of the facets of human life and the impact on them of the Technological Revolution. Richard F. Humphreys is president of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art.

By Richard F. Humphreys

ONE RARELY knows whom to hold responsible for the title of a book—the author, the publisher, an interested friend? Certainly the intelligence, perception, and acumen displayed by the author of this work were apparently abandoned when the problem of its label arose, for it is not the society of space (whatever that is) that we are invited to consider, but the afflictions of man on terra firma. A title to me more apt might be "Musings of

a Scholar on the State of Homo Sapiens."

In no sense are Mr. Ritner's cogitations idle or particularly abstract. They center on an analysis of the impact on civilized society of the Technological Revolution that the Western world has "enjoyed" in the last hundred years. A reading of the chapter headings is sufficient to indicate the range of his thoughts: "The Rejuvenation of Idealism," "Personality," "Other Forms of Life," "Youth and Work," "Love." "Art," "The Empire," "The Ultimate Future." The prologue makes clear that the book discourses on three kinds of "space": that inside the head (intellectual potentialities), that for making choices (opportunities presented by the Technological Revolution), and that measured in light years (extraterrestrial environment). With these as his thread and intelligence as his shuttle he weaves a tapestry of inquiries, sermons, speculations, and profundities on the loom of Technological Revolution, with a somewhat faint pattern of space (light-years variety) cutting across it.

It will not be surprising that an author who prowls from the Second Law of Thermodynamics (somehow its grasp must be broken) to planned obsolescence ("technology of the shabby"), from the "senility of idealism" to the population explosion, will leave strong indentations on some subjects, add only dust to others. His chapter on "Youth and Work" is refreshing and constructive. A comparison of the population "profile" and the economic "profile" of our industrial society drives him to the conviction that rootlessness, irresponsibility, even delinquency, arise from the lack of social need for youth today. The time has long passed when a father needed sons to till the soil or carry on his skills, a mother needed daughters to do the housework and help make the clothing. Today our