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THE LITERARY WARS OF MIKE GOLD, A STUDY IN THE BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF MIKE GOLD'S LITERARY IDEAS, 1920-1941

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Norman, Oklahoma

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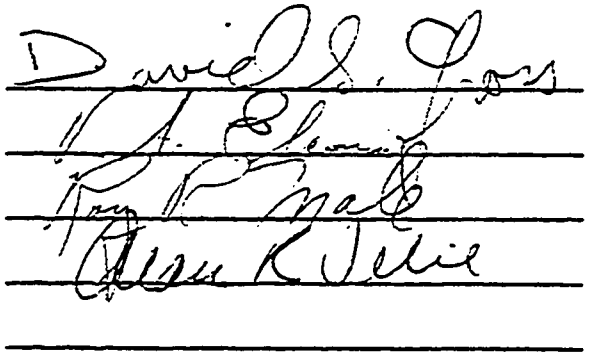

DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

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THE LITERARY WARS OF MIKE GOLD, A STUDY IN THE BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF MIKE GOLD'S LITERARY IDEAS, 1920-1940

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> If literature is important to history, it is not because it serves as a social document or a footnote to political or intellectual history, but primarily because it is a culmination, a genuine means of realizing the major issues of its time.[1]

This study is mainly an attempt to provide a critical appraisal of Mike Gold's literary ideas, tracing their development from before the 1920's up to the early 1940's. Through this I hope to examine and analyze those forces and ideas which influenced Gold and molded him into one of the foremost radical literary figures of his time. Gold's role in the creation and development of revolutionary literature in the twenties and the thirties was a vital and central one. Because of this he earned the anger of many and the praise of some who thought of him as the "father of proletarian literature."

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[1]Frederick J. Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Post War Decade (New York: Viking Press, 1955), p. x.

The radical literary movement which reached its height in the thirties was a movement in the literal sense of the word: "An organized effort to promote and attain an end." That end was the creation of a revolutionary literature for and by the proletariat. Gold devoted his whole life and career towards the achievement of such a goal. His personal life, literary career, and revolutionary politics are so interrelated and interdependent that it is futile to study one in isolation from the others. Thus, an examination of his literary ideas inevitably involves a study of his background, as well as the radical literary movement he helped create and develop in the twenties and thirties.

The proletarian literary movement was the most significant radical movement in the history of American literature. Yet it has been for too long misrepresented by the established criticism in this country. Some of the most conscientious work on this literature has been done by those who at one time or another participated in the radical literary movement, like Max Eastman[2] and Joseph Freeman.[3] These works are invaluable, but they are not enough. Some serious if inadequate studies have been attempted on the history of

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[2]Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Living (New York: Harper, 1948), Love and Revolution, My Journey Through an Epoch (New York: Random House, 1964).

[3]Joseph Freeman, An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics (New York: Farrar Rinehart, 1936).

radical literature or of certain aspects of it.[4] But although some studies have been attempted on proletarian literature, very little critical attention has been given to to the individual writers and critics instrumental in its creation and development. Too often these authors have been dismissed with condescending acknowledgements and tart remarks. While no one, for example, would claim to have understood the English Romantic movement without an understanding of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, some critics have claimed to understand and fairly appraise the proletarian literary movement without real analysis of writers like Gold, Freeman, or Kunitz.

In the past few years we have witnessed a quiet but definite revival of interest in radical literature, especially that of the proletarians. This renewed interest is not accidental, but stems from the fact that there is still a need for this kind of literature. Proletarian classics such as Jack Conroy's The Disinherited (New York 1939), Mike Gold's Jews Without Money (New York 1930), and Henry Roth's Call it Sleep (New York 1934) have been reprinted. Similarly James Farrell's trilogy Studs Lonigan (New York 1935) is now being called a "classic" and advertised as the "book you were forbidden to read is now an N.B.C. novel for T.V." Several

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[4]Some notable examples of this are: Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, Walter Rideout, Radical Literature in the United States, Leo Gurko, The Angry Decade, David Madden, ed., Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, and Warren French, ed., The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama.

anthologies of radical literature in the twenties and the thirties have been published.[5] These books and collections demonstrate that contrary to the claims of some critics the proletarians were not narrow and artless. They covered a wide range of subjects and their works contained quite a bit of flesh and blood.

This renewed interest, however, necessitates a re-evaluation and re-examination of the radical writers of that period. Apart from a few articles and fewer books on these writers, the dominant literary opinion on them is still shaped by the decrees passed against them in the forties and fifties. One source for this hostility and neglect lies in the weaknesses and shortcomings of the proletarians (and the radical writers and critics who followed them), and the fact that they never offered a coherent and systematic criticism of their own work. But the problem goes much deeper than that. The attacks on the proletarians also have their roots in the period of MacCarthy and the Cold War, when not only the politics but all aspects of the movement of radical and progressive writers and artists came to be questioned and condemned. In this period they were considered not only enemies of the American people and the American way of life, but also the enemies of the whole "civilized" life and

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[5]Some good examples are: William O'Neil, ed., Echoes of Revolt, Joseph North, ed., New Masses, Michael Folsom, ed., Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, Jack Conroy and Curt Johnson, eds., Writers in Revolt, and Jack Salzman, ed., Years of Protest.

culture, aiming to destroy literature and the arts. It is both ironic and tragic that those who accused the radicals of being reductionist and crude, themselves became crude and reductionist in their evaluation of the left. The times were such that Ezra Pound's fascism could be forgiven because of his literary merits, but Mike Gold's literary worth could be denied on the basis of his politics.

Typical of such biased and one-sided attitudes towards the proletarians is the criticisms of W. K. Wimsatt Jr. Wimsatt, in 1957, states: "Marxism and the forms of social criticism more closely related to it have never had any concern with literature and literary problems."[6] He also claims that such criticsm "completely destroys the literary viewpoint," and "does not believe in the work of art." Inherent in such judgments were the inevitable conclusion that forms of social cricism do not merit literary attention because they are not concerned exclusively with literature and art.

In my study I will discuss at some length the degrees and ways in which radical criticism "believes" in literature and concerns itself with literary problems. The controversies between the radicals and their literary opponents had never actually been over concern, or lack of concern, for

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[6]J. K. Wimsatt, Jr., Literary Criticism: A Short History (New York, 1957), cited in Telos (#18 Winter 1973-74), p. 107.

literature. Their differences were much deeper than that, touching upon their whole view of literature in relation to life. Many aspects of the theories put forward by Gold and his comrades are rooted in a literary tradition which can be traced back for many centuries and includes writers like Fielding and Dickens, who claimed literature to be a reflection of reality and a vehicle for moral and social change. But more specifically they inherited a democratic American literary tradition represented by men such as Thoreau, Twain, London, Sinclair and Whitman who had declared that literature should be seen as "only a weapon, an instrument, in the service of something larger than itself."[7]

Like Whitman, Twain, and Melville in their day, the proletarians and their literary worth were questioned. If the older writers had become more "respected," it was mainly because the issues they raised no longer had the same radical ring in a time and period so different from their own. But the proletarians and their fellow travellers voiced what was at the heart of the social, economic, political, and cultural crisis of the time. Gold bitterly remarks on this paradox:

> They can understand dead revolutions and dead revolutionary writers. They can "place" the revolutionary writings of Walt Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson, they

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[7]Recorded by Traubel, Whitman's secretary for Seven Arts, in 1917, cited in Aaron, Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World), p. 7.

can overlook the lack of style and "behavioristic" psychology in Uncle Tom's Cabin.[8]

The real issues at stake, therefore, were opposing views on the function of literature and its relation to society as a whole. Gold and his comrades took the viewpoint of the workers, the "have-nots," the tenement and slumdwellers. As such they were as much a part of the American literary heritage as the subjects they presented were a part of American life. I by no means wish to exonerate Gold and his comrades of their "sins," literary or otherwise; neither do I wish to throw mud at them in order to keep up an old tradition. This position of Daniel Aaron's seems a far more useful way to begin in dealing with these writers:

> In their excavations of the radical past, the historians have dug up little but fragments and ruins. Yet surely a movement which involved so many intelligent and generous men and women can not be barren of significance. . . . The strong impact of communism's program even upon those writers who opposed it must be reckoned with. So must the vitalizing influence of the left-wing intellectuals who stirred up controversies, discovered new novelists and playwrights, opened up hitherto neglected areas of American life, and broke down the barriers that had isolated many writers from the great issues of our times. . . . We who precariously survive in the sixties, we can regret their inadequacies and their failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their self-righteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and ineffective to change the world.[9]

Like all vital and significant movements that of the

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[8]"In Foggy California," New Masses, November 1928, Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, ed. Michael B. Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), p. 170.

[9]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, pp. 395-396.

proletarians' helped towards the creation and development of a specific form of literature. At the same time, it also contributed to the enrichment of American literature as a whole. As Warren French points out, the "major" contributors to the literature of the thirties, men like Steinbeck, Wolfe and the "proletarians," created a "triumphant literature" at a time when:

> The drama and novel, however, flourished as rarely before. . . . The novel proved to be an ideal vehicle for recording and attempting to structure the chaotic flux of the cheerless years. Writers and readers alike had time for contemplation that they were to lack in the next frenetic decade. . . .[10]

Because the issues the proletarians raised were at the heart of the social and cultural crisis of the time, they had inevitably concerned and attracted the non-proletarian writers and critics. For this reason many of the most talented writers of the time like Dos Passos, Caldwell, Anderson, Dreiser and Steinbeck had joined rank with the proletarians, and others like Wright and Hughes were literally nurtured by the radical writers and critics.

These radical writers and critics presented the old literary questions in a new way. They attempted to go beyond the old solutions to create a new literature both through criticism and through development of the old, and they concerned themselves with ideas which interested and occupied many other serious writers of the time. Hence, they could

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[10]Warren French, "Introduction," The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama (Deland, Florida: E. Edward St., 1969), p. 2.

be vehemently rejected by others or passionately defended, but they could not be complacently ignored. Edmund Wilson recognized this fact when he wrote of the controversy created by Mike Gold's biting review of Thornton Wilder's works in 1930:

> There is no question that the Gold-Wilder row marked definitely the eruption of the Marxist issues out of the literary circles and into the field of general criticism. After that, it became very plain the economic crisis was to be accompanied by a literary one.[11]

Given the concerns I have outlined the choice of studying Mike Gold is a logical one. No other figure was more central to the development of proletarian literature in the twenties and the thirties than Gold. The older generation of radical writers like Dell, Eastman, and Sinclair belonged to a different era. By the time of the gloriously hectic years of the thirties, their influence had diminished considerably. Moreover, some of the radicals, like Hicks and Eastman, self-righteously left the revolutionary movement before the end of the thirties. Gold, on the other hand, never even disavowed it. Writers like Freeman and Kunitz were very important in developing the proletarian literature, but Gold played an even more central role. I may not have chosen the best "literary" man in the formal sense of the word, but I believe I have chosen the man who best represents

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[11]Edmund Wilson, "Literary Class War," The Shores of Light, A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Young, 1972), p. 539.

the "proletarian literature." I did not wish to study the writer with the fewest literary flaws, but the one in whom both the flaws and the strengths of proletarian literature are most crystallized and best reflected. No one combines these better than Gold.

If we judge the significance or relevance of literary works solely upon their formal and theoretical sophistication, then a study of Gold would not be especially necessary. But we must also bear in mind the historical importance of literature, the extent to which it is effective in capturing the mood and essence of its time. Gold himself points out that:

> proletarian literature is in its first crude beginnings in America. We have to know how to understand the inevitable crudity of our first rough hewn shelters, and their relation to the shining cities of tomorrow.[12]

My treatment of Gold's work will, therefore, be like the treatment appropriate to any pioneer endeavor: understanding its problems, criticizing its shortcomings, and discovering its relation "to the shining cities of tomorrow." Part of the worth of such work is not only in what it offers, but in what possibilities it has for future development.

My approach to Gold will be within both a historical and a theoretical context. While every literary work is a product of concrete reality as experienced by its author, it is also a product of a larger context, that of its time and

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[12]Mike Gold, Change the World (New York: International Publishers, 1937), p. 216.

history. Tom Jones is not the story of every man but of an English man born of a certain time and society. Even "The Wasteland," despite all its numerous allusions to the past, likewise represents a very modern idea. One of my guide lines, then, in considering the historicity of Gold's work will be Sartre's statement that:

> Just as physics submits to mathematics new problems which require them to produce a new symbolism, in the like manner the always new requirements of the social engage the artist in finding a new language and new techniques. If we no longer write the way they did in the eighteenth century it is because the language of Racine does not lend itself to talking of locomotives and the proletariat. After that the purists will perhaps forbid us to write about locomotives, but art has never been on the side of the purists.[13]

In my study I will examine the extent and the way in which Gold fulfilled, or failed to fulfill, the "new requirements" of his time.

In order to examine Gold's work, I have deliberately chosen to concentrate on his literary criticism. One obvious reason for this choice is that a full study of his life and literary career is being written and published by Mike Folsom who worked with Gold on his memoirs until Gold's death in 1967. But the main reason for my concentration on his criticism is my concern with development of Gold's literary ideas, especially those which were instrumental in the definition and formation of proletarian literature. His literary

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[13]Jean Paul Sartre, What is Literature?, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Harper Colphon, 1965), pp. 20-21.

criticism is the most naked expression of his ideas; it unveils the reasons for his other works' shortcomings and strengths. In his criticism one can best find the basis of his social theory of art. As Folsom notes in his "Introduction" to Gold's literary anthology:

> In the journalism and literary criticism Gold's politics is up front, clear and strong. And politics is always there behind the fiction, beneath it for foundation, even working against it sometimes. One cannot grasp exactly what Gold was getting at in his stories without understanding that he conceived them in the context of his own daily work to change beyond recognition the world he represented in art. . . .[14]

While I will concentrate most on Gold's critical writings, I will also consider such questions as how his ideas were manifested in practice, and to what extent his fictional work can throw light upon the development of his literary and critical ideas. I will deal with these concerns in the context of a few of Gold's short stories and especially his novel, Jews Without Money.

A great many of Gold's fictional writings, especially Jews Without Money, are heavily autobiographical. Since an understanding of his background is important to the study of his ideas, I will also use this material as biography whenever necessary. In the study of Gold's early years, for instance, I will use Jews Without Money as the main source. Later his two autogiographical short stories, "Sesames and Lilies" and "Love on a Garbage Dump," will be used in the same

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[14] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 10.

context. I am quite aware of the risks involved in using fiction as biography and do so cautiously. The main reasons for attempting this careful use of fiction is that as yet no biography of Gold exists, and Gold himself, as well as Folsom who worked very closely with him, have stated that these works are in essence simply veiled autobiography.

The main focus of my writing will be, however, on Gold's critical essays written in The New Masses, The Liberator, other journals and also those published in Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology (New York, 1971), Hollow Men (New York, 1941) and Change the World (New York, 1937). I will also use his fiction, political and social writings, and various unpublished papers and letters, for the use of which I am indebted to Professor Mike Folsom.

One problem in approaching Mike Gold's literary ideas has its source in the very nature of his work, which is often erratic and impulsive. He wrote a great deal, pioneering many new ideas, but he seldom deepened and expanded these ideas into a systematic theory. His criticism has the advantage of being concrete and the disadvantage of lacking the necessary theoretical abstractions. Nevertheless, all through his work I find a center which, like a seed, grows with time and develops branches. I have found that the best way to understand this development is to study it in a chronological and historical order. In this way I can go beyond the immediate and impulsive aspects of his work to discover

the unifying elements in each stage in his development which make his work distinct from and yet at the same time a continuation of his previous endeavors.

Despite the fact that Gold's social and literary ideals are at the present time far from being fulfilled and despite the failures and ultimate defeat of the proletarian literary movement, that movement and men like Gold did leave their imprint upon the history of American literature. As Steinbeck says so well in the Grapes of Wrath:

> When theories change and crash, when souls, philosophies, when narrow dark alleys of thought, national, religious, economic, grow and disintegrate, man reaches, stumbles forward, he may slip back, but only half a step, never the full step back.[15]

Our task, then, is to discover not only that half step back, but also the full step forward.

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[15]John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath (New York: Bantam Pathfinder, 1969), p. 256.

CHAPTER II

EARLY YEARS

> I was born in a tenement. That tall, somber mass, holding its freight of obscure human destinites, is the pattern in which my being has been cast. It was in a tenement that I first heard the sad music of humanity rise to the stars. The sky above the air shafts was my sky; and the voices of the tenement neighbors in the air shaft were the voices of all my world. There, in suffering youth, I feverishly sought God and found man. . . . All that I know of life I learned in the tenement. I saw love there in an old mother who wept for her sons. I saw courage there in a sick worker who went to the factory every morning. I saw beauty in little children playing in the dim hallways, and despair and hate incarnated in the simple figures of those who lived there with me.[1]

Mike Gold's literary and political ideas and ideals were mainly inspired by his consuming passion against what he considered to be the economic, social and cultural poverty created by the capitalist system. This passion is the unifying force which dominates the bulk of his writing from 1916 to his death in 1967. It lies at the core of his literary ideas, providing them with unity of purpose as well as consistency. To understand these ideas, to trace their development, one has to go to Gold's childhood and adolescent

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[1]Mike Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art," Liberator, February 1921, Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, ed. Mike Folson, pp. 64-66.

years in New York's east side ghettos and understand those social and personal factors which transformed a bright and petulant Jewish boy into a compassionate and revolutionary writer.

Gold's autobiographical novel, Jews Without Money, provides us with the best insight into his formative years. According to Mike Folsom in his "Introduction" to Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, the novel accounts for the first twenty-one years of Gold's life. Although it is not a factual biography, "in most respects, it catches the essence of the life lived in the ghetto and on the fringes of Christian America just before and after the turn of this century."[2] The novel's central character, a Jewish boy called Mickey, is modelled after Itzok Isaac Granich (Gold's real name),[3] born in 1893, of Romanian immigrant parents. Reading about Mickey's life in the New York's east side ghettos, we can better understand the reasons for young Itzok's change into Irwin Granich the rebellious and promising young writer and later into Mike Gold, the chief founder of proletarian literature in the thirties.

In "Towards Proletarian Art," nine years before the publication of Jews Without Money, Gold had already stated:

> The tenement is in my blood, when I think it is the tenement thinking. When I hope it is the tenement

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[2]Michael B. Folsom, "Introduction," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, pp. 1-11.

[3]In his early youth Gold took the Christian name

> hoping. I am not an individual. I am all that the tenement group poured into me during those days of my spiritual travail.[4]

Likewise later in the novel Mickey and all the other characters melt into the tenement. They are individuals, but they are born of the tenement and bear its mark, like the early Christians bore the cross, with pride and humiliation. Such contradictory attributes can only exist deeply within those who have suffered and who in their suffering have felt the depth of the injustice committed against them. This accounts for the peculiar character of Gold's writing. He writes with a personal zeal and passion which at times becomes overwhelming. And he writes from personal experience. But his personal life and feelings are described within the framework of the larger social forces which shape them. Gold's own life experiences and emotions are reflected so much in his writing that one could safely say he was what he wrote. Yet this "I", this living, and moving individual, is in the words of Mike Folsom quite "self-effacing." When the "I" speaks it is not only of itself but of the world throbbing with life around and about it. In thise sense the "I"--be it little Mickey in Jews Without Money, his fictional characters in his short stories, or Mike Gold, the literary

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Irwin, which appeared under this early writings. During the Palmer Raids of 1919-1920, he adopted as a protective pseudonym "Mike Gold," which was the name of an old revolutionary who had fought on Lincoln's side against slavery.

[4]Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 64.

critic--becomes a vehicle through which Gold unravels page by page the other side of the story of America's gold and glitter.

When Gold says "the tenement is in my blood," he does not say it to be dramatic. The stench of poverty never left him alone. He did not wish to become an Horatio Alger, another "successful" pauper out of a million unsuccessful ones. His teacher had hoped that he would learn from another "success" story, that of Abraham Lincoln's. But he learned more from the likes of Joe Hill. All Gold's writings carry with them the urge to cleanse the tenement stench from the soul, to cleanse the world of the tenement stench; and more significant than all, to clease the tenement of the tenement stench. It was the tenement which was Gold's real teacher. He himself time and again points out the fact that he had learned most from his actual life experiences which had guided him in his writing and revolutionary struggle. He despised formal education. For him the academic world and its educational institutions were negative teachers:

> School is a jail for children. One'scrime is youth, and the jailers punish one for it. I hated school at first; I missed the street. It made me nervous to sit stiffly in a room while New York blazed with autumn.[5]

Part of this hatred stemmed from the little boy's restless nature and his defiance against the confinements which were part of the educational order. But the problem goes deeper

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[5]Gold, Jews Without Money, p. 36.

than that. For if he disliked the rules and preferred the New York autumn to the four walls of the classroom, he also had a deep love and passion for learning and for books. What angered him about the educational institutions was the built-in inequality of their system. He never forgot the teacher who punished him for using a "dirty word" by washing his mouth out with yellow lye soap and who hated teaching in a Jewish neighborhood. Gold never forgave or forgot the "stupid, proper, unimaginative despot" who had called him "little kike." Nor did he forgive or forget the system whose schools taught him empty words with no correspondence to the every day reality of his life. Later at Harvard he was to discover the more subtle and "polite" form of injustice which had been so nakedly and brutally revealed to him through his old school teacher.

Most intellectuals learned about the ghetto and the exploitation of the workers through radical theories and ideas. Their intellectual dissatisfaction with the established set of values and norms made it easier for them to find their refuge in radical thoughts and politics. Max Eastman, for example, who was Gold's mentor for many years before he changed political sides, had become interested in Marxism because he found Marx's idea of class struggle interesting. Many others like John Dos Passos became disgusted with the existing order of things. They found no creative future within the confines of the established values and

norms. For them the radical movement and ideology was for a while the most feasible alternative to the established order. But, on the other hand, Gold came to accept Marxism through the objective reality of his own life. Marxism did not have to open his eyes to the miseries of the oppressed. Rather it explained to him the reason for the miseries which he himself had felt and lived. It also offered him a solution, a way to change the present into a better future. More than the radical theories, it was his own life, his parent's anguished perserverance, his father's shattered dream of wealth, the naked brutality of the East Side ghetto with its array of prostitutes, pimps, tramps, and defiant kids chasing hungry cats which taught him the necessity of struggle. And it was the Union Square demonstration, the Sacco and Vanzetti case, and the Russian Revolution which inspired him to make the struggle a lasting part of his life.

"Blessed are the Poor . . ."

The subject is poverty. In Jews Without Money, it is described with neither distant sympathy, nor with euphoric glorification. Rather it is depicted as a disease which nests in the walls of the buildings, creeps into the streets, and like a rat gnaws away at the innards of the slum-dwellers. The building where Gold's family lived was so rotten that it bred bed-bugs which during the summer heat

tormented him and hundreds of other tenement children. The people tried to fight the insects. His mother was:

> as clean as any German housewife; she slaved, she worked herself to the bone keeping us fresh and neat. The bed bugs were a torment to her. She doused the bed with kerosene, changed the sheets, sprayed the mattress in an endless frantic war with the bed bugs. What was the use; nothing could help; it was Poverty; it was the Tenement.[6]

The bed bugs could not be destroyed without pulling down the building. But the building, like hundred of others like it, could not be pulled down unless the whole tenement which housed them was destroyed. Early in life, then, Gold had discovered that the tenement was a part of the system; it was the "necessary evil." The rage and frustration he had felt when battling the bed bugs in his childhood later deepened and expanded into the uncompromising anger against the system which had produced them.

The system, through its division into povery and wealth, had also defined little Mickey and his friends, as well as the middle class and rich kids. It had stamped them with certain characteristics and peculiarities. The affluent kids enjoyed keeping and playing with pets. The tenement children were also fond of playing with the animals. The difference, as always, was not in the act itself, but in how it was performed. The tenement cat was also a creature of poverty:

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[6]Ibid., p. 71.

> . . . its head was gaunt, its bones jutted sharply like parts of a strange machine. It was sick. Its belly dragged the ground. It was sick with a new litter. It paused before a garbage can, sniffing out food.[7]

The kids relieved their boredom while they "pursued it like fiends, pelting it with offal." There was no conscious cruelty involved in their acts: It was only that "it was a world of violence and stone, there were too many cats, there were too many children. And we tortured them, they tortured us. It was poverty." (p. 63)

Later Gold as the old revolutionary writer in one of his conversations with Mike Folsom (9/1/66) talked of one of the black textile workers whose house he had once visited. Gold had wished to go to the toilet: His host, a tall and dignified black man,

> bowed like an old courtly man and followed me to the door. Then we went out there, we went a couple of steps and he bowed me into the back yard which was all cement. And I looked at him for a while and I realized that it was where I was supposed to crap. Out there in the guy's cement. They had no toilet you know, so poor.

This whole incident is like an episode out of black comedy. Pride and dignity need conditions suitable for their preservation. To attempt to preserve them amidst such deprivation and degradation is certainly heroic, but it becomes either too tragic or too comic. Gold decided that the poor had to create their own conditions, through the negation of the already existing ones. He could only keep his own

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[7]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

dignity by defying those who had theorized that his kind were poor because they had no drive to be otherwise. He could only hold his head high through his contempt for those who had created the conditions for his deprivation.

Max Eastman, in his reactionary years, wrote of Gold:

> Anyone who reads his book, with its brilliantly horrifying account of his pauper boyhood on an East-Side block inhabited by crooks and perverts, pimps and prostitutes, will understand his fitful emotionalism; his rage of enthusiasm for the paradisal hope held out by the Masses; his angry recoil when the Liberator seemed to loiter along the road to paradise. It seems natural enough.[8]

One could understand all this and much more. For Eastman had either forgotten or had never understood, that the main thing was not Gold's "natural" reaction to his childhood, but the fact that he had been able to go beyond these reactions to harness his "fitful emotionalism" (though sometimes quite unsuccessfully) into a systematic and conscious struggle against the system which had created such nightmares for millions like him. If he turned this nightmare into a dream of future, it was not because of his blind faith or stupidity, but because of his refusal to accept the degradation imposed upon him. Having lived at the bottom of hell, he could not be denied his dream of paradise. Had his anger and his struggle been merely a personal one, they would have been petty and insignificant; his story

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[8]Max Eastman, Love and Revolution, p. 265.

would have been merely that of any pauper boy trying to make it big. But his was not a personal vendetta against society at large. He was not another Charles Bronson-type hero out to take his revenge on the world. Although his life had been typical of millions of tenement dwellers, he had recognized their anger against their conditions to be a source of their power. His own sufferings had melted into those of the millions like him. When he talked of little Mickey, he was also talking of other Mickeys scattered throughout American ghettos and slums. He wanted the voices of all the oppressed to become one voice and to turn against the source of their miseries. Many "well wishers" considered such ideas and ideals as merely utopian; many still do. But in his attempts to build a different future, Gold was certainly much less idealistic than those who for hundreds of years had tried to convince themselves and the world that povery could be eliminated in a system based upon inequality of wealth and that somehow justice would be meted out in equal doses to the Tom Buchanans, Jay Gatsbys and Isaac Graniches of the world.

"Turning the World Inside Out . . ."

> If I am extreme I am not extreme in the same way as you
> Against Nature's silence I use action
> In the vast indifference I invent a meaning
> I don't watch unmoved I intervene
> And say that this and this are wrong
> And I work to alter them and improve them
> The important thing is to pull yourself up by your own hair to turn yourself

> Inside out and see the whole world with fresh eyes.[9]

One of Gold's greatest merits was that he was able simultaneously to see himself and the world "inside out." Having seen and experienced poverty in his childhood, he later tried to "intervene," to "use action" against the established order of things. Even as children, he and his ghetto friends were forced to see the American system inside out. They were not "blessed" with the innocence of the upper class children, which shielded them from seeing and judging the world as it really is. This loss of innocence was not because the ghetto parents were without "morality" or "dignity." Gold was brought up by honest and upright parents who hated the physical and spiritual filth they were subjected to. But, nonetheless, they had to share the same days and nights with the pimps, prostitutes, and bums. The "pious jews" who had migrated to America, the "promised land," had "tried to live" and to "shut their eyes. We children did not shut our eyes. We saw and knew."

The boy Mickey saw along with the other kids, and when he knew, he was hurt and had to suffer for what he saw. He carried that knowledge and suffering all through his life; it was reflected in his political beliefs and literary endeavors. He never forgot that: "It was my world; it was

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[9]Peter Weiss, Marat/Sade (New York: Pocket Books, 1966), p. 46.

my mother's world too. We had to live in it and learn what it chose to teach us."[10] He had chosen to learn one thing early in life and that was what his hero Whitman had advised in his poem "The States": "to resist much, obey little." He had learned to despise and resist all that was judged by the capitalist society to be respectable and subject to obedience. The tenement, however, had had no active share in creating those laws and setting up those standards of respectability. The dominant class alone had created those standards and laws, partly to keep order over its tenement dwellers and its disobedient rebels. So, for the tenement, the just way was to create its own laws, standards, and morals. To little Mickey the "bad guys" were those who tried to impose the laws on them like their miserly landlord, or the cops. When confronted with the police he ran, or if he stopped, it was either out of defiance or fear. To him poverty had become synonymous with injustice.

Had Gold only seen the poverty and stopped there, he would have either resigned himself to his lot like the "pious jews" in his ghetto, or he would have turned against that lot in mindless rebellion like the gangsters in Jews Without Money. The important point is not only that he saw the system "inside out," but how he saw it and what effect this knowledge had upon him. Gold tried to rid himself of

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[10]Gold, Jews Without Money, p. 19.

the blindness and ignorance gripping both the law-abiding ghetto dwellers and the outlaws. For him the rebellion had to be a conscious one which tried to discover and to destroy the roots of the disease. The real villain in Gold's fiction, as well as in his life, was the system which had created the tenement.

> One hates the gangsters, as one must hate all mercenaries. Yet some are unfortunate boys, bad eggs, hatched by the bad world hen.
>
> Gyp the Blood who burned in the chair for the killing of gambler Rosenthal, was in my class at public school. He was just the ordinary rugged East Side boy. Any of us might have ended in the electric chair with him. I am not proud I escaped, it is only my luck.[11]

Louis One Eye the hated gangster, and the closest thing in Gold's novel to a villain, had a violent father. At the age of fourteen, seeing his father trying to beat his mother, Louis had tried to push him out of the window, nearly causing his death. He was sent to a reformatory where the state "reformed" him by carefully teaching him to be a criminal and by robbing him of one eye. His eyeball had been cracked open by a keeper. Gold mediatated upon this incident with ferocious bitterness: "The State had turned a moody unhappy boy into this evil rattlesnake, that struck a death blow at the slightest touch of man."[12]

Then there were the prostitutes, for whom Gold

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[11] Ibid., p. 125.

[12] Ibid.

tried to preserve more affection than sentimentality. Some of them he had known as young girls, pure and beautiful, who had tried to escape the life of drudgery imposed upon them. Others had been immigrant girls who found prostitution the quickest and most practical way to earn money to send back home to their families.

> Many of the whores were girls who had been starved into this profession. Once in, they knew no way out. They were afraid of starving again if they left.[13]

It is significant the way Gold portrays the prostitutes in his novel. The whores in the novel possess neither the sentimental charm of an Irma LaDouce nor the tragic sophistication of a Madame O'Camellia. Rather it is the glaring simplicity and matter of fact way of their existence which attracts attention and reveals the deep, lonely tragedy of their lives. In their case as in other cases we are confronted with the simple fact of survival. Gold's characters are drawn the way they are, not because of any inherent traits as some naturalists had claimed, but because they had to survive. This survival is crucial both on a spiritual and physical level. Its necessity made pimps, whores, and gangsters out of men and women who under different circumstances could have been otherwise.

A contrast between Gold's attitude in this respect to that of some other writers with similar experiences is

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[13]Ibid., p. 34.

revealing. Jean Genet is a good example. Though he had not only been a tenement dweller, he had spent most of his adult life in the "under world" with pimps and prostitutes and the gangsters. Genet's Our Lady of Flowers (Trans. Bernard Frechtman, Paris Olympia Press, 1957) is essentially about this world. Genet became an almost overnight success with some intellectuals. One reason for this is, of course, that he is an excellent stylist. The other reason must be sought in his basic attitude toward the subject he describes and toward the world as a whole. I do not intend to contrast Genet's background with Gold's. That would be the subject for another study. My purpose is to compare their attitudes on this specific subject.

Gold and Genet both express a deep contempt for the world built and supported by the bourgeoisie. Their aim is in part to negate the already established set of values and norms. They do this through their portrayal of a world hidden from and if known at all only half-known to the middle-class readers. From this point, however, they part ways.

The parting of ways as I have mentioned is mainly because of the two authors' basically different attitudes, in the way they view life, and in their appraisal of things as they are. Genet presents the underworld with a kind of skillful perversity. The beauty is in how he chooses his words and in how he orders them, not in the subject he

presents. The beauty is in his art. His primary goal is to shock the readers, to disgust, and to frustrate them.

Gold's portrayal of the prostitutes and pimps at times verges on the grotesque. But rather than shocking the readers, he tries to unfold to them an essentially unfamiliar world. He wishes to make that world familiar and understood by the readers. What he presents is ugly and disgusting, but the people he presents are not. He tries to create love and compassion for the people and a hatred for their world. Genet is essentially cynical; Gold is basically optimistic. Genet has not gone beyond his world, seeing the potential for change. Gold has. That step makes all the difference.

Gold came tc hate the lives of all the tenement dwellers, from his own parents and the pious Jews down to the pimps, whores and gangsters. But he did not hate the tenement dwellers themselves. In them he discovered beauty, compassion, and dignity. This hatred of their lives and love for them dominates most of his works. He does not justify gangsterism or prostitution. He hated them as much as he hated the poverty and ignorance which were such an integral part of the tenement. Later in life he tried to avoid visiting the place of his childhood as much as possible. His hatred was so complete and whole that he could not tolerate the tenement which time and again he had claimed was in his blood. He wanted to destroy it completely. This desire became both his passion and his obsession.

Continuing the War

"I say where liberty draws not the blood of slavery, there slavery draws the blood out of liberty" [Walt Whitman, "Says," Selections from Leaves of Grass (New York: Avenel Books), p. 105].

On the East Side war was a daily part of life. The simple war of survival had to be waged on all levels. Each side had to draw out the other's blood or die. Later in life for Mike Gold the dedicated revolutionary and equally dedicated writer, this war took on a different form and was waged on a different level; nonetheless, it was still war and its target only more defined. To put it simply, for Gold it was a war between the just and the unjust, between those who had created a place where "rose of syphilis bloomed by night and by day," (p. 14) and those who wished to build "a garden for the human spirit." (p. 305)

Those who live, suffer and die in the ghettos create their own laws based upon their own sense and definition of justice. Any cop who has been assigned to a Harlem or a Watts could testify to this. As a child, Gold had been part of the ghetto and had accepted its laws and moral codes. He instinctively had chosen those codes which protected him the most from the ghetto's physical and spiritual brutality. The everyday realities of tenement life were to him the grossest representations of injustice. As a child, he could only become angry and frustrated. Later he discovered his

own method of struggle and found a new theory of justice. He could grasp this struggle more readily and thoroughly than all those "Harvard boys" whom he came to attack and despise vehemently. That he could so easily take up and embrace Marxism was quite natural. He had already felt in life what Marx elucidated in theory. Unlike so many radical intellectuals, he did not side with the have-nots because he had read and intellectually accepted Marx. Rather, he embraced Marxism because it had taken his side, the side of the have-nots. His loyalty, more than to any theory or dogma, was to his own class and kind.

The idea of justice, what was later to be defined as "proletarian justice," was very much at the heart of Gold's works. One of the most respected characters in Jews Without Money is Nigger, an instinctive rebel. His family is very poor, living in the ghettos of the ghetto. Through his defiance and bravado Nigger tries to hide the shame and agony of his family's poverty. He also knows how to implement justice. When their school teacher, the "teacher for little slaves," the "ruptured virgin of fifty-five," calls Mickey a "little Kike," Nigger bangs her on the nose. Gold's narrator comments: "I should have been as brave. It was justice." Once a hated cop breaks the kids' crap game, pocketing the pennies they leave behind in their flight. Nigger refuses to leave his money. When punished by the cop, he reciprocates by trying to drop a brick on

the cop's head: "He was ready to die for justice. The cop was not as brave." (Ibid., p. 45)

There is a sense of ruthless and single-minded ferocity in this kind of justice. But it is created more by necessity than by any heartless cruelty on the part of its adherents. In the tenement you either beat the enemy or are beaten by him. There it certainly is not the "meek" who are blessed. This point is well-demonstrated in Gold's strangely grotesque short story "God is Love," published in the August, 1917, issue of the Masses.

The story centers around a meek little preacher who has "sinned" in his youth and has willingly accepted the punishment. But despite his faith he cannot find repose. He looks for the god of justice, but "there was no god of justice, for there was no justice." One night he discovers that "god is love." Jubilant at his discovery he tries to help spread love and charity to his fellow beings. His attempts to help his drunken sailor mate result in his being beated by the sailor and thrown into jail.

The preacher's meekness and his resignation to the reality around him bring him his final agony. His cell-mate, a mad Negro, is singing hymns which the preacher can no longer stand to hear. In his efforts to quiet his cell-mate, he is torn into pieces. The madman:

> tore at him with teeth, claws and feet . . . hungrily. . . . Blood spurted on the dark cell air. . . . And nobody heard or came to rescue

> the gentle old man who had sought good all his day. . . .[14]

Later in Gold's life the Sacco and Vanzetti case in which he was deeply involved, the workers' strikes he observed and closely supported, and the crisis which drove millions of Americans homeless and jobless during the depression, all deepened his antagonism towards the established system of justice. Gold saw that this "justice" went beyond the experiences of a little Jewish boy in the ghetto; it had gone beyond the ghetto itself and embraced the society and system as a whole. As a boy he had instinctively rebelled against manifestations of that system; as a radical writer his rebellion was a conscious one. Once a man rebels against a code or a system, he is ready to define a new code and system. From then on the fact of his rebellion becomes secondary in relation to the nature of it.

Towards New Definitions . . .

Mickey's beloved and respected childhood friend Nigger defined his rebellion in the gangsterism which finally killed him. Isaac Granich had other ambitions. He wanted to become a writer of his people. All through his life two factors, the tenement and a yearning for culture, shaped Gold's work and its direction. One led him to commitment to the revolution and his people, the other to a passionate love of literature.

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[14] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 43.

Many claimed--and many still claim--that this desire to intervene and change the world is poison to the artist's creative life. The history of world literature, of course, has disproved such claims. Who could say that great writers from Cervantes, Voltaire, Fielding, Richardson, and Dickens to Melville, Whitman, Tolstoy, Gorky, Twain, and London separated their social and political ideas and commitments from their creative work?

In Gold's case one difference is that he emphasized and admitted his political ideas, and he consciously strove towards fusing them into his literary creations. Such effort is not sacrilegious to the ideals of art and literature. For many it is the very basis of such ideals. Sartre says it well when he claims:

> Thus the prose-writer is a man who has chosen a certain method of secondary action which we may call action by disclosure. It is therefore permissible to ask him this second question: "What aspect of the world do you want to disclose?" The "engaged" writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change. He has given up the impossible dream of giving an impartial picture of Society and the human condition. Man is a being toward whom no being can be impartial, not even God.[15]

The criticism of Gold should not be of his attempts to be partial, to use his words as action, and to be "engaged" as Sartre puts. Instead criticism of his work should be based on the degree of his success in achieving this goal. The

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[15]Jean Paul Sartre, What is Literature? p. 17.

question is how far and to what extent he was able to realize his experiences, emotions, and ideas in their social context, so that they were no longer mere facts of life but genuine works of art.

In later chapters I will discuss in some depth Gold's "social" theory of literature, its flaws and successes. But it is worth mentioning that the contradiction between the advocates of art for art's sake and those who were known as social or radical critics and writers did not only exist between the two opposing camps. Nor was this contradiction limited to the field of art and literature. In a society where artists and writers are alienated from both their audiences and readers, and from the invisible patrons who publish their works, there is bound to be a separation between the artist and the writer and their society. No writer no matter how radical could claim to have solved the problem within the confines of capitalist society. Many aspects of this contradiction were manifested in the fierce fighting which existed within the revolutionary and radical writers' camps about the relation of art to society.

Gold himself was not above this dilemma. He wanted the leisure and freedom to develop as a writer, as a creative worker. But such desire constantly came into comflict with other demands. Time and again, he was pained to see gifted artists like Robert Minor give up their art for political work. In his essay, "John Reed the Real Thing," published

in the November, 1927, issue of the New Masses, Gold says with a touch of contempt:

> It is part of the American hard-boiled tradition, shared by the revolutionists here who believe it is unproletarian and unmanly to write a play, or study politics, or discuss the arts. Mr. Babbitt feels the same way.[16]

He praises John Reed precisely because of his ability to excel both in political and literary struggles. Rejecting those artists who desired to build a sanctuary for art separate from life and its struggles, he also fought against those revolutionaries who denied the role and significance of art and literature in the struggle. In this respect the two very opposite factions became the two sides of the same coin.

Joseph Freeman, in his autobiography, An American Testament, has said: "As for himself, Mike Gold said, he had never wanted to be a politician and was not going to become one; he was happier trying to write."[17] Gold not only wanted to write, but he also wanted to define what he wrote and for whom. For his anger did not stem merely from the physical and material deprivation imposed upon masses of oppressed people; it was also directed against the spiritual and intellectual poverty accompanying that deprivation. He deeply believed that this system based upon the profit

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[16] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 153.

[17] Joseph Freeman, An American Testament, p. 163.

of a few cannot, will not, provide any real literature and culture for its tenement dwellers.

Gold himself had been a victim of such deprivation. A bright and precocious student, one who had always won prizes in school, he was eagerly encouraged by his teachers to continue his education. His parents wanted him to become a doctor. But as he said: "I was morbid enough to be wiser than my parents. Even then I could sense that education is a luxury reserved for the well-to-do." His father was sick and his mother could not go to work. It fell upon his shoulders as the eldest son to go to work at the age of twelve. He had to resign himself to his fate, but he did so with anger and bitterness. If he did not finish high school, it was not because of his lack of intelligence or interest.

> I was trying to be hard. For years my ego had been fed by everyone's praise of my precocity. I had always loved books; I was mad about books; I wanted passionately to go to high school and college. Since I couldn't, I meant to despise all that nonsense.[18]

Isaac Granich had not gone to school because he had to go to work. At the age of twelve this was perhaps the limit of his understanding of the problem, that realization and his anger at having to make the sacrifice. Later, however, he could look back at that experience and judge it from a different perspective. He could go beyond the anger

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[18]Gold, Jews Without Money, p. 303.

and make social a problem which had been only personal. There were many more Isaac Graniches living in his ghetto and the ghettos around the "promised land." They, too, were deprived of the education so easily accessible to those he contemptuously had called "momma's boys." He then wanted a fair share of everything for the tenement dwellers, the education and culture as well as the wealth. The extremity of his views and aspirations can only be understood and explained through an understanding of the extremity of his people's material and intellectual poverty. In 1921 in his emotional and callow essay, "Towards Proletarian Art," he asks:

> . . . can we understand that which is not our very own? We who are sprung from the workers, can so easily forget the milk that nourished us, and the hearts that gave us growth? Need we apologize or be ashamed if we express in art that manifestation of life which is so exclusively ours, the life of the toilers?[19]

His argument is unfinished, and in a later chapter, I will discuss it and the whole essay. But the point remains that every oppressed race, class, or people creates its own writers and artists, as well as its own literature and art. Out of the working class and black struggles in the United States, or the struggles of African, Latin American, Asian and other peoples of the world, new and distinct forms of literature and art have been created. These peoples have created this culture out of the daily experiences of their

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[19] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 65.

lives and also out of the desire to achieve a separate and distinct identity of their own. Similarly, Gold wanted to create such a culture for his unrecognized people.

The Process of Acquiring a Mind

> These Jews came from the world of peasant Europe, where art is inherited with one's father's farm, and is a simple act of life. (Jews Without Money, p. 83)

Gold's life was a peculiar mixture of literature and revolution. If these things could be measured, one might almost say that he was as much a writer as he was a revolutionary; more accurately perhaps he was a revolutionary-writer in the literal sense of the words. Curiously enough, the tenement which planted in him the seeds for his later revolutionary activity also created in him a passionate love and deep respect for literature and art. This passion was so strong that it was accompanied by a feeling almost like awe. Part of this feeling came from his inability to gratify his intellectual curiosity and passion for learning. Poverty, besides forcing him to work at an early age, had also deprived him of both the leisure and the access to enjoy the cultural and intellectual activities which he so badly desired. This very inaccessibility increased, and at the same time, frustrated, his passion for literature and art.

But this passion is also rooted in the rich if simple culture of the Jewish ghetto. In his essay "Towards Proletarian Art," where he pleads for the creation of a distinct proletarian literature, Gold says:

> . . . in art Life is speaking out its heart at last, and to censor the poor brute-murmurings would be sacrilege. Whatever they are, they are significant and precious, and to stifle the meanest of Life's moods taking form in the artist would be death. Artists are bitter lovers of Life, and in beauty or horror she is ever dear to them. I wish to speak no word against their holy passion, therefore, and I regard with reverence the scarred and tortured figures of the artist-saints of time. . . .[20]

These words were written by one who in the same article attacks those who set art above the proletarian struggle; one who in other essays calls Hemingway "the white collar poet," and Wilder the "Emily Post of culture." Such near worship of art had its roots in his childhood education in the ghetto, where the ghetto artists and poets were treated as semi-gods. As in the case of revolution, his initiation to literature and art had not been through formal and academic education. He was merely born and bred with it. It was a part of his life, the way the bed-bugs and the hungry cats were. Only this was the beautiful and desirable part of his life; the one which took him beyond the bleak reality of the East Side's Christie Street.

In the tenement, artists, poets, and actors were close to the lives and hearts of their people. They gave them color, imagination, and beauty. And they were worshipped in return. Gold's father, who loved Shakespeare and Schiller, would spend hours arguing with his friends over the merits of his favorite actor. Such a subject was so

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[20]Ibid., p. 64.

serious to him that he would momentarily sacrifice his friendship in defense of his actor-hero. These Jewish immigrants who had brought with them from Europe rich cultural traditions, took art seriously, with little of that cynicism and irony so typical of the middle and upper class intellectuals.

> Amid all its dirt, violence and poverty, the East Side yet sung. My father loved to sing and he and his friends often argued fervently over the merits of their favorite folk-singers and synagogue cantors. Poetry and music were important to these paupers.[21]

It was his father's tales which would rain beauty over the bleak tenement nights. Like an ancient bard he wove stories into a single golden thread, and night after night the stench and filth of the tenement would softly melt into the magic of his words, creating a golden tapestry. His father had memorized most of the tales of the Arabian Nights as well as his favorite play, Schiller's The Robbers. This unorthodox christening into literature and art shaped much of Gold's later attitude toward life.

His other teachers were the "sweat shop" poets who impressed him as well as his father because they talked in a familiar language of things which they had touched and known.

> They knew the same life and suffering as the people, and what they wrote of themselves was true of the people. They dwelt in no special remote planet of fine letters, but in the world of the people. Their

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[21]Ibid., pp. 303-304.

> poetry was realistic as a photograph, all the homely details of truth were there yet ennobled with the rebellion and hope of man. The East Side Jews knew and loved their poets as warmly as the Scottish folk have loved their peasant-bard, Bobby Burns.[22]

What impressed Gold later about these poets as well as about his own father was their amazing simplicity and closeness to life. They had not yet been tainted by the sophistication which separates art from life. The poets were recognized; Eliakum Zunner, the Jewish poet, was known as the bard and poet of his people. On his grave they inscribed: "O Passerby, pause in reverence. Here silent in the dust, lies the faithful voice of his people."[23] Later when Gold came to try to create a literature for his people, he learned less from Marxist theory than from his father and his friends, from the sweat shop poets and Zunner, their ancient bard. They, as much as the revolutionary politics, inspired him to the creation of a distinct proletarian literature. The theories demonstrated that such literature was both possible and necessary; these others had proved its possibility as well as necessity.

Many radical intellectuals sympathized with the aspirations of the workers but had no faith in their ability to contribute to literature in any significant way. Even Trotsky had claimed that the term "proletarian art" is a

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[22]Ibid., p. 305.

[23]Ibid., p. 306.

"misnomer." Floyd Dell, a one-time mentor of Gold, in an article called "Explanations and Apologies " (Liberator, March 1922), declares that it would be a happy arrangement for the workers to tend to their work and for the radical intellectuals to tend to their writing. Dell wished to be the workers' spokesman without actually being a worker and giving up the leisure time which intellectual life afforded him. He neatly divided the labor: the radical intellectuals would write for the proletariat, and the proletariat would work for the intellectuals. Dell advised that Gold accept this fact. For then he could look the striking miner in the eye and say:

> The leisure you have given me hasn't been misspent. In fact, if you'd pay more attention to our magazine, and boom our circulation so that I could have a decent salary, it would be money well-invested.[24]

Many of Gold's other radical colleagues had wished, like Dell, to have their cake and eat it too. But Gold had seen how his people, despite their lack of sophistication and intellectual refinement, loved and appreciated the "finer things in life." He had also enjoyed and understood the direct language of the sweat shop poets. He could not rest easy with Dell's justifications and "explanations," although he could not find any pat solutions to the problem of being a radical intellectual whose life was essentially different

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[24]Floyd Dell, "Explanations and Apologies," Liberator (March 1922), p. 25.

from that of the workers. Gold grasped the potential in his people; he wanted to realize that potential in terms of literature and art. Nevertheless he also led the life of an intellectual. He was neither a simple worker like Joe Hill, nor a middle-class radical intellectual like Floyd Dell. His was the dilemma of many revolutionary intellectuals. The problem was that he had some of the best of both worlds and not enough of either.

Gold had learned a great deal from his father and his friends:

> what passion what fine-smelling finesse, they often showed in their aesthetic disputations! In the wine celler [sic] or around our kitchen table, they were forever arguing just like intellectuals, about God and socialism and their favorite actors and plays.[25]

It was this simplicity and at the same time this depth which he later tried to recapture and expand in radical literature and art. He knew that the tenements of the East Side were like sleeping dragons waiting to waken economically, politically, and culturally.

If the struggle were to destroy elitism in economics and to distribute the wealth, if the struggle were to simplify and to clarify the social and political issues, making them accessible to the masses, then it could do the same in terms of literature and art. Gold's struggle--and he carried

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[25]"A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums," (People's World, April-Oct. 1954), Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, pp. 313-314.

it further and deeper than any of his literary comrades--was aimed at simplifying literature, tearing it away from private ownership and saving it from its own elitism, thus making it accessible to people like his own father.

As a child, in love with Mark Twain, Gold had read The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn to his ecstatic father.

> "Your Mark Twain, he understands the aristocrats!" my father chuckled. "He spits on them, he has a heart of gold! Like our own Sholem Aleichem he wants to help people to laugh. . . . But I think he [Aleichem] also feels the tears of the people. Mark Twain has no tears."[26]

It was for people like his father, with their simple passion for culture, and their great folk wisdom, that Gold tried to write. What he strived after was the kind of simplicity best defined by Brecht:

> When complicated problems are so mastered as to make them easier to deal with and less difficult to grasp. A great number of seemingly self-contradictory facts, a vast and discouraging tangle is often set in order by science in such a way that a relatively simple truth emerges.[27]

This kind of simplicity Gold achieved to a great degree both in his creative and critical works. It was his greatest asset. He had learned well the art of demystifying and, therefore, clarifying the truth. This accounts for much of the force and dynamism in his work. It also is the main

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[26]Ibid., p. 307.

[27]Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 148.

reason for the popularity and notoriety he earned. It was when he confused simplicity with mere emotionality that he became mystical and obtuse, losing control of the reality he valued so and turning it into a mystification. The reality, literature, and man, rather than being "set in order" and explained, became mere abstract and general words with capital letters.

The problem was that this simplicity though greatly needed was not enough. His work needed to be expanded and deepened, to go beyond the tenement and its folk wisdom to assert itself at a higher level. And this is what Gold often failed to do.

Beginning to Build

Ghetto culture provided Gold with a rare love and passion for literature, but as he himself often said, revolution had given him a mind. This distinction between the heart and the mind is a significant one. His love for literature was so much a part of him that it was impulsive and instinctive. But he had to go beyond that. It was his involvement in radical politics and acquaintance with radical theories which made him think out the logic behind that love. Revolution, he claims in Jews Without Money, had "forced" him to "think, to struggle, to live" (p. 309).

Gold's occupation and preoccupation with revolution and revolutionary thought is quite complex and multi-faceted. On the most obvious level, it corresponded to his hatred of

the tenement. In his childhood he had made his own laws within the confines of which justice meant beating the established order. As an adult, revolutionary thought provided him with a more effective tool. As a boy, even his dreams of the Messiah were not meek and passive ones. The Messiah had to be like Buffalo Bill, good, hard and strong. But the only Messiah he had seen in the ghetto was a fat Rabbi who had left his poor devout followers at the first offer he received from a wealthy congregation.

In school, religion was taught to him by a greedy, dirty, and foul smelling teacher who had no resemblance to the brave and forgiving Messiah of his dreams. Gold was soon to discover that the Messiah had no place in America. His mother had said that America was a good land, but not for the poor and:

> When the Messiah comes to America, he had better come in a fine automobile, with a dozen servants. If he comes here on a white horse, people will think he is just another poor immigrant. They may set him to work washing dishes in a restaurant.[28]

Early in life Gold had discovered that his Messiah had no chance in a world where its spiritual leaders ate off golden plates and blessed the poor with chubby pink hands. He turned to religion for answers, and it had failed him. The Messiah was truly not of or for this world. He was not practical. But the revolution provided him with a

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[28] Jews Without Money, pp. 159-160.

challenge and an answer. It was within his reach, even being practised with some tangible results around the world. It seemed to him that the revolution had spoken in the name of the have-nots, relying on their power. It was his childhood disappointment with religion and his father's shattered dream of American success that had made him accept so readily the revolutionary theory and practice.

But the matter went deeper than that. Gold had a curious and inquisitive mind. As a child, he had turned to religion for the answers to his numerous questions.

> Now at seventeen I was entering a painful time when religion was to begin to trouble me. It wasn't a reflection of the sex delirium of the adolescent, though God knows I had that trouble, too. Religion was man's first questioning of the universe, the questions that separated man from the animals What is life? Why are we here? Not how the world was made, but why, why?[29]

To the immigrant Jews, grouped together in their persecution by others, religion became a crucial part of their lives. Because they were persecuted in the name of their religion, they felt more deeply bound to it; because they had struggled and sacrificed in its defense, they loved it and wished to obey it all the more strongly. Little Mickey, like those "pious Jews," had tried to turn to God for answers. At first his questions were the simple ones of a child curious about the ever-elusive and

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[29]"A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 316.

mysterious God. At night tortured by the bedbugs or on the rooftops looking at the sky, and during the day-time playing with his friends, he wondered about God. As he described it, he was "oppressed with thoughts of God." Every day he was sent to a Jewish religious school where he was taught by a "walking belching symbol of the decay of orthodox Judaism." He had no hope in his teacher. But he did believe in his mother, who solemnly declared that God had made everything:

> I couldn't get the thought out of my head; God made everything. A child carries such thoughts about him unconsciously, the way he carries his body. They grow inside him. He sits quietly; no-one knows why; he himself doesn't know. He is thinking. The one day he will speak.[30]

When he was tormented by the bedbugs which later became to him the symbol of poverty, he had wanted to know if a "God of Love" had created the bedbugs. It was this simple and fundamental question which tormented him: If God was good and kind, then why did he create poverty? Millions of children found no answer to this question.

Gold found no answer in his religion. He was expected to accept it on faith, to believe in it without knowing why. He was asked to acquiesce. Yet he never knew how to acquiesce. He had looked for an answer that would explain the reality rather than confuse and mystify it. He had not looked for justifications, but for explanations.

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[30] Jews Without Money, p. 68.

But he had seen how dreams and dogmas based on blind faith shattered the lives of millions like himself. And the struggle had given him a new faith. It involved him in the process of creating and changing and had also shown him that it was practical. Those were the gloriously innocent early days of the Russian Revolution when the revolution had not yet been betrayed and when men like Gide, Malraux, Steinbeck, and Dos Passos cheered the rise of the young Soviets.

> The War came; the Russian Revolution; I was against the War, I was 100 percent with the Bolsheviks. It seemed marvelous then, beyond any words, and it still is as marvelous, that the worker's state had come down from the clouds of Shelley's dream and established itself on the earth.[31]

But the revolution also stimulated Gold's mind. It deepened his instinctive sense of proletarian justice and clarified his anger. The book he mentions most is Lenin's State and Revolution. There are several reasons for his attraction to this particular work. Gold claims that it saved him from his own confusion. Until then one half of him had been acquainted with "proletarian realities" and the other half had been "full of the most extra-ordinary mystic hash, the result of reading. Let me confess it now--I took Shelley, Blake, and Walt Whitman quite literally."[32]

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[31]Ibid., p. 211.

[32]"Why Am I A Communist?", Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 210.

Lenin's State and Revolution did not merely clear Gold of his "mystic hash." It appealed to and emphasized his extreme militancy. For the pamphlet is in essence about the state as a force used to keep the class antagonisms under control. Lenin goes into the nature of the "bourgeois state," its various arms of suppression, the parlimentary form of democracy, and concludes that the state is an organ of bourgeois dictatorship over the proletariat. To defeat it the workers have to smash it with the revolution and build their own state, that is, the state of the "proletariat organized as the ruling class." In his preface to the first edication, Lenin says that the question posed in the pamphlet contains

> a more urgent problem of the day, the problem of explaining to the masses what they will have to do before long to free themselves from capitalist society. . . .[33]

Unlike most of Marx and Engels' classics and Lenin's own Materialism and Empiro-criticsm, this work had more political urgency and impact than a philosophical one. Lenin directs it against the European social democracy and its most prominent theoretician, Karl Kautsky. He sharply attacks those who preached any form of compromise with the bourgeoisie or denied the significance of "the dictatorship of the proletariat." His polemics in their force and

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[33]Vladimir I. Lenin, The State and Revolution, Selected Works, Vol. II (Moscow: Progress Pub., 1970), p. 288.

clarity must have appealed strongly to the young Isaac Granich, who later says:

> I have wanted for fifteen years one supreme thing; I have wanted it more than love, health, fame or security. It is world socialism that I want--for I know this alone can banish the miseries of the world I now live in. It will free the factory slaves, the farm drudges, it will set women free, and restore the Negro race to its human rights, I know that the world will be beautiful soon in the sunlight of proletarian brotherhood; meanwhile, the struggle. And I want socialism so much that I accept this fierce, crude struggle as my fate in time; I accept its disciplines and necessities; I become as practical and realistic as possible for me; I want victory.[34]

Gold's reaction to Lenin's pamphlet had been typical: it was theoretically shallow and emotionally deep. It seemed to him that Lenin had said "the communist dream is beautiful" and that "the revolution is this highest poetry of human race. But to be mystic about it means admitting it is only a dream, and can never be realized" (p. 210). The fact is that in his work Lenin had not said any of those things in so many words, although such conclusions and generalities could be drawn from it, as well as from his other writings. The point worth noting is the for Gold, more important than the theoretical complexities of the work (and there were many), was its inherent militancy and optimism. This militancy, although an integral part of any revolutionary individual, was certainly not enough to deal with the deep problems of the communist movement in

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[34]"Why Am I A Communist?", Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 214.

general, and the proletarian literary movement in particular.

Gold had learned one thing. He learned it the hard way, and he learned it well. In the words of Peter Weiss' Marat, it was that

> We can't begin to build till we've burnt the old
> building down
> However dreadful that may seem to those who lounge
> in make-believe contentment
> Wearing their scruples as protective clothing.[35]

A Freshman at Harvard

Of all the places for a young rebel to be, the least likely was Harvard College; yet that was where Irwin Granich for a while had desired to be most. The time he spent in Boston was both painful and important. While the tenement was in his "blood," Harvard never became a part of him; rather it was like a sore, ugly and painful. It introduced him to a different kind of pain, one which was in a sense more excruciating than what he had experienced in the tenement.

His parents wanted him to become a doctor, his teacher hoped he would continue his education, and he himself had a secret yearning for that delicate and alluring world of intellectual wisdom which was to be many a poor boy's password to thought and culture. In New York he had joined a group of young intellectuals, the most notable of

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[35] Marat/Sade, p. 85.

whom was Lewis Mumford. They spent many hours arguing and philosophizing, and they all had that intellectual thirst which they hoped Harvard would satiate. Later, in his conversations with Mike Folsom in September 1966, Gold remembered:

> If college in general was venerated by Americans, Harvard was especially an object of superstitious veneration to many people and I was one of them, I was a socialist then and talked about it, but I didn't have the knowledge or even the system for studying. I was all on my own and I felt it. If two or three academic giants as my friends Feis and Mumford, believed that I, an underpaid shipping clerk for the Southern Pacific Branch in New York, could make the grade, why it was almost my duty to do it.

In a position of inferiority, one has either to rise above the opponent and challenge him or be dominated by him. Gold had not yet learned his own worth or the worthlessness of his opponent. It was a contradiction that the self-styled socialist wanted more than anything else in the world to be accepted by the most respected and elitist college in America. This contradiction may have stemmed from his own basic insecurity as a poor Jewish boy, and also from the fact that no matter how hard he tried, his ideas and ideals were still shaped and influenced by the dominant culture. He could lessen, never completely resolve, this contradiction, until he began to build his own system of ideals and ideas, one which could be validated in theory as well as in practice.

By the time Gold was initiated into the Masses and the Provincetown Players after an anarchist meeting and a

demonstration at Union Square (in 1914), he had already begun to drift away from his regular job. He had begun to enjoy the kind of Bohemian life which Boston later so well encouraged:

> You can't be a Bohemian and work regularly. And you can't be a writer without learning to sit by yourself in a room thinking over your own special thoughts and putting together your own peculiar and unique little fables. (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 1/1/66)

Harvard was the place where for the first time Gold lost his "anchor," both in the economic and intellectual sense of the word. He worked hard to collect three hundred dollars in order to go to college. He shamelessly scrounged every cent he could from his family and relatives. He literally talked his way into being admitted to Harvard, by recounting a Lincolnesque tale of himself as a poor starving boy, studying by the lamp light, in order to get to the college of his dreams. Once in the college in 1914, he enjoyed for a while the systematic sytle of studying. He liked some of his professors, attended the weekly Socialist club's meetings, even studied hard, making good grades. But he soon encountered difficulties, most of which were rooted in the economic factor. It was hard enough for a shy, poor and uncouth Jewish boy to prove himself amidst the sharp and confident Harvard boys with their immaculate sweaters and parted hair. But the most difficult of all was the problem of economic support. His daily meal consisted mostly of two or three doughnuts and coffee. He obtained a

badly paid job at the liberal Boston Journal, writing the "Freshman at Harvard" columns; and for a while he worked at the city's garbage dump. The pressures mounted upon him so that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

One day before the end of the semester the dreamy Harvard boy pawned all his books at a second hand store and dropped out of college, ending a bitter, if short, love affair with the academic world. It was once more the issue of a dream betrayed. For even if the East Side Jewish boy were granted the privilege of being admitted to Harvard, his awareness of economic and social problems would soon cause him to question the sanity of the act. Someone with a less erratic nature and more disciplined mind might have stuck it out, but not Irwin Granich, who among other things could never succumb to the educational discipline demanded of him. The only discipline he acquiesced in willingly was that of the revolution. To that he remained faithful through both good times and bad, through periods of hope and times of despair.

It was not only his economic problems and his temperamental nature which drove him out of Harvard. Despite all his desire to get into Harvard, he lacked the necessary zeal and motivation to keep him going through all the hardships. He had once talked of how in his early days in the ghetto, he was picked by a local gangster-business man named

Dropper to go through law school and become Dropper's personal lawyer.

> I had no will power, nor any craving for success. I didn't know what I wanted, I was formless, and the Dropper could have molded me in any shape he desired. Except for one obstacle, I was a romantic. In me the will woke only when the heart was on fire. I needed something more inspiring than the Dropper's dollar flag.[36]

The same could be said of Harvard; after a while it did not offer him enough to set his heart on fire.

His failure at Harvard completed his sense of contempt for the academy as a whole. He remembered later in his conversations with Mike Folsom how his conversations and debates with his group of New York friends had been more valuable to him than all his formal education at the college.

> We hand't read enough to really do a good job on the philosophers, but we had a rich intellectual curiosity. A passionate curiosity, and our university was not the passive classroom of Harvard where the instructor very often fell asleep, and the football boys slept and snored and it was all a purchased convention that had to be gone through for the kudos of a college boy, at least that was fact of the matter at that time. (9/15/66)

Many of the radical intellectuals felt strongly about college education, among them Floyd Dell and Max Eastman, who close to finishing his Ph.D. degree had decided to abandon it altogether. John Dos Passos in those green days had said:

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[36]"A Jewish Childhood in the New York Slums," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 302.

> All the thrust and advance and courage in the country now, lies in the East Side Jews and in a few of the isolated "foreigners" whose opinions so shock the New York Times. I'd like to annihilate these stupid colleges of ours, and all the nice young men therein, instillers of stodginess--every form of bastard culture, middle-class snobbism.
>
> Until Wilder is blown up and A. Lawrence Lowell assassinated and the Business School destroyed and its site sowed with salt--no good will come out of Cambridge.[37]

Part of this reaction was just like any healthy rebellion against the established order of things. You did not have to be a radical to feel that way. Many of the best writers in the country looked with contempt as well as distaste upon college and college education. It was against this kind of intellectual, this neat and very orderly man of Harvard, that Gold had gradually built his own version of an intellectual, one which corresponded in every detail to his romantic ideals and vision.

There exists quite a bit of confusion over the radical writers' attitude toward intellectuals. They are often accused of being anti-intellectual. Part of this confusion is due to the confusing attitude of the radicals themselves. Gold, for example, at times mixes the intellectual with the academic and uses the two words interchangeably. This is in part due to his own erratic and impulsive nature and his inherent suspicion of academia. But he is by no means an anti-intellectual. What he vehemently

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[37]Cited in Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 346. The source is not mentioned.

opposed was the established and dominant concept of the intellectual.

Gold had spent his life trying to fuse the intellectual with the actual. At the same time he abhorred the intellectual aristocracy and dilettantes who had kept literature and art in the hands of a chosen few. What he opposed were not the intellectuals as a whole but a certain kind of intellectual. If he was attracted to the treatment of art and literature in the U.S.S.R., it was because there this art was not "the boudoir sport of the dilettantes," but a "heroic spirit" moving the streets, marching with the army and sharing life with the peasants and the factory workers. He exulted in the fact that there art was no longer "snobbish or cowardly" but "necessary as bread."

> Art that was once the polite butler of the bored and esthetic, has become the heroic and fascinating comrade of all humanity. This is a better role for her, we think. She was meant for this from the beginning.[38]

Such ideas as he had about art and literature were not very popular in the literary world, but they were feasible. The democratization of literature was at the core of Gold's literary efforts. Like his favorite poet Whitman, he had wished to sing of and for his people. To develop this idea, he needed to negate its opposite, the already established academic norms and codes.

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[38]"American Needs a Critic," New Masses, October 1926, Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 130.

In 1928, in "Go Left Young Writers," published in the May issue of the New Masses, Gold ecstatically claims:

> A new writer has been appearing; a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self-confidence but writes because he must--and because he has a real talent.
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> He is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment. He writes that way because it is the only way for him. His spiritual attitudes are all mixed up with tenements, factories, lumber camps and steel mills. He knows it in the same way that one of Professor Baker's students knows the six different ways of ending a first act.[39]

It is not difficult to notice that many of the characteristics he attributes to his ideal writer happen to fit his own description! But the more significant point is the meticulous way he describes his ideal, portraying in detail his mannerisms and characteristics. What he created is a sort of Frankenstein's monster which was never to leave him. Gold's ideal writer is by no means the ideal Marxist portrait of a writer. In fact Gold's writer is more akin to a Greenwich Village Bohemian or an anarchist from working class background than to a revolutionary worker-writer. Marxist aesthetics inevitably sees consciousness as the key to its most vital questions. It argues in favor of a writer who through this consciousness becomes aware of the

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[39] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 188.

world, and thus is able to contribute towards its control and change. It is through this awareness that the writer lays bare the truth, catching the pulse which beats beneath the surface. "Impatient," "exasperated feeling," "violent and sentimental," "few theories," "all instinct" and "no conscious straining" are all the wrong words to qualify such a writer.

It is important to note here that in his passion for a simple and revolutionary literature and in his angry dismay at the established academic world, Gold himself was unable to develop and transcend much beyond the tenement. Surely it was a very naive and romantic notion to try to confront the sophisticated and theoretically powerful academic world with mere instinct and wild revolutionary fervor. It was like fighting modern, sophisticated weaponry with only bows and arrows.

The "Homeless" Blues

For the young Irwin Granich it was out of Harvard and into the cold. After dropping out of college he became a drifter, or what he called a "professional scrounger." Up to then there had always been a center to his life, despite his dislike of that center. But now he found himself with no particular aim, and nowhere to go. He had lost his own "anchors." There was no going back to the tenement, to the place he so eagerly had escaped. He reached that

stage of transition in life where everything seemed to be situated in a twilight zone, and where both the past and the future were hazy and unattainable dreams.

> I was thoroughly unhappy and disoriented. I had no vision of any center to the universe, which was it seemed to me a series of disagreeable accidents which I could not cope with. In short I had the homeless, unaffiliated, down-in-the-gutter blues. (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 9/15/66)

Here the word "unaffiliated" is the key. The impulsive, often violent writer accused by his opponents of being irresponsible, was most afraid of having no responsibilities, no affiliations.

His "beatnik" period in Boston, when he frequented the houses of anarchists, lived in shabby clothes, and bummed off benevolent friends, was not a liberating experience. It depressed and shamed the Jewish boy who had gone to work at the age of twelve and whose parents were too proud to accept social welfare.

After this period he was seldom "unaffiliated." He was to become violent and depressed but never without a center. Literature and revolution became his center. That did not make life easier for him, but it made it worth living. He later reflected on this period in his life:

> . . . I can understand how a beatnik evolves. He can be the most intelligent man in the world the greatest potential, but if he starts revolting against a job that pays him enough wages to eat and sleep on, then he is on the way down. One must never despise work. However you earn your living, respect it. You are a man and work needs you and you need the

> work to give you the anchor that every mind needs. (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 9/15/66)

Of course this was the difference between a beatnik from a working class background and one from the middle class. Many beatniks were middle-class kids who had not specifically revolted against their jobs. More than anything else their revolt had been against boredom, the mediocrity of their parents, against that vain emptiness, who like Beckett's character in his book The Unnamable keeps repeating "Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning I, say I, Unbelieving." With Gold revolt went deeper than that; it was a mixture of anger and disappointment against a system which at every point had both created and destroyed his father's and his own dreams:

> You could say for one thing, as in my case, that bohemianism was a peculiar revolt against the drudgery that was assigned to the lower ranks and exploited slaves of the industrial system. (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 9/15/66)

But Gold had also learned a great deal in Boston. His suffering left a deep impression on him, some of which was to last him a lifetime. It was there that he started to frequent around the house of a kind-hearted, eccentric and self styled anarchist named Polly. Like many men in Polly's circle, he fell in love with her pretty seventeen year old daughter Dorothea. He also came to know Van Kleek Allison, who had left his millionaire parents in search of an identity. The shy and lonesome millionaire boy "with

too strong feelings of involvement in the human struggle," soon chose the reluctant and condescending Granich as his mentor. It was Van who persuaded Granich to publish an anarchist-oriented journal with him, with the monthly allowance he got from his mother. Van had fought for the right to birth control, a hot issue at that time among the liberals and radicals. He had gone to jail for it, and after jail he had lost the will to live. A few years later he had died of tuberculosis.

There is something peculiarly touching about the relationship between the two men who in so many ways were so different. Van came from a background opposite that of Gold's. He soon drifted into that aimless "beatnik" world which Gold later came to despise. But the old revolutionary writer of seventy three, remembering his friend, said:

> Any way he was a beatnik towards the end. And we have to understand the accidents and motives of the human characters who try to accomplish something good and permanent for humanity.
> (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 9/7/66)

It was not so much Van Kleek Allison, the fragile and insignificant boy, who had roused Gold to such feelings. What touched him was the boy's desperate effort to identify with a cause which went beyond his own immediate needs, to participate in a struggle which could create hope and optimism, not just for one individual but for man as a whole. Gold's own lack of center and hope at that time and Van's search for one taught him how easy it was to die intellectually

and spiritually when one merely negated and could not affirm.

> I have learned to respect the positive attitude, to think that it can accomplish healing miracles for a person. And if one persists in a negative attitude, it makes a tramp out of you, the sort of tramp I was at this juncture.
> (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 9/7/66)

Gold kept this hope, this positive attitude, in his struggle for socialism. He held onto this with a desperate, almost childlike tenacity. Never did he completely lose sight of this hope or of the hope for creation of a proletarian literature. In the later years when many radical intellectuals had lost their "positive attitude" towards the movement, it was mainly this tenacity which made Gold keep his. He had negated the old system so completely that he had no choice but to keep the faith in the creation of a new one.

Of course, all was not negative in Gold's Boston experiences. Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of it was his acquaintance with the workers and his direct and indirect participation in their day to day struggles. At that time the young and disenchanted anarchist did not have the insight or the knowledge of the seasoned revolutionary to deeply penetrate into the workers' lives and minds. But he did learn a great deal from them. He was impressed by their strength and unity. It was then that he discovered the significance of the working class' day to day' struggles which he called a "revolutionary fact":

> I had learned enough by then to understand the true spiritual meaning of a living wage, and what it meant in bringing a human standard of life to the people of America and their families.
> (Conversations with Mike Folsom, 5/5/66)

It was also there that he met Vanzetti, the great hero of the American people, whose case was later to bring to Gold and thousands of Americans much involvement as well as bitterness.

In the next chapter I will more fully discuss Gold's understanding of the working class and how this understanding, as presented in his fiction and criticism, was in many ways different from that of most other radical writers in America.

The Flame

In 1916 when Granich and V. K. Allison joined to publish and edit The Flame, their invitation for contribution contained these words:

> The Flame is to be a monthly journal of revolution, soon to take life. It is to burn against oppression and authority everywhere, and is to be as pure and merciless as the flower of light after which it is named.

Whether The Flame was a journal of "revolution" or not would perhaps depend upon our definitions of revolution itself. But it is safe to say that it was a journal with well-intentioned revolutionary tendencies. Its contents were as general as the adjectives its editors were so generous in using. Only two issues of the paper were published,

and the first issue cannot be found anywhere. The second issue lists among its contributors some rather well-known figures from various radical tendencies in the U.S. In addition to Irwin Granich, they were Louis Untermeyer, Maurice Becker, Eugene Higgins, Arturo Giovannitti, Mary Carolyn Davies, Eugene Debs, Frederick Gellert, and Lingard Laud.

The "Journal for the New Age," had little new to say; what is said mainly reflected the passion, naiveté and eclectism of its editors. From their own writings and other contributions in the second journal, it is apparent that they had not yet formulated a specific school of thought. The editorial which was to be "Flavored by the anarchy of the publishers" was more flavored by their arrogant if charming eclectism. They were not anarchists if we take anarchism as a formulated system of thought which offers theoretical and ideological arguments and justifications for its existence. With the young editors, the line and the system were not as yet formulated. The second issue covered a wide range of subjects. It included an editorial by Van Kleek Allison describing his experiences in jail beginning with the statement "A night in the Boston City Prison convinced me that jails are among the first evils of the world" (p. 14). There is a short article eulogizing the revolutionary struggles in Spain; and an article by the beloved Polly, or E. Chapin Parrot, on the

virtues of vegetarianism, which started with the confident note that "Every revolutionist ought to be a vegetarian too." She tries to cite every reason against the eating of meat, including the charge of cruelty to animals ("When we eat them we are eating our fellow-creatures. As Shaw says we are a latter-day form of cannibals, no more") (p. 19). There is another article demonstrating the evils of capitalism and one on birth control, the most active issue on the editors' minds at that time. The essay written by Irwin Granich is perhaps the most general and least concrete of all. It is titled "Groups."

> It is exquisitely good to live and learn, and it is in groups that man lives and learns the most.[40]

He once more affirms his deep-rooted love of community, while celebrating those he calls "my equals."

> Next to a group of my equals and betters, I prefer barroom groups, then groups of children. My equals are men and women who are gay, mad, opinionated, hungry, profound, frivolous, violent, gentle, bestial, blithe, aesthetic, melancholy and boisterous, fluid and warm and expanding.
>
> They know all that is knowable in their generation, or divine it. They die for ideas, and yet laugh at them. They do nothing out of duty, but everything out of love. . . .[41]

The article is interesting in contrast with Gold's later work. It is abstract and almost playful. It lacks the force and dynamism which so characterized Gold's later

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[40] The Flame, August, 1916, p. 22.

[41] Ibid., p. 22.

work. He achieved that dynamism mainly through his polemics, by developing his arguments as opposed to the ones he negated. But in 1916, he had not developed enough to be concrete, and he was not concrete enough to be effectively polemic. What he was at that time was a sort of frustrated and frustrating "yea" and "nay" saying beatnik radical in search of an identity. It is not surprising that the definitions he used to describe his "equals" are more fitting to a group of Greenwich Village Bohemians than to any serious radical intellectuals.

Some of the tendencies in this essay such as his near-worship of instinct, his desire and yearning for community and his deep hatred of the intellectual "dilettantes," were later developed and incorporated into Gold's formulation of proletarian literature. It is in his attacks on the middle-class intellectuals that he gains the sharpness and strength of his later polemics. To him they were always enemies who "cling to the skirts of all the arts and sciences and are great connoisseurs of other's passions"; they to whose "silken parlors" "Fiery, furious, unshaven strike leaders are inveighed" and "are emasculated by pink tea and dowagerly gush."[42] In his attitude towards the intellectual "elite," there is not much development or change from the young, frustrated Bohemian to the mature radical writer.

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[42]Ibid., p. 22.

Also interesting to note is young Granich's view of the workers. Unlike many radical intellectuals, he is at home with them. There is a certain good-natured condescension in his attitude: the workers are more interesting in the barrooms, and their talk is "vigorous and rank and vivid." Yet they respect him most "for my good clothes and fluency of thought and language" (ibid.). Of course this also reflects Gold's insight into the mind and life of the working men who, although intelligent, are cowed by the dominant thought and culture which teaches them to respect a man because he has a "choker collar" on and carries a "cane" and looks like an "assistant Professor of Harvard" (ibid.). It was this insight which later made Gold so adamant in his persistent demand for the creation of a distinct proletarian culture. Five years later, in his essay "Towards Proletarian Art," he furiously states that:

> We are prepared for the economic revolution of the world, but what shakes us with terror is the cultural upheaval that must come. We rebel instinctively against that change. We have been bred in the old capitalist planet, and its stuff is in our very bones. Its ideals, mutilated and poor, were yet the precious stays of our live.[43]

The essay also reveals his lack of respect for any form of stability, including jobs, which he later came to respect so. His "equals" "will not worry over much about a livelihood, but take what chances befell them, stealing or sweating as

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[43] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 62.

the Monster Capitalism dictates" (Flame, p. 22). This demonstrates well what he later describes as his lack of center or orientation. Underneath all his "yea-sayings" there is no substance, no bone and flesh to give life and credibility to his abstract generalities.

The editors of The Flame claim ecstatically if unconvincingly:

> We are rebels because we must be so. We are rebels because there are chains on our spirits which we hate and which we must shake off or die. There are slums, and prisons and taboos whose combined darkness clouds the beauty of life and make us gasp. We reach for light as the seed does thourgh the husk and mould, and unless we find this light we are naught. Only in freedom or its forerunner, revolution, can the rebel live and love.[44]

Their rebellion was not as yet against a system but only against some of its manifestations, such as slums, prisons, and social taboos. As such, it was an unfinished rebellion in the process of defining itself. In some ways this rebellion resembles that of the middle-class youth in the sixties. They too protested against the "chains"; they were "yea-saying" across the American campuses and streets. Soon they were to be consumed by the fire of their own passion. This sort of rebellion, no matter what the background of its participants, is in essence a middle-class one. Its demands are aimed at the society's institutions and its superstructure rather than its economic base. Even the workers'

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[44] The Flame, p. 17.

economic struggles are in many ways more concrete and basic than this sort of protest. For they are concerned with the plain and basic matter of survival. They are also more dangerous in the long term because they threaten the economic foundations of society.

The most concrete and political articles in The Flame concern the issue of birth control. The nature of the case demonstrates the extent of its editors' actual involvement in the political struggle.

As in the earlier times, for Gold the nature of his rebellion had to be developed and defined. The question was would he reamin a half-rebel, a Bohemian drifter who was tied to the umbilical cord despite his hatred of it, or would he move on? Of course in those days the whole radical movement was in the process of clarifying its nature and defining its goals and directions.

In the same issue of The Flame there is a saying by Eugene Debs:

> While there is a lower class, I am of it.
> While there is a criminal element, I am of it.
> While there is a soul in jail, I am not free.

It was this spirit and direction which Gold had decided to adopt and make his own.

CHAPTER III

"TOWARD PROLETARIAN ART"

In the February, 1921, issue of The Liberator in his famous or infamous essay, "Towards Proletarian Art," Mike Gold asks:

> Why should we artists born in the tenements go beyond them for our expression? "Life burns in both camps," in the tenements and in the palaces, but can we understand that which is not our very own? . . . What is art? Art is the tenement pouring out its soul through us, its most sensitive and articulate sons and daughters. What is Life? Life for us has been the tenement that bore and molded us through years of meaningful pain.[1]

In 1916, the young and frustrated bohemian, Irwin Granich, wanted to be a rebel, to be a "yea-saying" lover of life. His mentors were men like Max Eastman and Floyd Dell, and his school house had been the Masses and the Provincetown Theatre. In 1921, after the First World War from which Gold had escaped to Mexico, and the first proletarian revolution which he had celebrated ecstatically, things were quite different. The rebellion had to be defined by taking sides not only in the name of humanity but of a specific class. The bohemian youth had developed into

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[1]Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 62.

the proletarian writer and critic. He still preserved that spirited sense of constant rebellion which had urged the editors of The Flame to write:

> Let us be free! Let us revel joyously, because we are young and laughter-loving, and scornful of the cowardice of the old. Let us not be menials to the ideas we venerate, but their masters, using them freely toward the conquest of that grade which must one day shine on all the world.[2]

"Towards Proletarian Art," which was an indirect attack against Max Eastman's introduction to his book of poetry, Colors of Life, was in effect the signal for the end of an era and the beginning of a new one in the history of American radical literature. It was an open challenge to the politics and ideas of the older generation of radical writers, such as Floyd Dell and Max Eastman. Like many a precocious child, Gold was to rebel against and leave behind the parents he had loved and respected to move on to newer realms. As the words to the famous song go, times were "a-changing." So were the ideas.

The essay is significant for two main reasons: one, as Walter Rideout has pointed out, it is ". . . the first attempt in America to formulate a definition for what was to become the most important critical term among radical literary groups of the early thirties--proletarian literature,"[3] and two, it is the basis of Gold's ideas on radical

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[2]"Duty," Flame (II, August, 1916), p. 19.

[3]Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966), p. 123.

and proletarian literature. These ideas made Gold the chief representative and founder of the proletarian literary movement in the United States, a movement dominating the American literary scene well into the thirties.

From Reform to Revolution

The third decade of the twentieth century was to be very different from the first two in terms of radical politics and literature. Early in the decade the middle-class disillusion with the American system and the working-class's extreme oppression created a great deal of sympathy for radical and socialist ideas. Many middle-class citizens, informed by the muckrakers of the capitalist politicians' hypocrisy and corruption, were attracted to the social-democratic appeals of Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party and later Eugene Debs' Social Democratic Party. They demanded true "respectability" and "democracy" instead of the current false ones and approved of the socialists' non-violent means of achieving social and political change.

Many migrant and unskilled workers were effectively organized in the militant International Workers of the World (I.W.W.), while many other political dissidents were drawn to the anarchists and their circles.

The socialists more than any other group created a radical and progressive literature. In November, 1901, the first socialist literary magazine appeared under the name

of Comrade. In that first issue Eugene Limedorfer states, "I say a thief or a vagabond is a hero compared with us respectable people." He asks, "How is one to get out of our eternally correct and proper society?" This question became central to radical writers and critics for the next two decades. They all directed their energies against established respectability and its various institutions.

In 1912 the magazine Masses, under its new editor Max Eastman, became a far livelier and more militant paper than Comrade. It was a link between the intellectuals and the labor movement and a real school for young revolutionary aspirants, like Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman. It offered good art, as well as militant politics, and used the talents of many professional artists and writers. Later Eastman remembered how Harper's Weekly, under Norman Hapgood, unsuccessfully tried to copy the Masses' pictures and hire its artists. The New Yorker later succeeded where Harper's had failed. ". . . and the pictorial revolution for which the Masses artists worked without pay turned out to be one of the most profitable innovations in the history of journalism."[4]

In those days when the revolutionary movement was in its happy youth, the Masses reflected its jovial and militant-bohemian character. Its mast head, suggested by John Reed and phrased by Eastman, read:

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[4]Max Eastman, The Enjoyment of Living, p. 412.

> A revolutionary and not reform magazine; a magazine with no dividends to pay; a free magazine; frankly arrogant, impertinent, searching for the true causes, a magazine directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found; printing what is too naked or true for a money making press; a magazine whose policy is to do as it pleases and conciliate nobody not even its readers--there is room for this publication in America.[5]

It is easy to see where Irwin Granich and Van Kleek Allison borrowed their philosophy, as well as language, when writing and editing the Flame. In those days Gold's militant rebellion was well nourished by the eclectic ideology and kind encouragement of the Masses' editors Floyd Dell and Max Eastman. Gold was in agreement with the mood of the times when free sex and revolution went hand in hand, and the refusal of one was as sacrilegious as the repudiation of the other. Joseph Freeman remembered that when Floyd Dell wrote in defense of marriage it created a terrible scandal. Many radicals were married, but in Dell's case "in addition to marrying in practise, he now approved of marriage in theory. This was almost as if William Z. Foster had come out openly in favor of private profit. . . ."[6] Dell and Eastman ruled radical literary American from that "Lyric year" (according to Dell) of 1912 when Debs won nearly a million votes in the presidential elections and Eastman took over the editorship of the Masses. They had

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[5]Echoes of Revolt, ed. William O'Neil, p. 29.

[6]Joseph Freeman, An American Testament, p. 245.

both reached the same point from two different angles. Eastman had been a well-to-do middle-class intellectual drawn to radical ideas, and Dell was a poor Midwestern kid who had made good in the middle-class world of American intellectualism. They were products of a time when one was a radical and a writer, rather than being a radical writer. Both ultimately valued their art and leisure above politics. In the December, 1918, issue of The Liberator, Dell declares: "I am not ashamed to say that to me art is more important than the destinies of nations, and the artist a more exalted figure than the prophet. . . ."[7] In the 1920's, both were showing signs of becoming what was to be labelled "tired radicals." Many others in the radical literary world were joining the "back to normalcy" movement. As long as the revolution was a diversion, an ideal in the words and minds of those who preached it, it could unite radicals and liberals of all colors. But in 1921, it was already taking shape as a violent fact which had not only become a reality, but was asserting and defining itself through a process of long and bitter struggle.

The distance between 1912 and 1921 was filled with the suppression of the Masses in 1917 and the trial of its editors under the anti-sedition act, the notorious red-baiting and "Palmer raids" of 1919, and the killing and

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[7]Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 299.

imprisonment of hundreds of I.W.W. leaders and members.[8] World War I and the boom period had also taken their toll on radical intellectuals. The newly reorganized communist party demanded more commitment and discipline from its sympathizers and members. Even the excitement over the Russian revolution had become more sober and subdued; the revolution that "shook the world" was entering the drab period of reconstruction and the New Economic Policy.

Under the new conditions polarizations and frictions were inevitable. The new generation of radical writers were already denying the old in the same spirit of defiance and irreverence that had fashioned the elder generation's earlier rebellion. And Mike Gold was qualified and prepared to articulate this new spirit of rebellion. As Mike Folsom notes in his introduction to Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology:

> The Masses was Gold's school house--the Masses and the Provincetown Theatre, which was the dramatic wing of revolutionary Bohemia around the time of the First World War, and which produced Gold's first one-act plays, along with those of Eugene O'Neil. Gold's great teachers were Max Eastman and Floyd Dell of the Masses, who curried the poet and hopeful novelist, and

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[8]See Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, pp. 95, 104-106, 108-109. "The powers of capitalism are indeed strong. In one way or another, by temptation, social pressure, indifference, or cruelty, they broke the challenge of I.W.W. as they broke that of the Anarchists and the socialists. With that destruction, went for a decade, any chance to maintain the radical novel as a significant form in American literature" (p. 95).

> George Cram ("Jig") Cook of the Provincetown, who made him a dramatist. Brave John Reed was his hero in those chaotic years of war and revolution. No lost rebel poet ever found more congenial mentors or a better time tc bloom than did Mike Gold in Greenwich Village on the eve of the first world holocaust, at the dawn of Soviet power.[9]

In the same year that he wrote "Towards Proletarian Art," Gold also became the editor of the Liberator, which had replaced the suppressed Masses. The Liberator, at first a mixture of the old and new generations of radical writers, the radical and the liberals, the "pure" aesthetes, the "pure" revolutionaries and the revolutionary aesthetes (to which Gold belonged), was soon to become polarized and politicized merging into the Workers' Monthly at the end of 1924. Gold had already resigned the editorship of the paper in 1922, taking off for the Bay Area for two years.

Despite his extreme radical politics and his call for proletarization of radical literature, Gold shared Eastman's passionate love of literature and art. In so far as his bohemian disrespect for respectability and love of literature were concerned, Gold's feelings and ideas are a more defined version of the old. He calls for the creation of a proletarian literature and not for elimination of literature as some of his critics would like to believe. A devotee of both literature and revolution, he tries to integrate the two, but at times he forgets one at the expense of the other, and not necessarily always literature for revolution.

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[9]P. 12.

In his autobiography, An American Testament, Joseph Freeman states that for the radical writers in the twenties "the tragedy of America was the tragedy of the whole capitalist civilization" (p. 251). In his numerous essays and short stories, Gold attacks not so much that civilization's economic, but its cultural and intellectual poverty.

Sesames and Lilies

In one of Gold's autobiographical short stories, "Password to Thought--to Culture," written in the February issue of the Liberator, the boss at a ladies' clothing factory catches his young shipping clerk, David, reading Ruskin's Sesames and Lilies. The outraged boss demands to know the meaning of the title:

> David floundered guiltily. "It's used only in a sort of symbolic sense here," he explained. "Sesame was used as a password by Ali Baba in the story, when he wanted to get into the robber's cave, but here it means the password to thought--to culture."[10]

In the twenties, the more mature and committed Gold began his untiring campaign for the creation of a literature which would become many a tenement kid's password to thought and culture. The autobiographical story demonstrates the underlying reasons for his tenacity in this matter. David, who is the replica of the young Gold working in Adam's Express Co., is asked by his boss: "What do you want with thought and culture anyway?" (p. 103). The boss represents

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[10]Ibid., p. 102.

not only that American civilization which deprives the workers of their rights to a life of mind and culture but also the one which is mercantile and petty. Capitalism is hostile to culture; the two cannot be reconciled: ". . . and this culture. Cut it out, see? If ya want to read, read it outside the factory and read something that'll bring you in dividends--good American reading."[11]

The boy remains silent, but defiant. His indignation goes beyond mere anger at the boss and at the tiresome and mindless job he has to perform day in and day out. In this story as elsewhere, Gold tries to show that the capitalist system not only produces the tenement, the poverty and misery of the workers, but also stands opposed to the creation of a genuine working class culture and prevents the full blossoming of workers' intellectual growth.

In "Towards Proletarian Art" Gold had already described his ideal society:

> When there is singing and music rising in every American street, when in every factory there is a drama group of the workers, when mechanics paint in their leisure, and farmers write sonnets, the greater art will grow and only then.
>
> Only a creative nation understands creation. Only an artist understands art.[12]

The last sentence of course, is a curious statement coming from a revolutionary writer, one with which the advocates

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[11]Ibid., p. 103.

[12]Ibid., p. 70.

of art for art's sake would have no quarrel. Nonetheless, for Gold the growth and blossoming of art had a direct relation to the growth and blossoming of the society as a whole. To expand their views the masses had to have access to art and literature; for art and literature to grow they had to be rooted in the lives of the people.

David/Gold's resentment and defiance in the story is not confined to the boss. His parents, whom he loves and for whose sake he has given up college in order to work, are also unable to understand his craving for culture--for thought. David's invalid father is confined to bed. His only hope is his son's daily visits to his sick-bed. Like Gold's own father, he had come to America "with youthful, rosy cheeks" and marvelous faith in the miracle "of the Promised Land." But:

> The sweat shops had soon robbed him of that youthful bloom; then they had eaten slowly, like a beast in a cave gnawing for days at a carcass, his lungs, his stomach, his heart, all his vital organs, one by one.[13]

Despite his desperate love for his father, David resents him. The resentment is rooted not only in the fact that he has to give up what he loves most in order to work for his family, but also because the father still believes in miracles from the "Promised Land." Fictional David and the author Mike Gold could never accept that dream. In fact,

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[13]"Password to Thought--To Culture," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 105.

Gold spent most of his life exposing the falsity of America's golden promises of success and prosperity. Jews Without Money and many of his other works are as much about this unfulfilled dream of millions of America's migrant Jews and tenement dwellers as they are about the filth and poverty of America's slums.

More than anyone else Gold's father represented for him the tragedy of the American dream. In Gold's passion to create a truly mass culture, he was in part responding to his own father's simple and passionate love of literature. Like Tantalus, his idealistic and sensitive father had constantly groped for the fruit which seemed so near him and was in reality so far out of his reach. In his old age the seventy-three year old writer admitted:

> Everyday I thought of him as I still do. And I think the thing that hurt me the most was that I adored him as one of the most brilliant people I had known, in childhood or later. I had always felt that he had not been given a chance to discover his own make up and to work towards his own special career. I felt that he had been robbed, he had been done a vast injustice, and it was this sense of injustice to my father that had prepared me so readily for my contact with the revolution in Union Square. Now in the dark Boston night filled with crime, perversions, filth, despair of human beings, I wandered night after night, pitying my father and full of abject self-pity for myself. No one should pity himself. It is just what a man can do who is in trouble. One must get angry, that's better.[14]

David in the story is angry. He, like most others

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[14]Conversations with Michael B. Folsom, September 15, 1966.

of Gold's heroes, cannot tolerate the injustice. Though he does not turn to revolution or think of struggle, neither does he give in. It is this anger which is the backbone of Gold's writing, critical or otherwise. When controlled, it gives his works a unique force and dynamism; otherwise, it merely turns into enraged sentimentality which mars the effect of his most forceful ideas and emotions.

Like Gold's father, David's parents are the victims of the system which had deprived David of his most cherished ideal. But they are resigned to their fate, and they have stopped questioning. In this way they become innocent accomplices of the boss. They are frightened and humble people whose humility has become their curse; it has made them afraid to stand up to their fate. They have become conservative because of their fear. Books are windows to an unknown world and David's mother instinctively turns against them: "I don't know what's the matter with those books, anyway; they make you sick, David."[15]

The story ends with no solutions for David's dilemma. Unlike Jews Without Money or "Love on the Garbage Dump," the hero is not brought to revolutionary consciousness. There is, in fact, no mention of revolution. For the story is in essence about culture, its necessity. It is about the weary monotony of the worker's life. Like silent drizzle

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[15]Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 109.

on a quiet night, its touch is light but it leaves behind a memory. David does not change to revolution, but in order to gain access to thought and culture, he must reject his boss and his parents; he has to negate their belief in the world of American success and their acquiescence in an American ghetto. The end of the story is almost no end:

> He put on his hat and coat and wandered aimlessly into the East Side, not in obedience to his mother, but because it was easier than to sit here under the impeding flow of her nightly exhortations.[16]

"In the Name of Art"

> America today, I believe offers the honest young writer only once choice--Revolt! No humane and sensitive artist can assent to this vast Roman orgy of commercialism, this wholesale prostitution of mind, this vast empire of cheapness and shallowness and hyprocisy that forms the current America. We are not satisfied, we are not part of this American Empire. We repudiate it, if only in the name of art. . . .

These words written in the first issue of the New Masses in May, 1926, by Mike Gold could belong to almost any notable writer or critic of the time. Already in 1922, thirty intellectuals had issued a joint declaration which made the bitter claim that the great United States of America was no place for artists and writers. The problem did not only concern the radical intellectuals, but all those who could not find much place for their creativity in the smug and complacent oasis of middle-class America. In 1924, William Carlos Williams had sadly stated that America had

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[16]Ibid., p. 110.

become "a panorama of murders, perversions, a terrific ungoverned strength excusable only because of the horrid beauty of its great machines."[17]

So, as far as the opposition to the dominant culture and to the inherent hypocrisy of the American political system was concerned, most writers, critics, poets and artists agreed. Gold's appeal was made in the name of art, and his criticism instead of striking at the economic base, attacked the "commercialism," the "wholesale prostitution of mind," and the "cheapness and shallowness and hypocrisy that forms the current America." He had not appealed specifically to the radical and revolutionary writers, but to the "humane and sensitive" ones. So far, many writers and artists of the time could agree with him with their hearts as well as their minds. As Fredrick Hoffman points out about them:

> One thing they had early succeeded in doing: they had again and again pointed to the contradictions in social values and to the hypocrisies underlying the preaching and practice of democracy. The social and moral criticism of the 1920s was largely concerned with the failure of society to provide breathing space for its dependent spirits.[18]

It was not surprising, then, for Mencken to support and encourage young Gold or for Ezra Pound to keep affectionate correspondence with him from Europe. Their differences

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[17]Cited in Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 111.

[18]Fredrick Hoffman, The Twenties: American Writing in the Post War Decade, p. 9.

were not in their opposition to the American system but in the nature of that opposition. It best manifested itself in the solutions they sought to a common problem. Some, like Mencken, turned to that extreme cynicism which becomes appealing in its absolute negation. Others like Hemingway and the expatriates left for Europe. T. S. Eliot turned to the past, seeing no hope in the present or the future. But Gold saw the only hope in the present struggle for the bright future. As Mike Folsom points out:

> Gold continued to write, and he built a theory to explain his practice and his experience and to solve his problems. The one fundamental fact about Gold's career is that, in spite of his monumental chagrin, he did not forswear his commitment to the life of mind and of the imagination, but rather revised it in a way which the custodians of our culture can scarcely conceive.[19]

The process of building his theory began in the early twenties with the publication of "Towards Proletarian Art." As the title indicates it is only a move towards the creation of such art. As far as the realization of his ideas was concerned, that would take another decade, an economic depression and a hard and bitter struggle.

The Coming of Age of Radical Literature

> In the beginning, socialist criticism was unaware of the potentialities of its own philosophy. It sought primarily to praise the writers who sympathized with exploited lower classes and secondarily to attract

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[19] Michael B. Folsom, "The Education of Mike Gold," published in Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: S. Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 229.

writers to the life of the masses as a theme of incalculable richness which had already been tapped.[20]

The early twenties marked the coming of age of socialist and radical literature in America. With it there developed polarizations between different trends within the literary radical movement. The time was ripe for more specific definitions, more formulated theories to explain and develop the aims and direction of radical writers and critics. In the days of the Masses under the leadership of Floyd Dell and Max Eastman, the revolutionary writers were already beginning to gain that confidence and literary independence which the older socialist writers lacked. Men like Upton Sinclair, the grand old man of socialist literature, or Jack London, its precocious genius, did contribute a great deal. But these contributions owed more to the individual merits and shortcomings of the individual writers than to the movement as a whole.

One thing the Masses could never achieve was the integration in theory and practice of literature and revolutionary politics. For the editors of the Masses, the two remained different spheres, often posing the problem of choosing between them. Like an attractive girl caught between the affections of two equally attractive suitors, they constantly vacillated between the two. With the change in

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[20]Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1939), p. 288.

the politics and demands of time, they too were inevitably drawn to one side more than to the other. Daniel Aaron notes that for them the conflict was between the "socialist head" and the "bourgeois heart."[21] Although it took the head a few painful years of struggle, it finally gave in to the demands of the heart.

Towards the Creation of a New Culture

Unlike his old mentors and many other radical intellectuals, there existed for Gold little conflict between the head and the heart. Many intellectuals had to be convinced of the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal in the American system. Most of them had not felt the realities which Marxist theory based itself upon: the humiliation of unemployment and hunger, the unity and strength of the workers even in the struggle for their economic demands, the pressures and pains of a life making the fight for a better future worthwhile. Many workers and "have-nots" who could feel all this did not have access to the books and theories which would abstract from their experiences the formula to guide their acts. But Gold in this respect had the best of both worlds: the experience of proletarian life and the advantages of an intellectual one. Most intellectuals, having discovered Marxist ideas and feeling dissatisfied with middle-class life, bcame "converted" to radicalism.

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[21]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 50.

But for Gold the process was more one of natural growth and development than of conversion. His head finally found the way to explain his heart.

Both Eastman and Dell continued their association with the revolutionary movement for some time. They were both editors of the Liberator for some time and even carried on a fierce fight in its pages against the Clarté group of intellectuals in Europe and against Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland for wanting to make art independent of politics. But their association was a declining one. Their relation with the younger generation of writers who had been essentially nurtured by them was a love-hate one which inevitably turned into acid hatred and bitterness. The new generation was a definite outgrowth of the old in its bohemian attitude towards life, but it was already creating a new literary formula with more demands for integration of art and revolution and for more commitment and dedication to the life and struggle of the workers. Gold's "Towards Proletarian Art" was to provide the basis for this generation's later theories and practices.

The basic tenet of the essay is that there exists a need for the creation of a proletarian literature. This is based on the assumption that the old bourgeois culture offers nothing that is new to writers and artists. It is the working class which can provide the real potential for the development of literature and art. Of course, from a

revolutionary perspective the creation of a culture for and by the proletariat is also significant as a weapon against the dominant class.

Gold was acutely aware of the depth and breadth of culture's influence upon the most revolutionary of all the revolutionaries. In order to bring about change in the people there is the need to change their world view, to make them conscious of reality, to demystify all the complex myths created by the dominant class's culture and view:

> We are prepared for the economic revolution of the world, but what shakes us with terror and doubt is the cultural upheaval that must come. We rebel instinctively against that change. We have been bred in the old capitalist planet, and its stuff is in our very bones. Its ideals, mutilated and poor, were yet the precious stays of our lives. Its art, its science, its philosophy and metaphysics are deeper in us than logic or will. They are deeper than the reach of the knife on our social passion. We cannot consent to the suicide of our souls. We cling to the old culture, and fight for it against ourselves.[22]

Of course, Gold feels that if such culture has little that is positive to offer the intellectuals all that it can possibly offer the proletariat is in essence negative. As Folsom notes in his introduction to Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology:

> And like the black militant today who is so intent on building the dignity of his own people that he denies the white race any gift or virtue, Gold at times insisted that his people, the poor and the working class and their writers, had nothing to learn from studying

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[22]"Towards Proletarian Art," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 62.

> the great literature of the "bourgeois" past--even though he himself had been weaned on Schiller and Shakespeare and Tolstoy, and his reverence for them never flagged.[23]

The extent of Gold's passion and involvement for the creation of a working class literature can be demonstrated in his semi-autobiographical short story "Love on a Garbage Dump," published in the December, 1929, issue of the New Masses. This story symbolizes how Gold, unlike Eastman and Dell, perceived literature and revolutionary struggle to be interrelated and interdependent. Folsom sums up the literary significance of the story:

> The literary device--conflicting aspirations revealed in terms of conflicting loves--is commonplace, but the experience it orders was essentially, symbolically, Gold's own. Gold added a significant variation to one of the crucial tales of modern literature: the struggle of working class youths--Jude, Martin Eden, Paul Morel--to enjoy the life of the mind in a society where that life, its content, and the institution which foster it are class-bound.[24]

The story interestingly enough opens with the flat statement that:

> Certain enemies have spread the slander that I once attended Harvard College. This is a lie. I worked on the garbage dump in Boston, city of Harvard. But that's all.[25]

This being fiction and not fact, Gold could make any alterations he pleased in his actual life experiences. But it is

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[23] Ibid., pp. 16-17.

[24] "The Education of Mike Gold," Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden, p. 229.

[25] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 177.

noteworthy that in his fiction, as well as in real life, he tended to disown and eliminate that part of his experiences which concerned the "bourgeois" institutions and the academy. The part he glorified and emphasized belonged to his life in the tenement and as a working class youth.

The story runs parallel to the development and "resolution" of a major contradiction within Gold, namely the conflict between his burning passion for culture and his loyalty to the cause of the workers. The central character in the story is a young, frustrated worker who is caught between his physical love for a poor Portuguese girl and his spiritual passion for a girl living in Boston's prosperous Beacon Hill. His "baser" passions can be satisfied by the poor Portuguese beauty, but for finer feelings he has to turn elsewhere. Such was the effect of a culture which justified not only the segregation of classes, races and sexes, but also that of the physical and the spiritual, the manual and the intellectual.

The Portuguese girl is earthy and accessible, but the other is a mirage whose image is more tantalizing than even reality.

> From the window of a beautiful old colonial home on this street, a girl played Mozart in the dusk. I would linger there and listen with a beautiful aching in my "soul."
>
> Behind the yellow shades I could see in the candlelight the girl's silhouette as she sat at the piano.
>
> That's all but I was madly in love with her.[26]

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[26]Ibid., p. 181

To the proletarian boy the girl is a mystery which does not materialize in flesh and blood. Her music promises a world he has never experienced before. Like the ring to Daisy Buchanan's voice, her music teases its listener. Again like Daisy's voice, what it promises is unattainable to those who do not already possess it. In Daisy's voice there echoed the metallic ring of money. And Gatsby's dream had been to penetrate into that deep and mysterious well which was the source of that elusive promise. For the young worker, Mozart carries the promise of an intellectual luxury which can only be attained through material success. His prayer had been "My God, would I ever escape the garbage dump of America" (p. 184).

Gatsby, like Fitzgerald, tried to become rich, to melt into the moneyed world of the very wealthy. His tragedy lies in the falsity of his dream, in his pathetic heroism and sacrifice. Gatsby died so that Daisy could live. Gold's hero is luckier. He refuses to assert the values of the wealthy by becoming one of them.

When the young worker's Portuguese beauty succumbs to his passion in return for a dollar, he is horrified and shocked. He has thought that she wanted him for himself, but instead she chooses to remember her sick mother, her unemployed father, her starving sisters more than she does the reward of "pure" love. This painful discovery leads to

the revelation about his other passion. In his desperation he goes to the house on Beacon Hill:

> This was the world of spiritual beauty, of music and art, and eternal love, and I, the proletarian could never enter it. My destiny was evident, I would die like a stinking old dog on a garbage dump.
>
> I wanted to cry for yearning and self-pity. I was ready to give up the endless futile struggle for a living. I grew weak and cowardly, and wanted to die.[27]

How many other boys like him had stopped and given up precisely at the threshold of the realization that the glory of the promised dream would never be possessed by them? But the boy is saved by a strange and reluctant savior who appears in the guise of a policeman, part of whose sacred duty is to rid the Beacon Hills of the world of the deadly menace of boys like him:

> "Move on bum," he said, "bums have got no business hanging around this part of town."
>
> Of course I moved on, the proletarian anger boiled up in my deeps, beneficient anger, beautiful anger to save me from mushy self-pity, harsh, strong, clean anger like the gales at the sea.[28]

As in Gold's actual experience at the Union Square demonstration in 1914, the policeman's club is made into a tool for his consciousness. It evokes that anger in him which prevents resignation and provokes struggle. Gold says in his essay "Why Am I A Communist":

> I have always been grateful to that cop and his club. For one thing he introduced me to literature and

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[27] Ibid., p. 184.

[28] Ibid., pp. 184-185.

> revolution. . . . Now I grew so bitter because of that cop that I went around to the anarchist Ferrer School and discovered books--I discovered history, poetry, science and class-struggle.[29]

Love of Life

Unlike the 100 percent aesthetes or 100 percent revolutionists, Gold did not see either literature or revolution as ends in themselves. If he was devoted to revolution, it was because he felt that the "Social Revolution of today is not the mere political movement artists classify it as. It is Life at its fullest and noblest."[30] But art is necessary to man because it captures the essence of life. If Marxism or the Russian revolution could provide the social and economic condition for the growth and development of art, then they should be accepted and supported:

> The Russians are creating all from the depths upward. Their Prolet-Kult is not an artificial theory evolved in the brains of a few phrase-intoxicated intellectuals, and foisted by them on the masses. Art cannot be called into existence that way. It must grow from the soul of life, freely and without forethought. But art has always flourished secretly in the hearts of the masses, and the Prolet-Kult is Russia's organized attempt to remove the economic barriers and social degradation that repressed that proletarian instinct during the centuries.
>
> In factories, mines, fields and workshops the word has been spread in Russia that the nation expects more of its workers than production. They are not machines, but men and women. They must learn to express their divinity in art and culture. They are encouraged and given the means of that expression, so long the property of the bourgeoisie.[31]

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[29]Ibid., p. 299. [30]Ibid., p. 67. [31]Ibid., p. 69.

Again, art is the expression of man's "divinity," and because of that it must be democratized and made available to the people.

Arguments could and have been made against the cultural sterility and suppression in the Soviet Union. Despite all that can be said about this subject in relation to the present Russian society, or to the one that began to change character in the mid 1930's, the Russian revolution and what followed it was a great liberating power in cultural as well as economic and political spheres. New experiments in drama and cinema in Russia tremendously influenced those fields as a whole. And Russian literature and art in the twenties had not yet assumed the stale and faded character which it was to acquire later. This was not merely the opinion of militants like Gold and his comrades. Many writers looked to the Soviet Union wistfully, and many like Dell felt that Russia had "turned over the artistic destinies of Russia to her artists."[32]

While America's writers were either leaving or writing about it in mock despair, Russia's seemed to burst with new creative energy and force. The "Resolution on Literature" adopted by the Party's political bureau stated a hands-off policy toward the various rival literary groups. As Daniel Aaron points out, it "spoke out strongly against

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[32]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 64.

all pretentious and semi-illiterate 'Communist Conceit.'" The party should favor "the free competition" of various literary groups and tendencies. "Any other solution to the question would be quasi-bureaucratic. . . ."[33]

So, for Gold the call for a revolutionary literature was not an attempt to place literature at the service of revolution, as some paranoid critics of radical writers claim. In fact, his call for a proletarian literature was accompanied by a long and strenuous struggle against two tendencies within the radical literary movement.

The first tendency was that which he had attacked in "Towards Proletarian Art," the tendency of the older generation of radical writers and critics such as Eastman and Dell to separate art from revolution and to place one above the other. This separation and categorization of art and literature in its development would inevitably lead to the negation of one in favor of the other. In the case of men like Robert Minor, it was art which was sacrificed at the altar of revolution. Dell and Eastman later were to denounce revolutionary politics and ideals. Gold was one of the first to note and criticize this growing tendency within them. Later as the editor of the Liberator and New Masses, Gold had to fight the same tendencies within those radical and liberal writers who according to Joesph Freeman

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[33]Ibid., p. 145.

"Jumped on and off the bandwagon as it offered or deprived them of convenient opportunities for 'self-expression.'"[34] They had even tried unsuccessfully to expel Gold on the charge of "irresponsibility." But Freeman, who supported him, felt

> . . . he had that which many reliable writers lacked; he really cared about socialism more than he cared about his personal career. This was the secret of his passionate literary style, his poverty in the lodging houses of the East Side, ridden with bedbugs, his irritable polemics against aesthetes who supported the status quo.[35]

But the other side of such a tendency was that of "pure" revolutionists, who defined their revolutionary principles through complete negation of aesthetics:

> But while we were struggling with the opportunists, we had another problem on our hands. There were among us actual sectarians whose illiterate and fanatic attitude hampered the development of revolutionary culture. Their attitude was so extreme that they looked upon the reading of Shakespeare or James Joyce as in itself a counter-revolutionary act.[36]

Such an attitude, as Freeman noted, essentially belonged to the nihilist:

> The sectarian, however, was something of a nihilist in this realm, anxious to dynamite the past out of existence and memory, a fantastic desire that could have no practical results of any value.[37]

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[34] An American Testament, p. 633.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 635.

[37] Ibid., p. 637.

If later in the thirties the radicals could boast of having made contributions to the literature and art of the period, most of their thanks should have gone to men like Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, who in those lonely years of the 1920's carried the struggle against both negators of struggle and those of culture.

All through the twenties Gold's passionate plea was addressed toward men like Robert Minor, who had given up their great talents for the sake of the struggle. In his essay "John Reed and the Real Thing," published in the New Masses, in November, 1927, he criticizes the "pale, rootless intellectuals" who could not sympathize with the struggle for social justice; those who "lead wasted lives in their meek offices, academic sanctions, and bootleg parlors."[38] He was not anti-intellectual, but against a certain kind of intellectual, just as he was not anti-revolutionary but opposed to a certain kind of revolutionism. In the same essay he bitterly criticizes those revolutionaries who denied the significance of intellect and culture:

> The role of the intellectual in the revolutionary labor movement has always been a debating point. In the I.W.W. the fellow-workers would tar and feather (almost) any intellectual who appeared among them. The word "intellectual" became a synonym for the word "bastard," and in the American Communist movement there is some of this feeling.[39]

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[38] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 153.

[39] Ibid.

He also goes on to make a prediction:

> And the revolution will grow in America, and there will be a new youth and Jack Reed will teach them how to live greatly again. This depression, this cowardice, this callousness and spiritual death will not last forever among the youth of America. It cannot. Life is mean only in cycles; it sinks defeated, then it inevitably rises. There will be more Jack Reeds in America, his grandchildren perhaps. This mean decade of ours will pass on.[40]

The "mean decade" was to end in four years for Gold and his comrades. But it had in many ways been his most fruitful time, the years when he developed the ideas which bloomed so rapidly in the decade that followed. It is also important to note that throughout both the "mean cycles" and the more hopeful ones Gold kept his faith.

For Whom Does One Write?

> One cannot write without a public and without a myth--without a certain public which historical circumstances have made, without a certain myth of literature which depends to a very great extent upon the demands of this public. In a word the author is in a situation, like all other men. But his writings, like every human project, simultaneously enclose, specify, and surpass this situation, even explain it and set it up, just as the idea of a circle explains and sets up that of the rotation of a segment.[41]

"Towards Proletarian Art" marks the beginning of a bitter and protracted struggle within the American literary left over a vital and significant issue: the relation of the writer to his public. The issue seemed simple enough,

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[40]Ibid., p. 154.

[41]Jean Paul Sartre, What is Literature, p. 144.

and it is stated in a simple (if emotional) manner by Mike Gold. But it was one which had occupied and pre-occupied writers from Cervantes to Fielding, from James to Sartre. Fielding in his seriously joking manner had stated in the first paragraph of Tom Jones:

> An author ought to consider himself not as a gentleman who gives a private or eleemosynary treat, but rather as one who keeps a public ordinary, at which all persons are welcome for their money.

In the third decade of the twentieth century most writers had begun to lose this amusing and amused attitude toward their public. They were gradually, but surely, cultivating a negligent pose toward their readers. At its most extreme this pose would become drastic subjectivism and lead to different variants of the art for art's sake theory. However, the very act of writing for publication presupposes a reading public. No matter how frustrated or pleased the author might be at the knowledge of this fact, part of his creative work will always be a response, either negative or positive, to the public.

Already in the United States, writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain had experienced the painful alienation from a middle-class public on whose purse-strings they were dependent and whose tastes they whole-heartedly despised. Near the end of the nineteenth-century America was entering that period of its political, economic, and social growth when it demanded more praise than criticism,

more affirmation than negation, more complacency than disturbance. As Henry Nash Smith points out in his interesting study of this subject:

> By the outbreak of the Civil War both Hawthorne and Melville had in effect been rejected by a reading public devoted to what Hawthorne ironically called "a common-place prosperity," in broad and simple daylight.[42]

The more "popular" writers wrote simple romances with happy endings, making the never-never land as down to earth as Mom and apple pie. But these other writers wrote the truth, and wrote it in a disturbing and disquieting manner. Their heroes were the opposite of the prevailing standards of decency and morality, ruthlessly ripping apart the chintz covered respectability of "bourgeois" America, laying bare its ugliness. The contradiction between American reality and American morality was exposed in books such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Melville's brilliant The Confidence-Man. They left a maze for the reader to solve on his own. They left it to the public to think, and to the public at this time real thinking seemed to have become hazardous to the health and well-being of American society. As Smith points out:

> The 19th century novelists whom we now value resisted the demand of the new middle brow audience. Yet without exception their work was visibly influenced by

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[42]Henry Nash Smith, Democracy and Novel. Popular Resistance to Classic American Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 5.

> by the struggle--sometimes (as in Melville's case) only slightly, sometimes (as in Howell's) to a considerable, even decisive extent.[43]

The tendency which had started with these writers later developed and became more distinct. But whatever they chose and no matter what their claims and ultimate goals were, the writers were haunted by their public. The author was followed by the specter of his public, whether he felt damned or blessed by it.

Radical writers from Whitman to Norris, London, and others wrote for the "people"; they had as their subject, as Whitman had stated in "Democratic Vistas":

> the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular, in which all the superstructures of the future are to permanently rest.[44]

In the 1920's, after a World War and a worker's revolution abroad had closed the old options and opened many new ones, such statements were necessary, but not sufficient. The working class emerged as a new potential, a new source of discovery and conflict for intellectuals. The "workers' state" in Russia was laying claim to the creation of a new "worker's culture." What had once been a dream had become a reality. It seemed as simple as that. As Daniel Aaron points out, even Joseph Wood Krutch had "mournfully conceded in 1929 that perhaps the future did lie in Russia."[45]

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[43] Ibid., p. 7.

[44] Cited in Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 149.

[45] Writers on the Left, p. 147.

There was a need to revive the old issue in a new manner. The working class in America could be a potential public for the disenchanted writers. Its world, as Gold claimed, was an undiscovered world. Gold, who had a rare gift for catching the pulse of his time, made the first call for such a working class literature in "Towards Proletarian Art."

His concept of the workers was a mixture of Whitman and Marx. Later the "purer" Marxist critics would differentiate between the "proletarian" and the "revolutionary" novel. G. A. Schachner, a journalist, editor and member of the Communist Party, claims in his essay "Revolutionary Literature in the United States Today" (1934), that revolutionary fiction "consciously supports the movement for the revolutionary destruction of Capitalism," while the proletarian fiction "reflects the life of any typical cross section of the proletariat and need not be more revolutionary than the proletariat itself is at the time the novel is written."[46]

But these words were written in 1934, in the heat of the depression and at the height of the radical writers' popularity and success. In 1921, many were bewildered, but very few knew what was needed for the radical literary movement. Gold's call for a proletarian literature stemmed more

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[46]Cited in Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States, p. 167.

from his instinctive reactions to his people's needs than from any reading of Marxist theory. It so happened that theory expressed the proletariat's aspirations and so was often in agreement with Gold's aims and general direction.

"In the Name of Victims" . . .

> We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but that of the victims. These truly are two distinct matters, for the victims are often told that they ought to be contented with their lot, for moral reasons. Moralists of this sort see man as existing for morality, not morality for man.[47]

The issue Gold raise in 1921 was significant, especially for the radical writers and critics. If they were to develop a sound theory in opposition to the more subjective cries for "art for art's sake," they had first to answer the questions of why they wrote and for whom. The relationship between the author and his public had, then, to be asserted in a new and convincing way. Both the writer and the "victims" in whose name he wrote had to be defined.

Viewed from Gold's perspective the writer is not a solitary figure, but one who is in unity with and conscious of his public. He is at once separate and one with his readers. In this relationship, it is not only the reader who contemplates the author's work; the public also becomes the subject of the writer's contemplation. Within

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[47]Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, Trans. and ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 75.

such a context a literary or artistic work does not assume "eternal" values, although it gains literary values. It is situated within the framework of a changing reality and answers the needs and demands of a changing public. From this perspective the writer, his public, and the literary work are three separate entities united by a common bond. The writer dies, the public changes, and the work remains.

This concept develops a new attitude not only towards the writer, but also towards the public, no longer the unknowing and unknowable mass, but an intimate companion whose life, beliefs, and aspirations play an active role in the shaping of the writer. This new relationship is one reason for Gold's constant emphasis on the need for radical writers to go to the workers and learn from their lives. One of the major differences, therefore, between writers like Gold and the exponents of art for art's sake lies in their view of their public. The former based his work on the assumption that the public was capable of changing and being changed. From this perspective the writer takes his readers seriously: He writes for them, in order to influence and be influenced by them; he writes because he respects them and their point of view. But the proponents of art for art's sake and its variants believed in a limited and elite public, who neither needed nor demanded change. This group was either opposed to change or cynical about its possibility. This writer wrote only because he believed

in his craft. Because his own attitude towards his public was cynical negligence, he wrote because he respected his art, not his public.

From Gold's point of view the literary product, although in essence the creation of itw writer, is at the same time a synthesis of the writer's subjective self and the objective world. From that world the writer draws both his subject matter and his public. He internalizes them and gives them back to the world in a work both of it and yet separate from it.

The "bourgeois" authors were faced with a dying world; one which, having lost hope in itself, had become bitter and cynical. Like Gatsby they were constantly mesmerized by that world's glitter and repelled by its hollow superficiality. All the significant writers of the twenties, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein, Mencken, and others exposed in their writing a ruthless and callous world, offering the creative and sensitive writer no dreams of the present or hopes for the future. Many other writers found excitement and conflict in portraying the "ascendant class," as Bertolt Brecht had called the proletariat. The issue was not merely a moral and political one; it was also a literary and artistic one. The question was: Could there exist a subject which can excite the author's mind and heart, could there exist a public which would stand by the author rather than oppose him? Gold's hope was that

in this new public the writer would find a new subject and new way of expression, that he would, in short, create a new kind of literature. In "Go Left, Young Writers" in the June, 1929, issue of the New Masses, he claims

> The America of the working class is practically undiscovered. It is like a lost continent. Bits of it come above the surface in our literature occasionally and everyone is amazed.[48]

In the later years many writers created great works of art through their discovery of this "lost continent." John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Erskine Caldwell, and William Carlos Williams based their best works upon this discovery. Most of these writers later recanted their allegiance to the left, but no one could deny either the influence of the radicals upon their writing or the fact that their subject matter was what Mike Gold had called for, the life of the "have nots."

"Why Write?"

> But since, for us, writing is an enterprise; since writers are alive before being dead; since we think that we must try to be as right as we can in our books; and since, even if the centuries show us to be in the wrong, this is no reason to show in advance that we are wrong; since we think that the writer should engage himself completely in his works and not as an abject passivity by jutting forward his vices, his misfortunes, and his weaknesses, but as a resolute will and as a choice, as this total enterprise of living that each one of us is, it is then proper that we take up this problem at its beinning, and that we, in turn, ask ourselves "Why does one Write?"[49]

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[48] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 188.

[49] Jean Paul Sartre, What is Literature?, p. 29.

The question for whom does one write would inevitably lead to the related one: Why write? Does one write in order to fulfill a social obligation or a literary one? The question when dissected in such a neat and mechanical fashion loses its meaning and becomes merely absurd. If literature could be separated from life, then its "social" message could also be separated from its literary one. In his struggle against the "pure" aesthetics and "pure" revolutionaries, Gold tried to show the relation between reality and fiction; they were different and yet flowed from one another. In his essay "At King Menchen's Court," published in Hollow Men, Gold says:

> Life shapes literature, but in turn is also shaped by it. Where such a period of nihilism exists in a literature, there must be something in the social environment conducive to nihilism. The twenties saw the presidentiad of Harding, Coolidge and Hoover. And Sam Gompers still dominated the labor movement, after having robbed it of any social ideals, and reduced it to the degradation and dishonesty of "business unionism."
>
> It was a post-war decade. The war killed off for a decade the spirit of labor; it destroyed the march of a Socialist movement that had registered in one election almost a million votes; it also crushed the naive, populist democracy that had flowerd in the writing of men like Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and Edgar Lee Masters.[50]

The issue discussed above is not the brittle demand of a party chief that the writer must answer the call of duty and become "engaged" in the social struggle. The

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[50]Mike Gold, Hollow Men (New York: Int. Publishers, 1941), p. 21.

issue at stake is that the writer is a participant in the process of creating and changing reality. He is "engaged" in the act of portraying that reality so as to lay it bare, to show the contradictions which are often clouded by the mundane daily affairs of living and earning a living. This very act involves participation and "engagement" in the affairs of the world. The writer is not indifferent to the world and its existence. For the mere pose of indifference itself reveals a certain attitude toward the world; it shows that the way things are makes a different to the man who responds to them as well as to the one who ignores them. Indifference becomes a statement about certain aspects of reality. The characters who in a novel or play turn their back on their public, who become uncommunicative toward it, are making specific statements about that public. For the act of turning one's back is one of the most pointed statements and so clearest messages. The difference between radicals and their opponents--no matter what their claims--was not in essence a matter of whether one should, or could, dismiss the public and the world, but of how one dismissed or ascertained reality. The issue at stake was that of the perspective on and attitude towards reality.

In the eighteenth century when the writers felt they had something to say and a public to say it to they were most adamant and persistent in conveying their message to their readers. They felt that they had an obligation

towards mankind, and that they spoke in the language of all humanity. Yet all the while only certain segments of society read and responded. They also wrote more in the name of "morality" than of its "victims." Their attempt was to make men submit to morality. For Gold the issue was to change humanity by addressing a specific segment of it. His purpose in doing so was not to further submission to morality, but instead to create a new morality for a new mankind.

"Are Artists People?"

> If you prick an artist, does he bleed? If you starve him, does he faint? Is heaven his home or can he properly take an active part in our mundane struggle for the fact of bread and the concepts of liberty, justice, etc.? As a social critic and evaluator, can he not merely say what's wrong, but also and by more than negative implication declare what's right?[51]

Gold's concept of literature inevitably led to the view of what Sartre calls the "engaged writer." The writer who is indifferent neither to reality nor to his public must of necessity take sides. He is aware, as Gold was, that "Life burns in both camps." But he is also aware that words are spoken to denote some form of action.

This concept was not new or peculiar with Gold. The concept of "engagement" in literature became a point of debate and strong feelings exactly at the same time that the word "alienation" was in the process of being born. Traubel,

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[51]Mike Gold, New Masses, II, 1927, cited in Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 165.

Whitman's secretary, had recorded for The Seven Arts in 1917, Whitman's remark that:

> The trouble is that writers are too literary--too damned literary. There has grown up--Swinburne I think an apostle of it--the doctrine (you have heard of it? It is dinned everywhere), art for art's sake: think of it--art for art's sake. Let a man really accept that--let that really be his ruling--and he is lost. . . . Instead of regarding literature as only a weapon, an instrument, in the service of something larger than itself, it looks upon itself as an end--as a fact to be finally worshipped, adored. To me that's all a horrible blasphemy--a bad smelling apostasy.[52]

It was this same "blasphemy" which was to be the target of Gold's zealous attacks all through the twenties and the decades following. To him literature went beyond the literary craft and artistic skill; it was responsible to the world, as the world was responsible to it. If pages of beautiful prose could be written about the most insignificant matters, then certainly the same could be done to describe the life of the working class. Some had given up their art in the "service" of revolution; others had given up their "life" in the "service" of art. Both built altars; both were one-sided and dogmatic.

Since words were action, since the writer could not escape the responsibility of his words, then what was being said, to whom and why, were important questions to consider. As Sartre eloquently states:

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[52]Cited in Aaron, p. 7.

> Thus by speaking, I reveal the situation by my very intention of changing it; I reveal it to myself and to others in order to change it. I strike at its very heart and transpierce it, and I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it; with every word I utter, I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it toward the future.[53]

Many would argue, and in fact have argued, that "engagement" detracts from the artistic value of a literary work. They argue a writer must be apolitical, or he will be forever lost in literary and artistic terms.

"I am a royalist in politics, a classicist in literature, and an Anglo-Catholic in religion,"[54] declared T. S. Eliot. Yet Eliot's conservatism did not increase or decrease his ability to write. What it did was to shape the content of his works and influence his view of his readers. It also influenced his style. Since he did not write for the "people" but for a select few, his work became elitist and "learned."

Gold's artistic problems and literary flaws did not, however, stem from his "engagement" in the social and political issues of the time, but mainly from his own weaknesses and those of the movement he belonged to. Had he become a "royalist," he still would have encountered many artistic problems. And certainly the same charges cannot

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[53] What is Literature?, p. 16.

[54] Cited in Mike Gold, Hollow Men, p. 20.

be made against writers such as Brecht, Gorky, Sartre or Myakovsky, whose beauty of style is at times perfect to the point of distraction. Certainly many a 100 percent revolutionist could also make the mistake of blaming Gold's political shortcomings on his love of and commitment to literature.

Advancing the "Old Bard"

> Poets to come! Orators, singers, musicians to come!
> Not to-day is to justify me and answer what I am for,
> But you, a new brood, native, athletic, continental,
> greater than before known
> Arouse! for you must justify me.
> . . . . . .
> I myself but write one or two indicative words for
> the future,
> I but advance a moment only to wheel and hurry back
> in the darkness.
> . . . . . .
> I am a man who, sauntering along without fully stopping,
> Turns a casual look upon you and then averts his face,
> Leaving it to you to prove and define it,
> Expecting the main things from you.[55]

In 1921, Mike Gold was an avowed Marxist, but in "Towards Proletarian Art" is was the language and thoughts of Walt Whitman, the great bard of American poetry, which shaped his words and sentences. In many ways Gold was closer to Whitman than to Marx. As Folsom has pointed out in his essay "The Education of Mike Gold,"

> Gold's early education was as much Jewish as it was "American," and a part of Gold's growth was to learn

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[55]Walt Whitman, "Poets to Come," Selections from Leaves of Grass, p. 52.

> to assimilate the two cultures, rejecting the dead and corrupt in both, revering what seemed to him strong and humane in two traditions which gave him pride in the duel identity of an American Jew.[56]

Whitman's democracy which celebrated the lives of simple men and women, and which was suspicious of sophistication, appealed to the young revolutionary.

> For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and keep watch. It is I let out in the morning and barr'd at night.
>
> Not a mutineer walks handcuff'd to jail but I am handcuff'd to him and walk by his side,
> (I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat on my twitching lips.)[57]

He shared with the old poet hatred of the established aristocracy and love of the people. The "people" for Whitman, as well as for Gold in his essay, were not clearly defined into the strict classes of Marx. They were simply the masses of working people. Gold was unconsciously drawn towards Whitman, who had proudly declared: "I speak the word of the modern, the word En-Masse"; Whitman who had celebrated science and the "flush of knowledge and of investigation"; Whitman who had despised the elite and the aristocrat; Whitman who had relied on instinct; Whitman who had faith in the democracy of politics, as well as of literature; Whitman who had said "everything comes out of dirt--everything comes out of the people."

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[56] Proletarian Writers of the Thirties, ed. David Madden, p. 239.

[57] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," Selections from Leaves of Grass, p. 31.

If Gold like Whitman were charged with contradicting himself, praising science and worshipping instinct, eulogizing the proletariat and remaining an intellectual, his answer to such charges could have easily been "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes."[58]

The problem was that in 1921 Gold's view of the proletarian was still that of Whitman's "masses" in 1855. In his essay Gold has not differentiated between the "proletariat" and the idealistic view of primitive masses. His celebration of their "primitiveness" leads to his negation of the intellectual's sophistication. He criticizes the artists for having become "the aristocrats of mankind," hence they are

> sad and spiritually sterile. They live in a vacuum and the thought of God and Reason which once sustained them have been discarded by them; they have turned to the life of the moods, to the worship of beauty and sensation, but they cannot live there happily.[59]

To recover they must belong again; they must find faith in the people. "But the intellectuals have become contemptuous of the people and are therefore sick to death.[60]

Gold offers no analysis, no explanation for the change within the intellectuals. He writes what he sees,

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[58]Ibid., p. 43.

[59]"Towards Proletarian Art," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 69.

[60]Ibid., p. 66.

and he wishes to see, without going beyond that vision to analyze the forces which shape the appearances. The "masses" for whom the writers must write are:

> Never pessimistic. Masses are never sterile. Masses are never far from the Earth. Masses are never far from the heaven. Masses go on--they are the eternal truth. Masses are simple, strong and sure. They are never lost long; they have always a goal in each stage.[61]

This is hardly a good argument for convincing the intellectuals to write of and for the masses. It seems, of course, that if the "Masses" possess all the above qualities they are in little need either of revolution or of literature. The issue at stake, however, has nothing to do with the primitive nature of the masses. It is concerned with the exact opposite. Because the workers are potentially the least "primitive" and most advanced class, the writer must turn to them. They are simple but not simplistic. Because they need popular, but not vulgar art, the new writer must write for them. Their advanced nature should not only be defined in terms of science, technique or economics, but also in terms of culture. They desire to advance humanity in advancing themselves. The role of the workers within capitalist society, therefore, gains some of the aspects of the role of the bourgeosie played in feudal society. They represent the new, the progressive, the "advanced."

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[61] Ibid.

Gold's infantile celebration of the primitive nature of the masses becomes extreme when he celebrates the backward and the feudal at the expense of the modern and the sophisticated.

> In the Orient, where millions live and labor and die, peace has brooded in the air for centuries. There have never been individuals there, but family clans and ancestor worshippers, so that men have felt themselves part of a mystic group extending from the dim past into the unfolding future. Men have gathered peace from that bond, and strength to support the sorrow of Life. From the solidarity learned in the family group, they have learned the solidarity of the universe, and have created creeds that fill every device of the universe with the family love and trust.[62]

Such nonsense could only stem from blatant ignorance as well as blind worship of the "primitive." Gold's view of the "Orient" is similar to that of the affluent middle-class teenager of today who, dissatisfied with the state of affairs and unable to locate the source of his dissatisfaction, blames it on progress, on science, and turns to what he knows least about, namely the "mystic East," where the "peace" reigning is the rule of death and where for decades the struggle has been to disturb and destroy that "peace."

Gold never again offers such slanted view of the masses and the workers. Later in his essay "In Foggy California," in the November, 1928, issue of the New Masses, he says in criticism of Sinclair's books:

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[62]Ibid., p. 67.

> But in all these books there is a faint trace of the Protestant minister that I can't enjoy. It is my only quarrel with this great writer. I do not relish these easy victories of virtue. There is nobility in the revolutionary camp; there is also gloom, dirt and disorder. The worker is not a bright radiant legend like one of Walter Crane's Merrie England peasants. The worker is a man. We don't need to edit him. Let us not shirk our problems. Let us not rob the worker of his humanity in fiction. Not every worker is like Jesus; there are Hamlets, Othellos, Tom Jonses and Macbeths among them, too. And I prefer this variety of life to abstractions.[63]

It was his regard for "variety of life," his concern and involvement with the worker's life, which cured him of his early emotionality over the proletariat. But what he was never completely cured of was his attraction to "instincts" and feelings. The truth of the people is "their instincts"; Whitman is the "heroic grandfather of our generation in America"; he is "that giant with his cosmic intuitions and comprehensions."[64] Such glorification of the instinct inevitably led to a belittling of logic, reason, and analysis.

Although his criticism of the intellectuals is never a criticism of the intellect and although he criticizes only a certain brand of intellectuals and not all of them, Gold is never able to offer a systematic analysis of the intellectuals within the present society. He does not face them with their own tool, namely analysis. Since his

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[63]Ibid., p. 169.

[64]"Towards Proletarian Art," Ibid., p. 67.

attraction to Marx was sympathetic rather than a theoretic grasp of Marxist theory, unlike Marxist critics he does not analyze exploitation but gives an account of it in terms of what he has experienced and what millions of the poor have daily felt and lived. In this light it is not surprising that he should claim: "The social Revolution in the world today arises out of the deep need of the masses for the old primitive group life."[65]

Unlike Eastman and other radical intellectuals who according to Aaron had to face the conflict between their "socialist mind" and "bourgeois heart," Gold's heart and mind were in no conflict, although the heart was always the real spokesman. And his heart instinctively led him always to raise those issues which were at the core of the radical problems at the time.

It is interesting to contrast Gold on this point with Brecht, whose involvement with Marxism is expressed on a highly intellectual level:

> When I read Marx's Capital, I understood my plays. Naturally I want to see this book widely circulated. It wasn't of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole file of Marxist plays: but this man was the only spectator for my plays I'd ever come across. For a man with interests like his must of necessity be interested in my plays, not because they are so intelligent, but because he is--they are something to him to think about. This happened because I was as hard up for opinions as for money, and the same attitude to both: that they are not to be hoarded but to spend.[66]

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[65] Ibid., p. 66.

[66] Brecht on Theatre, p. 23.

Thought was the way to Brecht's work. He wanted to arouse his audiences' intellect, to shock them into thinking. He had an aversion to the kind of drama which involved the audience's heart and soul to such degree that they completely identified with it. For Brecht, intellectual detachment and not emotional identification was most vital and essential. It was only through thought that the public could contemplate changing the state of affairs as they were. He did not trust feeling and strove for an "extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance."[67] For he acutely felt that:

> Feelings are usually products of opinions. They follow on. But opinions are decisive. Only experience sometimes ranks higher. Though we all know that not every opinion stems from experience.[68]

Brecht had one other advantage over Gold; he was very precise and specific on the question of his public. To say that one must write for the proletariat is to make a general remark. It needs to be more specific in order to gain the practice in life. What is the purpose of the proletarian writer; through what means does he wish to change the worker's consciousness? Even the Communist Party had defined itself as the party organizing the vanguard, the most advanced section of the working class. Certainly in a society with such strict divisions between classes, between

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[67]Ibid., p. 14.

[68]Ibid., p. 16.

mental and manual labor, one could not write for workers at large, but with the viewpoint and interest of workers in mind. The writer essentially had to focus his appeal toward the most advanced worker, as well as the radical and revolutionary intellectuals. He had to address a thinking public ready to assimilate the complexities of the present order and ready to withstand the challenge of reshaping that order from the roots up. Gold and other proletarians hardly ever specified this audience. They portrayed working class life, and they showed the need for revolution. But they seldom presented a kind of literature which not only arouses feelings and emotions, but offers analysis, and intellectual complexity. With Brecht it was different. He, of course, had the advantages of a rich European Marxist tradition and the experience of the European working class, especially the German proletariat who could boast of such leaders as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibnecht:

> I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed. . . . The one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent. It is utterly wrong to treat people as simpletons when they are grown up at seventeen. I appeal to reason.[69]

Of course, one great attribute of Gold and his fellow writers was that in their attempts to create a new proletarian culture they had also created a new dignity and identity for the working class. They opposed that undying

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[69]Ibid., pp. 138-139.

supply of pulp and sentimental trash offered by the established guardians of popular culture as simply cultural lollipops to pacify the working men and women.

"Send Us a Critic"

> This generation of writers is corrupted by all the money floating around everywhere. It is unfashionable to believe in human progress any longer. It is unfashionable to work for a better world. It is unfashionable and unsophisticated to follow in the footsteps of Tolstoi, of Dickens, Shelley, Blake, Burns, Whitman, Trotsky. Send us a critic. Send a giant who can shame our writers back to their task of civilizing America. Send a soldier who has studied history, send a strong poet who loves the masses and their future. Send someone who doesn't give a damn about money; send one who is not a pompous liberal, but a man of the street. Send no mystics--they give us Americans the willies. Send no coward. Send no pedant, send us a man fit to stand up to skyscrapers; a man of art who can match the purposeful deeds of Henry Ford. Send us a Jesus in overalls. Send no saint. Send an artist. Send a scientist. Send a Bolshevik. Send a man.[70]

In 1926, in his essay "America Needs a Critic," published in the New Masses, Gold expands and develops his concept of literature and art. In a euphoric review of Trotsky's Literature and Revolution--at a time when Trotsky was still the "darling" of all radicals--Gold celebrates the dawn of a new art. He still emphasizes the close and interdependent relation of literature and revolution. But here he goes a step further and specifies its relation to science and knowledge. His earlier praise of the "primitive"

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[70] "America Needs a Critic," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, pp. 138-39.

man is here mellowed into admiration for the "universal" man, a modern day "Leonardo da Vinci."

> The Revolution shares with the Renaissance the fact that men have again become versatile. They have taken all knowledge for their province, because all knowledge is a necessary tool to the Revolution.[71]

In this sense the purpose of revolution is to destroy the evils of the old while preserving and developing its achievements. If the Renaissance man of the past had been a bourgeois, that man of the present will be born of the proletariat. Both would love and act in the name and interest of humanity. As the "Renaissance" man of the past served his class in the name of humanity, that of the present would serve humanity in the name of his class.

From this perspective it is though action and interaction with other fields that literature gains vitality and strength. Literature, then, becomes relevant to all life and all life becomes relevant to it. This point was emphasized by all the radicals, especially Marxist writers. The social and economic revolution was not only for the purpose of dividing the material wealth of the passing classes, but also for sharing the spiritual and intellectual wealth. Its purpose was to integrate and unite a disintegrated and disunited world. In this act literature and science could no longer turn their backs upon one another, but rather had to walk hand in hand. Brecht explained it adequately:

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[71]Ibid., p. 131.

> I am not trying to shelter behind them; but I must say that I do need the sciences. I have to admit, however, that I look askance at all sorts of people who I know do not operate on the level of scientific understanding: that is to say who sing as birds sing, or as people imagine the birds to sing. I don't mean by that that I would reject a charming poem about the taste of fried fish, or the delights of a boating party just because the writer had not studied gastronomy or navigation. But in my view the great and complicated things that go on in the world can not be adequately recognized by people who do not use every possible aid to understanding.[72]

Inherent in such a concept is also a new view of knowledge. Learning and education are dragged out of the book shelves and classrooms and exposed to the thirsty eyes of men and women in the streets, factories, and offices. Art teaches life, art is enriched by knowledge, and knowledge is learned not in order to gain money or status, but in order to master reality, to contribute to it through the attempt to change it.

In his later work, Gold also negates subjective criticism for:

> It is worthless to the writer, it cannot help him understand himself, or his relation to his age. At best it is a pat on the shoulder, a freshly strung bouquet of appreciation; at worst, a kick in the rear.[73]

It is interesting to note that Gold's own writing, although highly emotional and personal, is seldom subjective. It is not subjective because it uses the personal to depict and

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[72] Brecht on Theatre, p. 73.

[73] "America Needs a Critic," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 132.

and demonstrate something larger than itself. Gold's characters are not "private persons." They gain life and vitality through the public and public expression. This rejection of subjectivism leads to a refutation of the subjective style of writing. It shifts the center of the universe from the artist's inner self and locates it in the world; the world existed long before and continues to exist long after the writer or the artist is gone. In shifting the center it refutes the artists' role as a mere craftsman, as a person with highly skilled ability:

> The writer and artist of today has become a specialist. He thinks of himself merely as a craftsman, and is proud to confess that he is ignorant of history, economics, and science. This lack of universal culture has left him with the naive egotism of a child. The average artist still believes that he is a child of some immaculate conception, his umbilical cord attached to Eternity though the rest of humanity is bound to time.[74]

The New Masses

> Why did we start the New Masses? For myself, I would only say that life needed a New Masses. Life with me anyway had become so impregnated with the mission of writing on social theme, so involved mentally, and morally with the feeling that America needed a New Masses, the magazine who would tell the truth and fight for the oppressed. It made me feel as if I had lost an arm and feel as if I felt lonesome for something that something was the magazine. And most people I met would have seconded my motion that the world needed a New Masses.[75]

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[74] Ibid., p. 133.

[75] Conversations with Michael B. Folsom, May 5, 1966.

Two of the biggest obsessions in Gold's life were the "truth" and the "fight for the oppressed." He wrote Jews Without Money because there were enough "superficial liars" in America, and he wished to tell the truth. Truth was the key to everything, even a good style of writing. It was with this in mind that he set out to create a new radical literary magazine in the mid-twenties.

Already in the case of the Liberator he and other prominent radical writers like Freeman had felt the pressure from the "party" fanatics to replace aesthetics with politics. Joseph Freeman recalls in An American Testament

> Gold urged me not to let myself be "swamped by the new regime" and not to "give up trying for the literary people and the artists in the matter of contributions. Fight for fiction, poetry, pictures, he wrote.[76]

At its inception, Eastman had promised that the Liberator "will be distinguished by a complete freedom in art and poetry and fiction and criticism."[77] It was to be a meeting ground for political radical and literary people. But by 1922, Eastman had already left for Europe and the U.S.S.R., and Gold, after some fierce skirmishes with the more liberal Claude Mackey, had gone to the west coast. In 1924, the Liberator was merged to form the C.P.'s (Communist Party) Worker's Monthly.

Gold's dream had been to create a truly literary,

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[76] An American Testament, p. 323.

[77] Ibid., p. 123.

radical magazine. He, like London, felt that puritanism was a ploy against the workers and, consequently, had rejected the more pious and gentle Upton Sinclair's offer for a joint effort on a magazine. In a letter to Sinclair he said:

> I am immoral Upton, I drink, smoke, swear, loaf, sneer, shoot pool, dance jazz, shake the shimmy, ride box-cars, and do most everything. . . . I am a good Red, etc. and take that seriously enough, but it might get on your nerves if you found me smoking six or seven cigars a day, and hanging out in bootlegging joints with a bunch of wobblies. I can't be as pure, fervent and puritanical as yourself, Upton, and I would not want to be. The mass of humanity, stupid or intellectual, is fond of any kind of fun, sensuality, relaxation, sport and frivolity, and I am one of them.[78]

What Gold wanted was a revival of the old Masses. Only one which would answer the needs of its times. Joseph Freeman gave a description of what it had to be:

> It must never take itself too seriously. It must be interesting above everything else; fresh, vivid, youthful, satirical, brave and gay. . . . it must also be sympathetic to any crudeness which is the expression of something young, vital as yet groping and undeveloped.[79]

In May 1926, the New Masses began publishing with money from the Garland's fund. Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, Carl Sandburg, Eugene O'Neill, John Howard Lawson and many literary notables gave it their support. Its contributors were a mixture of radicals and liberals, and its format was close to that of the old Masses. In

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[78]Cited in Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 97.

[79]Ibid., p. 101.

its first issue Robinson Jeffer's "Apology for Bad Dreams" appeared by the side of Mary Heaton Vorse, a skilled labor reporter, on the Passaic, New York textile strike. Whittaker Chambers, William Carlos Williams, Scott Nearing, Whittier Bynner were all contributors to that first issue. From that time until 1929, the New Masses was a battling ground for radicals and liberals. The magazine faltered until 1928 when under Gold and a few other radicals it was published in a new, cheaper format and claimed itself "a magazine of worker's art and literature."

Despite Gold's hope for a wide circulation and his complaint in a letter to Sinclair that "This fooling around with a 15,000 circulation among extremists and "tired radicals and intelligensia is the bunk,"[80] it took a few more years to resolve the problem of low circulation as well as the conflict between the liberals and the radicals. The depression ultimately changed the fate of a great many things in the U.S., among them the New Masses and its hopeful young editors.

"Go Left, Young Writers!"

In the January, 1929, issue of the New Masses, Gold advises that:

> The best and newest thing a young writer can now do in America, if he has the vigor and the guts, is to go leftward. If he gets tangled up in the other thing

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[80]Ibid., p. 99.

> he will make some money, maybe, but he will lose everything else. Neither the Saturday Evening Post, or the Nation can any longer nourish the free heroic soul. Try it and see.[81]

This same concept was to be expressed in different words and forms over the next decade by many of the most prominent liberal and radical writers in America, as well as in Europe. In 1929, on the eve of the stock market crash, the disenchantment with the Saturday Evening Post and the Nation had become crystallized, but the alternatives had not yet been defined. Very few had taken Gold's slogan "Go Left!" and made it their own.

At the end of the decade, Gold developed and firmly re-asserted what he had proclaimed at its beginning. To him the "bourgeoisie" offered no more hope for the creative writer and artist. The hope lay with that "great mass of America" who was neither prosperous, nor represented in the "Current politics of literature." This mass consisted of the "Negroes, immigrants, poor farmers and city proletarians and they live in the same holes they did ten years ago."[82] It is this mass which must rise and create a new world and a new culture: and it is in the future of this "mass" that the future of the writer could be defined.

What Gold put forward, developed, and expounded in the twenties was to become the core of the literary issues

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[81]"Go Left, Young Writers," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 188.

[82]Ibid., p. 187.

involving liberal, radical, and even many conservative writers and critics. While in the thirties the negation of the capitalist society turned into the search for its alternatives, for Gold the alternative had already been found and formulated. It is interesting, if not a little ironic, that the "mean" and "sterile" years (in terms of the literary left) of the twenties had been his most fertile and creative in terms of literary ideas. The thirties provided the soil for the fruition of these ideas. But by 1929 Gold had already formulated the most important aspects of his literary thesis. Between "Towards Proletarian Art" and "Go Left, Young Writers," Gold had drawn the line between himself and both the literary and revolutionary dogmatists, defined his concept of literature, and had even put that concept into practice through the establishment and publication of the New Masses.

It can be safely stated that on the literary front very few were as ready to embrace the turbulent and furious certainty of the thirties as was Mike Gold, né Itzok Isaac Granich, in that twilight year of 1929.

CHAPTER IV

"YEARS OF PROTEST"

In a review of Ernest Hemingway called "Hemingway the White Collar Poet," published in the March, 1928, issue of the New Masses, Gold had predicted:

> A new wave of social struggle is moving on the ocean of American life. Unemployment is here; limits of a financial depression; the big conservative unions are breaking up; another world war is being announced by Admirals and Generals.
>
> Babbitt was one of the evidences of the desperation and pessimism of the middle-class idealists during the Judas decade, Hemingway was another sign. In the decade to come we may develop Gorkys and Tolstoys to follow these Artzibashevi. The Sacco-Vanzetti case woke the conscience of the intellectuals. They brushed Mencken aside and walked on the picket lines in Boston. Upton Sinclair is coming back in popularity in his own land. There is surely something brewing. Hemingway is not the herald of a new way of feeling, but the last voice of a decade of despair.[1]

Two years later Gold's prophecy was beginning to come true. That "something" which was "brewing" had come to a vigorous boil. It had drawn many of the previous decade's literary voices while bringing to the surface some of its more neglected ones. To this latter group belonged Mike Gold.

Gold started the thirties with a bang and not a

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[1] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, pp. 160-161.

whimper. In the February of 1930, his novel Jews Without Money was published. By October, it had gone through its eleventh printing, and before 1935, it was translated into French, Swedish, Romanian, Spanish, Yugoslavian, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Ukranian, Russian, Yiddish, Bohemian, Bulgarian, Dutch, and Tartar. In September of that year, the New Republic published Gold's scathing review of Thornton Wilder aptly titled "Wilder, Prophet of the Genteel Christ." Both the review and the novel caused a great deal of stir within American literary circles. Their significance went beyond their own specific worth; their publication and reception indicated the coming of a new era. The subject of both works reveal nothing that is essentially new about Gold or his ideas. They are natural outgrowths of his earlier work, now more polished, unified and assertive. What was new was the manner in which they were received.

In the 1920's Gold had led his campaign against the established literary intelligensia, and issued the call for "proletarian literature" mainly from the pages of the New Masses. His attacks upon such luminaries as Shaw, Wells, and Hemingway had been as vigorous and uncompromising as the one against Wilder. But in 1930, at the twilight of the old era, and dawn of a new one, matters were quite different. From the "subversive" pages of the New Masses, he had been elevated to the "respectable" ones of the

New Republic. This shift signified among other things the new attitude the liberals were beginning to assume towards the Marxist and radical intellectuals.

Why was the issue suddenly raised by a relatively obscure writer against one of the "lights" of the literary world taking on such vast dimensions? For months, pages of the New Republic were the arena of verbal struggle between the proponents and opponents of Gold's article. Most liberal readers found its form, as well as the content, outrageously disrespectful and indecorous. One genteel reader found it "scurrilous, profane, dirty. . . . I heavily resent as do many of my liberal friends, this attack on a man who we consider has done lovely things and who we believe is endowed with a very lovely nature."[2] Of course, the matter at stake had very little to do with Wilder's "lovely nature" or the "lovely things" he had accomplished. Rather it concerned the whole nature of literature and the direction it was to take in that memorable year of 1930.

In the twenties, writers like Wilder were glorified and overrated, mainly because of their literary skill and craftsmanship. Gold objected to such reductionist view of literature and life. He criticized Wilder because his work was antiseptic, without much involvement in life. He

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[2]Cited in Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s (New York: Viking Press, 1951), p. 304.

charged that Wilder lacked the passion of such great writers as Balzac, Tolstoy, Dickens, Whitman, Twain, London, and others. To Gold those critics who judged Wilder solely on the basis of his literary style isolated literature and art from all other phenomena, reducing them to the level of mere ornaments, to things of "pure" beauty. They put art on a pedestal and turned it into an object of worship, depriving it of its social power and emotion.

If in the twenties Gold's views could be ignored or tolerated with good humor, in the thirties they had to be taken seriously even if at times reluctantly. It was a sign of the times that the liberals' response to Gold's review was more defensive than offensive. The review had served as an evil omen foreshadowing a serious danger to the liberal establishment. They were beginning to feel the threat of a radical storm which, if it did not destroy their established world, was able for a while to shake its foundations. Consequently, some protested Gold's outrageous views, but as Malcolm Cowley reports, soon most of the New Republic's correspondents were "half-agreeing with Gold." They could not easily dismiss his views and criticisms for:

> . . . he had expressed a mood that was growing as the situation of the country became more desperate. Literature for the next few years would be asked to deal in one way or another with the problems of the day.[3]

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[3]Ibid., pp. 304-305.

The "Afflicted" Liberals

"I can't ask you to go out and comfort the afflicted; that would be considered eccentric. But perhaps you can afflict the comfortable."[4]

In the twenties many of the most established writers such as Eliot, Hemingway, Lewis, Fitzgerald, and Mencken had done little if anything to "comfort the afflicted," but they achieved a few accomplishments in "afflicting the comfortable." Continuously protesting the ills of a society smug and complacent in its fat, they became its rebel conscience. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in this protest they were accompanied by the radical and Marxist writers. The radicals themselves, however, had no organization, no very clear lines of distinction. As Joseph Freeman states in his An American Testament, they had one foot in the "Bohemia" and the other in the revolutionary movement. Their efforts were mainly confined to the individual level, like joint literary efforts with liberals on publications such as the New Masses.

Now in the thirties the liberals themselves had become "afflicted." They lacked the strong stand of the conservative New Humanists or the firm convictions of the radical writers. At a time of extreme crisis their liberal neutrality seemed out of place and uncomfortable. Mencken's

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[4]John Kenneth Galbraith, recent address at Yale, Time (June 4, 1979), p. 69.

cynicism, so welcome in the "gay" twenties, somehow looked in bad taste when set against the suffering experienced by millions of Americans. The ex-patriots' acquired indifference was reluctantly changing into some form of response. The question of whose side to take and for whom to write became one of the central issues to many writers, such as Wilson, Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell and Anderson.

At no other period in the history of American literature were the writers and artists so closely drawn to one another and to the other strata and classes of society. What brought them together was not the fact they all agreed with one another; on the contrary, no other period produced such vehement and vigorous literary struggles as did the thirties. But they were all concerned with common issues. Whether they liked or disliked the involvement of literature in politics, they had to reason their tendencies, to explain and defend them, to reject their opponents. One single poem such as Macleish's "To the Social Muse" could cause a major controversy, involving men of various literary and political colors. Even when they were on two opposite sides of the pole, the writers were quite conscious of their common claim to the pole itself!

Those who in the twenties had been pre-occupied with their art were now having second thoughts. Cowley had ended his exile; Dos Passos, Wilson and Anderson, shifting more and more towards the left had begun touring the country

observing and reporting the life and struggles of the "common people." Gold had quoted Anderson in an article in a 1929 issue of Vanity Fair:

> You see, I am ready to brush all down-trodden people aside. Let them go, let them suffer. If they became slaves, let them be slaves. I am now as aristocratic as any man in the world can be. I am as cruel and heartless too. I am as Mr. Bernard Shaw once said of a character in one of his plays, "a very simple man, perfectly satisfied with the best of everything."[5]

But by 1931, "the best of everything" apparently did not satisfy the "heartless" "aristocrat." On June 24, of that year Wilson reports in a letter to John Dos Passos:

> I found Sherwood Anderson all full of communism. He doesn't know much about it, but the idea has given him a powerful afflatus. He has a new girl, a radical Y.W.C.A. secretary, who took him around to the mills. He is writing a novel with a communist hero and I have never seen him so much around.[6]

Wilson himself, as he admitted in a letter to Allen Tate, found himself "going further and further to the left all the time. . . ."[7]

Although until the end of the decade one of the major issues of controvery was over the relation between literature and politics, almost all writers in one way or another mixed politics with literature. The changes within

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[5]Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 264.

[6]Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972, Ed. by Elena Wilson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 1977), p. 218.

[7]Ibid., p. 196.

Russia, the policies of C. P., the rise of fascism, the struggles of workers and minorities occupied the writers to such an extent that even in the cases of "level headed" men, such as Wilson, they became more vehement over political than aesthetic matters. This change indicated that with the deepening of the economic and political crisis, even the more esoteric of the literary mandarins were becoming reconciled with the idea of soiling their aesthetics with issues beyond the realms of art and literature. They were beginning to take the communists more seriously. As Edmund Wilson states in his report of the communists' performance before the Fish Committee

> When one has seen the communists before the Fish Committee one is no longer sure that in spite of their faults and their small numbers, they are so unimportant as we are usually told.[8]

In 1932, Lewis Mumford, Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and Edmund Wilson drew up a manifesto, linking the economic and political crisis to the "crisis of human culture." They condemned the system which "depends on the exploitation of the many for the profit of few" and demanded the expulsion of the "ruling castes" and a "temporary dictatorship of the class-conscious workers."[9] They now felt as Gold had felt a decade earlier that the creation

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[8]Edmund Wilson, "Foster and Fish," New Republic (December 24, 1930), p. 162.

[9]Edmund Wilson, Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972, pp. 222-223.

and development of a new and vital culture was inevitably tied to the destruction of the old system along with the creation of a new one. Their manifesto was not published, however, because they later joined over thirty writers and intellectuals in their support of the communist presidential candidates, Foster and Ford, issuing a pamphlet in its stead called "Culture and Crisis." In this move, they formally extended hands to the communist writers, acknowledging their place and their significance.

The reason so many liberals were attracted to the communists was that they seemed to be the only alternative to the corrupt and inept system of capitalism. Every day the representatives of this system seemed more foolish, more unreliable, and their theories more deceptive, while the communists seemed more confident, more trustworthy and reliable. Wilson, who had been as obviously impressed with William Foster's performance at the inquiries of the Fish Committee as he was disappointed in that of the American politicians, observed that the communists despite all their vices "have the great advantage in America of knowing exactly what they want and having adopted an uncompromising policy to get it."[10]

The President, refusing to help the poor while pouring money into the private corporations, adamantly denied

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[10]"Foster and Fish," New Republic (December 24, 1930), p. 162.

the existence of the crisis. The contradictions at the heart of capitalist society were reaching a point where to ignore them would have been to ignore the matter of one's own survival. If the writer wanted to get into the thick of life, he no longer had to travel to Spain or France; New York and Chicago, even the small towns of the Midwest and the South were throbbing with all the vitality of great social conflicts. The past seemed drab in contrast with the promise of the future. And it seemed that Hoover and his pals belonged to the past while Foster and his comrades promised the future.

In view of the this feeling, Wilson's support of Gold in the Gold-Wilder controversy becomes understandable:

> Now, this magazine has, of course, no prejudice against Thornton Wilder--his books have been often enough praised in its pages to invalidate this charge. But, on the other hand, it considers Michael Gold also an important writer whose critical opinions have a special interest, since he is one of the only American critics of any literary ability who writes about books from the Marxist point of view. Most of our critics, like most other Americans, have no central point of view--they are in the habit of merely sampling different kinds of books and writing down the various thoughts that come into their heads. Does not the very outcry which Mr. Gold has provoked show up the insipidity and pointlessness of most of our criticism?[11]

Utilizing the "Weapons of Criticism"

> So the writers found that they could fight with weapons blessed in the name of politics aganst their old

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[11]Edmund Wilson, "The Economic Interpretation of Wilder," New Republic, 1930, Shores of Light, p. 500.

> enemy, now conceived as a dominant class seeking to keep down the creative masses, from this new standpoint. Flaubert who had counseled that hatred of the bourgeosie was the beginning of virtues was not contradicted by Marx, but transcended by him. Through the Marxist view of the world history, individual hatred could be enlarged into class antagonism, victory by rebellion into victory by revolution. Communism answered both the writer's negative recoil from things as they were and his positive desire for things as they should be.[12]

In the thirties, Gold discovered that the "weapons" he had used for years were being taken up by the more established writers. What he had claimed in "Towards Proletarian Art" was now being polished and formulated by those who a decade earlier had merely shrugged their shoulders at such talk. Until the mid-thirties, he had the pleasure of seeing his ideas gain popularity within certain circles and at least recognition within others.

The essential difference between Gold and many of those like Hicks who were "converted" to Marxism in the thirties, or became its fellow travelers, was in the nature of their revolt. As writers they all perceived the future of literature linked to that of struggle. But as men and women who accepted revolutionary politics, they did so more out of their pessimism about the capitalist system than hope for the Socialist one. Many, like Wilson and Dos Passos, never completely identified with Marxism. Their responses and attitudes were more those of observers than actual

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[12]Walter Rideout, Radical Novel in the United States, p. 144.

participants. As the initial enthusiasm about the discovery of a new promise wore off and confusion settled in, the rift which seemed to be closing began to develop into a deep and unbridgeable gap.

The review of Thornton Wilder gave Gold the "official" literary credibility which was no longer restricted to the annals of radical and Marxist literature. Whether considered as a friend or a foe, he was formidable and had to be reckoned with. He kept this status until the mid-thirties when the "United Front" policy turned him rather more into an embarrassment than an asset for communist officials.

Unlike the previous decade, in the thirties Gold did not formulate many new literary ideas. This period was the time to realize those ideas in practice. In the new decade, he basically presented the same ideas in a more mature, polished and assertive manner. Some of the old emotionality of his earlier work now disappeared into the firm and clear anger of his later essays.

The review of Wilder and his editorial "Notes of the Month" in the September, 1930, issue of the New Masses (entitled "Proletarian Realism" in the Anthology) best represent his works and ideas during the depression decade. Their study is also helpful because while the Wilder review mainly negates a certain view of literature, the basis of his works is formed by this negation. In the other essay

he expands and defines a positive formulation for literature. Thus in many ways the two complement and clarify one another.

"Prophet of the Genteel Christ"

> A group of people losing sleep over a host of notions that the rest of the world has out-grown several centuries ago; one duchess's right to enter a door before another; the word orders in a dogma of the church; the divine rights of the kings, especially of bourbons.[13]

Gold begins his review of Wilder with the above quote from Wilder's first book, The Cabala. Listing the themes Wilder writes about, Gold complains:

> And this to date, is the garden cultivated by Mr. Thornton Wilder. It is a museum, it is not a world. In this devitalized air move the wan ghosts he has called up, each in "romantic" costume. It is an historic Junkshop over which our author presides.[14]

The issue here is not of course why Wilder does not write of the proletariat, etc., but the way he treats his characters. It is not a problem of politics, although it could be analyzed from a political point of view as well. The issue, although insufficiently elaborated by Gold, concerned a certain view and style of writing. Wilder's characters according to his own descriptions are insignificant and outdated yet he:

> hints their palace mustiness is a most important fact in the world of today. He writes with a brooding seriousness of them as if all the Gods were watching their little lavendar tragedies.[15]

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[13] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 197.

[14] Ibid., p. 199. [15] Ibid., p. 198.

It is this contradiction between the lightness and insignificance of Wilder's themes and the seriousness with which he treats them that makes his style range from a "diluted Henry James" to a "diluted and veritable Anatole France."

It would be legitimate for the author to use the past or characters from the past in order to enrich the meaning and depth of his work, in order to demonstrate and represent his point better. But Gold's objection to Wilder is that his characters have neither the vigor nor the vitality of those ancient figures they are modelled after, nor do they signify anything pertinent about the present. They become simply empty shells without the kernel, dangling marionettes, bewildered ghosts. Gold asked Wilder where America was in his works: He demanded this "nativism" because Wilder "offered himself as a spiritual teacher; therefore one may say: Father what are your lessons? How will your teaching help the 'spirit' trapped in American Capitalism?"[16]

Many would claim that Gold is concerned only with the temporal while the value of literature and its themes are eternal. They would join Eliot, who in his "commentary" in the journal Criterion had claimed "Art, we feel, aspires to the condition of the timeless; and communist art, according to the sentence of those who foretell what it is to

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[16]Ibid., p. 201.

be, is bound to the temporal."[17] Having previously discussed Gold's concept of historicity, I here would like just to expand briefly upon it. Neither Gold nor any of the Marxist writers claimed that art and literature do not present certain "universal concepts" or that they do not possess "eternal" qualities. But neither can one deny that even concepts which we have come to accept as "eternal" such as love, hate, war, and so on all mean differently to people of different races, classes and culture. All these abstractions lose their eternity as soon as a writer begins to describe them, to give them the color of their time and place. It is, in fact, this historicity of a work of art which gives such variety to it, which makes love look and act so differently in Homer than in Cervantes, Voltaire, Fielding, Lawrence, James, or Eliot.

Indeed eternity is a very dull place if it loses its historical stages, for then literature depicting it would become as boring as the winged Angels in the Bible, Koran, and Torat. In fact Eliot's own "Wasteland" is an example of how the past can be used in a contemporary work of art, but used only in a modern sense and meaning. Thus from a different point of view, literature's worth, its "eternal" value is precisely inherent in its historicity, in the fact that it presents a specific historical stage and yet

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[17] Criterion (XII, 1932-33), p. 248; cited in Telos, (#18, Winter 1973-74), p. 107.

demonstrates its link in the endless and never-changing course of history. Brecht says it well when he states:

> Whenever the works of art handed down to us allow us to share the emotions of other men, of men of a bygone period, different social classes, etc., we have to conclude that we are partaking in interests which were universally human. These men now dead represented the interest of classes that gave a lead to progress. It is a very different matter when Fascism today conjures up on the grandest scale emotions which for most of the people who succumb to them are not determined by interest.[18]

Without that historicity, the attempt to become "spiritual" becomes mere formal matter; it is deprived of the passion and vitality which comes from reality. It becomes a "newly fashionable literary religion that centers around Jesus Christ the First British Gentleman. It is a pastel, pastiche, dilettante religion, with the true neurotic blood and fire. . . ."[19]

The charge is that without passion there could be no spirit to the work of art. Without relation to contemporary reality, to the lives that are daily made and destroyed, there can exist no great literature: Bereft of the reality of its passion all that remains at best is good craftsmanship.

Who Needs the Bourgeoisie?

One of Gold's greatest shortcomings was his view

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[18] Brecht on Theatre, p. 146.

[19] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 200.

and appraisal of what was called "bourgeois art." In his article on "Proletarian realism" Gold states that:

> Proletarian realism deals with the real conflicts of men and women who work for a living. It has nothing to do with the sickly mental states of the idle Bohemians, their subtleties, their sentimentalities, their fine-spun affairs. The worst example and the best of what we do not want to do is the spectacle of Proust, master-masturbator of the bourgeois literature. We know the suffering of hungry, persecuted and heroic millions is enough of a theme for anyone, without inventing these precious silly little agonies.[20]

Essentially Gold's attempt was to boycott the "bourgeoisie," literally to eliminate it from the proletarian literature, to ignore its style, to denounce its achievements.

Part of the reason for this attitude was what Folsom explained in his "Introduction" to the Gold Anthology; Gold was like "the black militant today who is so intent on building the dignity of his own people that he denies the white race any gift or virtue."[21] In his struggle to build a proletarian culture, Gold was pushed to the extreme of completly negating that of the bourgeoisie.

This explains the reason for Gold's attitude but does not justify it. Certainly Marx and Engels, who developed their own theories from bourgeois thinkers such as Hegel, Feurbach, Rousseau, Smith, Ricardo, Saint Simon and others, did not negate the achievements of this class; nor

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[20]Ibid., p. 206.

[21]Ibid., p. 17.

did they forget its great literature, respecting the works of Shakespeare, Goethe, Dickens, Gaskell, and above all the royalist Balzac.

Of course, Gold's position was challenged by Marxist critics themselves. Those writing for and in charge of another Marxist literary magazine Partisan Review, men like Phillip Rahv and Wendell Phillips, had serious objections to such a narrow and one-sided attitude. Along with Farrell, they also demanded more autonomy for art, more separation from politics, than the editors and critics of the New Masses allowed. Some of their criticism was relevant and well taken, especially because they were more theoretical, more acquainted with both the Marxist theory and the various literary theories. This approach provided them with a more logical and analytical attitude towards Marxist aesthetics.

However, these critics were also beset with serious shortcomings. Their interest in Marxism was more on an intellectual level than on that of mass struggle. As Richard H. Pells points out, they were intellectuals for whom "ideas were more interesting than political organizations, essays more important than strikes, personal brilliance more compelling than mass movements. . . ."[22] If the problem with the intellectuals on the New Masses staff was too much involvement in politics and not enough in literature, for

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[22]Richard M. Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams, p. 132.

those of the Partisan Review it was that while preaching a philosophy that demanded active participation in life, they actually refrained from it, confining themselves only to ideas.

Also in their separation of art from politics, they bordered at times on theoretical dualism. Ultimately their concern for aesthetics was more actue than their concern for revolutionary struggle. Yet their criticism of the Sectarian attitudes of Gold and others were sharp and eloquent. For a while they played the role of "loyal opposition." But when the factional disputes within world communist movements became irreconcilable, they took sides more with Trotsky against Stalin.

From this period the attacks hurled by Partisan Review and New Masses at one another took on more the character of phrase-mongering than real criticism. The aim was to destroy the opponent, who gradually took the form of the enemy. Rahv, Farrell, and his group became so obsessed in their struggles that unconsciously the fight against Marxists of other factions took precedence over the struggle against what they all professed to be their main enemy: capitalism. Meanwhile the others prevented the development of any fruitful theoretical polemics by name-callings.

Gold's dictum that proletarian literature must present only the proletariat was repudiated by most Marxists,

and four years later Gold had to modify his view in response to those young writers who, basically echoing him, had demanded that proletarian literature must only depict the proletariat. In fact, many Marxists saw this attitude as one of the basic shortcomings of proletarian literature.

Since the proletariat did not live in a vacuum, but in relation to the society as a whole, it could only be defined and "find" itself in terms of other classes within the society and its relation to them. Marxists did not need to portray the bourgeoisie from bourgeois point of view, but they certainly needed to know and depict it in their works. Otherwise, what they presented would be what they accused the "bourgeois" writers of doing: presenting only a half-world. Radek in his speech to the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, saw this problem well:

> The failing of this literature lies not only in the fact that it has not yet fully mastered artistic form, that it presents as yet little more than a simple chronicle of the history of proletarian struggle. Its main shortcoming is that its authors in their tales and stories, do not go beyond portrayal of the immediate struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, often confining themselves to direct portrayal of the economic struggle of the proletariat. . . . Proletarian art cannot content itself with the class struggle alone. It should describe the processes that are going on in the classes themselves--their way of life, their psychology, their development, their strivings.[23]

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[23] Soviet Writers' Congress, 1934, The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p. 136.

Radek mentioned the failing of proletarian writers to present life as a whole and criticized their attempt to "squeeze the whole world into this narrow framework, and all that exists for them in this world is the proletariat and the bourgeoisie."[24]

For a man like Gold who was reared on the great bourgeois writers, one who never stopped appreciating great works of literature and art, denial of any merit to bourgeois writers, or the assertion that there was nothing to be learned from them, was at best self-contradictory. Every advance, every step forward by one class is a step forward and advance for humanity as a whole. Thus when the Marxists claimed a certain theory of literature, they did so not only because it served the cause of the proletariat. They also did so because its advanced nature and the new potentials helped the field of aesthetics as a whole. The achievements of the bourgeoisie in the realms of science, aesthetics and other fields of thought did not merely enhance the cause of one class, but that of humanity as a whole. What socialist scientist in his right mind would state that socialist science had nothing to learn from the bourgeoisie? Yet there existed many critics of writers who claimed there was nothing to be gained from the great and vast tradition of bourgeois literature, that creating new literature did not

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[24]Ibid., p. 146.

involve the process of criticizing and at the same time developing the past.

The proletariat as a class could not exist without the bourgeoisie; how, then, could proletarian literature be created without both negating and affirming that of the bourgeoisie? Part of this view came from a confused view of the role of literature in relation to politics, for literature, like science or any other field, is related to society as a whole, at the same time possessing its own internal laws and contradictions. At times reactionary writers have even more to offer in terms of the form and technique than do the proletarians. Brecht, who was able to put his political bias and literary skill in their proper perspectives, understood this very well. He uses the methods of many bourgeois writers and praises Claudel, a reactionary writer, because: "In such ways people who have nothing new in mind have none the less done pioneering work for the new technique."[25]

Lenin, who was no writer, and whose revolutionary order none can doubt, was very careful in his appraisal of writers and artists. His appraisal of Tolstoy and his relation to Gorky who at times vacillated between allegiance to the Bolsheviks and denunciation of them as murderers and butchers testifies to this fact. In a review of A Dozen

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[25] Brecht on Theatre, p. 68.

Knives in the Back of the Revolution (Paris, 1921)--written by the white guard Arkady Averchenko--against the Russian Revolution, Lenin praises the writer for his skillful depiction of the life of the old and rich Russian landowners and capitalists. He charges that the author does not describe himself and Trotsky well because "to describe them skillfully one must know what they are." This Averchenko does not know. But his "burning hatred makes some--in fact most--of his stories amazingly vivid."[26] At a time when the young Soviet Republic was most virulently attacked on all fronts by the likes of Averchenko, Lenin writes: "In my opinion some of these stories are worth reprinting. Talent should be encouraged."[27] But for most proletarian writers in the U.S. and for the custodians of culture in the U.S.S.R. during the thirties, the only talent to be encouraged was one adhering to their dictates. The rest, not blessed with their approval, were doomed.

Not fully grasping the relation between literature and revolution, Gold became contradictory in his attitude. On the one hand as a literary man, one who was conscious of the merits of bourgeois writers, he could not close his eyes to their achievements, nor could he limit all art to the sphere of politics; on the other hand, he could never

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[26]V. J. Lenin, "A Capably Written Little Book" (Lenin on Literature and Art (Moscow: Progress Pub., 1970), p. 156.

[27]Ibid., p. 157.

completely come to terms with the problem of both criticizing and developing the works of great bourgeois writers. He could at one point denounce writers--both of the right and left--for not being political enough, and at the next point in defense of a writer (here Upton Sinclair) declare:

> A writer must in the last analysis be judged by his work; not by his private morals or party affiliations. . . . Party affiliations are of life and death importance on the political field, but it is almost impossible to approach literature and art in the party spirit. . . .[28]

At his best Gold could offer some sharp criticism and great insight into the faults of other writers. At his worst, reducing the work of art to its "bourgeois" or "proletarian" qualities, he had already condemned it. No more a critic, he became like a religious fanatic passing anathema and excommunicating the sinners.

On the Question of Style

In the May, 1930, issue of the New Masses, Joshua Kunitz, a prominent and veteran Marxist critic under the pseudonym J. Q. Neets wrote:

> We also need literary craftsmanship, technique. . . . We must learn from the bourgeoisie just as the brougeoisie had once learned from the aristocracy.

In the June issue Gold, in response to a reader's letter and Kunitz's suggestion, wrote:

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[28] New Masses, December 1929.

> His advice that the proletarian writer study Wilder for style seemed to me nothing but the old academic banalism. Would you tell a young Mayakovsky to study Chekhov or Tolstoy for style? Would you tell a young Lenin to study Walter Lippman? Would you tell a young Jack London to give up his own natural instincts and make himself over in the image of a William Dean Howells? (p. 22)

The last statement, of course, presupposes that in a literary work instinct is inherently more valuable than craftsmanship, than conscious striving, and that if a Jack London controlled and channelled his instincts he would inevitably turn into a William Dean Howells. This attitude towards idolization of instinct at the expense of intellect was Gold's literary Achilles' Heel, and to the last it remained with him. As mentioned before, in the early twenties it led to an adoration of primitivism; while in trying to be scientific, in reality it stood opposed to science.

Gold's view of instinct as opposed to craftsmanship at times borders on an obscuring dualism. He sets the two against each another, so that inevitably one has to be lost at the expense of the other. In this respect he was the other side of the coin from the advocates of art for art's sake, who were exclusively devoted to the idea of literature as a craft. From their point of view the writer's whole pre-occupation is with the matter of craft, with the question of skill, a conscious attempt to deprive the work of its passion, of its instinctual response to the world. Thus, the finished work becomes a cluster of crystalline

words creating an object of "pure" beauty. Probably part of Gold's insistence upon instinct stemmed from reaction to the prevailing over-emphasis upon craft.

The writers who treated literature in this manner were like pilots who in their air-conditioned cockpits relished the art of war, the stream-lined beauty of their weapons. This perspective separated form from content and reduced it only to a matter of literary craftsmanship. In reaction to this theory, the question of literary style for Gold became almost anathema. Setting skill against instinct rather than seeing it as a necessary development of it, he glorified one at the expense of the other:

> . . . if a man has something new to say, as all proletarian writers have, he will learn to say it clearly in time, if he writes long enough.
>
> And his material and his proletarian character will create a new style in the world which will be different and better than the dead splendors of all the Wilders and Peters in the world.
>
> We are beginning something new. This is something professors can never understand. Yes we are engaged in an international collective research, into a new life and a new art.[29]

There is a great truth in Gold's assertion that the necessity and desire for expression involve the creation of new forms, that, to paraphrase Hegel, form is nothing but content turned into form and content is nothing but form turned into content. The concept is radical in that rather than separating form and content and placing them in

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[29] Ibid.

opposition to one another, it integrates them so that one flows from the other. Such a view does not impose restrictions upon style; rather it opens the door to experimentations in style that are as varied as the subjects they describe:

> Within this new world of proletarian literature, there are many living forms. It is dogmatic folly to seize upon any single literature form and erect it into a pattern for all proletarian literature.[30]

This idea was very similar to Brecht's who carried on a long and protracted struggle against Lukacs' essentially conservative ideas on form. Becht complained that Lukacs in his adherence to the forms of the classical realist writers such as Balzac, in his adamant rejection of the great recent writers such as Joyce and Dos Passos on the basis that their forms are decadent, reduces the question of realism to the level of formalism and in so doing also deprives the Marxist writer of the benefit derived from the modern writer's experimentation.

The new realism did not merely concern the matter of form or a photographic representation of life, but was involved in using any form which best reflected and portrayed the reality. The best Marxist writers and artists such as Brecht, Pisarev, Eisenstein, and Meyerhold were pioneers in attempting many new experimentations both in

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[30]"Proletarian Realism," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 206.

terms of form and technique. As Brecht claims, "Literary works cannot be taken over like factories, or literary forms of expression like industrial methods." He asks for a realism which would be free of convention and aesthetic restrictions, one which did not "cling to well-tried rules":

> We must not abstract the one and only realism from certain given works, but shall make a lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered. We shall take care to not ascribe realism to a particular historical form of novel belonging to a particular period, Balzac's or Tolstoy's, for instance, so as to set up purely formal and literary criteria of realism. We shall not restrict ourselves to speaking of realism in cases where one can (e.g.) smell, look, feel whatever is depicted, where "atmosphere" is created and stories develop in such a way that the characters are physiologically stripped down.[31]

Brecht claims that the workers not only do not shun new experimentation, but in fact welcome it, and in the case of his own plays makes suggestions which are themselves new, innovative, and free of conventions.

But the difference between Gold and Brecht is that Brecht is a very conscious craftsman, and that he not only does not reject the "bourgeois writers" but praises and learns a great deal from even the most "decadent" of them. To say that the subject, the need for new forms of expression, creates the new forms and styles is only the first step which needs to be accompanied by a second one:

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[31] Brecht on Theatre, p. 109.

conscious striving to develop and polish the form, learning from the greater writers, and through that perfecting the individual's style.

But Gold's insistence that only the "material" and "proletarian" character of the writer are enough smacked of a dangerous voluntarism, indirectly minimizing the role of consciousness, the significance of literary aesthetics. In fact, proletarian writers more than any others needed this skill; being new and unschooled in the literary craft and tradition they had all the more conscientiously to try and understand the craft which was involved in the creation of a literary work. A man like Richard Wright, who like Gold had experienced the agony of oppression and like Gold felt the need and urge to write for and of his people, describes in his autobiography his painstaking efforts to try to understand logically the reality he had deeply felt and his conscious attempts at developing his literary style:

> Working nights, I spent my days in experimental writing, filling endless pages with stream-of-consciousness Negro dialect, trying to depict the dwellers of the Black belt as I felt and saw them. . . . Perhaps my writing was more an attempt at understanding than self-expression. . . .
>
> But something was missing in my imaginative efforts; my flights of imagination were too subjective, too lacking in reference to social action. I hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living, for a knowledge of life about me, for eyes to see the bony structures of personality, for theories to light up the shadows of conduct.[32]

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[32]Richard Wright, American Hunger (Perenial Library, Harper and Row Pub., 1977), p. 26.

Not only did Wright hunger for more knowledge, more craftsmanship but he also strove to reach the perfection that a man like Proust had reached in his writing.

There existed, therefore, a contradiction in Gold's view of style, which on one hand allowed free experimentation but on the other hand denied the necessity of developing these forms with conscious craftsmanship. This view, dominant throughout the first half of the thirties, created many works which were cinematic in their style, catching reality in its dramatic essence. But most of this literature lacked enough depth and intensity.

One reason for this was that it was assumed once a writer takes sides, once he wills to write for the proletariat, his problems are almost solved. But a revolutionary view did not merely involve the act of political commitment. What was required was a new and radically different view of reality, of the world as a whole. Many Marxists who were radical in their politics were essentially conservative in other matters. As Sartre points out, in their propaganda, in their concepts of family and many other issues they were at times more bourgeois than the bourgeoisie. The same was true in matters of literature and aesthetics. It so happened that many "apolitical" writers were more radical, more revolutionary, in their view of aesthetics than were the Marxists. Brecht, who was a Marxist, was closer in aesthetics (and claimed this) to many "bourgeois writers" than to the Marxists.

Of course most proletarian writers had the added problem of writing about experiences with which they were unfamiliar. Living in a society which by its nature divides the manual from the intellectual, even those from proletarian background were isolated from that background once they took writing as a profession.

So the writer whose level of consciousness (Marxist ideology) was in contradiction with the reality of his life rather than using that consciousness to depict the world he knew at times forced himself to write of what he did not. This attempt was more out of a sense of moral obligation and guilt, often resulting in works with passion but little depth, with dramatization, but little psychological dimension, with conviction but not persuasion enough.

It is little surprising that Gold himself in the mid-thirties turned mainly to criticism and journalism, and despite all his promising future never finished another novel after Jews Without Money. In that work he had described the truth of his experiences; but as he drifted from that life he found fewer themes which he knew intimately enough to satisfy both his adherence to truth and the demands of his political conscience.

Gold had more conscientiously than any other radical writer tried to address the problem of art in life. He encouraged writers to go and live with the workers and asked the workers to write fiction, criticism, poetry. But

if such an idea was impractical in the U.S.S.R., it was considered crazy in the U.S. Ultimately the most talented of the writers were influenced greatly by workers' lives and by Marxist thought, but even at the height of their commitment, their prime concern was their art. Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Caldwell, Hughes, and Wright are some of the best examples of this.

Gold, of course, was more aware of this problem in his concrete criticism of the proletarian writers. In his criticism of Upton Sinclair, for example, he points to Sinclair's false and cheerful portrayal of the workers, and in his review of Jack Conroy's The Disinherited, he states:

> For it is noteworthy that your novel has many of the same faults and virtues as other first novels by proletarians. It is semi-autobiographic, which is a virtue. However, in avoiding the sickly introspection of the bourgeois autobiographers of youth, the psychological reality often escapes our young authors. They neglect the major problem of all fiction, which is the creation of full-blooded characters.[33]

This demonstrates that Gold while dealing with abstract concepts made blunders which were corrected once he was faced with the concrete. His criticism of specific works of art are much sharper, more "aesthetic," than are his abstract formulations. While in answer to Kunitz he claims facts are the creator of a new poetry and that "facts are all we need," in his review of Conroy he states:

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[33]"Letter to the Author of a First Book," Change the World, p. 216.

". . . Facts are not enough. There must be a living human man portrayed through whose mind all this is reflected."[34]

In terms of his own literary and critical style Gold was true to his own formulas, and thus his creative and critical writing suffered from the same shortcomings and benefitted from the same advantages.

In his literary criticism rather than merely stating or elaborating upon theories, he makes his points through polemics. Thus, his criticism is a process of negation as well as creation. His definitions are formed through this dynamic process and gain a vigor and vitality of their own. Since there exists a unity and harmony between his personal, aesthetic, and social beliefs, at his best he could integrate all three and create many dimensions to the ideas expressed.

His main problem is in dealing with theory and abstract formulation. While in dealing with the concrete criticizing specific points, he becomes sharp; in dealing with his own definitions and generalizations, he is at times both confused and confusing. Relying on instinct and emotion, Gold misses the clarity and coherence of an anlytical mind.

In his writing he creates direct and clear pictures with words; his fiction gains camera-like quality. For

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[34]Ibid., p. 217.

this reason some of his best writing is journalistic in essence. This is perhaps one reason which deterred Gold from developing his fictional style. He spent most of his time writing columns for the New Masses, Daily Worker, and other Marxist papers. That form of writing is more agitational and immediate in its style. It must address tangible day to day issues; it must appeal to the emotions in order to provoke action and immediate response. With fiction, on the other hand, it is not so much the day to day issues as the unfolding of a whole range of events which can cover a day or a century. The writer goes beyond the everyday affairs; there is no need for immediate response. Instead the reader needs to sink in, to contemplate, to integrate, and conclude. It might take ten years for a writer to finish his work. But ten days will be too long, too late for a newspaper column or a critical review.

One thing Gold suffered from both in his fiction and literary criticism was his inability to maintain an aesthetic distance from his theme. In a work of art there is a need for identification with and separation from the subject. While the identification gives the work its "spirit," its "vitality," the separation provides it with depth and dimension. The very act of narration or description necessitates a certain distance between the creator and his creation. This distance stems from the author's conscious control over this theme. A Tom Buchannan would

never portray himself the way Fitzgerald did, because Fitzgerald, as an observer, can analyze his characters and penetrate into them in a manner they could never do. So the very facts, the very acts which would seem natural to a real life Tom Buchanan, seem unnatural and unacceptable to the writer and the reader in their view of the fictional Tom.

At times in Gold's writings, however, the distance between the creator and his creation, observer and observed, the writer and his subject becomes blurred and confused, leaving behind residues of "pure" emotions. Unable to depict real passion, they merely fade into outbursts of sentimentality.

Jews Without Money

> The essential pattern of Michael Gold's bewildered ghetto childhood and wretched adolescence, and of his response to the conditions of his life, is true of every time and culture in which poverty is felt and resisted. Gold's experience is really unique only in what he made out of it: a simple book, rich in clarity, force, truth and art.
> Micahel B. Folsom, The Nation (February 28, 1966), p. 245.

> The characters are not proletarians (though he wants them to be): They are merely poor people.
> Melvin P. Levy, New Republic (March 26, 1930), p. 161.

> Gold is the Gorky of the American Ghetto. Jews Without Money kindles pity until it is a flame of protest. Gold makes human understanding an art that shames mere trick technique and sophistry.
> Samuel Orintz, cited on the cover of Jews Without Money (New York: Avon, 1963).

> He had just published and had been having considerable success with his book about the New York East Side, Jews Without Money, and the Communist critics were scolding him for having made this a volume of personal memoirs that centered around an individual, the official theory being that, in a Communist work of art, there ought not be a protagonist, since the subject should be always the group.
> Edmund Wilson, "The Literary Class War," New Republic (May 4, 1932), The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties, p. 536.

> This irrepressible Jewish messianism, estranged from its traditional soil, finally discovered a pseudo-religious outlet in communism.
> Solliptzin, Congress Weekly (Vol. 24, No. 11, March 18, 1957), p. 12.

In Jews Without Money Gold claims: "There are enough pleasant superficial liars writing in America, I will write a truthful book of poverty; I will mention bedbugs."[35] In that novel and his numerous other writings, Gold tries to demonstrate the power of money and its significance by meticulously portraying the lack of it.

The novel has many different levels to it. On one level it is about the subject suggested by its title, the Jews without money, living in New York's East Side ghettos. More specifically, it describes the growth and development of a little Jewish boy named Mickey. At the core of the novel is the story of the poverty of America, of the tenements mushrooming at its heart of hearts, mocking its claims to liberty, equality and justice. This poverty is described with deep emotion and anger. The first three pages, like

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[35]Gold, Jews Without Money, p. 71.

frames from a movie camera, present its different aspects in the movement and noises of one street. They capture the whores with "meaty legs," mothers with "heroic bosoms," kids dancing, bums slugging, faces peering out of windows, push cart peddlers howling, dogs barking, livery stable coach drivers lounging, pimps, gamblers, bums and "peanut politicians"--all crowding in and out of the street. The noise of this one street, symbolizing the tenement, always remained with Gold: "even in sleep I could hear it; I can hear it now" (p. 14).

Words are slippery unless they are defined within the context of daily life. Webster's Dictionary defines poverty as "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially accepted amount of money, or material possessions." But Gold breathes life into the word. His concern is not only with this lack, this material deprivation so neatly packed and condensed into a series of words, but also with the effects of the thing. Poverty becomes not only a word, not only a concept, but a state of being, an everyday fact of life which should not be tolerated, yet is accepted as a part of life like bread and water. His purpose is to demystify the dominant myths around and about it. In doing so he reveals it in all its brutality and simplicity. Like a series of words that are put together to create a definition, in the novel various life experiences are woven together in order to define poverty and deprivation.

Once More Fighting the Purists

The overnight success of Jews Without Money was largely due to the vehement responses it created from both the right and the left. As Anette Rubinstein points out in "Jews Without Money--Not Jews Without Love," it even created controversies in the Jewish press with the

> vehement, unconvincing denials that such phenomena as Jewish prostitutes or gangsters, or parental curses did in fact, exist, and the firm assertions that, even if they did, it was a shandah (shame) for the neighbors, and no office for a friend, to portray them.[36]

It is important for our purposes to study the novel both in terms of the responses to it and as the basis for an evaluation of Gold's literary ideas applied in practice.

It is ironic that both the leftist critics and those to their right spent more time appraising the book from a political perspective rather than a literary one. The "pure" Marxists felt Gold had left out the struggles of the working class, had paid no attention to the significant garment strikes occurring at the time the novel describes. The others thought the book was too "political," pointing to the sudden "conversion" of the hero at the end. But very few denied the fact that the novel, coming from the heart, appealed to the heart and that, as Folsom states, "we live through Gold's experience, and we put down the

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[36] Jewish Currents [Vol. 14, No. 10 (159), November 1960], p. 8.

book a little changed ourselves: the gentile is turned Jew: the comfortable suffer."[37]

One significant point about the novel is that in it as well as in his other works of fiction Gold remains faithful to his own dictum:

> There is no "style"--there is only clarity, force, truth in writing--if a man has something new to say, as all proletarian writers have, he will learn to say it clearly in time, if he writes long enough.[38]

In his novel, therefore, Gold set himself the task of writing the "truth." Our concern cannot, however, be merely with the fact that he presented the truth, but with how, through what literary means, he tried this and with the extent to which he was successful in doing so. Did he present the "truth" as a political propagandist, stripping life of its vague abstractions, showing it stark naked, through deliberately avoiding subtleties? Or did he present it as a writer, creating the complexities, and multidimensionality of life, intermingling and yet keeping separate facts, emotions, and thought?

In Jews Without Money, as in his numerous short stories, Gold is not overtly political. He unfolds the story to us through unfolding the life, actions and interactions of his characters. If at the end we respond to the realities depicted in the book, it is not because of the

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[37]"The Book of Poverty," The Nation (February 28, 1966), p. 244.

[38]The New Masses (June 1930), p. 22.

author's political sermons, but because the development of the story itself naturally leads us toward certain conclusions. If the novel is effective it is because it is embedded in Gold's deeply-felt life experiences and realized into fiction through his naive and yet appealing artistry. Ironically enough, he was criticized for this political "sin" by some of his more single-minded Marxist colleagues in the same way that he had criticized other writers like Hemingway, Shaw or Wells. He had written without "reference to the mass," he left out the great "shirt waist strike and the Triangle Fire."[39] But Gold stuck to his cherished belief that one writes what one knows, and it is mechanical as well as in bad taste to smuggle in what the writer does not know enough about simply in order to appease the political critics.

As Wilson reports, Gold in his answer to Levy's otherwise appreciative criticism, found him "too dogmatic in his application of the proletarian canon."[40] To Gold proletarians were "pioneers" in the creation of a new literature and they could not afford to have "fixed minds," for there is "nothing finished or dogmatic in proletarian

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[39]Melvin P. Levy, "Mike Gold," New Republic (March 26, 1930), p. 161.

[40]"Literary Class War," New Republic (May 4, 1932), Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties, p. 537.

thought and literature."[41] He repudiated any standards or models which all writers had to imitate. "Each writer has to find his own way. All that unites us, and all we have for a guide, is the revolutionary spirit. . . ."[42] Such an approach to literature stood in direct opposition to the conservative barriers many Marxist writers and critics imposed upon their own and their fellow writers' creations. The admission that in the field of aesthetics Marxists were only "pioneers" who had no set dogmas, but instead were in search of new forms and new ways of expression, certainly produced a far healthier and more liberating effect than the smug assertions of many radicals who had already discovered, sealed, and stamped the "correct" aesthetics as well as political formulas.

As for his omission of the proletarian struggles in his novel, Gold's reply was as simple and eloquent as his earlier defense of truth in writing:

> To my mind it is the task of each proletarian writer to describe that portion of proletarian life with which he is most saturated. . . . Comrade Levy . . . is disappointed because I . . . did not include the Triangle fire and the great garment strikes. Yet I could do nothing else honestly and emotionally at the time. I could only describe what I had seen with my own eyes. I did not want to falsify the emotional values and bring in material that I did not feel. I do not believe any good writing can come out of this mechanical application of proletarian literature.

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[41] Cited in Ibid.

[42] Ibid., p. 537.

> In America, where everything is confused, we must begin humbly with the things we know best.[43]

Levy's naively mechanical criticism was also extended to Gold's portrayal of his characters. It was charged, for example, that the father's failure in the novel was a case of individual bad luck and that the characters' failures are not "inevitable; they are individual accidents." Of course, the whole purpose of fiction is to demonstrate certain realities of life through portrayal of individual lives. The abstract concepts forming the author's point of view, as well as the reality of the situation he presents, come to life credibly through portrayal of individual lives and of the "accidents" forming those lives. The sum-total of the novel is derived through the interaction of those individuals with the outside world. If Gold had presented individual failures only with regard to and as a result of their class situation, he would have created an artificial and one-dimensional world in which the individual is a puppet, a non-entity. But what Gold was able to achieve is precisely a multi-dimensional world in which the events occur as a result of individual actions and reactions, as a result of good and bad luck, and ultimately as a result of their social surroundings. Thus, the class-situation becomes the framework within which the individuals interact, rather than becoming the inexorable hand of fate striking

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[43]Ibid., pp. 537-538.

thunder and lightning at the helpless workers whose failures are merely "inevitable."

In fact precisely because Gold writes the truth rather than reducing it to dogma, his characters and their actions become believable and, therefore, leave their impressions upon the reader deeply and effectively. The novel is according to Folsom 85 percent autobiographical.[44] Yet as discussed earlier, the "I" of its narrator melts and becomes one with the social forces which shape his life. This is the new concept of writing a personal life history, one practiced by other prominent radicals such as Joseph Freeman in his autobiography, An American Testament. From this perspective the life of the individual is not written merely in order to amaze and to amuse, but for the purpose of making a statement as well as a revelation about larger social and political matters. The life of the individual gains significance in terms of the world around him, and the world gains fuller meaning through its presentation. The characters in the novel are representative of various social types, yet they preserve their individuality. They are described in the light of the book's ultimate concern, poverty, yet they are also portrayed through their own peculiarities. Thus while the theme of the book is universal, going beyond the limits of its time and place, it is yet

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[44] "Book of Poverty," Nation (February 28, 1966), p. 243.

described through the medium of a specific historical time, place and situation. The novel is both about poor Jewish immigrants on New York's East-Side and about poverty which cannot be confined to the Jewish poor only.

I mentioned that the characters are multi-dimensional; they are so without losing the historicity of their social class and background. If Fitzgerald's Tom, Daisy, and Jordan act as much out of their individual peculiarities as those of their class and wealth, Mickey, Esther, Louis One Eye and Nigger are also products of the conditions which gave birth to them. If the characters in Edith Wharton's or Henry James' novels value their social norms and principles to the extent that they lose their identity without them, the same can be said of Gold's characters.

Gold's characters manage to lose their abstract quality in relation to the magic touch of reality in their existence. Unlike many proletarian novelists, Gold seldom commits the sin of portraying his workers as absolutely pure, and his bosses as purely black. Adhering to the principle of writing what he knew, he seldom treats the rich in his works. When they are presented, it is in the shape of the hero's father's boss or the landlord, with whom Gold was well-acquainted. Thus, in Jews Without Money, unlike most working class novels, the rich are present through their absence. Their power is felt through the institutions they have created, and the misery they have caused. Unlike a

Mrs. Gaskell who had dubious feelings towards them, Gold feels no doubts in his emotions and thoughts. He avoids the pitfall she leads herself into in presenting the wealthy in an unnatural and unconvincing light.

Those characters he knows he presents well. In the November, 1928, issue of the New Masses in an essay called "In Foggy California," Gold's otherwise appreciative review of Upton Sinclair had found one major flaw in the old writer: "He has too successfully deodorized his mind."[45] Gold criticizes Sinclair's sunny portrayal of the workers stating:

> And I will confess my own obsession; I dislike pictures of cheerful and virtuous poverty such as Upton Sinclair often draws. Anyone who has been really poor during a lifetime becomes a little morbid, if he has any brains. Like a stoical life prisoner, he doesn't want cheery church ladies to come and comfort him. If he can escape, he will do so; that is all that counts; the rest is bunk.[46]

In his fiction Gold sets out to draw the gloomy as well as the cheerful side of the poor. His characters are not always flawless or even sympathetic. The view of the poor is not the censured, sterilized, and antiseptic one. Gold's mother, the heroine of the novel, "this brave and beautiful proletarian woman," has her faults. She is strong, calling herself a "work horse"; she would have "stolen or killed" for her family; she helps her neighbors even those she

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[45] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 168.

[46] Ibid., p. 169.

disliked and disapproved of, and yet she could not rid herself of the prejudice bred in her by ignorance and persecution: "My mother was opposed to the Italians, Irish, Germans and every other variety of Christians with whom we were surrounded."[47] Elsewhere in his short story "Password to Thought--To Culture" his mother is presented as an obstacle to development of his life of thought.

Louis One Eye the hated and villainous gangster on their block rapes and forces young girls into prostitution, bullies the ghetto's men, women and children, and is equally hated by them all. Yet his relation with his old mother is touching to the point of tenderness. His mother does not see the reality of her son's life, and for her Louis is prepared to make great sacrifices. Louis "ruled the tenement and all hated him, and blamed him for everything." But:

> His old mother, half-crippled, hunched in an old shawl, like some humble dwarf, alone loved Louis. She hobbled about, and on the street and in the grocery store, would stop people and stare into their faces with her dim eyes, and ask: "Why do they say my Louis is a bad boy? My Louis is a good boy." Louis must have loved his mother, too; he helped her up the stairs, he shopped mornings for the groceries, to save her rheumatic legs the pain of walking; he gave her money every week, and bought her dresses.[48]

In an earlier story "A Damned Agitator" which appeared in the New York Call on March 4, 1917, Gold had

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[47] Jews Without Money, p. 163.

[48] Ibid., p. 137.

given the same multi-dimensionality to his hero, a simple strike leader, "tall, tragic, rough-hewn pole." Kurelovitch, the hero of the story, is first described through the eyes of the bosses:

> 'The man is a menace, a mad dog, whose career ought to be stopped before he does more mischief,' said one venerable director, his kind, blue eyes developing a pinkish glare that would have horrified the women folk of his family. 'The scoundrel's probably pocketing half of the strike funds,' declared another director with plump, rosy gills and a full, bald head that glittered like a sunset cloud, as he stunned the long table with a blow of his balled fist.[49]

As the story unfolds, however, we find Kurelovitch to be neither a "mad dog" and "scoundrel," nor the brave and shining hero who, like the commercial Ajax or the commercial John Wayne, sweeps the world of dirt and filth. He is a weary and somber worker, whose starving wife nags him for lack of money and who "had been suddenly hammered into leadership by the crisis of the strike, by reason of his unquenchable integrity and social fire."[50]

The strength of the sad worker comes from his struggle against the bosses; it is not arrogant and overwhelming, it lacks the individual heroism of a Robert Jordan and the daring confidence of a Tom Jones; it is a simple courage and bravery produced out of necessity. This character's strength is inherent in the extremity of the conditions

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[49] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 25.

[50] Ibid., p. 29.

which created it. When he talks to his fellow strikers "The searing phrases would rush from his lips in a wild, stormy music, like the voice of a gale, and as mystic and powerful."[51] This was the secret of his strength, the cause he shared with his fellow workers. Yet the story does not end with the hero's success or failure. Its point is simply to unfold the character of a proletarian leader isolated from the myths which either defile him to the level of inhumanity or elevate him out of the realm of the human world.

All Gold's characters, whether proletarian heroes or villains, have their glories as well as failures. The ignorance, fear, and sordidness surrounding their many lives are the products of their poverty. Gold knew poverty too well to hide its sordidness; he hated it too much to white-wash its effects upon the victims. If after reading him we become a little "wiser and sadder," it is because without the knowledge we would never effectively begin to understand and hate the system.

In Search of the "Natural"

Brecht one stated:

> When something seems "the most obvious thing in the world" it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. What is "natural" must have the force of what is startling. This is the

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[51] Ibid., p. 28.

> only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. People's activity must simultaneously be so and be capable of being different.[52]

The major strength and shortcoming of Gold's fiction lies in the way he presents the "natural," in the manner he exposes the truth. If in Jews Without Money he is not overtly political, spelling out the decorum of "proletarian literature" according to the taste of its more rigid connoisseurs, he does to a great extent present what seems "natural" through the force of "What is startling." He is able to achieve to a modest degree what is the high point of all great writers: the unraveling of the contradictions between the ideal expressed by the theoreticians of the system and the reality, the contradictions between what was presented and what existed. It is only through the unraveling of this contradiction that people become conscious and uneasy at the state of affairs. If some people are made to believe that they are the superior race, that the rest are inferior to them, that the rest are "niggers," "gooks," "Japs," "Wops," and "camel-jocks," it becomes easy for them to lynch, to kill, or to bomb in the name of freedom. As soon as it is revealed that the concept of superiority is false and that freedom never walks hand in hand with slavery, the existing conditions are exposed as undesirable and the myths surrounding them as simply lies. This has

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[52] Brecht on Theatre, p. 71.

been one of the functions of literature: standing in opposition to the established "truth." From Cervantes to Balzac to the present writers, great art has exposed the truth, creating doubt. Gore Vidal's trilogy breaks the myth of American history, startles us into observing Jefferson and Washington as men capable of the worst and not always the best. Brecht's Mother shatters all our expected beliefs about an old woman worker by developing the heroine toward becoming a revolutionary fighter. Habitually we would never give credit to the old, to the "lower orders," to the illiterate, to the "weaker sex." Now we are led to see that things are neither always what they seem to be, nor do they need to remain as they are forever. In Gold's novel as well as in his short fiction we find the same pattern. The prostitutes, the pimps, the gangsters are neither the "scum of the earth" and by nature evil as we are taught since childhood, nor are they the sugary creations of some Hollywood movies. They are men and women forced into degradation by a system which rejects them while feeding upon them. The America presented in the book is not the top-hatted, high-heeled America of Park Avenue, dilettante, bejewelled and confident, but the dirty and filthy slum which in its backwardness and horror competes with the worst ghettoes of the underdeveloped countries. There is little need for dramatization; truth itself is dramatic enough.

This truth is laid bare with simple mastery by Gold. What mars its effects is when he attempts to be what Brecht calls "obvious." In describing Louis One Eye rather than describing the process of his development, he interrupts himself with statements like: "Is there any gangster who is as cruel and heartless as the present legal state?"[53] Louis had wounds: "They were the fatal wounds given him by Society,"[54] or "Everyone went on hating Louis One Eye, and I did too. Now I hate more those who took an East Side boy and turned him into a monster useful to bosses in strikes, and to politicians on election day."[55] These and the sentimental outbursts which eliminate the necessary distance between the writer and his work mar the effects of an otherwise fine narrative. After a touching description of his "humble funny little East Side mother," for example, Gold lapses into:

> Mother! Momma! I am still bound to you by the cords of birth. I cannot forget you. I must remain faithful to the poor because I cannot be faithless to you! I believe in the poor because I have known you. The world must be made gracious for the poor! Momma, you taught me that![56]

Such feelings and emotions should become an integral part of the narrative, rather than standing out from it like

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[53] Jews Without Money, p. 129.

[54] Ibid., p. 128.

[55] Ibid., p. 140.

[56] Ibid., p. 159.

hastily stitched embroidery. Yet Gold is most obvious and sentimental about the things he treasures most.

The conclusion of the novel is a good example of this. It has been time and again criticized for its unexpectedness. As Rideout points out, the whole narrative leaves no solution but the destruction of what has been described. It is understandable why a person with Mickey's background and experience would turn to revolution. But it is not aesthetically justifiable. A boy of his background could have also turned to the life of many of Gold's old chums, that of gangsterism. Or he could have struck it rich and become a Horatio Alger. What forces shaped the boy's consciousness, what led him towards the life struggle? The questions could have been more fully answered. It almost seems as if near the end of the narrative, Gold becomes impatient and decides to "wrap it up."

In his essay on "Proletarian Realism," Gold had stated:

> Swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words, this seems to be one of the principles of proletarian realism. It knows exactly what it believes and where it is going: this makes for its beautiful youthful clarity.[57]

If Jews Without Money does not always possess a "beautiful" youthful clarity," it is nonetheless very much patterned after the formula "cinema in words." The very first pages evoke the scenes of a movie: His street becomes alive:

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[57]Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 207.

> I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy. It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces.
>
> Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks.
>
> People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried.
>
> A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang.
>
> At the livery stable coach drivers lounged on a bench. They hee-hawed with laughter, they guzzled cans of beer.
>
> Pimps, gamblers and red-nosed bums; peanut politicians, pugilists in sweaters; tinhorn sports and tall longshoremen in overalls. An endless pageant of East Side life passed through the wicker doors of Jake Wolf's saloon.
>
> The saloon goat lay on the sidewalk, and dreamily consumed a Police Gazette.
>
> East Side mothers with heroic bosoms pushed their baby carriages, gossiping. Horse cars jingled by. A tinker hammered at brass. Junkbells clanged.
>
> Whirlwinds of dust and newspaper. The prostitutes laughed shrilly. A prophet passed, an old-clothes Jew with a white beard. Kids were dancing around the hurdygurdy. Two bums slugged each other.
>
> Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos! The sound of my street lifted like the blast of a great carnival or catastrophe. The noise was always in my ears. Even in sleep I could hear it; I can hear it now.[58]

The novel more than unfolding the interior world of the individuals is a kaleidoscope of colors and moving pictures. This is facilitated because, as some critics have suggested, the book rather than being a novel is a series of sketches strung togehter by a common theme. Folsom states it best, when he describes the book as:

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[58] Jews Without Money, pp. 13-14.

> A miscellany of vignettes, anecdotes, reflections, sketches. Gold often catches in words the same spirit and sense of ghetto life that the Ashcan artists--Sloan, Becker, Bellows--got on stone and canvas. What overall structure the book has is thematic, not narrative. Gold groups his matter more or less by subject--Jews and Christians, Sex, Economics, though there is no sense of the structure of sociological analysis either. Within his chapters however, and their numerous subdivisions, Gold works with a firm hand developing a theme or a short narrative, forming it full, and bringing its satisfying resolution. The book doesn't seem miscellaneous.[59]

In a sense the novel becomes a series of tales told by an old bard, all linked by a common motif and a common theme. The central subject matter, the concept of poverty, becomes the center of a rose, and each sketch a petal opens up rooted in the center and yet moving away from it.

The work as a whole catches the attention of the reader who has had similar experiences, evoking anger and indignation at his own humiliation and suffering; but it also has the merit of appealing to the reader who has never experienced the ghetto life, arousing his anger and indignation at the fact that life should contain such absolute cruelty, and worse that this degradation should be as basic to our society as bread and butter and should be accepted and tolerated.

So in Jews Without Money, Gold fulfills some of his own theories. He also discovers a contradiction: having written the "truth," he finds it inadequate on account of

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[59]"The Book of Poverty," The Nation (February 28, 1966), p. 243.

the truth that he has not written because he has experienced. Similarly, having written with only his heart, he finds it difficult to achieve the necessary aesthetic and intellectual distance to fully expand and exploit his theme.

The First American Writer's Congress

> Even those writers who continue to cling to the old aesthetic attitudes begin to be aware that, if culture is to survive, all men and women who create it, absorb it and cherish it, must unite with those social forces which can save the world from reaction and darkness.[60]

The first American Writer's Congress was convened in New York's Mecca Temple in 1935. The Congress was the first attempt of the Communists to rally and organize writers around a progressive and essentially anti-fascist program. Writers ranging from Mike Gold to Richard Wright to Nathaniel West had signed the call for the Congress out of which the League of American Writers was to be formed. The prestige gained by the Marxists was evident in the size and number in attendance at the Congress: 216 delegates, 150 attending writers including representatives from Mexico, Cuba, Germany, and Japan attended the Congress at Mecca Temple in New York. The number of spectators was estimated at 4,000. The honorary presiding committee included such international luminaries as Aragon, Barbusse, Gide, Malraux, Roeland, Sghers, Becker, Heinrich Mann, Nexo, Gorky, and Sholokov.

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[60]Henry Hart, ed., American Writer's Congress (New York: Int. Publishers, 1935), p. 9.

The Congress was the Communists' first official move away from their "old sectarian" policies, toward the new policy of the "United Front" against Fascism. In so far as there was an admission of the errors in the past theories and practices, this was a move to be welcomed. For as I have discussed in previous sections, the over-zealous, if well-intentioned, moves of the Communist writers and critics had resulted in unnecessary alienation of many intellectuals. It had also closed off many possibilities for the radical writers. But this new move if it were to produce any fruitful results had to also be accompanied with criticism and analysis of the past. It was not enough to assert hastily that there had been past mistakes and relegate all present shortcomings to the bad old days. What was necessary was the formulation of the reasons for those errors negating that part of the past which had become an obstacle and based upon a new formulation.

But what was done was not a self-criticism; the Communists were not half as thorough when it came to their own crucial shortcomings as they were in the case of their opponents. The main source of the change was to be found in the U.S.S.R.'s new "United Front" policy. The "petit bourgeois" writers had to be befriended because they now were potential allies in the fight against fascism. Such a move in itself was necessary. But the problem was in the manner that that move was made.

In that Congress Mike Gold was hailed as "the best loved American revolutionary writer." He was later chosen as the American delegate to the International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture to be held in Paris. This was to be the last time in the decade when Gold would play a major and influential role within the radical literary movement. Although he never publicly disagreed with the new policies, it was obvious that the new diplomatic and gracious policy of "United Front" needed more diplomatic and gracious men to present and represent it. Ironically enough, there was little room left for the "oustanding proletarian" precisely because he wanted to be too close to the proletariat.

Gold's speech, titled "The Workers as an Audience for Writers," was essentially a confirmation of his favorite theme. He hoped:

> May this Congress be the beginning of a great new literature which will reflect truthfully, the struggles of the workers, the soul of the workers, the soul of the basic American human being. May this Congress be another of the landmarks in American history by which our happier descendants will discern the steps in our progress toward a richer and more social life and a more intelligent America.[61]

Three aspects of the conference were of significance both in terms of the Congress and also the further development of radical literary movement. One was the subject discussed by Malcolm Cowley in his paper "What the

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[61]Ibid., p. 16.

Revolutionary Movement Can Do for a Writer." He began by pointing out that the movement could not bring the writer personal salvation, transform or change "third rate bourgeois novelists into great proletarian novelists."[62] What the revolution could do for a writer according to Cowley was what Gold and other proletarians had been saying over the previous years. The significance of this admission was that it was made by a "convert" to Marxism, and that the shift was becoming more prevalent among liberal and progressive writers. The basic tenet of Cowley's essay could be divided into three basic points:

1. The movement offered to the writer an alive, enthusiastic, and eager audience

2. It presented to him a whole range of subject matter, opening new vistas for him both in terms of content and form

3. It provided the writer a wider and deeper perception of himself.[63]

Such a viewpoint did not seem overly optimistic at a period when writers were travelling the country, getting glimpses of the people's lives; when poetry recitals enjoyed an audience of five hundred people, and when those "dangerous," "crude" and "disgusting" Marxists, as they would be termed

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[62]Ibid., p. 59.

[63]"What the Revolutionary Writer Can Do For a Writer," Ibid., pp. 55-65.

in the following decades, were amiably shaking hands with the "renegades" of those later years.

The second significant point about the Congress was the discussion about the relation between the proletarian and "petit-bourgeois" writers. Those of the radical writers who had been reared on the militancy of Mike Gold's New Masses had carried it to such an extreme that they denied any form of cooperation with the "petit-bourgeoisie." Martin Russaks' arguments echoed Gold's own at his most sectarian. He felt that the proletarian novel:

> . . . is already becoming [sic], a novel that deals with the working class. I don't think our novels should be concerned with the emotions and reactions and values of the upper or middle-class or the lumpen-proletariat. I don't think the life experiences of hoboes and tramps, as depicted in some of our writing recently, is legitimate subject matter.[64]

Gold in his discussion took issue both against Russak's idea and the one which claimed that "when we are dealing with a class myth we can juggle this class myth around."[65] His position on both issues was basically sound. While he wished to avoid one-sidedness in proletarian literature, he also desired to differentiate between the proletarian form of literature and others. His main point of argument was that "one of the basic tasks of every writer is to stimulate and encourage and help the growth of proletarian literature which is written by workers."[66]

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[64]Ibid., p. 166. [65]Ibid. [66]Ibid., p. 167.

The problem with Gold's argument against Russak lies mainly in his line of reasoning: The middle-class should be represented in the proletarian literature because it is an ally of the proletariat. He went on to say "The Viewpoint, as Edwin Seaver said, is what is important. The man with the revolutionary mind and approach can write a revolutionary book."[67]

The last part of his argument is convincing, for otherwise the whole concept of the proletarian would become narrow, limited and divorced from the author's world view. It is the first part which is problematic. The view expressed is essentially that of the "United Front" outlook. The "alliance" with "petit-bourgeoisie" being a matter of tactical concern for the party, is transferred to the realm of literature and art. But instead of going to the roots of the problem and criticizing that aspect of the radical view which basically disallowed literature a life and law of its own, this position overzealously tended to negate without any dialectical affirmation. It had forced upon itself the view that it had nothing to learn from the "bourgeois" and "petit-bourgeois" authors. Gold, on the other hand, resorted to the tactical question of the "petit-bourgeois" as an ally. This viewpoint was linked to his earlier neglect of all subjects except those about the proletariat. He advocated this view despite his acute

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[67]Ibid., p. 166.

awareness that "radical" meant change from the roots; that it did not only involve a political process, a declaration of allegiance to a certain class, but a change in the whole point of view of life. Precisely because the purpose was to bring about a change in the values, habits, and norms of the people, every subject matter about any stratum and class was legitimate as long as it was written with the view of that change in mind. The fact that many "bourgeois" and "petit-bourgeois" writers were often more skilled in writing, and stylistically better able to expose the existing conditions, was only one reason to show how much the proletarians had to learn from their "bourgeois" and "petit-bourgeois" colleagues. Admission of this fact could only trouble those who were too elitist, too exclusive to share the honor of their position and who banked on their proletarian background in the same way aristocrats showed off theirs. It troubled those who were too afraid to learn.

Because the question was more a matter of expediency than true radical change, it failed to answer the real needs of proletarian writers. Having failed to look at itself critically to make its advances based upon an understanding of its own set-backs and having been forced to bow to an alliance it had not been prepared for, the proletarian literature as Gold had dreamed of it was to falter and flicker for the rest of the decade.

The third important issue of the Congress was the controversy and discussion around Kenneth Burke's paper. Burke had suggested that for the purposes of propaganda they should replace such words as "worker" with that of the "people." He argued that such a word would be more appealing to the masses of people. His arguments were almost unanimously rejected.

Although the discussion in itself was interesting, it ultimately did not reach any fruitful results. None of the two sides paid enough attention to the problem from a literary point of view. While Burke argued for replacement of certain words for the sake of propaganda, Freeman and others put forward the basic laws of class struggle and the necessity for differentiating the proletariat from the rest of the society.

From the point of view of the revolutionary writer a differentiation was needed between the concept of political propaganda and literature. This was not in order to disassociate the two but to situate and assess the role and function of each in relation to the other and as separate entitites. There was some truth both to what Burke and his opponents were saying. It was true that because of the ruling ideology the American people, especially workers, were made to react negatively to certain words. It was also true that from a revolutionary standpoint the writer had to make clear to the people the meaning of these words

rather than refrain from using them for the fear of unpopularity. The main problem was not really the use or disuse of certain words, but the way and manner they could be presented to the public.

A political organization uses direct and agitational propaganda in order to communicate with its public. Certain words are used in fact to identify in the mind of the public a certain political tendency with certain concepts. The communist party identifies itself with the "proletariat," "revolution," and "Socialism." If it is a genuine party, it will not hesitate to use these words even if they are unpopular. Bourgeois politicians and organizations, too, try to identify with specific words "free enterprise," "democracy," etc. Roosevelt is identified with "New Deal," Johnson with the "Great Society," Nixon with "the silent majority." But with aesthetics it is different. In a broad and general sense it could be claimed that all literature is propaganda because it propagates certain ideas and ultimately represents a specific world view. The author, not being above life in his presentation of life, is also making statements about and presenting his biases. But to conclude from this that literature is therefore equal to propaganda, to level the two diffent concepts and thus neutralize the effects of both, is at best nothing more than a false syllogism.

In their creative work many proletarian writers did distinguish between the two concepts. But because they never drew the line, because they never fully differentiated between the two, they were never fully able to surmount the problem and transcend the level of propaganda.

The Second American Writer's Congress

The Second American Writer's Congress was held on June 4th-6th, 1937, by the League of American Writers. In the first Congress Mike Gold was lionized and heralded as the best loved American revolutionary writer; in the second he was not even present, nor were his ideas about proletarian and revolutionary literature. In lieu of those ideas were the new ones of unity in the struggle against fascism. The "villains" of previous Communist propaganda were now the respectable "allies" who were welcomed if cautiously but with a broad smile. Mr. Roosevelt himself could hardly outdo Earl Browder in his eulogies over patriotism and Americanism. It was a strange time, when the democratic party to gain popularity had to sound "Socialistic" and the Communist party sounded "democratic" for the very same reasons.

Among the prime purposes of the Congress was an attempt to broaden the League so that:

> All writers be made aware of the issues now confronting themselves and the world, and the consequent necessity for uniting together, and second that the

league might become more truly representative of writers in all parts of the United States.[68]

If Mike Gold was not present, those established authors who only a few years before had been the object of his most virulent attacks were there to assert their political bias in the face of fascism. The most notable among these were Archibald Macleish, Ernest Hemingway (who addressed the Congress) and, of course, Gold's "Emily Post of the Culture" Thornton Wilder. Such prestigious men as Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann sent their messages of solidarity and support, and Freeman in his address could justifiably boast: "The alleged antagonism between art and propaganda, between poetry and politics, seemed very academic to men and women facing the realities of 1937."[69] He quoted the literary esthete Thomas Mann as saying "Whoever tries to get away from the political befools himself."[70]

The times were such that the cries and pleas of men like Gold and Freeman for the necessity of taking sides were now echoed in a more eloquent manner by men like Macleish and Hemingway. It signified the fact that there was some truth to the pleas of the radical writers and critics; it also signified the mood of the times. As Hemingway states in his paper:

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[68]Henry Hart, ed., Writers in a Changing World (Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937), p. 195.

[69]Ibid., p. 9. [70]Ibid., p. 10.

> A writer's problem does not change. He himself changes but his problem remains the same. It is always how to write truly and having found what is true, to project it in such a way that it becomes a part of the experience of the person who reads it.[71]

According to him this truth could be communicated by a good artist under any system of government but fascism, for: "Fascism is a lie told by bullies. A writer who will not lie cannot live or work under fascism."[72]

As long as writers were not affected by the political and economic exploitation of the workers, many of them were satisfied to put up with things as they were, but when their own existence as writers was threatened then they were forced to action. They had to forget the comfortable sunlit verandahs of neutral art. Thus in that summer of 1937 the liberal writers and Marxists seemed comfortable enough to join voices and forces against a common enemy.

But the alliance was to be a short-lived one. The Communists had entered it not after thorough analysis, not through an understanding of the role of writer in the present capitalist society, but because of the matter of urgency and pragmatism. Like all good pragmatists, they had concluded that whatever works is good, and it was this flag that they waved in the face of their critics.

Their critics, a small band of Trotskyist writers

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[71]Ibid., p. 69.

[72]Ibid.

mostly aligned to Philip Rahv's and William Philipp's Partisan Review, as always put forward some good criticism with no real alternatives. While they were correct in their criticism of the party's liquidation of proletarian struggle, they became ultra-left in their ultimate denial of even the tactical necessity of a "united Front." As such, their criticisms became the mere nagging of a disgruntled few.

It is ironic that while Burke's plea for the use of the word "people" had been rejected as reactionary and eclectic earlier, in the second Congress, in place of "militant communists" and "revolutionary proletariat," the "man of conscience" and "man of heart" were made fashionable. "Freedom" in its most abstract form took the place of "freedom from the capitalist exploitation," and "socialism" was traded in for "democracy." Gold's fear in the first Congress and his warning against the danger of "our literary movement becoming a petty bourgeois movement" had come true; only now the "petty bourgeois" did not include just the intellectuals and writers, but the head of the Communist party and his circle of writers and critics as well. For a while it seemed as if all were going well in the best of both worlds. But soon the Indian summer was to end. By the end of the decade and after the Hitler-Stalin pact and the Moscow trials, the alliance was to be broken, although

the communists still remained "petit-bourgeois," and most anti-fascists carried their banner for a while longer.

"Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism"

The policies of the communist party in the long run harmed the proletarian and Marist writers like Gold the most. This is not the place to give an analysis of the direction and policies of the party; but a brief discussion of some of its positions is necessary in relation to the subject I am dealing with.

The Russian Revolution and the emergence of organized communist parties around the world opened new possibilities for writers and artists as well as other strata of the society. In the workers the writers could find a whole new potential public. As Cowley had pointed out, the revolution could offer little money to the writer, but it did offer something capitalist society could never be so generous with: namely a responsive and responsible public. But now between the writer and its potential public there was an intermediary which claimed itself to be the representative of the workers. In order for the writer to develop a fruitful relation with the party there had to exist two essential pre-conditions:

1. The relation between the writer and party had to be an open and flexible one, one which, as was the case of Lenin and Gorky or Marx and Heine, understood the

possibilities and limitations of one another. The distinction between the role of the revolutionary writer and party militant had to be made clear.

2. The party in order to convince the writer to join its side had to demonstrate that it offered possibilities closed to the writer within the confines of capitalist society. It could not approach the writer with the morose tone of a preacher (as Gold at times did) preaching to him of the suffering of the masses. Rather it had to genuinely demonstrate to the writer that in theory as well as in practice it offered him new possibilities within a new context. To do this it had to be a genuinely radical party, one which not only in politics but in all aspects of life perceived and practiced life in a new and more advanced manner.

In the first part of the thirties the writers' disillusionment with the present system, their lack of alternatives, and the extremity of the conditions drove many of them down the Marxist path. It was this vision of a new freedom, a new means of expression, a new world which attracted both men like Gold and Edmund Wilson. The growth and popularity of "proletarian literature" was due to these new conditions. The proletarians in many ways were what Gold had called "pioneers." As such they were crude, and often negligent of others' achievements; their confidence made them too narrow and self-conscious. If they were to

advance, they had to become broader in their perspective, less sectarian, more flexible.

A sudden shift in the policy of the party gradually changed the nature of the party and inevitably the nature of its relation with writers and artists. All of a sudden the party seemed to have become more flexible, but it had lost its second prerequisite: its revolutionary character. Its flexibility was also a false one, one which extended a hand to its allies, but suppressed any criticism. Men like Eastman or Calverton were not criticized by analysis and criticism, but were branded as agents of fascism. The same tactics used against communists were now being used by them against their opponents. As Sartre points out:

> And generally it is enough to skim through a piece of communist writing to pick out at random a hundred conservative procedures, persuasion by repetion, by intimidation, by veiled threats, by forceful and scornful assertion, by cryptic allusions to demonstrations that are not forthcoming, by exhibiting so complete and superb a conviction that; all debate, casts its spell, and ends by becoming contagious; the opponent is never answered; he is discredited, he belongs to the police, to the Intelligence Service; he's a fascist.[73]

In this way the freedom of writers was curbed and limited in the name of freedom itself. Those Marxist and revolutionary writers who aligned themselves with the party had to become silent in relation to their criticisms of the party. Protest was welcome only as long as it concerned

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[73] What is Literature?, p. 251.

the opponents. Lenin's praise of Mayakovsky because of his poem exposing Soviet bureaucracy was forgotten. Criticism, self-criticism as a revolutionary means to the preservation of party's health and internal democracy, was replaced by bourgeois phrase-mongering. The opponent was not contended with, but annihilated. Thus Gold, whose earlier literary ideas contradicted the party's present policy was not activated into struggle, but merely became silent for the sake of diplomacy. As Folsom states in his "Introduction" to Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology:

> Though he considered it necessary, Gold had never felt at ease with "United Front" policy which stressed alliance with middle-class liberals over revolutionary working-class consciousness and activity. Fighting fascism was one thing, but forgetting about the revolution was quite another, and after the war he was one of the first Communists to take a public stand against long-time party head, Earl Browder, who had liquidated the party as such.[74]

Yet Gold never publicly disavowed the party's swing towards conservatism. In an undated letter to Charles Humboldt against publishing a poem in the Masses and Mainstream he states: "and it is a false theory of literary 'United Front' that would make us surrender our socialist identity, and welcome every sort of art."

But Gold was to remain more a nominal writer than a real one until the end of the decade. When he re-emerged in the early forties, it was to denounce those who had

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[74] Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 18.

turned their backs on revolution. As a creative writer, a writer of protest and vital courage, he produced very little that could compare with his work in the twenties or early thirties.

Those writers who had turned to the Party and the U.S.S.R. for truly revolutionary internationalism were now faced with an astute nationalism. What Sartre had said of the C.P. in France rang true of the C.P. in the U.S.

> A party which is planning revolution should have nothing to lose. For the C.P. there is something to lose and there is something to handle circumspectly. As its immediate goal can no longer be the establishment of a dictatorship of the proletariat by force, but rather that of safeguarding a Russia that is in danger, it now presents an ambiguous appearance. Progressive and revolutionary in its doctrine and in its avowed ends, it has become conservative in its means. Even before it has seized power, it has adopted the turn of mind, the reasoning, and the artifices of those who have long since attained it, those who feel that it is escaping them and who want to maintain themselves.[75]

Had the C.P. corrected its old sectarian policies, without liquidating the revolutionary ones, had it become broader, more "democratic" in its views without becoming self-compromising, both the proletarian writers and their fellow-travellers would have found and realized their new potentials. But for the C.P. its prestige, the preservation of the status quo, the defense of the U.S.S.R. under any circumstances had become the imperative. It had to change its image to gain access to the hearts of the respectable;

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[75] What is Literature?, pp. 250-251.

it had to polish its language to win votes; it had to forget its aims to preserve its respectability. The communist party had to do all this in the name of revolution. The bourgeois forces did not change as quickly to win the alliance of the radicals as the Marxists did to shake the hands of the bourgeoisie. As Joseph Freeman claims in a letter to Daniel Aaron:

> In the Twenties Communism was envisioned as the ideal society of the future that would liberate us from the horrors of Capitalism; in the Thirties, Communism according to the C.P. slogans--was 20th century Americanism: i.e., Communism was 20th century capitalism--and never was a truer word spoken or a truer slogan launched, though few people realized it at the time.[76]

In the early thirties Edmund Wilson had lauded William Foster and the communists for their uncompromising dignity. In the late thirties how would the writers react to Earl Browder's comforting and comfortable smile brandishing the C.P.'s latest slogan: "Communism is twentieth century Americanism"?

In 1938, Granville Hicks, one of the most famous of communist critics, published a book named I Like America (New York: Modern Age Books, 1938). The form and content of the book matched in that they presented red, white, and blue Americanism, a sort of "intellectual" version of the song "Okie from Muskogee" with radical overtones. Hicks is

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[76]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, pp. 429-430.

basically trying to show that, although a communist, he is a true blue American with all the necessary trimmings. This book became the most favored of all Hick's works with the communists. Aaron praises it because:

> Here is no manifesto demanding a "dictatorship of the proletariat" for the "toiling masses," no declaration of war against a "ruthless capitalist boss," no program to establish "Soviets" and "Red Guards" and a Negro state in the South. I Like America, instead, is a soft-spoken and amiable declaration of independence in the old reformist vein, it is grass-roots Marxism, an argument for the progressive verities: Justice, equality, opportunity.[77]

Later when Granville Hicks had turned against the movement, he could claim that apart from a few pages in praise of Russia and the C.P. he believed in all tenets of the book. This was one of the "literary" achievements of the late thirties. Those writers like Gold who turned to the C.P. for the promise of new and radical literature found in the late thirties good old Americanism. Like the bourgeoisie they too had to rely more and more on the glorious past to preserve their present respectability. Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln were resurrected by both bourgeois and communist politicians. For the liberal and progressive writers, communism lost its appeal when it ceased to maintain its novelty. After all if it were Americanism that they wanted, capitalists could offer it much better.

Writers such as Gold who found their subdued

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[77]Ibid., p. 357.

revolutionary aspirations in conflict with their previous propaganda in the New Masses were caught by the contradiction. Some like Hicks wrote mediocre books; others left the party although they did not abandon their revolutionary politics.

For Gold and those like him, if they could have followed their old road while criticizing and purging themselves of the old mistakes, they could have achieved something. But Gold kept his loyalty. But he did not produce much that had any creative force. In his polemics against reactionaries there were sparks of the old vigor, but they did not spread to catch his whole heart on fire. He too talked of Americanism although he never could wholly reconcile himself to the policies of "United Front."

Later as an old man Gold defended the C.P. against the charges brought by people like Cowley and Rideout that the "United Front" policy caused the early demise of proletarian literature. He accused those critics of lacking the "heart," the love and passion for the people that is so essential for any revolutionary. It was true that many critics of the C.P. criticized it from a conservative point of view; they essentially never did give their whole heart and mind to the revolution. In the comfort of observers they mostly sat in the stalls with their field glasses, booing and cheering the players, but never feeling or knowing their real difficulties and pains. But this fact could

not alter the truth of their criticism. After all many "heartless" critics could be more correct in their criticism than those with revolutionary "heart" and "soul." Militancy and devotion, one learns painfully, do not always make one right. Gold's angry retorts remained only on that level; they did not reckon with the roots of the problem, nor did they save the Marxists from the criticisms hurled at them. The only way for them to have coped with the situation would have been to become harder critics of their shortcomings than their opponents, to expose honestly the truth and begin from there.

By the end of the thirties, the Communist Party resembled an elephant who had lost its trunk, its tusks, and tail and yet insisted on being an elephant. The proletarian literature had produced some good writers, had influenced a good many more, and then had been asked to kindly step aside. Like Edmund Wilson who had tried to take Marxism away from the Marxists, some Marxist critics now tried to take Americanism away from its advocates. These suffered the same results as did Wilson: their Americanism turned against them the same way Wilson's Marxism had turned against him.

After the Flood

> You, who shall emerge from the flood
> In which we are sinking,
> Think--

When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth.

For we went, changing our country more often than
our shoes.

In the class war, despairing
When there was only injustice and no resistance,

For we knew only too well:
Even the hatred of squalor
Makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.[78]

It is very difficult to speak of the thirties without emotion. Those who lived through the period whether conservative or radical, when writing of that time become emotional, their words taking on the quality of poetry, pained and ecstatic at the same time. Photographs which capture moments of that decade have a quality and depth which make the hazy, distant past acutely concrete and ever-present. It is not merely art, merely the artist's or the writer's craft which has captured this depth, but also the intensity of the subject matters themselves.

Like all periods of great social unheaval, the 1930's left their deep mark upon the conscious and the

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[78]Bertolt Brecht, "To Posterity," Selected Poems, trans. H. R. Hays (New York: Harvest, 1947), pp. 175-77.

unconscious mind of the American people. In any movement for change from simple strikes and demonstration, from the struggle for civil rights, to revolutions, there is a hope, an optimism and longing which makes itself felt at every moment. Any such movement despite its shortcomings--and the radical movement of the thirties had plenty of shortcomings--becomes positive because of the hope it generates. For it revives man's confidence in himself and his world; it restates the fact that things can change and are in the process of changing. Once the hope is gone, the vitality leaves. What remains is the desire and the fight to preserve the status quo, to preseve what has already been gained. It moves towards conservatism; it becomes a part of our lives. This was true of the movement in the thirties. Those men and women who at the dawn of the decade opened their eyes to the prospect of a new world, by the end had either lost that prospect, turned aginst it, or were carrying on a bitter and unrewarding struggle.

But would we reject the struggle because it was aborted? Would we prefer not to have "loved at all" rather than having "loved and lost"? If the civil rights movement has not achieved all its goals, if the women's struggle is yet far from achieving its aims, if the workers' long and bloody battles for unions ended in corrupt, inept unions ruled by iron bosses, would we then decide that none of these movements should have happened? For every struggle

even in its defeats achieves something which will make life different, will change its course a little. If nothing else its memory will last in the minds of the rulers making them a little uncomfortable and will survive in the hearts of the people making them a little more hopeful, a little more confident of their strength. The literary movement, for whose creation men like Gold were responsible, produced hope not only within Marxist radicals but in the hearts of many writers, artists, and critics. It produced in them a new vitality, remaining in their works long after it had abandoned their hearts and minds. It influenced the creation of novels like U.S.A., Grapes of Wrath, and Native Son. Even though it ended in defeat and failure, it left the flicker of hope amidst all the ashes of bitterness.

Most ruling ideologies try to dissuade us from change by pointing to the failures of the past. For it is always easier to remember those failures. The achievements have already been assimilated by us, becoming so much a part of us that we do not even remember them. Like our refrigerators, cars, and televisions which are no more luxuries but necessities, we feel they have always existed from time immemorial, that no struggle, no pain went into acquiring them, that Adam and Eve brought them down to our earth from God's heaven! Such attitudes had been particularly true in terms of the achievements gained by the writers in the thirties. There is always a certain uneasiness,

a certain tension hovering in the air, whether people defend or reject them. Part of this is because the thirties was a decade of extremities. Men seldom talked; they more often shouted because of the desperate need to be heard. The issues discussed had the flavor of life and death in them. And those who emerged out of the decade, like soldiers coming back from the war, were never quite the same. They were a little "sadder" if not always "wiser," and they were a lot more bitter.

In their evaluation of the radical literary movement in the thirties men like Gold found themselves pushed against the wall. The recantations, the accusations, and denunciations were so strong that any form of answer to them became too defensive, too uncritical of the past failures. While Gold's analysis of the achievements are basically correct, his criticism of past mistakes is virtually non-existent. He himself had been so much a part of that movement that he could not distance himself from it. Its shortcomings and achievements were so peculiarly identical with his that talking of them was like talking of himself.

In the previous section I have tried to point out some of the major weaknesses of the Marxist writers and critics. In my summation I would like to cite their major achievements and contributions since most of their contributions relate directly or indirectly to Gold's literary ideas and practices. If in the twenties he developed the

essence of his literary ideas, in the thirties he had the opportunity and the advantage of putting to them practice and thus being able to test and appraise their worth.

There are basically two essential features of the radical literary movement which could be classified as major achievements. Neither of them got the chance to develop fully and realize their potentials, but they are significant in their implications about the potentials for creation of a new literature.

The first of these was what had always fascinated Gold since his youth: the sense of community. This was encouraged in its simplest sense: It was a unity with those closest in ideas and background and the larger scope of "communion" with the external world. It attempted to establish a mutual relationship between the writer and the public, the individual and society, the manual worker and the intellectual. And ultimately it aimed to create a world view integrated and whole in its relation with reality.

Curiously enough this very idea of unity and collectivity had inherent in it the essence of variety. Although many proletarians failed to understand or achieve this in their work and were often accused of uniformity, this fact did not change the truth of the ideas. As David G. Pugh argues in "Reading the Proletarians Thirty Years Later":

> The shift in orientation from personal loyalties to collective loyalty involves first recognizing differences in the behavior and values of different social classes, and second, delineating them more sharply rather than glossing over or homogenizing them. The frontier, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian political practice, and the unifying experiences of the long public school tradition in transmitting middle-class values to all, immigrants to the melting pot, rich and poor alike, suffer the usual American tendency to consider equality and similarity to be the same thing. To delineate the gulf more sharply, as the proletarians did in order to foster the class struggle, was a reversal.[79]

Had the Communists not slipped into the same conservatism as their opponents, had they adhered to their principles without becoming dogmatic, they could have developed this idea, demystifying the fables of bourgeois "equality" and "individuality." They could have shown how under the guise of individualism a selfish egotism had been developed and in order to quell opposition the equal had become synonymous with the conventional and the obedient. What they did achieve for a while was the chance to discredit the dominant myths, to achieve a certain distinction between various forces within the society. Gold's dogged persistence on the class nature of the society and his open declaration in favor of one class over the other made it hard for others to preach bourgeois morality and practice bourgeois "justice" in the name of all humanity. In order to form the community that he longed for, he first

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[79] The Thirties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama, ed. Warren French, p. 92.

had to draw the lines to make clear the differences. So while he and other radicals enjoyed the comfort of collective work for a common cause, they consistently had to define the conflicts and contradictions with the others as well as within themselves.

Both the social and economic conditions and the efforts of the intellectuals created in the thirties an atmosphere in which the American writers came closest to integrating the intellectual with imaginative, the actual with the real; one in which they could situate themselves and their works within the larger context of the society, could feel involved in the affairs of their public and could realize the enormous power and significance of their craft. At no other time did writers become so frank and uninhibited about one another. They were brought together by their agreements as well as disagreements. The issues discussed the nature of art and the role of the writer were not exclusive to the radicals. The future of all writers was at stake in their discussions. It was a time of doubt and the search for certainty. Thus both the past and the future were open to question, ready to be redefined and reintegrated.

The second important attribute of the radical writers was their attempt to democratize art. In his numerous essays and reviews Gold had constantly come back to this concept of democracy. The upper and middle-classes had

already developed their own literature and arts, but that of workers was either expressed in folklore and music or simply commercialized to the point of vulgarity. The very title "proletarian literature" gave the masses of American workers a new and distinct literary identity.

Gold's concept of "proletarian literature" presupposes two conditions: (1) the proletariat is deprived of its potential to develop its culture, (2) the proletariat has the aesthetic need, desire, and ability to create a superior literature and art. In order for the writers to help in the creation of such a culture they had to live the life of the proletariat, to sympathize with its aspirations, to democratize their own standards of judgments and values.

One of the great merits of such an idea was that it challenged the elitist view of the American people and culture. In this challenge it also stood in opposition to the great mass of pulp written for the consumption by the masses.

It would take decades even within a truly socialist country to create a truly proletarian literature. In this field Gold and his colleagues were as he claimed nothing more or less than pioneers. What they achieved is best described by Gold when he says:

> The first scouts in a new terrain can do little more than hurriedly map the main land marks. One does not expect them to be serene landscape painters.[80]

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[80]"A Letter to the Author of a First Book," Change the World, p. 216.

More important than writing only of the worker's life--although it was a new subject to be experimented with--was writing about reality, about different aspects of it from a new point of view and presenting this in a new and popular form. Only in this way could a truly popular, but not vulgar or mechanical literature, be produced. As Brecht--who was highly advanced in his style and form--realized, workers were not insensitive to the new and experimental forms. The most advanced among them in fact welcomed such experiments in contrast to the drabness of their daily lives and the cheapness of what was offered them as art and entertainment.

The realization of this idea in practice led to a rediscovery of American folklore and a discovery of the lives and feelings of the American people. It resulted in hundreds of new experiments in popular forms of culture such as agit props, oral poetry, short fiction, reportage and so on. The writers and poets found a new audience who would jam their poetry sessions. In their Congress they had comments and criticism from miners and workers. Although it is true that the bulk of American workers did not respond or were not even aware of the attempts and practices of the writers, the fact that the most advanced of them came forward was a sign of what could be achieved in the future.

Not only was the image of the workers changed in works of literature and art, but also that of the minorities, especially blacks. These writers found the vitality and poignant reality that the lives of an oppressed people contain. Black men and women began to be portrayed with their heroic patience and suppressed anger. Men like Richard Wright and Langston Hughes wrote of their people in a language which was novel precisely because it was inspired by the life and suffering of the black people. Other writers like Conroy and Meridel LeSueur showed the mid-western farmers in the process of a struggle which created poetry out of their drab everyday lives. And for a change the upper classes were not portrayed in their daily strife of making and breaking existential choices about love or lack of love. Neither were the poor, the disinherited, transformed into the jolly rogues or the numbskull idiots, the perverts, or the dangerous threats who deserved no better than their lot.

When at the end of the decade many were trying to retrace their steps to those famous towers of ivory, they all knew that although things might become "normal" again, they would never become normal in the same manner. Men like Gold, Freeman, Kunitz, and their "fellow travellers" Dos Passos, Wright, Hughes, Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Wilson had broken certain myths. They had laid bare certain realities. No matter what they did afterwards, they could

never completely undo what they had done before. Gold, Dos Passos, and Wright--all these men are dead and yet Jews Without Money, U.S.A., Native Son, and many other works remain to testify to what had been, as well as what might someday be.

One day
the apolitical
intellectuals
of my country
will be interrogated
by the simplest
of our people

They will be asked
what they did
when their nation died out
slowly
like a sweet fire
small and alone

No one will ask them
about their dress,
their long siestas
after lunch,
no one will want to know
about their sterile combats
with the idea
of the nothing.

No one will care about
their higher financial learning.
They won't be questioned
on Greek mythology
or regarding their self-disgust
when someone within them
begins to die
the coward's death.

They'll be asked nothing
about their absurd
justifications
born in the shadow
of the total lie.

On that day
the simple people will come.

Those who had no place
in the books and poems
of the apolitical intellectuals
but daily delivered their
bread and milk
their tortillas and eggs
those who had mended their clothes,
those who drove their cars,
who cared for the dogs and gardens
and worked for them, and they'll ask:

What did you do when the poor
suffered,
when tenderness and life
burned out in them?

Otto Rene Castillo

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION, A BRIEF SUMMARY

Some Necessary Explanations

As mentioned in the "Introduction," a study and re-evaluation of Mike Gold's literary career is important both in terms of what he contributed as a writer and a critic and in what he presented as the founder and representative of an important literary trend in the U.S.[1] I have tried to situate Gold's work within its historical context. I have also tried through an explanation of its shortcomings and achievements to point to some of its potentialities for further development. I am quite aware of the limitations and inadequacies of my efforts. Joseph Freeman in his address to the First American Writer's Congress has stated:

> A brief, inadequate note on the past has no value except as it teaches us something about the present. We ought to know that we have a revolutionary

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[1]Such an effort is all the more necessary because a study of Gold's literary and critical ideas and their development--within such context--has not been attempted before, either by the radical critics or by their opponents.

> literary heritage behind us in order that we may transcend it.[2]

Likewise, my present study is no more than a "brief, inadequate" note, but if it throws some light upon the past, containing a few lessons for the present as well as for the future, then it has been successful in achieving one of its main goals. Within this context it becomes only a beginning, a necessary first step.

Fighting for the Dreams

Gold's literary career was so closely interwoven with that of the revolutionary movement that it took turns, rose and fell with the movement's rise and fall. Lenin in What is to be Done, has stated:

> The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasy.[3]

In the youthful twenties Gold mostly formulated a theory of literature attempting to close the rift between his dreams and reality. In the thirties he was able at least partially to realize his ideas in regard to the creation of a proletarian literature. In the forties and the

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[2]Joseph Freeman, "The Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature," published in Henry Hart, ed., American Writer's Congress, p. 58.

[3]Cited in Lenin on Literature and Art, p. 21.

years that followed, he enjoyed neither the creativity of the twenties nor the productivity of the thirties. He had simply to defend his dream and reaffirm his hope in its possibility.

If in the years following the depression decade Gold did not produce much that contained the vigor, vitality, and novelty of his earlier works, the same was much more true of most of those writers and critics who decided to leave the revolutionary camp. The ex-communists and radicals like Granville Hicks and Max Eastman or their fellow-travellers like John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, and Richard Wright had produced their best and most lasting works in the thirties under the influence of revolutionary ideas and struggles. Gold had once said of people like them, citing the anarchist leader Kroptokin: "Let them go. We have had the best of them; we have had their youths."[4]

The most important contributions of Gold lie in his persistent efforts to create a genuinely revolutionary literature, one which would be democratic and popular, but not commercial and vulgar, one which would follow in the footsteps of men like Whitman, Twain, and London, but also embrace the essence of its own times, and finally one which would be in tune with the spirit of its time, yet transcend it in the universality of its appeal. From the early

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[4]"The Renegades and Radicals," The Mike Gold Reader (New York: Int. Pub., 1954), p. 56.

years that followed, he enjoyed neither the creativity of the twenties nor the productivity of the thirties. He had simply to defend his dream and reaffirm his hope in its possibility.

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[redacted]: in his p[redacted]utionary literat[redacted]ular, but not comme[redacted]low in the footsteps of [redacted]London, but also embrace the essence [redacted], and finally one which would be in tune with the spirit of its time, yet transcend it in the universality of its appeal. From the early

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[4]"The Renegades and Radicals," The Mike Gold Reader (New York: Int. Pub., 1954), p. 56.

twenties until his death, Gold's ideas are bound by this unity of purpose, this determination to create a genuine literature for and of his people. In the twenties, he issued his call for the creation of this literature. In his writings he depicted the life of his people in a way which was simple but seldom simplistic, which was vital if at times overly sentimental. In the thirties, his ideas were put to practice and his aspirations partly realized. He summarized well the literary achievements of this decade in his address to the Fourth Congress of American Writers in 1941:

> Thirties was no misunderstanding or accident, no foreign plot, no feeble esthetic cult that a few critics had artifically created and now can easily destroy. It was a great movement out of the heart of the American people. It can no more be erased from our national history than can the public school system or trade union movement. It is fascistic to want to destroy the trade unions of America. It is just as fascistic to try to destroy this people's culture and literature of the thirties. . . . The thirties compares favorably with the Civil War decade. . . . Its importance lies in its mass character. Therefore no single Emerson or Walt Whitman stands out, though thousands of potential Emersons and Whitmans were formed.[5]

In defense of the radical literary movement of the thirties Gold pointed to the influence of the radical's ideas upon major writers, to the creation of works such as the Grapes of Wrath and Native Son. He pointed to the

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[5]"The Second American Renaissance," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, p. 253.

revival and rediscovery of the American folk-culture, to the creation of Federal Writers' project, to the mass poetry recitals, and the new vigor and vitality of the American writers, poets, critics, and artists.

But as the proletarian literature began to ebb, so did Gold's career as a creative writer. In the forties he spent most of his time defending the achievements of the radical thirties. He still maintained his militant stance on literature and politics, but the unresolved contradiction within the C.P., the increasing pressures of the reaction against the radical and progressive forces, and the recantations of many ex-Communists all took their toll upon Gold's literary creativity and productivity.

The decade of the thirties began and ended with a deep-rooted bitterness which shaped the attitude of its immediate future. Only the bitterness of the early thirties, because it was directed against the old system, bred hope and vitality. But the end of the decade was marked with a sense of deep betrayal which stemmed from the shattered hope of previous years. As such it led towards much retraction and a regression on the part of many writers and intellectuals toward the past. Suddenly the bad old days became the good new ones, and the dream lost its possibility of becoming a reality. It seemed a little ironic that while so many turned against radicalism as a whole because the C.P. and the U.S.S.R. had betrayed their own

promises and ideals, they had no problem turning instead toward toward a system which from its inception and for over two centuries had betrayed all its ideals and the hopes of its best people.

Later when red-baiting was installed as the favorite national pastime, it was charged by many that those intellectuals who had participated in the movement--and there were many--were either victims of a Moscow plot or were Soviet spies! The matter of Moscow gold paid to men like Gold to secure their loyalty became a matter of joke among many. Such charges were refuted not only by the radiclas, but also by those conservative and literary writers and historians who valued their integrity above cheap political thrills and tricks. As Mathew Josephson states in his book Infidel in the Temple:

> In the light of later recantations and "revelation" by some of the persons involved in the left-wing activities here described, and their later claim that it was part of a vast underground "Conspiracy" to use writers and scholars as "dupes" who would deliver the people into the hands of the Bolshovist, I should like to deny all such allegations with all my heart, I cannot for the life of me recall anything partaking of the nature of a conspiracy.[6]

Precisely because "writers and scholars" had more than any other force pricked the conscious of their society, precisely because the power of their pens gave them the ability to portray the truth as well as to distort it,

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[6]Quoted in the New Masses, An Anthology.

precisely because some of the best and the most talented among them chose not only to portray the truth but also to protest it, they later became the easiest targets for the witch hunts of the post-depression decades. The radical writers like Gold suffered most from the red-baitings. They were branded as "aliens," their works only a few years earlier applauded were then seen as "crude" and worthless. All attempts were made to erase them from the annals of literary history. But as Gold had said life has its mean "cycles" and its hopeful ones. History always plays tricks with those who try to play tricks on it. By the sixties the radical writers were being re-evaluated and their works "rediscovered" and reprinted. But it will take more years of travail and honest struggle to restore them completely to their proper place and render unto them what is theirs: the blunders as well as the achievements.

In evaluation of Gold's achievements and failures, one can credit him with being nothing more or less than a pioneer, a term he often used when describing the proletarian writers and critics. His greatest shortcomings stem from his erratic nature and his lack of theoretical depth. As a creative writer he could literally paint the truth with words, creating poignancy and beauty. But he lacks the aesthetic distance which enables a writer to develop and expand his theme in a consistent and unified manner. As a critic Gold was sharp in depicting the shortcomings

of specific works and authors--both on the left and right--but he was unable to develop and expand his reasoning, to abstract from the concrete a consistent theory of literature.

His lack of theoretical depth partly explains his inability to fully criticize and transcend his own shortcomings, or those of the movement's. But Gold unlike many later "renegades" of the revolution, never abandoned his revolutionary and literary aspirations. At the moments of highest success, as well as those of bitter defeats, he kept his faith in the possibility of a newer, better, more humane world, as well as in the potential for the creation of a literature which was of and for his people:

> Democracy has still a future in America--as it has all over the struggling world. The present war interrupts the democratic renaissance of the thirties. But that renaissance and its literature will in turn end the system of war and profit. Let us persist.[7]

In pointing out Gold's blunders and failures, we also remember his attempts to create a new literature, his attempts to make literature embrace life as a whole, and his attempts to create possibilities out of seemingly impossibility. For in these attempts Gold had taken a step forward both as a passionate revolutionary and as a passionate writer.

This step might be very small, but it cannot be

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[7]"The Second American Renaissance," Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology, pp. 253-254.

retracted either by the most virulent attacks of his critics or the worst of his own blunders and shortcomings. For as another revolutionary writer once stated:

> Every step forward means the end of previous step forward, because that is where it starts and goes on from. At the same time it makes use of this previous step, which in a sense survives in men's consciousness as a step forward, just as it survives in its effects in real life.[8]

And here lies much of Gold's honor and glory.

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[8]Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, p. 141.

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*A few of the articles are cited from the books mentioned in the Bibliography. The reason for this is their special significance in terms of the subject of my study. In cases of these articles I have not repeated the name of the publishers.