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POLITICAL COMMITMENT: THE IMPACT
OF POLITICS ON AMERICAN DRAMA OF
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DRAMA AND POLITICAL COMMITMENT:
THE IMPACT OF POLITICS ON AMERICAN DRAMA OF THE 1930'S

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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PROLOGUE: THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL COMMITMENT

A drama of "no comment" is a drama of no future. Art of any kind that turns its back on the world is uncivilized in the precise and single sense of the word.

Kenneth Tynan, "Theatre and Living"

In the conflict between the poet and the politician the chief honor the poet can hope for is that of remaining himself. Life and reality, on the one hand, and politics, on the other . . . are not interchangeable terms.

Wallace Stevens, response to questionnaire in Partisan Review

Since the end of World War II, a new word has entered the lexicon of English and American criticism. Perhaps "new" is not quite the appropriate adjective, for the word, "commitment," is obviously not of recent vintage. Yet an examination of contemporary criticism reveals that "commitment" and its various adjectival forms have recently assumed new literary connotations. For example, in a review of Henry Miller's Colossus of Maroussi, Richard West writes: "Good luck to his lonely stand against a score of modern idiocies! He remains the last great un-American, uncommitted,

status-spurning, disorganization man."¹ And the new usage has even found its way into fiction. The following exchange is from James Baldwin's Giovanni's Room:

"You may laugh," she said, humorously, "but there is something in what I say. I began to realize it in Spain--that I wasn't free, that I couldn't be free until I was attached--no, committed--to someone."

"To someone? Not something?"
She was silent. "I don't know," she said at last.²

The hesitancy of Baldwin's heroine has not been shared by her generation. Not only has "commitment" emerged as one of the most frequently used literary terms, but it has raised a number of literary problems, one of which has been the subject of recent critical debate. In an editorial of November 27, 1959, the Times Literary Supplement noted that "a word like 'commitment' was unwrapped one day from its continental wrapper . . . and was found not to be the blank cartridge of foreign intellectuals, but to contain explosive charges that might go off here too."³ The charges did go off, and British writers have, for the past decade, heatedly chosen sides on the problem of whether or not the artist should be "committed." Hugh Thomas, for example, maintained strenuously that "engagement is essential" for the artist,⁴ and Kenneth Tynan argued that "if all art is a gesture against death, it must not stand by while Cypriots are hanged. . . . It must commit itself."⁵ Tynan's argument is typical of the case for commitment; in an essay entitled "Theatre and Living," he argues that there are three attitudes toward life open to the dramatist: he can record it

imitatively, he can withdraw from it, or he can seek to change it. Great art, he continues, must, by definition, deal with more than the recording of detail; it must, in the nature of the case, comment, and drama, in particular, demands not only explanation, but resolution as well. Therefore, the artist, and particularly the dramatist, is forced to involve himself with political issues, to immerse himself in the world of which he is a part. Art which ignores social questions "is a shrinking flower that conspires at its own death by ignoring the soil in which it grows."⁶

Other defenders of the necessity of commitment, however, have pointed out the dangers inherent in a too strenuous dedication to political action. Doris Lessing, speaking from years of experience in the political vicissitudes of the left, counsels that the point can easily arrive when commitment sells out to expediency, and art may be replaced by "the little tracts about progress, the false optimism, the dreadful lifeless products of socialist realism."⁷ However, despite these real dangers she stresses the importance of commitment. Commitment to what? To the efficacy of political action, to the humanistic gesture. Art is a social act with social consequences: "The image of the pretty singer in the ivory tower has always seemed to me a dishonest one. . . . The act of getting a story or a novel published is an act of communication, an attempt to impose one's personality and beliefs on other people."⁸ Similarly, K. W. Gransden sees

the problem of commitment as the necessary reassertion of humanistic values in an empirically-oriented, apolitical society. To Gransden, the committed writer represents the voice crying in the wilderness that something can be done, that something must be done. He agrees with Miss Lessing that what the writer is committed to is less important than the fact of commitment. What is the writer committed to? "Everything. Nothing. . . . It is the attitude, the generalized nature of the protest they feel impelled to make which is significant."⁹

In contrast to their British counterparts, American writers, since the war, have consistently reaffirmed the liabilities of political commitment. They have become loath to involve themselves politically, a trepidation several attribute to the bad experience of "position-taking" in the thirties. For example, a questionnaire sent to a number of writers by the Partisan Review in 1948 asked about the artist's relationship to the then growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States: "Do you think a writer should involve himself in it (as writer? as person?) to the point of commitment?" The responses affirmed the necessity of the writer's detachment. John Berryman answered defiantly: "The writer 'should' do any damned thing he can think of to keep on writing, writing well."¹⁰ Wallace Stevens pointed out that "in the conflict between the poet and the politician the chief honor the poet can hope for is that of

remaining himself."¹¹ Clement Greenberg seized upon the distinction posed between writer and person, and asserted that while the person might have political obligations, the writer had obligations only to his art: "Qua writer he is only interested necessarily in what he can write about successfully."¹² And Leslie Fiedler seconded this distinction: although the writer may at times be forced into a position of political commitment, he is so at the sacrifice of his role as writer, for "a successful poem is a complete and final act; if it leads outward to other action, it is just so far a failure."¹³

This apolitical position has remained constant for the past decade and a half. Anvil, a socialist periodical, recently asked Lionel Abel, Arthur Miller, Paul Goodman, and Harold Rosenberg three main questions: "Is there, in fact, a drift away from politics on the part of writers; does the writer have an obligation to political commitment; is there a conflict between art and political commitment?"¹⁴ All agreed that political activity is at present in the United States bankrupt, that political stands are futile, that "there is an inherent conflict between artistic integrity and any commitment."¹⁵ Rosenberg put it this way:

Writers will rise to issues only when these issues are handed to them ready-made by others with instructions on how to react to those issues. But, then, . . . the writers will not be acting as writers but as cohorts, and their activity will be in fact only another species of passivity.¹⁶

I think we may observe from these various statements that one specific aspect of the concept of commitment has emerged as the subject of debate. The issue under contention involves the importance of political commitment for the artist, the significance of his conscious involvement in the social issues of the age in which he belongs. This problem is, of course, by no means a new one. It was, in fact, heatedly debated in the 1930's as the problem of "social significance." That it should arise anew in our time as the problem of political commitment is not surprising in light of the origin of commitment as a term in literary criticism.

The concept of commitment arises in response to the widespread post-war dissemination of Existentialist philosophy. The Oxford English Dictionary, in a recent inquiry sheet, tentatively lists the initial appearance of "commitment" as a term in literary criticism as 1954, and also cites 1952 as the earliest date for the appearance of "committed" (in a similar sense) and "committedness."¹⁷ But the Partisan Review, in the questionnaire on the state of American writing cited previously, had already used the term in almost its specifically modern sense as early as 1948 ("Do you think a writer should involve himself in it [i.e., the cold war] As writer? As person? to the point of commitment?"). The absence of qualification is significant, and several contributors to the symposium were indeed puzzled.¹⁸ Perhaps it might not be deemed arbitrary if we found some connection between

the emergence of the term and the fact that Partisan Review had, in the previous issue, just finished the serialization of the translation of Qu'est-ce Que La Litterature?, Jean-Paul Sartre's attempt to demonstrate the necessity of an engaged or committed literature.

Although Bernard Frechtman, the translator of What Is Literature? continually uses the English cognate of engagement, the word in English does not entirely subsume the implications of its French counterpart. "Engager," writes Hazel Barnes in her glossary to terms in Sartre's Being and Nothingness, "includes both the idea of involvement and the idea of deliberate commitment,"¹⁹ and most translators have preferred to use the latter word.²⁰ F. H. Heinemann refers to Sartre as "the philosopher as well as the artist of commitment,"²¹ and in the current literary debate, the terms engagement and "commitment" are frequently interchanged. Lionel Abel, in the symposium in Anvil, notes: "the word 'commitment' appears in Anvil's letter, and I presume was used in the same sense Sartre gave to the French word engagement."²²

The concern with commitment, then, reflects the vital contemporary influence of existentialist art and theory. Engagement or commitment arose as an esthetic problem when the French existentialists--Sartre and his disciple Beauvoir--attempted to redefine the purpose of art in terms of their general philosophical position. It was not an arbitrary

redefinition, for in existentialism the traditional philosophical categories--ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, etc.--are not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they are inextricably intertwined. Since French Existentialism is an activist philosophy, ethics is not a by-product or more basic philosophical concerns; it is the category from which all else follows. Sartre's position is not one of detachment; man is in the world here and now, and must act upon this existentialist fact in order to achieve freedom and self-realization.

Notre liberté aujourd'hui n'est rien d'autre que le libre choix de lutter pour devenir libre. . . . Il ne s'agit pas . . . d'encager mes contemporains: ils sont déjà dans la cage; il s'agit au contraire de nous unir à eux pour briser les barreaux . . . pour mériter le droit d'influencer des hommes qui luttent, il faut d'abord participer à leur combat, il faut d'abord accepter beaucoup de choses, si l'on veut essayer d'en changer quelques-unes.²³

Logically, therefore, the existentialist as both theoretician and artist cannot cite the inevitability of engagement in the human condition without recognizing its necessary extension into esthetics. If, as he tries to establish, the individual is of necessity involved in the fact of existence, and to survive this involvement must commit himself to certain actions, however absurd, must not the artist by logical inclusion be involved in the same existentialist dilemma? And since his actions are manifested in the works of art which he produces, does not commitment as an ontological or ethical category lead inevitably to commitment as an esthetic category?

In What is Literature?, Sartre attempts his most explicit esthetic analysis in order to demonstrate the necessity of a committed literature. His process of argumentation is cumulative; he does not construct, throughout the work, a logically consistent position, but attempts rather to demonstrate his thesis through various approaches (formal, functional, and historical), all of which end with the affirmation: literature must be committed. Yet whether we consider What is Literature? as an attempt at serious esthetic argument or, as Iris Murdoch does, "a recommendation to writers concerning their craft, not a demonstration of its essential nature,"²⁴ the fact remains that the concept of commitment arises in the late forties with the intense interest in existentialist problems.

It is reasonably clear from Sartre's work that engagement is conceived as a social and political activity. The writer, he maintains, must commit himself to the political arena in order to retain his artistic integrity. However, when the concept made the journey across the Channel and the Atlantic, it suffered a slight sea-change. Much of the confusion which has arisen from the term "commitment" in recent years derives from ambiguities bred by the connotations of the word in English. We speak of commitment in common usage as a pledge, a bond, an obligation; we speak of non-committed nations and candidates. It is not difficult in English usage, therefore, to extend the concept of commitment to include any

belief which incurs obligation, whether individual or social; for by inclusion it is possible to say that we are all "committed" to some moral, religious, political, or esthetic belief. The extension to non-political areas of consideration was thus easy, and Anglo-American critics began to investigate the literary implications of all sorts of "commitments," such as the moral and the religious. The horizons of engagement were, therefore, greatly widened.

Since the concept of commitment has been extended by English and American critics into considerations of the literary consequences of many varieties of belief, it is perhaps difficult to speak of a single problem of commitment. Indeed, the term "commitment" as such is meaningless, for it is obvious that neither in common nor existentialist usage is it possible to speak of the act of commitment without predicating an object to which one is committed. The question which inevitably arises is: commitment to what? Since all art is by definition "committed" to human or esthetic values, an abstract discussion of the concept of commitment in art is obviously tautological. Insofar as the artist is primarily concerned with esthetic commitments, there is no problem. The problem of commitment arises when the artist is committed to values or actions extrinsic to the immediate concerns of his art, when the moral urgency of outside imperatives forces him as artist into non-esthetic areas of consideration. This problem, implicit in the contemporary debate and explicit in

the Sartrean origins of the concept, is most clearly defined in terms of social and political commitment. The former, moreover, inevitably predicates the latter; if an individual is committed to certain social objectives, he is necessarily involved with considerations of means to realize them. It is, then, this specific aspect of the relationship between art and commitment which may be profitably examined. The problem of political commitment is not only of sufficient literary importance to justify such an investigation, but may also throw light on the larger problem of the esthetic consequences of any non-esthetic belief.

Certain facets of the problem became apparent when the Bollingen prize for poetry was awarded in 1948 to Ezra Pound. Many critics were troubled by the prospect of conferring literary honors upon an individual who had supported the fascist cause. Karl Shapiro wrote: "I voted against Pound in the belief that the poet's political and moral philosophy ultimately vitiates his poetry and lowers its standards as literary work."²⁵ Clement Greenberg took a slightly different position: "Life includes and is more important than art, and it judges things by their consequences. . . . It is still justifiable to demand that . . . [the artist] be a successful human being before anything else, even at the cost of his art."²⁶

We can see the critical difficulties raised by these pronouncements. Shapiro maintains that a bad man cannot produce

great art. Greenberg, on the other hand, does not attack Pound as an artist, but merely as a man with despicable opinions. There are certain fundamentals of human decency which must be preserved "even at the cost of art." Irving Howe delineates the moral-esthetic problem involved:

Once you consider extra-literary matters in a literary judgment, where do you stop? You stop at the point where intelligence and sensibility tell you to--that is what they are for. But it would be absurd to deny that there are occasions when esthetic standards and our central human values clash, and even the latter must seem more important.²⁷

This debate reveals negatively several of the issues implicit in the problem of political commitment. If, at times, the artist is led to political affiliation and action, what are the esthetic consequences? If we approve of art which takes stands with which we concur, what is the effect on our esthetic sensibility of the commitment we detest? I think we may observe the importance of political commitment as a literary problem; it brings into focus many of the perennial esthetic dilemmas, dilemmas which, while they may lie dormant in periods of formalism, continually reemerge when life demands of art its due.

With respect to the artist, therefore, the problem of political commitment has two aspects. There is, first, the moral problem: can the artist, as a human being living within a situation which demands political resolution, morally ignore these problems and still retain his integrity as a man? Second, and growing out of the first, there is the

esthetic problem: can the artist qua artist ignore these problems in his art and still maintain its integrity?

Since the former aspect lies outside the realm of literary criticism, it is the latter aspect to which we shall direct ourselves. It is, therefore, necessary to consider in what context the problem may be most advantageously studied. Since light is most often thrown on a present problem by the consideration of an analogue detached from it, we may find it valuable to consider the problem of political commitment in terms of an historical period in which the problem was similarly crucial--if not always defined in exactly the same terms as today. And we are fortunate to have in recent history precisely such a period; for on one point the contemporary debaters concur: the 1930's were a "committed" period, even if they disagree on the suitability of this commitment for our present age. "The last thing one wants in literature now," writes Roy Fuller, "is a phony 'contemporaneity,' bearing as much relation to the committed writing of the thirties as the visit of the four undergraduates to Hungary (in the news as I write) does to the International Brigade."²⁸ And the editor of the London Magazine (presumably John Lehmann), in a questionnaire addressed to several British writers on the question of commitment in the present age, makes the comparison explicit: "During the thirties it was a widely-held view that poets, novelists and playwrights

should be closely concerned in their writing with the fundamental political and social issues of their time. . . ."29

In considering the political commitments of writers in the 1930's, however, it may be advantageous to restrict our field of enquiry. The literary manifestations of the age were too diversified to encompass fully within the scope of this study. Poetry and the novel--although both affected by the particular social climate of their age--were beset by their own formal considerations. One genre, however, was obviously and generally affected by political concerns; in drama of the 1930's the problem of political commitment manifest in all art of the period is most sharply and clearly delineated. It is not surprising that this should be the case, for drama, by its very nature, is an immediate and public art. As Francis Fergusson has pointed out:

The art of the theatre--notoriously an "impure" art--seems to be as close to the art of politics as it is to poetry, painting or music. The theatre artist, whether actor or playwright, depends upon the interest and support of an audience just as the politician depends upon his constituency. . . . The theatre artist cannot practice his art without real people assembled before a real stage; a theatre without an audience is a contradiction in terms. That is why politics and the theatre are necessarily so close to the public mood and the public mind of their times.³⁰

Thus, this study will ask the following questions: in a period of intense social change, what influence did political and social forces exert upon an art form necessarily responsive to these forces; what were the forms of commitment, the political alternatives chosen by writers living in an age of

controversy; and what were the esthetic consequences of their choice?

Since the question at issue is that of commitment, let me clarify at the outset the sense in which the term is used in the present study. In doing so, my intention is not to offer any new definition, but simply to clarify the significance of the term in current usage. Employing both its existentialist and its common linguistic connotations, I shall use the term to describe (1) the conscious involvement of the artist in the social and political issues of his age (in contrast to deliberate detachment or political non-involvement); and (2) the specific political obligations which the artist assumes in consequence of this involvement (e.g., the liberal commitment, the Marxist commitment). The aims of my study are dual: on one hand, to investigate the drama of the thirties in order to illumine the problem of political commitment in terms of a specific body of work which most observers agree was "committed"; and on the other, to illumine the drama itself--as a specific literary genre with its own formal concerns--by viewing it from the vantage point of contemporary perspective. Let me affirm that I am in full agreement with the distinction made by Irving Howe in his study of the political novel. When I speak of the problem of political commitment, I have no ambition, in Howe's words, "of setting up still another rigid category. I am concerned with perspectives of observation, not categories of classification."³¹

Footnotes to Prologue

1. Manchester Guardian, Feb. 18, 1960, p. 11.
2. (New York, 1956), p. 107.
3. "After Commitment," p. 693.
4. Quoted in Kenneth Allsop, The Angry Decade (New York, 1958), p. 135.
5. "Theatre and Living," Declaration, ed. Tom Maschler (London, 1957), p. 94.
6. Ibid., p. 95.
7. "The Small, Personal Voice," Declaration, p. 195.
8. Ibid., p. 190.
9. "Till Rome Burns," International Literary Annual, No. 1, ed. John Wain (London, 1958), p. 28.
10. "Symposium on the State of American Writing," Aug. 1948, p. 860.
11. Ibid., p. 886.
12. Ibid., p. 879.
13. Ibid., p. 886.
14. "Art and Commitment," Winter 1960, p. 5.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 6.
17. Supplement to The Periodical, Autumn 1959, p. 1.
18. R. P. Blackmur wrote: "We do not know to what it is we are committed" (p. 865).
19. (New York, 1956), p. 631.
20. See, e.g., Erich Kahler, The Tower and the Abyss (New York, 1957), p. 238.
21. Existentialism and the Modern Predicament (London, 1953), p. 130.
22. Page. 6.

23. "Réponse à Albert Camus," Les Temps Modernes,
Aug. 1952, p. 345.
24. Sartre (New Haven, 1953), p. 112.
25. "The Pound Case," Partisan Review, May 1949, p. 518.
26. Ibid., p. 515.
27. Ibid., p. 517.
28. "The Writer in His Age," The London Magazine, May
1957, p. 44.
29. Loc. cit.
30. The Human Image in Dramatic Literature (Garden
City, N.Y., 1957), pp. 20-21.
31. Politics and the Novel (New York, 1957), p. 16.

CHAPTER I

THE COMMITTED DECADE AND ITS DRAMA

The 1930s are becoming the great unknown era in American history. The public wants to forget them, the politicians distort them and they have not yet been recreated by novelists or historians; yet we cannot form a true picture of the present while trying to abolish the recent past.

Malcolm Cowley, Exile's Return

You, who shall emerge from the
flood
In which we are sinking,
Think--
When you speak of our weak-
nesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth.

Bert Brecht, "To Posterity"

At the end of Exile's Return, Malcolm Cowley recounts the series of wild New Year's Eve parties which the generation of the twenties offered in homage to the decade which was passing into history. The decade had really ended the previous October on Black Thursday; the lost generation sensed that it was performing the ritual of self-interment, and was determined to go out with a bang, not a whimper.

"They traveled about the city in caravans of taxicabs, suddenly irrupting into a strange house in a mass attack . . . filling every corner with screeches and guffaws, in half an hour drinking all the punch, then rushing off to another house in a great undisciplined body. . . ."1 Of all the bacchanalian events that occurred that night, Cowley reports that he was most impressed by the story of a friend who told how after attending four successive parties he found himself in a sub-cellar joint in Harlem:

The room was smoky and sweaty; all the lights were tinted red or green, and as the smoke drifted across them, nothing had its own shape or color; the cellar was like somebody's crazy vision of Hell; it was as if he were caught there and condemned to live in a perpetual nightmare. When he came out on the street, he said, it was bathed in harsh winter sunlight, ugly and clear and somehow reassuring. An ashcolored woman was hunting for scraps in a garbage can.

That was the way a decade came to its end.²

This is the way another decade ends: on New Year's Eve ten years later W. H. Auden--speaking, like Cowley, in the authentic voice of his generation--writes:

Tonight a scrambling decade ends,
 And strangers, enemies and friends
 Stand once more puzzled underneath
 The signpost on the barren heath
 Where the rough mountain track divides
 To silent valleys on all sides,
 Endeavoring to decipher what
 Is written on it but cannot,
 Nor guess in what direction lies
 The overhanging precipice.³

Between these two dates was enacted the drama of a generation. For Cowley and his friend the image of the

scavenging woman, however pitiful, was "somehow reassuring." This reassurance was born of the conviction that the Big Party was at last over; the unreal phantasmagoria of the cellar club was dispelled by the harsh light of reality. The ruins of social decay were illumined by the testimony of the senses; and it is not surprising that the worlds of art and ideas should themselves be characterized by the search for social enlightenment. "Come into the light, comrade!" was the communist offer of salvation, and it is the metaphor of illumination which characterizes the thirties. Man could no longer exist in the shadow of his personal nightmare; the pose of non-commitment, he came to feel, was itself a political act. No less than the striking worker, the artist-intellectual felt compelled to ask--and to answer--the question posed by the union song: which side are you on?

By the end of the decade, as Auden's poem reveals, the light of social illumination had dimmed, and the answers once so clear and bright, the sharp black-and-white images of reality, began to blur and fade. The signpost on the barren heath was no longer clearly decipherable, the path to salvation no longer led in a single direction. But Auden, no less than Cowley, had shared the perils and consolations of commitment; he, too, had found in the necessity for social action a moral imperative which outweighed the esthetic.

Yesterday, the belief in the absolute value of Greek;
 The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero;
 Yesterday the prayer to the sunset,
 And the adoration of madmen. But today the struggle.

.

Tomorrow, for the young, the poets exploding like bombs,
 The walks by the lake, the winter of perfect communion;
 Tomorrow the bicycle races
 Through the suburbs on summer evenings; but today
 the struggle.⁴

"Today the struggle," this is the key to the contradictions of the thirties, the source of both its weakness and its strength. An age of tension, terror, and breakdown, it seemed to demand action. But action within the context of an era of convulsive change becomes more than an idle gesture; paradoxically, despite the enormity of conflicting social forces, man in the thirties felt anything but impotent. The act of commitment was crucial because it seemed meaningful. It was not mere hyperbole which caused a Marxist critic to write: "This is a marvelous time in which to be alive. It is immeasurably better than 1890, when literature was devoted to trivia. Today we have everything but triviality to write about."⁵ It is this sense of living on the crest of history-- of being a vital element in the age to which one is born-- which endows literature and criticism of the thirties with both the virtue of enthusiasm and the liability of temporality.

But before we concern ourselves with the species of commitment, let us briefly consider a few social facts too easily overlooked in these days of the affluent society. It is difficult now to appreciate that the question of revolution was uppermost in the minds of many Americans--not merely the radicals--in 1931 and 1932. Most abhorred the possibility;

a few saw the fulfillment of the revolutionary dream, but neither side would have been surprised had national violence indeed erupted. It was soon apparent that America would not accept the revolutionary alternative; but it is significant that the possibility was seriously entertained. A large newspaper syndicate featured a series of interviews with financiers and business leaders entitled "Can Capitalism Survive?" The answers, not surprisingly, were in the affirmative, but the question itself implied that an element of doubt remained. A New Yorker cartoon revealed a pampered debutante saying to her newspaper-reading father, "Well, Daddy, can I come out after the Revolution then?"⁶ Harper's magazine--hardly a radical publication--ran, in 1932-33, a series of articles with such titles as "And If the Revolution Comes?", "Rebellion in the Cornbelt," "The Revolution and the American Scene," and "Are We Going to Have a Revolution?" George R. Leighton, a staff writer for the periodical, voiced the wide-spread apprehension of many Americans when he wrote:

The citizen can only ask himself: how shall I be prepared to deal with the problems of a collapse, what shall I do if all the pent-up wrath breaks out? What if, after a long succession of catastrophes, I should awake some morning and learn that the great banks of the country had gone down, that the Federal Reserve had succumbed; what if, day after day, the newspapers brought word of further disasters . . . until at last the Federal government proclaimed martial law throughout the land, and established a dictatorship? And what, if, despite all this, the function of government was powerless? What then? What should I do?

In the beginning days of the decade the social situation indeed seemed grim. The illimitable vista of prosperity proclaimed in the twenties had vanished with the stock market crash, and in its place were seen the harsh images of social breakdown. In February, 1930, Seattle, Los Angeles, and Chicago witnessed demonstrations by the unemployed; in the same month bread lines on the Bowery were drawing 2000 daily; in March, Milwaukee opened a municipal soup kitchen. Everywhere the citizen saw and experienced the signs of Depression: an army of bankrupts offered testimony to the fallacy of the theory of illimitable credit; the miners' time-sheets showed monthly wages of \$31.88, minus \$22 for "transfers"; the farmers of the mid-west, having exhausted all credit through years of selling grain for less than it cost to raise it, turned to violence and talked rebellion;⁸ many teachers, finding jobs ever scarcer because of the universities' loss of endowments and operating funds, joined, with hundreds of thousands of other professional workers, the great masses of the unemployed.

The economic breakdown manifest in the misery of individuals was confirmed by the impartiality of statistics. National income dwindled from eighty-one billion dollars in 1929 to less than sixty-eight in 1930, then fell to fifty-three in 1931, and finally hit bottom in 1932 with forty-one. Correspondingly, the country's estimated wealth over this period shrank from 365 billion to 239, a loss which

represented diminished values in real property, capital, and commodities. The machine of capitalism seemed dangerously stalled: these three years saw the failure of 85,000 businesses and the suspension of 500,000 banks. Nine million savings accounts were wiped out, and wage losses reached upwards of 26 billion dollars.⁹ The volume of money paid as salaries dwindled 40 per cent, dividends 56.6 per cent, and wages 60 per cent. Per capita realized income (adjusted to the cost of living) fell from \$681 in 1929 to \$495 in 1933. Yet those who could count upon any income at all were the lucky ones, for the spectre of total unemployment stalked the land. In April, 1930, President Hoover ordered a house-to-house survey of the situation, the first federal census of unemployment in the nation's history, and found that slightly more than three million employables were reported out of work, against forty-five million persons gainfully employed. But the number was increasing steadily, and although the national picture shifted continually, it is estimated that at the depths of the Depression in 1932-33 unemployment reached a total of between thirteen and sixteen millions, the equivalent of one quarter of the country's entire labor force.¹⁰

New symbols arose to replace those of the Jazz Age: the bouncy progression of the "Charleston" was resolved in the minor key of "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime"; the hip-flask and the speakeasy were replaced by the side-walk apple-seller. And throughout the land the average citizen tightened

his belt. For him the Depression was reflected in a myriad of personal sacrifices: the postponed operation, the depleted food-basket. The myth of success, along with that of rugged individualism, was severely tarnished. The old formulas no longer seemed to suffice. A collegian voiced the scepticism of his generation: "We realize that honesty, integrity, and industry don't get you to the top anymore."¹¹

But if the old myths were dying, new ones arose to replace them. The economic breakdown brought forth the search for social alternatives. Intellectuals who had remained defiantly apolitical throughout the preceding decade now rushed to make public commitment, intoxicated by a new-found sense of potency. They found in the breakdown of capitalism not despair, but rather hope. Edmund Wilson wrote that

. . . a darkness seemed to descend. Yet, to the writers and artists of my generation who had grown up in the Big Business era and had always resented its barbarism, its crowding-out of everything they cared about, these years were not depressing but stimulating. One couldn't help being exhilarated at the sudden unexpected collapse of that stupid gigantic fraud. It gave us a new sense of freedom.¹²

Even the apolitical Fugitive poets, hitherto dedicated almost exclusively to esthetic problems, entered the political arena. In the collective symposium I'll Take My Stand (1930) and Allen Tate's Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas (1935), they advocated an avowedly reactionary Agrarianism to replace the broken-down machine of industrial capitalism. The significance of Agrarianism lay in the political gesture

itself, since it was never seriously considered as a social alternative; but the public commitment of fifty-two writers, painters, teachers, and other professional workers in the pamphlet Culture and the Crisis had wider implications for the generation of the thirties. The social alternative here offered was one that was to play a crucial role in determining the intellectual climate of the age--Marxism. In October, 1932, at the peak of the presidential campaign, a group of intellectuals, dismayed by the manifest failure of capitalism, declared themselves for the Communist candidates, organized the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, and issued Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Intellectuals of America. The pamphlet--signed, among others, by Sherwood Anderson, Erskine Caldwell, Malcolm Cowley, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, Sidney Howard, Horace Gregory, Langston Hughes, Matthew Josephson, Lincoln Steffens, and Edmund Wilson--noted that there was only one issue in the campaign, the failure of capitalism. Only one alternative would suffice: the acceptance of a program to overhaul radically the entire structure; and such a program, the pamphlet asserted, was available from only one source, the Communist Party. All other alternatives were half-measures, doomed to failure. As for becoming a Socialist, Dos Passos remarked in a different context: "Right now [that] would have just about the same effect on anybody as drinking a bottle of near-beer."¹³

Above all, Culture and the Crisis stressed the importance of political commitment. The role of the intellectual was no longer seen as one of detached contemplation; he was duty-bound, by virtue of his role, to act.

We who write this, listed among the so-called "intellectuals" of our generation, people trained, at least, to think for ourselves and hence to a degree for our time and our people--we have no faintest desire to exaggerate our talents and our influence. Yet, on the other hand, why should we as a class be humble? Practically everything that is orderly and sane and useful in America was made by two classes of Americans: our class, the class of brain workers, and the "lower classes," the muscle workers. Very well, we strike hands with our true comrades. We claim our own and we reject the disorder, the lunacy spawned by grabbers, advertisers, traders, speculators, salesmen. . . . We claim the right to live and to function. It is our business to think and we shall not permit business men to teach us our business. It is, also, in the end, our business to act.

We have acted. As responsible intellectual workers, we have aligned ourselves with the frankly revolutionary Communist Party, the party of the workers.¹⁴

George F. Babbitt--former member of the booboisie, now capitalist exploiter--is still the object of abuse; but he is no longer merely a fool, he has become a villain. It is, however, not inappropriate that he should remain the target, for the signers of Culture and the Crisis belonged to the generation that had created him. Their commitment, then, assumes meaning in the context of the political apathy from which they had recently emerged. H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, the editors of the Mercury, a characteristic periodical of the twenties, were, in their own words, "committed to

nothing save this: to keep to common sense as fast as they can, to belabor sham as agreeably as possible. . . ."15

Politicians--all politicians--were by definition fools and scoundrels, and political concerns seemed supremely irrelevant in the context of prosperity. "It was characteristic of the Jazz Age," said F. Scott Fitzgerald, "that it had no interest in politics at all." And again Mencken--the articulate embodiment of the Zeitgeist: "If I am convinced of anything, it is that Doing Good is in bad taste."16

The social enemies of the Twenties were, thus, strawmen. The Philistine and the Puritan might be ridiculed, but no one seriously entertained the possibility of replacing them. Escape lay in other directions: in the bohemianism of Greenwich Village, the primitivism of Mexico, or the cultural sophistication of Paris. Expatriation became the characteristic gesture of the age; they sold no beer on Main Street, but wine was cheap in the cafes of Pamplona. And always there was the great anodyne, Art. If the bourgeoisie could not appreciate his efforts, the artist would reciprocate by rendering his handiwork ever more experimentally complex.

The reformist zeal which, in the early years of the century, had exerted a strong and effective political and moral force, did not survive the Great War. The muck-raking attacks on the shame of the cities and Standard Oil--the concerted effort to combat corruption in both government and business--disappeared behind the facade of a cynicism bred by

overwhelming public endorsement of successive Republican administrations. Only one event in the 1920's shook the facade of apathy, but it demonstrated that forces of liberalism and radicalism could be revitalized if awakened by a cause. The arrest and subsequent execution of Sacco and Vanzetti brought liberals, anarchists, communists, proletarians, and intellectuals together in collective protest. But despite Marxist attempts to point the moral of the political martyrdom ("there is a bloody battle between classes . . . and the victory is Class Justice"),¹⁷ the disparate forces brought together by the case were dispersed by the tragic fact of execution; they were not to converge again until the era of the Popular Front. The intellectuals resumed their apolitical stance; the rechanneling of their political energies awaited the catalyst of the Depression.

Six months before the Crash Mike Gold had vainly exhorted young writers to "go left," but in the aftermath of depression little encouragement was needed. Commenting upon a symposium in the independently radical Modern Quarterly in the summer of 1932, the New Republic noted that the "leftward swing" of American writers was a reality:

Three years ago, these . . . critics and novelists were classified either as liberals or men wholly uninterested in politics. Today, most of them distrust the Socialists for being too conservative. . . . The writers themselves believe that the system is doomed. . . . Their change of opinion seems to indicate that American literature is about to assume a different character.¹⁸

The prediction was fulfilled; American literature in the thirties was, to a large extent, molded by the influence of the Marxist myth. An acceptance of this fact need not necessarily confirm the theory of the "Red decade." The influence of Marxism in the United States was determined by its lack of any substantial proletarian support. When a European intellectual in Germany in the late twenties or in France during the middle thirties attached himself to the communists, he found himself involved with and sustained by a movement comprised of millions of people. In America, however, it was soon apparent that the revolutionary alternative would not be accepted. After all, William Z. Foster--despite the urgings of many of America's leading intellectuals--received fewer than one hundred thousand votes in the 1932 elections. But it is difficult to measure the extent of a social myth statistically. The intellectual influence of Marxism in the 1930's--as revealed by the commitments of intellectuals and the work of artists--bore no direct relation to the growth of membership in the Communist Party, which reached its peak of 80,000 during the war years when Marxist intellectual influence had substantially diminished.¹⁹

The influence of Marxism on American letters passed through two distinct phases. In the depths of the Depression the newly radical esthetes of the twenties felt compelled to act, and Marxism as a philosophy, and the Communist Party as an organization, seemed the most effective means of realizing

this desire; in short, they accommodated themselves to what they felt were revolutionary necessities. For the communists offered a program of action, a disciplined organization, a working model--the USSR, which was embarking upon its first five year plan and maintaining full employment--and a body of doctrine which placed all social and esthetic phenomena in the coherent philosophical framework of dialectical materialism. The appeal of Marxism was found, however, less in the social analysis of Capital than in the activism of Marx's eleventh "Thesis on Feurbach": "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."²⁰

After 1935, however, the political accommodation was often the other way around. The communists, who had gradually alienated the early intellectual converts (by 1936 most of the signers of Culture and the Crisis had disaffiliated themselves from the Communist Party) now openly sought the support of non-radical, anti-fascist intellectuals. Thus, while the initial burst of Marxist influence had waned by the middle of the decade, this influence was revived by the rise of fascism; for although the economic collapse which had turned the intellectuals of the twenties toward radicalism had been ameliorated by New Deal reform, the fascist threat continued to grow throughout the decade. And after 1935 it was no longer necessary to accept all the particulars of communist faith. The policy of the United Front--

officially decreed in 1935 by the Comintern--no longer viewed all capitalist states as equally warlike. All could unite in opposition to the fascist menace. As Georgi Dimitrov wrote: "Today there exist (1) a proletarian state that is the greatest bulwark of peace; (2) definite fascist aggressors; (3) a number of countries under direct threat of fascist aggression. . . . (4) other capitalist states who are at the moment interested in the preservation of peace. Consequently it is absolutely inaccurate to represent all nations as aggressors."²¹

This change in attitude was similarly reflected by the presence at the 2nd Congress of the Marxist League of American Writers of such non-communist adherents of the Popular Front as Hemingway, MacLeish, and Frances Winwar. The Congress of 1935 had boldly advocated a program based upon the "fight against imperialist war and fascism," and "solidarity with colonial people in the struggles for freedom."²² But the program of the 1937 Congress was hardly revolutionary: "it seeks to restore and raise the living standards of the people; to extend the trade unions to the basic industries and to all workers and professionals . . ., to consolidate and extend social and labor legislation; to maintain and extend democratic rights and civil liberties . . ."²³ In short, "Communism," in the words of the party platform of 1936, was "twentieth-century Americanism."²⁴

The heyday of the Popular Front, however, was shattered in 1939 by the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. The impact was staggering. It had not been difficult for the communist writers to ameliorate their revolutionary fervor to cooperate with the opponents of fascism, for many, being middle-class intellectuals, had welcomed the opportunity to forego the necessity of viewing all non-communists as class enemies; but the pact demanded a total revision of attitude only the most deeply committed could achieve. To many it seemed the betrayal of all they had struggled for during the past years. One-third of the officers of the League of American Writers resigned, one hundred of its eight hundred members formally left, and many others drifted away. Granville Hicks, himself a victim of disillusionment, summed up the impact upon many Marxist intellectuals: "I remember very well the moment at which we got the news of the . . . pact. . . . At breakfast, on a beautiful summer morning, we heard the report. When I was able to speak, I said, 'That knocks the bottom out of everything.'"²⁵

With Hitler's invasion of Russia, the Popular Front was revived; but although public estimation of the Soviet Union was never so high as during the period when it was our war-time ally, for all intents and purposes the Marxist myth had lost its efficacy for the intellectuals. War-time, in any case, is rarely a time for intellectual vitality; all energy is directed toward the single goal of victory, and art

tends towards either exhortation or escape. With the advent of the Cold War and McCarthyism, the radical element in the United States dwindled to insignificance and many found that it was not sufficient to have repudiated the Marxist myth; the act of having once subscribed was itself condemnatory, unless accompanied by the most vigorous demonstrations of patriotic fervor.

The compulsion toward political commitment did not, however, enmesh all intellectuals in the many vagaries of Marxism. Although, in the early days of economic breakdown, many liberals turned left simply because they saw no other alternative, as the decade progressed, it became apparent that Roosevelt's pragmatic reformism, if it had not ended the Depression, had at least ended the Crisis. F.D.R. was fond of quoting Macauley's dictum that one must reform in order to preserve, and in order to preserve capitalism experimented boldly. Some efforts, like NRA, failed; others, like TVA, have become unchallenged American institutions. In any case, liberals no longer were confronted by an either/or situation; they found that they could indeed support a government which had undertaken such reforms as WPA and Social Security, which had encouraged trade unionism and, in general, taken an active role in all areas of American life. With the advent of the Popular Front, many liberals found in anti-fascism a cause with which they could affiliate with the communists, since the communists were, in any case, themselves

talking very much like New Dealers. The liberal commitment, however, was not related to a single social myth. Like New Dealism, it was itself pragmatic, accepting certain tenets of Marxism while eschewing others. Although the liberal often respected the social fervor of the Marxist, he saw no sense in predicating his anti-fascism upon what he conceived to be another form of totalitarianism. But whatever his politics, the significant fact is that, in the thirties, the writer felt compelled to commit himself, to involve himself in the social issues of the age to which he belonged.

Since drama is preeminently a social art, it is not surprising that the social concerns sketched above should find dramatic expression. Indeed, the virtues and defects of American drama of the 1930's are largely due to the intensity of its barometric reflection of social change. One cannot read the drama of that troubled decade without sensing a social atmosphere very different from both that of our own age and the age that preceded it. Because the Depression and, as the decade progressed, the imminence of war were never far off-stage, the serious American playwright responded to what seemed to him inexorable demands for social and political commitment. This does not mean, however, that most plays produced in the period 1930-1941 were social dramas. On the contrary, statistics reveal that the bulk of drama produced during the decade was substantially similar to that of the

periods which preceded and followed it; the common fare of Broadway has not varied considerably in forty years. But if we consider significant drama of the 1930's--that drama which has had greatest survival value and which has received most critical attention--we find an overwhelming preoccupation with social issues. The work of the major dramatists of the period--Odets, Lawson, Anderson, Rice, Behrman, Green, Shaw, Hellman, Sherwood--unquestionably reflects an intense, active concern with the political and social issues raised by the Depression and the rise of fascism.²⁶

To appreciate the change in the direction of American drama in the thirties, it is necessary to view the dramatic contribution of the decade which immediately preceded it; for the 1929 Crash represented a dramatic as well as an economic watershed. Serious American drama of the 1920's, no less than the other arts, was overwhelmed by various kinds of experiment. The constraints of realism were rejected in favor of attempts to reorder experience through new techniques, new concepts and sequences of dialogue, new versions of characterization, and bold innovations in scenic design. The main vehicle for this dramatic experimentation was the technique of expressionism, newly revealed to American playwrights through the Theatre Guild productions of the works of Kaiser, Toller, and Capek, and through films like The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari. Beginning with Lawson's Roger Bloomer and Rice's Adding Machine in 1923, American drama in

the twenties adapted expressionistic devices to its serious needs. Rice's The Subway, E. E. Cummings' Him, Kaufman and Connelly's Beggar on Horseback, all of Lawson's plays of the decade, and, of course, many of the dramas of Eugene O'Neill (Emperor Jones, The Hairy Ape, The Great God Brown, Lazarus Laughed) reveal an indebtedness to expressionistic technique. Indeed, the dramatic canon of O'Neill represents a persistent search for new horizons of dramatic expression.

The intensity of dramatic experiment in the twenties, however, does not merely indicate the dominance of esthetic over social concerns. That the serious dramatist was concerned with society is revealed by the explicit condemnation of contemporary business morality in such plays as The Adding Machine and Roger Bloomer. But, in general, this social criticism was ill-defined because the playwright could not as yet offer a political alternative. Indeed, one of the attractions of European expressionism lay in its perennial theme of alienation. Man, brutalized by industrial society, was conceived as a social victim, with little recourse but to accept his extinction at the hands of forces too vast for him to control. Rice's Mr. Zero became the characteristic "anti-hero" of the age, the embodiment of impotence who is condemned in death as in life.

That serious drama which was non-experimental, in that it retained the traditional, realistic form, was, more often than not, preoccupied with psychological rather than social

man. The moral revolution which followed the Great War, was reinforced by the impact of the sexual theories of Sigmund Freud, with the result that much of American drama turned inward to investigate the complexities of the human psyche in such plays as Sidney Howard's Silver Cord (1926), Anderson's Gypsy (1929), and O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms (1924).

American drama of the 1920's, no less than dramatists themselves, was politically uncommitted for the simple reason that there were few social issues that seemed to demand commitment. Although the Sacco-Vanzetti case brought forth the protest of Anderson's Gods of the Lightning, and despite the social experimentation of Lawson, Dos Passos and the Siftons at the end of the decade, in general, the jazz-age playwright, caught up in the dramatic experimentation of his age, preferred the esthetic to the political arena.

The realities of the Depression, however, changed the tenor and direction of American drama. The age of experimentation suffered an immediate demise, for experiment smacked of a frivolity inappropriate to the seriousness that now seemed to be demanded. Although the change is most manifest in the work of Lawson, one of the primary experimenters of the twenties, it is observable in the entire corpus of American drama over the two decades. Those dramatic experiments attempted in the 1930's invariably involved Brechtian technique. The Marxist "agit-prop," the Living Newspaper,

and several dramatically presentational productions (Brecht's Mother, Piscator's Case of Clyde Griffiths) shared the common aim of didacticism, the desire to confront the audience directly with specific social issues and political alternatives. On the whole, however, American drama of the 1930's was primarily realistic in form because it was concerned with centering attention on what it had to say, rather than on the means of dramatic statement. Protest was now channeled into specific political directions, and abstract condemnations of industrial society were replaced by serious searches for political alternatives. It is surely significant that the most characteristic dramatic voice of the twenties, Eugene O'Neill, was largely silent in the thirties. His only plays of the decade (save Mourning Becomes Electra, produced in 1931 but composed in the twenties) were Ah, Wilderness, an exercise in uncharacteristic sentimentality, and Days Without End, a confused, semi-Catholic attempt at religious affirmation.

The change in the direction of American drama is first noticeable in the season of 1932-33. Perhaps because drama is a complex and collective art, it takes a while for immediate social issues to find artistic reflection. In any case, the three years immediately following the Crash produced few social dramas. In 1932, however, several events indicated that American drama was taking a new turn. Lawson's Success Story revealed him for the first time abandoning his previous

experimentalism in a play which savagely attacked the myth of business success against the backdrop of the Depression. S. N. Behrman's Biography, produced the same year, also demonstrated the playwright's involvement in new social problems. Behrman had made a modest reputation at the end of the twenties writing high comedies involved with issues no more portentous than the obtaining or relinquishing of a mistress, but in Biography, the playwright chooses a political radical for his male protagonist, and the world of the Depression abruptly enters the world of the drawing room. Indeed, Behrman's comic world, as we shall observe in a later chapter, is continually besieged by the social conflicts of his time.

The political awakening of the intellectuals of the twenties, recorded in the initial section of this chapter, is similarly evidenced by the change in the work of several characteristic dramatists of the Jazz Age. In The Adding Machine and The Subway Elmer Rice had recorded man's impotence before the God of the Machine, but in We the People (1933) he emerges in a vigorous, politically committed role, proclaiming that social reform must be forthcoming to alleviate the ills of capitalism, and his subsequent plays of the decade reinforce his new-found activism. Social issues also play increasingly important roles in the Depression dramas of Maxwell Anderson and Robert Sherwood. Anderson, despite his concern with reinstating historical verse drama, becomes increasingly involved in the thirties with the themes of

liberty and rebellion in such plays as Valley Forge (1934), The Masque of Kings (1937), High Tor (1937), Second Overture (1938), and Key Largo (1932). Sherwood, on the other hand, eschews the world of comedy--The Road to Rome (1927), The Queen's Husband (1928) and Reunion in Vienna (1931)--for the world of social commitment--The Petrified Forest (1935), Idiot's Delight (1936), Abe Lincoln in Illinois (1938) and There Shall be No Night (1940). Indeed, in the political vicissitudes of their age, the newly committed playwrights found many common dramatic themes: social injustice (Winterset, We the People), anti-fascism (Key Largo, Judgment Day, Flight to the West), anti-war (There Shall Be No Night, Idiot's Delight, Second Overture) and Americanism (Valley Forge, Abe Lincoln in Illinois, American Landscape).

If one were to attempt to chart the rise and fall of politically committed drama in the 1930's, one might place the high-point at the mid-decade, 1934-1936. This period saw the major productions of the left-wing Theatre Union and the Marxist New Theatre League (which produced, among other short works, Odets' Waiting for Lefty and Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead); the Group Theatre's productions of the work of the decade's most important young dramatist, Clifford Odets; the Theatre Guild's productions of such plays as Wexley's They Shall Not Die, Sherwood's Idiot's Delight and the leftist revue, Parade (1935); the production on Broadway of such dramas with social themes as Dead End, Winterset, and The

Petrified Forest; and the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union's socially satiric revue, Pins and Needles, which succeeded in placing its finger on the pulse of the period by genially requesting:

Sing us a song with social significance
Or you can sing until you're blue
Let meaning shine from every line
Or we won't love you.²⁷

Despite the major theatrical event of the latter part of the decade, the unprecedented Federal Theatre Project, the record reveals that the period from 1938 to 1941 represents a general decline in social and, in particular, left-wing drama. By 1939, the left-wing theatre movement had died because of a variety of factors, primarily lack of patronage and the change in ideological direction demanded by the Popular Front; the dramas of Clifford Odets became increasingly preoccupied with personal problems after his defection to Hollywood; and several of the twenties playwrights who had moved left because of the initial impact of the Depression had found reason to be disenchanted with the intransigency of the radicals. Anger at the manifest failure of capitalism gave way to apprehension at the imminence of war, and the mood at the end of the thirties was unquestionably less socially aggressive than at the mid-decade. Perhaps the wistful, almost desperate optimism of William Saroyan accurately reflects the mood of the late thirties, a determined but largely unreasoned faith in the possibilities of man's

goodness. Survival was soon to be the only basic social question, and the spirit of political commitment which dominated American drama in the 1930's was largely dissipated by the entry of America into the second World War.

The political commitments of American dramatists in the thirties, like those of intellectuals in general, were invariably left of center, either reformist or radical. The 1930's unquestionably represent the high point of Marxist influence on American drama. Even those liberal playwrights who, like Rice, Behrman, and Sherwood, disapproved of radical dogmatism treated the Marxist alternative seriously. Rice, in particular, at the beginning of the decade, made common cause with the Marxists on many issues, and communist characters figure prominently--not always unsympathetically--in Behrman's plays of the mid-decade.

Marxist influence on the drama, as upon literature in general, was greatest at the middle of the decade, a period which witnessed the major productions of Theatre Union, the emergence of Odets, the most successful work of the New Theatre, and the brief flowering of "proletarian" drama, the genre which produced such plays as Let Freedom Ring, Waiting for Lefty, Stevedore, Marching Song, and Black Pit. Indeed, the entire phenomenon of proletarian literature is significant as a reflection of the impact of Marxism on American letters. We may observe that the years 1934-35 saw the publication of twenty-eight proletarian novels and a

representative anthology entitled Proletarian Literature in the United States. Nor were critical evaluations of the phenomenon restricted to the radical press. The Times Literary Supplement, observing the "vitality" of the American movement (in much the same manner as its recent praise for the vitality of "Beat" writing), commented, "An odd outlook, it may well appear, to capture so successfully, in capitalist and individualist America of all places, so many adherents, even among those notoriously unstable beings, artists and intellectuals!"²⁸ The vitality of the movement had, in fact, waned considerably by the time of TLS's endorsement, but the phenomenon of proletarian literature is significant because it was, briefly, a genuine movement, which had repercussions outside the sphere of its own parochialism; again, like the "Beat" or "Angry Young Man" movements of today, proletarian literature was less important for what it actually produced than for the interest it aroused in literary circles.

Proletarian literature exerted considerable influence upon the drama; for American drama was, and is, New York drama, and New York was the spiritual home of American Marxism. It is not surprising, then, that both the proletarian novel and play should share similar subject matter. Walter Rideout, in his analysis of the proletarian novel, finds such novels may be divided into four main categories: (1) those centered about a strike; (2) those concerned with the development of an individual's class consciousness and

his conversion to communism; (3) those dealing with the 'bottom dogs,' the lowest layers of society; and (4) those describing the decay of the middle-class."²⁹ American Marxist drama of the thirties uses each of these categories save the third, probably because the picaresque structure of the "bottom dog" novel was too episodic to lend itself to dramatic adaptation.

But proletarian literature was not so designated merely on the basis of its working-class subject matter. We may observe that Rideout's fourth category deals with the middle-class. Throughout the early part of the decade the problem of defining "proletarian" as a literary term became the major subject of Marxist esthetic debate. Some critics supported a literal use of the word: proletarian literature designated those works by working-class authors which dealt with authentic areas of working class experience. But others felt such a definition did not face the realities of the basic Marxist esthetic premise that art is a weapon in the class struggle. Just as the term "proletariat" came in the political lexicon to designate more than the working-class--it transcended description, and assumed the connotation of "the wave of the future"--so proletarian literature had to be based on ideological awareness. V. F. Calverton maintained this point of view in the Liberation of American Literature (1932), one of the few book-length applications of Marxism to literary analysis in the thirties. Definition

by subject matter was insufficient, he stated; the one necessary distinction between bourgeois and proletarian writers was the acceptance by the latter of Marxist ideology, whatever their class origin: "they are writers who have adopted the revolutionary point of view of the proletarian ideology, and who try to express that ideology in their work."³⁰

The problem received considerable attention at the American Writers' Congress of 1935--not unnaturally, since the proletarian genre was then at its zenith. By and large, the speakers affirmed Calverton's position. Proletarian art was not to be distinguished by its subject matter, but rather by its point of view. Waldo Frank attempted to dispel confusion as to the "material" and "subject" of art.

The subject of a book is a mere label or container; it may mislead or be empty. Our poet or prose-man, by his loyalty to the working class (whether born in it or not) . . . will write more and more of the struggles of farmer and worker. But if his vision be sound, it will make--whatever his subject--the material for revolutionary art. The term "proletarian" applied to art should refer to the key and vision in which the work is conceived, rather than to subject. It should be a qualitative, not quantitative, term.³¹

Such a definition had both loosening and restrictive consequences. Since "proletarian" was an evaluative, rather than a descriptive term, the Marxist writer was not confined to writing exclusively about the working class. His view-point, rather than his subject matter, qualified his work as "revolutionary." Nor need the view-point of the work be overtly militant. If the writer had made public commitment

as either party member or fellow-traveler, his work need not contain an overt revolutionary moral.

The concept of proletarian literature was, then, rather elastically applied, but it was never a purely descriptive term. For, as Joshua Junitz pointed out, it was not inconceivable that a novel be written about the proletariat by "someone from an inimical class with an inimical point of view."³² Such a work, from a Marxist point of view, could not possibly express the "attitudes, experience and aspiration" of the working-class; hence, it would not be a proletarian novel. But the dangers inherent in an ideological evaluation of art were soon manifest. Although some critics continually stressed the need for a concern with the technical problems of art, the more sectarian tended to evaluate literature almost solely on the grounds of political awareness. Art was, first and foremost, a class weapon, they asserted; the distinction between form and content was fallacious. "If a man has something to say, as all proletarian writers have," claimed Mike Gold, "he will learn to say it clearly in time."³³ Such a view, the less sectarian countered, grossly oversimplified the problems of art. Yes, they admitted, art was a weapon; but the better the art, the better the weapon.

After the inauguration of the Popular Front, the proletarian genre--and the esthetic debate which it engendered--disappeared, for although it was still acknowledged that art was a weapon, there was no longer agreement about what the

weapon was to be directed against. The Marxists were less prone to assert their ideological differences with the non-communist left, being more concerned with stressing the points of contact. Whereas in such pre-Popular Front proletarian plays as Peace on Earth and Stevedore the villain was inevitably the capitalist system, such doctrinaire aggressiveness might well have dissuaded New Deal liberals from joining in the anti-fascist crusade. The Class Struggle, no longer the dominant literary theme, was replaced by themes of anti-fascism and "Americanism." The communists now proclaimed themselves heirs to the American revolutionary tradition and pre-empted such native heroes as Tom Paine, Jefferson, Lincoln, and John Brown. Sklar's Life and Death of an American (1939) and Gold and Blankfort's Battle Hymn (1938), despite revolutionary implications, were both largely indistinguishable in theme from the work of such non-communist anti-fascists as Rice and Sherwood. Themes of revolutionary Marxism were never revived; Marxist influence upon the drama steadily declined from 1936 onwards; until, in the period of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the Marxist dramatic voice was completely silent.

There remains one other important characteristic of Depression drama which must be considered. As befits an age preoccupied with theories of collectivism, American drama of the 1930's was characterized by the dominance of theatrical

groups. Few periods in our dramatic history have witnessed such intense theatrical activity under group auspices. Indeed, most of what has remained valuable in the dramatic legacy of the thirties was the result of the activities of such groups as the Group Theatre, Theatre Union, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Mercury Theatre. In addition to these professional groups, amateur theatres--mostly of left-wing persuasion--proliferated: Theatre of Action, Theatre Collective, Artef, Labor Stage, the New Theatre League made substantial theatrical contributions by producing such social playlets as Waiting for Lefty, Bury the Dead, Hymn to the Rising Sun, Plant in the Sun, and by offering opportunities to many young theatrical artists. Elia Kazan's first directorial effort, for example, was The Young Go First for Theatre of Action (1935).

Even the established dramatist felt the need for a greater theatrical security than that available on Broadway. In the Spring of 1938, the foremost non-Marxist dramatists of the age--Anderson, Behrman, Rice, Howard, and Sherwood--formed the Playwrights' Company for the express purpose of controlling the productions of their own plays. The organization subsequently produced, among other works, Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois, Rice's American Landscape, and Anderson's Knickerbocker Holiday and Key Largo. Although the Playwrights' Company cannot properly be termed a theatre, in that it did not recruit permanent theatrical personnel nor

offer a specific program, it is significant that the playwrights involved felt the need to band together as a production unit in order to minimize the hazards of Broadway commercialism.

The thirties may, then, be accurately characterized as an age in search of collective alternatives--both social and theatrical. All of the groups cited above were caught up in the social climate of the age; all included a sense of social obligation in their theatrical credos. Even the august Theatre Guild, which had relinquished the mantle of the theatrical avant-garde by the thirties, could not remain aloof from the issues of the age. It, too, climbed on the bandwagon of social drama, producing such plays as Roar, China (1930) by the Soviet dramatist Tretyakov, which attacked the commercial exploitation of China in the twenties; Both Your Houses (1933), Anderson's muckraking attack on politics; They Shall Not Die (1934), John Wexley's spirited defense of the Scottsboro boys; and Peters and Sklar's leftist revue, Parade (1935), which satirized the enemies of the proletariat in such verses as the following:

Life could be so beautiful
 Life could be so grand for all
 If just a few didn't own everything
 And most of us nothing at all.³⁴

That the conservative Theatre Guild would produce a revue by two of the decade's foremost Marxist dramatists offers some indication of the social atmosphere of the 1930's. Theatre

groups--no less than the dramatists who comprised them--could not escape the social and political realities of their age. It is appropriate, then, that we begin our investigation of the dramatic implications of political commitment by examining the theatrical and social ideals of three major theatre groups of the decade, groups which, although all politically involved, reveal in the varied intensity of their respective commitments different facets of the general problem. After these generic considerations, we shall turn to an examination of the specific political commitments of several major dramatists of the period.

Footnotes to Chapter I

1. (New York, 1951), p. 307.
2. Ibid., p. 308.
3. "New Year's Letter," Collected Poetry (New York, 1945), p. 274.
4. "Spain 1937," Ibid., pp. 182, 184.
5. Josephine Herbst, quoted in introduction to American Writers' Congress, ed. Henry Hart (New York, 1935), p. 15.
6. Jan. 4, 1934, p. 58.
7. "If Revolution Comes," March 1932, 117.
8. Ibid., p. 118.
9. Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression (New York, 1948), p. 17.
10. Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States (Cambridge, 1956), p. 136.
11. Wecter, p. 33.
12. The Shores of Light (New York, 1952), p. 498.
13. "Whither the American Writer," Modern Quarterly, Summer 1932, p. 12.
14. (New York, 1932), p. 3.
15. Quoted in Frederick Hoffman, The Twenties (New York, 1955), p. 308.
16. Fitzgerald and Mencken quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933 (Boston, 1957), p. 145.
17. Michael Gold, editorial, New Masses, October 1927, p. 3. Henceforth the abbreviation NM shall be used.
18. Quoted in Granville Hicks, "Communism and the American Intellectuals," Whose Revolution? (New York, 1941), p. 90.
19. Rideout, The Radical Novel, p. 256.

20. Selected Works, II (Moscow, 1955), 404.
21. "What is the People's Front?," NM, May 26, 1936, p. 9.
22. American Writers' Congress, p. 11.
23. The Writer in a Changing World, ed. Henry Hart (New York, 1937), p. 32.
24. New York Daily Worker, June 29, 1936, p. 1. Henceforth the abbreviation DW shall be used.
25. Where We Came Out (New York, 1954), p. 80.
26. A perusal of the volumes of Burns Mantle's annual record of American drama reveals that of some 1500 presentations offered by independent managers on Broadway from 1929 through 1941, only about 100 treated themes of social, political, or economic significance; but this figure excludes all the significant theatrical organizations--the Group, the Theatre Guild, Theatre Union, the Mercury, the Federal Theatre Project, the Playwrights' Company--from which nearly all significant drama of the period arose.
27. Quoted in Morgan Y. Himelstein, Social Drama and the Communist Party, unpubl. diss. (Columbia, 1958), p. 101.
28. Quoted in "American Writers Look Left," NM, June 30, 1936, p. 25.
29. The Radical Novel, p. 171.
30. (New York, 1932), p. 461.
31. "Values of the Revolutionary Writer," American Writers' Congress, p. 76.
32. "In Defense of a Term," NM Literary Section, July 12, 1938, p. 146.
33. "Advertisement For Debate," NM, July 1930, p. 3.
34. Paul Peters, George Sklar, et al., Parade (New York Public Library, Theatre Collection, typewritten, 1935), n.p. Henceforth the abbreviation Thea Coll. shall be used.

COMMITMENT AND THE IDEA OF A THEATRE

CHAPTER II

THEATRE UNION: THEATRE IS A WEAPON

A revolutionary theatre without its most living element, the revolutionary public, is a contradiction which has no meaning.

Erwin Piscator, "The Social Theatre"

That the Theatre Union was primarily a class theatre is apparent from its initial manifesto:

1. We produce plays that deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional, and cultural problems that confront the majority of the people. Our plays speak directly to this majority, whose lives usually are caricatured or ignored on the stage. We do not expect that these plays fall into the accepted social pattern. This is a new kind of professional theatre, based on the interests and hopes of the great mass of working people.
2. We have established a low price scale so that masses of people who have been barred by high prices can attend this theatre. A scale of 30¢ to \$1.50 (no tax) with more than half the seats priced under a dollar, is bringing thousands of people into the theatre who have never seen a professional play or who have not gone to the theatre for years.
3. In order to exist we organize our audience through benefit theatre parties and subscribing members.¹

The significant phrase is, of course, "the interests and hopes of the great mass of working people." Theatre Union--the first and only professional American Marxist theatre--was an

overtly committed theatre; its *raison d'être* was to demonstrate the efficacy of the slogan: "Theatre is a weapon." "Theatre Union is based on a philosophy," Michael Blankfort, one of its members, asserted: "It has a 'touchstone.'"² And this 'touchstone' was ideological; the group was less concerned with the creation of a theatrical style than with the presentation of plays which had at their core a coherent political point of view; its purpose was "to produce plays about the working-class, written from the point of view of the working-class,"³ and to create a professional theatre supported primarily by working-class organizations. Theatre Union, in short, represented Marxism's most ambitious excursion into the mainstream of the American theatre.

That such a theatre should emerge when it did is no accident. As the "first professional social theatre in America,"⁴ Theatre Union emerged as the impact of Marxism on American intellectual life reached its apogee in the mid-thirties. It is not surprising that Theatre Union's brief life (1933-1937) should coincide with the similarly brief reign of the proletarian novel. In fact, the intimacy of the group's relationship to its political commitment is revealed by the directness with which it reacted to contemporary social currents. It arose in response to specific social stimuli and disappeared when these stimuli were no longer operative.

Theatre Union had its inception in two interrelated phenomena of the early and mid-thirties: the growth of the amateur communist theatre--stimulated by the fact of depression--and the emergence of the Popular Front--during which period communists, socialists, and independent liberals found themselves in uneasy alliance. The first phenomenon provided the ground-work for the establishment of a professional "workers" theatre; and the second allowed the fledgling group to draw upon the professional talents of non-Marxist theatre personnel.

Despite such ambitious precursors of social theatre as the Workers' Drama League (1926) and the New Playwrights (1927),⁵ there was little impetus toward the formation of radical theatre groups until the onset of the Depression. As social issues became of vital concern, amateur Marxist theatre groups--usually affiliated with social or labor organizations--sprang into being. Their twofold aim was the dissemination of communist doctrine and "the agitation for specific palliatives, which could be . . . slowly adopted by the American people without commitment to revolution."⁶ Two groups became the spearhead of the movement, the German-speaking Prolet-Bühne, and the Workers' Labor Theatre of New York; and they specialized in a form of drama known as the "agit-prop," whose avowed purpose was, as its abbreviated name indicated, agitation and propaganda. This drama of slogans and invective, cemented by expressionistic

device and rhythmic expression, was created for the specific purpose of mobility and adaptability to its playing environment: labor meetings, rallies of the unemployed, etc. Although we shall analyze the agit-prop in greater detail in relationship to Odets' Waiting for Lefty, we may observe at this point that its primary weakness as an agitational device was that its magical repetition of slogans appealed essentially to the already converted. In its early stages, moreover, it was extremely crude both dramatically and theatrically (the performers were non-professionals), and separated entirely from the mainstream of American theatrical development.

Looking largely to European examples, the amateur radical groups who specialized in the agit-prop, in the words of John Gassner, "scorned the professional stage as a fen of stagnant waters and an abomination in the sight of the deified proletariat";⁷ the ideals and techniques of Broadway were looked upon as inimical to political or theatrical virtue. As the Depression intensified, however, the movement flourished and by April, 1932, had grown to such an extent that a national festival and conference, the so-called Workers' Theatre Spartakiade and Conference, was convened to establish a central organization for the purpose of coordinating the activities of the various groups. The new organization, called the League of Workers' Theatres, inaugurated a number of theatrical activities, including the publishing of

its own journal, Workers' Theatre, and began to survey the radical theatre movement's new-found prosperity. It soon became apparent to the members of the League that if the radical theatre was to win adherents in an increasingly restive America, it would have to resort to greater professionalism; the agit-prop had its place, but it was, by its very nature, too limited to have wide appeal. As more intellectuals and theatre professionals found their way into the revolutionary movement, it was obvious that the principle of non-contamination by Broadway would have to be re-examined. Some of the die-hards still maintained the necessity of complete separation, but they were voices in the wilderness. Ben Blake, the chronicler of the "New Theatre" movement, wrote: "The practical results of such a line . . . would have been to neglect the achievements of some 2500 years of history, and to neglect the technical training and creative growth of the actors, directors, playwrights, and scenic artists of the workers' theatre."⁸ Workers' Theatre affirmed Blake's position: "I think we must . . . examine the bourgeois theatre very closely, learn the methods it employs in its propaganda, learn and--as far as possible--adopt the technique it uses to make its propaganda effective."⁹

A new principle arose, that of "a theatre greater than the labor movement but drawing its inspiration from the latter and continuing the new social outlook on a broader social scale."¹⁰ In response to this trend, in September, 1933,

Workers' Theatre was rechristened New Theatre, and the League of Workers' Theatres became the New Theatre League. Eligibility to membership in the new group was construed along the broad lines of the policy which was, in August, 1935, to be adopted by the seventh Congress of the Communist Internationale, the Popular or United Front. The door was opened for the non-communist professional who accepted the sole doctrinal commitment of opposition to "war, fascism and censorship." Ben Blake tendered the invitation for non-communist participation in the New Theatre League in his Awakening of the American Theatre:

The League in no way undertakes to supervise or impose any particular political or artistic creed upon any member. On the contrary, it seeks to unite, and has had marked success in uniting, theatres and individuals of many different political faiths, to the mutual benefit of all. . . . Members who follow any particular political party or doctrine are not required to forgo their beliefs or to limit their repertory or affiliation on this account, so long as they do not violate the basic program of the League: the encouragement of the broadest possible struggle against war, fascism and censorship.¹¹

The groundwork was laid. Not only were the communists asking for non-communist support, they were getting it; and New Theatre proudly listed among its contributory editors Sidney Howard, Lee Strasberg, Hallie Flanagan, and H.W.L. Dana. Since the time was propitious for the radical theatre movement to reach beyond its amateur status, the agit-prop theatre of the Prolet-Bühne and the WLT--so crude and sectarian--obviously would no longer suffice. Herbert Kline,

the editor of New Theatre, announced that "the day of the cliché and mechanical statement has gone by for the workers' theatre."¹² The time had come for a departure from dramatized poems, expressionistic satires, and mass recitations. Since Marxism had won intellectual adherents and had penetrated into the mainstream of American cultural life, a theatre was obviously needed to reflect its new-found respectability.

In 1933 Theatre Union responded to this demand by creating a theatre which aimed at a level of esthetic excellence hitherto impossible in the amateur radical theatre movement. Obviously, the agit-prop form was not conducive to the development of major drama. Moreover, the very fact of amateur status prevented the movement from sustaining and developing theatrical talent. It was apparent that Broadway was not going to provide patronage for revolutionary playwrights. There remained one answer: the establishment of a professional "working-class" theatre, which would cultivate its own class-conscious audience to support the kind of drama it felt must be produced. Such a theatre, proponents argued, would provide an outlet for revolutionary dramatists who were forced--by the absence of an alternative--to accept Broadway's terms. Maltz and Sklar wrote in the Daily Worker: "Since workers do not attend the [Broadway] theatre why should writers devote any time to the problems and the lives of a workers? A writer today who depends for his living on

the professional theatre must write for his audience. And since his audience is a bourgeois audience, he must write bourgeois plays."¹³

But, in the spirit of the Popular Front enunciated by the New Theatre League, Theatre Union did not construe "working-class" plays along strict, sectarian communist lines. The group aimed at creating the broadest-based Marxist theatre possible; not only was this consistent with the then current communist line, but it was a theatrical necessity if the group was to draw upon the reservoir of non-communist Broadway talent. Time and again, the directors of Theatre Union were to assert its political inclusiveness and to disavow connection with any specific political doctrine, at least officially. "Our only creed," wrote Margaret Larkin, "is to fight for the underdog."¹⁴ Similarly, in reply to a polemic by Lawson accusing the Union of insufficient specificity in its social criticism, Liston Oaks, a member of the executive board, asserted that "Theatre Union has consistently followed a non-sectarian, united front policy. . . . It is not an agit-prop theatre. It is a united front theatre organized to produce plays that all honest militant workers and middle-class sympathizers can support."¹⁵ In fact, one of its avowed aims was the hope of winning the support of the "unconverted" liberals, intellectuals, and theatregoers who might have been put off by a sectarian communist theatre.¹⁶ And it must be recorded that Theatre

Union did achieve wide non-communist support. Its initial presentation, Peace On Earth, was welcomed extravagantly by the Nation ("this is a working-class theatre of the only sort we believe in")¹⁷ the New Republic ("liberals and radicals, socialists and communists, can unite in their attitude toward war, and in supporting the opposition to it. . . ."),¹⁸ and even the socialist New Leader ("an exceedingly interesting and hopeful venture").¹⁹

Its role as a United Front theatre continually presented Theatre Union with difficulties. On one hand, it was primarily organized for the purpose of presenting "working-class," that is, Marxist-oriented, plays, plays that would lead inevitably to the assumption of a "progressive" political position; on the other, it was constrained by the necessity of Popular Front support to avoid a too rigid affirmation of communist policy. Since action is, of course, facilitated by specificity, as the communist critics of the Union continually affirmed, Theatre Union had to be ever-vigilant against the sin of "reformism." Oaks, in his rebuttal to Lawson, attempted to demonstrate that "political accuracy and ideological clarity does not necessitate specific organizational labels. . . . If liberals transfer the revolutionary content and implications of our plays into humanitarianism, that is not the fault of the playwright but the result of the confusion of liberal thinking."²⁰ Throughout its brief career Theatre Union walked the tight-rope between its

communist roots and its United Front policy, a balancing act still possible in the heady political atmosphere of the mid-thirties.

Such, then, were the forces behind the formation of Theatre Union. How did it undertake to realize its ambitious attempt to create a professional "workers'" theatre? The directors of Theatre Union realized that the key to its survival lay in the creation of a new, atypical theatrical audience--an audience composed partially of militant intellectuals, but largely of the working-class. A workers' theatre, they logically concluded, should be supported by the workers, a support Theatre Union attempted strenuously to achieve. But the group was the victim of its own political semantics. We have observed that the words "worker" and "proletarian" connoted, in the Marxist lexicon, much more than member of the laboring force. More often than not, the proletarian novel or play was considered such not by virtue of its subject matter, but rather by virtue of its point of view. Thus from the outset Theatre Union was involved in a necessary contradiction. It attempted to create a theatre of protest which would express the "workers' point of view," i.e., a class-conscious Marxism, while, in actuality, this point of view was never that of any significant segment of the American working class. Theatre Union fought a perennial battle to achieve working-class support by organizing theatre parties, but despite sporadic success in its initial efforts,

it was fighting a losing cause. It recognized, quite logically, that in order to survive it would have to depend upon an audience other than that of Broadway, and it made an all-out effort to enlist this support. Corps of Theatre Union council volunteers spoke nightly before labor groups, unions, and fraternal organizations;²¹ its policy of low-priced seats (30¢ to \$1.50) aimed at attracting a clientele that could not afford Broadway prices. Its efforts were not completely unrewarded. Pegce on Earth would not have achieved its sixteen week run without the support of theatre parties sponsored by such diverse organizations as the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Followers of Nature, the Jewelry Workers Club, the League of Women Voters, the Flatbush Culture Club, and the Bryn Mawr Alumni Association. Surely this was the Popular Front with a vengeance.²²

But the unfortunate fact is that despite its efforts-- despite continual assertions of a "dependable audience for plays dealing specifically with social questions"²³--Theatre Union never did succeed in creating an audience for its plays which would ignore the "reactionary" verdicts of the Broadway critics. Labor and fraternal groups proved as susceptible to Broadway reviews as the bourgeoisie. Thus, Stevedore, which received a good press despite its "class" nature, had no trouble in finding an audience. However, subsequent plays fared so poorly that the ailing Union, which had been housed in Eva Le Gallienne's old Civic

Repertory Theatre on 14th Street, in a last desperate effort decided to confront Broadway directly, and moved into the heart of the mid-town theatrical district for its presentation of Lawson's Marching Song, a move which was dictated by the recognition that Theatre Union had failed in its attempt to create a dependable working-class audience. Margaret Larkin pointed out that the inconvenient location of the Civic Repertory Theatre prevented the group from harvesting the patronage of passers-by. She also recognized that the solid core of Theatre Union's support came from the ranks of the unaffiliated leftist theatre-goers.²⁴ In hopes of organizing this group, the Union offered a cheap subscription plan, which entitled the subscriber not only to special privileges in the choice of seats, but also to a direct voice in the organization of the theatre. This last scheme never came to pass. Theatre Union put all its eggs into Lawson's basket, and when Marching Song failed, the group disbanded.

The inability to create a dependable audience lay at the heart of Theatre Union's failure. Without direct patronage, it succumbed to the commercial vagaries which it so consistently attacked. But this difficulty, though basic, was not the sole cause of Theatre Union's difficulties. As a political theatre continually aware of its ideological function, it had to face problems extrinsic to play production. For example, administration remained a permanent difficulty. Theatre Union, committed to "collective,

democratic" leadership, would not permit authority to be centralized. Its executive board originally consisted of writers, artists, and trade union officials who came together in enthusiasm for the creation of a professional social theatre, but with their chief commitments in other fields of endeavor. Since they were not able to engage fully in the activities of the theatre, the larger part of the activity attendant on play presentation was performed by a production committee which the executive board appointed from among its own ranks. All administrative decisions had to come from this production committee, which altered from one play to the next, depending upon who was free at the time. Moreover, when emergency problems arose during rehearsals, it was necessary to obtain the authority of the entire executive board.²⁵ Thus Theatre Union's commitment to "collective" leadership compounded its administrative difficulties.

Political considerations similarly influenced the group's attitude toward its acting company. Although the executive board had started the theatre with professionals of varying degrees of sympathy for what the plays stood for in order to make a beginning,²⁶ it recognized the need and the advantage of a permanent group of actors--politically "aware" as well as technically competent. Obviously, if the highest production standards were to be achieved actors would have to be hired on the primary basis of talent, not political awareness. This presented a few difficulties,

since a few of the non-political thespians balked at certain lines and bits of business as "soap-box." However, Emery Northrup reported optimistically in the pages of the New Theatre that after the first public performance of Peace on Earth the recalcitrant actors saw that the didactic elements "stood out as the most vital element of the play," and concluded, "backstage nobody talks about soapbox anymore. . ."27

Not An Actor Prepares or My Life in Art passed dog-eared from actor to actor, but instead John Strachey's The Coming Struggle for Power and communist pamphlets. The acting company, no less than the audience, was to be converted to militancy. "Out of the 40 there are now, besides the corps of worker ex-servicemen, twelve others who know their economics," Northrup reported. "They work like leaven among the group, a gradual, irresistible process of enlightenment."28

While it could not afford a permanent company, Theatre Union made an effort to recast actors who had appeared in previous plays. In Sailors of Cattaro seventeen of the cast of twenty-three had appeared in previous plays or were members of the studio; in Black Pit, twelve of the seventeen had this same close connection. And in the season of 1935-36, seven actors were selected as the nucleus of a potential permanent company. But a large permanent company was rejected on more than merely financial grounds. Although the Union recognized the stylistic advantages of such a set-up (as witnessed by the excellent productions of the Group), it

feared that a large, closed acting company might result "in the dangerous tendency to choose plays to fit the acting company, rather than for their intrinsic merit as working-class drama."²⁹ The esthetic consideration had to take second place to the political consideration. Consequently, Theatre Union augmented its small permanent group of actors from previous casts, from Broadway, from other theatrical sources, and from its own studio.

The most difficult single problem that Theatre Union had to face because of its ideological commitment was the discovery of plays that were both politically aware and dramatically sound. When a theatre limits itself on subject matter as stringently as did Theatre Union, the script famine becomes even more acute than when the only considerations are box-office potential and personal taste. Thus, although the group was in continual search for suitable plays to present, so few were found that it had to have plays specifically composed by members of its immediate group (Maltz, Sklar, Peters).³⁰ This action brought forth criticism--in the late, faltering moments of the group's existence--that it was a closed corporation which discouraged new talent.³¹ The problem of play selection was further complicated by the "collective" nature of the group's administration. When a script came into the office, the play-reading department, on deciding that it had possibilities, passed it on to the executive board of twelve men and women. If they found it

acceptable a meeting of the entire board was called, and the play was given a general reading. After several other readings a decision was reached as to whether it be produced or not. Once the play was accepted, a playwriting committee was appointed to work with the author on script revision.

Theatre Union held with no theories of the inviolability of the author's words. Frequently it demanded that changes be made, in the words of Michael Blankfort, "to fit the needs of its mass audience," i.e., for the sake of ideological correctness.³²

Each of the plays was rewritten in this manner. Stevedore was revised three times. Peters had originally written it in 1930 under the title Wharf Nigger; but between that date and the Union's production of the play in 1934, he had found political enlightenment, and felt that the play dealt inadequately with the "real social forces" behind the racial conflict in the South. He and Sklar thus set about writing a new play which attempted to show that the Negro question "was not a racial issue at all, but an economic one."³³

It is not surprising, then, that Theatre Union had difficulty finding adequate scripts. Many playwrights found themselves, in the words of Blankfort, "temperamentally incapable of collective work." They could not surmount the innumerable ideological roadblocks thrust in their path. For besides the playwriting committee, the script had to

receive (when the nature of the play called for it) the approval of a worker in the field with which the play dealt. Thus Negro and white longshoremen read Stevedore; Italian refugees read Bitter Stream. Finally the revised script was again read to the executive board, and, if definitely accepted, a production committee and director were appointed. These people, with the author, then decided upon a scenic designer and cast.³⁴ With such an array of obstacles to overcome it is no wonder that most of Theatre Union's scripts came from within the group itself. All had to demonstrate a fundamental unanimity concerning what the play must say, a unanimity based upon the group's political "touchstone."

What, then, was the dramatic contribution of Theatre Union? An investigation of the group's seven productions reveals that in each case the political touchstone remained paramount. Surveying the group's achievement at the time of the presentation of Black Pit, Margaret Larkin proudly noted the variety of the Union's productions. She observed, however, that despite diversity of style the plays all possessed a common aim: they all "laid bare the class forces surrounding each situation, pointing the way out."³⁵ "The way out" in each instance lay in the acceptance of Marxist social theory and a willingness to ally, in United Front, with all opponents of the capitalist system. All of the plays were either totally or partially proletarian in

subject matter. Stevedore, Black Pit, and Marching Song stressed the class nature of industrial and racial strife; Peace on Earth attacked war as an instrument of capitalist expansion; and the Union's three foreign works--Wolf's Sailors of Cattaro, Brecht's Mother, and Silone's Fontamara (adapted by Victor Wolfson under the title Bitter Stream)--came from the pens of several of Europe's leading Marxist writers. (Silone had, as yet, not defected.) They stressed in turn the necessity of revolutionary preparation, the conversion of a proletarian to Marxism, and the oppression of the Italian peasantry by the Fascists.

Despite the Marxist bias in each of these plays, the lessons each contained were not always sufficiently explicit to satisfy the more sectarian communist critics. For this the Theatre Union's Popular-Front role was partly responsible; it did not wish, after all, to alienate non-communist support. Partly it resulted from a most rigid interpretation of the role of proletarian literature. Works which diverged from formula were often suspect, despite the attempts of the less sectarian critics to demonstrate that class-consciousness did not necessarily demand cliché.

The group's initial production, Peace on Earth (1933), for example, received the following chiding from William Gardner in the New Masses:

The theme and story of the play are not to be endorsed unreservedly. . . . There is too much emphasis on Professor Peter Owens' individual

sacrifice. Apparently the authors lacked confidence in their ability to achieve the desired dramatic and emotional effect by basing their emphasis more directly on the working-class itself, through its organized representatives in the play.³⁶

This dissent, however, was drowned in a chorus of praise from the left-wing press; for opposition to war was, after all, a cause to which most could whole-heartedly subscribe. But Peace on Earth is not concerned with generalized protest in the manner of What Price Glory? or Idiot's Delight. It is specific in its attribution of war to the logic of capitalism.

Jo: Suppose they do go to war in Europe-- that doesn't mean we have to get into it.

Mac: We can't keep out of it, Jo--there's too much involved. We'll have credits to protect and markets to think of. We can't afford to keep out of it.³⁷

In fact, the pacifism of Peace on Earth is nowhere based upon a demonstration of the horror or absurdity of war, as in Johnny Johnson, for example. Its anti-war theme is, in actuality, a device to assert the fact of another very real war, class war. The evils which Maltz and Sklar itemized are the evils which, according to Marxism, inevitably arise from an oppressive capitalism: the murder of militant strikers, the suppression of radical opinion, the alliance of religion and education with finance capital, the corruption and subservience of the police, the control of the media of communication by vested interests. The catalytic elements in the plot are two familiar standbys of the proletarian genre: the

conflict between a group of militant workers and their capitalist oppressors, and the conversion of an uncommitted individual to militancy and, ultimately, martyrdom.

In the first instance, we may observe how Maltz and Sklar exploit their theme within the orthodox context of the strike situation. A group of longshoremen refuse to ship munitions and inevitably bring down upon themselves the might of capitalist suppression. Before they are dispersed by the law, however, they succeed in persuading a group of German longshoremen to refuse similarly to handle war goods. The roots of the agit-prop are clearly discernible in their sloganized appeal:

Show your solidarity with the strikers!
Down with the imperialist war!
Join our ranks!
No more war!
Don't be a traitor to your class!
Stop munition shipments!
Don't scab--Strike! (p.58)

But the authors of Peace on Earth do not pursue the theme of the strike. They are more concerned (after all, this is a United Front play) with the conversion of Professor Peter Owens to militancy. At first happily ensconced in the Ivory Tower, he ultimately comes to recognize the meaning of the strikers' action. He confronts his educational superiors with the injustices he has observed and is censured for his radicalism. Finally, he interrupts a commencement exercise to protest the granting of honors to a trustee who, because of his financial interests, has encouraged violence against

the militant strikers. In the tradition of many a proletarian hero Owens is rewarded for his honesty with a frame-up and goes militantly to a martyr's death.

Peace on Earth is significant as a transitional work which touches on various themes which were to be more fully exploited in later proletarian drama. Stylistically, it reveals at times its agit-prop roots in the directness of its call to militancy: the play's last lines are the slogan "Fight with us, fight against war." Despite the realism of specific scenes, its synoptic, staccato pace is reminiscent of much experimental drama of the 1920's. In fact, the last act of Peace on Earth abandons itself entirely to expressionism, a structural transition which mars the consistency of the work. Above all, however, Peace on Earth reveals Theatre Union's determination to woo the non-communist left. The facts of class strife are circumscribed by the greater issue of war or peace. Maltz and Sklar attempted, not altogether unsuccessfully as reviews from the non-communist left demonstrate, to link a condemnation of war to an acceptance of the Marxist interpretation of its causation. If leftists could not all agree on the skill of the production of Peace on Earth, they could at least agree with its fundamental thesis. They, too, were "agin' sin."

There were no doubts, however, of the success of the Union's second production, Stevedore; even the "bourgeois" critics praised it, a verdict not without mixed reaction.

After all, did not Broadway criticism of Peace on Earth reveal the effectiveness of its class analysis? Had not leftist critics continually affirmed that the condemnation of proletarian literature by the bourgeois critics was inevitable? Thus, the paradox of Theatre Union's theatrical position is revealed; although good Broadway reviews were a requisite to the filling of the more expensive seats in the house, such praise, if received, the militant feared, might compromise the effectiveness of the play's class criticism. The inevitable answer was that such praise had its roots in "mass pressure" which the Broadway critics did not dare to ignore.

In any case, Stevedore, with the blessing of Broadway, was the Theatre Union's most successful production. Despite Lawson's charge that the play lacked specificity ("what union did [the strikers] . . . belong to? If this was an AF of L union, what was the attitude of the workers toward the Federation bureaucracy?")³⁸ most radical critics were effusive in their praise. Mike Gold led the play's champions with characteristic enthusiasm: "when big, lovable, motherly Binnie who runs a lunch-room and bosses the husky stevedores with her spicy tongue, picks up an old gun and pops off one of the gangsters, the audience cheers. It cheers not only because a brute is dead, but because something has happened in the soul of a working-class mother."³⁹

Perhaps there were those among the spectators of Stevedore who responded similarly to Binnie's spiritual

enlightenment, but most responded to the simplicity of the play's melodramatic line. Peters and Sklar succeeded--where Maltz and Sklar had failed--in realizing their theme of class warfare structurally. In Peace on Earth the framing of Owens is gratuitously introduced in order to enforce the play's thesis; in Stevedore Lonnie's frame-up for the alleged rape of a white woman is intrinsic to the melodramatic plot. Thus, Stevedore moved forward with headlong directness to its violent conclusion in which Negro and white longshoremen fight side by side against the forces of reaction. Race prejudice is inexorably tied to economic factors: Lonnie is framed because he is the most militant of the Negro stevedores and supports the fledgling union. He will not accept an "Uncle Tom" role.

Ain't no peace fo' de black man . . . ain't never gwine be, till he fight to get it . . . We try to organize to get ourselves a decent living. And what happen? Dey beat us up, dey arrest us, shoot us, burn down our houses. . . . We can't wait for de judgment day. We can't wait till we dead and gone. We got to fight fo' de right to live.
Now--now--right now.⁴⁰

It comes as hardly a surprise that Lonnie should be offered as the traditional martyr to the proletarian cause, and this is not the only conventional element in Stevedore. Walcott, the strawboss, and his subordinates are painted in the familiar hues of caricature; and Lonnie's militancy is shared by the white organizer, Lem Morris, who points out to the prejudiced in his union that hatred is the boss's best

ally: "that's the stuff! You call them dirty niggers, and they call you low white trash. If you'd cut that out, if you'd get together and fight the Oceanic Stevedore Company for a change, maybe we'd get somewhere." (p. 62)

In short, Stevedore continually points the moral that race prejudice has its roots in the exploitation of the Negro, that it must disappear when Negro and white workers recognize their common class unity. In the words of the union song, "Black and white together/ We shall not be moved." The Negro stevedores are joined in battle by their white comrades and put the forces of evil to rout. It is as it should be in a melodrama; the cavalry always arrives in the nick of time. Stevedore succeeded because it appealed on the most primitive dramatic level. In the words of Robert Benchley, in the New Yorker, it was "a hell of a good show."⁴¹

Of all the plays which the Theatre Union produced, the one which aroused the greatest sectarian criticism was Maltz's Black Pit (1935); for although it was proletarian in subject matter--it dealt with the life of the miners--and point of view, it attempted something which ran dangerously close to heresy, the sympathetic portrayal of a man who betrays his class. In the black and white world of class struggle such an undertaking was indeed hazardous, and while radical critics recognized that Maltz portrayed the horror and degradation of such an action, many felt he might well have made a more positive statement. Under the heading

"Despicable Role of A Scab Portrayed in Play Black Pit," Carl Reeve wrote in the Daily Worker: "only the rottenest and weakest elements in the working class become stool pigeons, and I had the feeling that Joe must have been rotten at the start. . . . to yield to personal difficulties and betray his class;. . . in the vast masses of the American workers the hatred for stool pigeons is bred in their very blood."⁴² Joseph North seconded this verdict in the New Masses:

When the playwright sets out to tell his audience of workmen that obloquy and limitless misery are the lot of the traitor, he tells a tale more than twice told;. . . if through indirection the tragedy of the stool pigeon would cast into bolder relief the heroism of the rank and file (for that is the great reality) then Maltz's emphasis could be understood.⁴³

North attributed the play's ideological failings to Maltz's "relatively recent initiation into the proletarian environment."⁴⁴

But despite its divergence from the formula of the proletarian play, Black Pit leaves no doubt as to its ideological position. Joe Kovarsky, because of his defection, is anathematized with fervor only possible in the fully converted. No economic or personal difficult can justify the sell-out; in the long run the worker's only salvation is to make common cause with his class.

Joe: Tony . . . Iola gone have baby. She got have doctor. I t'ink maybe I fool Super get job. . . .
 Tony: By be stool pigeon, hah? Joe, bett'r be Iola die from baby--bett'r be you die from starve. . . .

Joe: I no wan' do, Tony. . . . I be wan' lil' bit
 somet'ings have. . . .have awright lil' bit. . . .
 Tony: Have awright? How you wan' awright? By self,
 hah? By lie, by cheat, by crawl on belly. . . .
 Jesus Chris', Joe, miner no can get by self. . . .
 when company got everyt'ings miner no can have
 noddings. . . . You wan' somet'ings you got go
 wit' odern miner, tak' company by t'roat,
 fight. . . .⁴⁵

And in the end, rejected by those who loved and trusted him, Joe recognizes the folly of his action: "What good get t'ings by be false to odern miner?. . . Bett'r be starve, bett'r be live in hole lake animal" (p. 105) Maltz attempted to point his moral negatively, but he pointed it clearly nevertheless. In place of melodrama he substituted a proletarian morality play: what does it profit a worker, he asked, if in gaining the world he lose his class?

It is a sad commentary upon the skill of American radical playwrights that the most significant, though not the most commercially successful, of the plays which Theatre Union produced came from the pens of Europeans. Friedrich Wolf's Sailors of Cattaro and Brecht's version of Gorki's Mother are undoubtedly the best of the group's seven plays. (Silone's Fontamara is certainly one of the great works of the decade--one of the very few genuine proletarian novels--but Victor Wolfson's adaptation, contemporary reviews indicate, unfortunately captured more of the letter than the spirit of the book.) Perhaps the European was more fundamentally involved in the radical experience than the American, who often seemed to come to his commitment more from an

act of conscious will than from personal total involvement. Much the same comment might be made about the religious commitment; we have no major modern religious novels, no writers comparable to Graham Greene or Francois Mauriac, no film makers comparable to Robert Bresson or Ingmar Bergman; and the American thirties produced no radical novels comparable to Fontamara or La Condition Humaine, nor no playwright of the stature of O'Casey or Brecht.

Wolf's Sailors of Cattaro, for example, faces certain fundamental facts of the revolutionary experience and succeeds largely because it does not melodramatize. The class struggle is not viewed as a conflict between all-virtuous heroes and all-evil villains, but rather as a social fact which must be accepted and acted upon. The playwright does not exploit the emotive nature of the revolutionary situation. Although the sailors' grievances are duly listed, Wolf presents no scenes of wanton brutality, his concern being with the problem of revolutionary action manifest in the dramatic situation. The play is based upon the actual abortive revolt of the sailors of the Austrian navy in the bay of Cattaro, an inlet of the Adriatic sea, in the last year of the first World War. Angered by their grievances and inspired by the expected support of the Viennese socialists, the crews of several battleships mutinied, demanding immediate overtures for world peace, participation of representatives of the Socialist Party in the peace negotiations with

Russia, equal rations for officers and enlisted men, recognition of committees and delegations elected by the crews to supervise all issues of food and clothing and to review all awards of punishment or leave. But the expected support from the mainland did not materialize, the revolt was quickly crushed, and the mutinous leaders executed.

Wolf is concerned less with the heroics of the Cattaro revolt than with the causes of its failure. He takes as his text Lenin's statement that "you can't play with revolution. Once it starts you've got to follow it through to the end."⁴⁶ Franz Rasch, Wolfe's hero, is not the monolithic, all virtuous protagonist of American proletarian drama. His militancy is indeed evident, and he fights to the end to prevent the sailors from accepting the captain's offer of clemency; but he is torn between his knowledge that autocratic action is demanded by the specific revolutionary situation and his willingness to act without the democratic consent of the Sailor's Council. This conflict is the key dramatic situation in the play, and it is not unequivocally resolved. Stonawski, the advocate of immediate action, observes that unless Rasch assumes direct command the revolt is in danger: "We've started something. We must go through with it. To the end. What else did we raise the red flag for?" But Franz's answer shows his refusal to compromise his democratic revolutionary ideals: "to put a stop to autocratic rule . . . to fix it so that all who fight our fight shall have a say in what we do." Stonawski--and he is confirmed by the turn of

events--counters with the traditional revolutionary excuse for the abrogation of democratic rule: there just isn't time. "That's not going against the men, Franz; this way you're playing with their only chance of stopping the war. . . . Let them learn the trade of government as they've learnt the trade of sailing, but for what we've got to do now minutes count. . . ." (pp. 73-4)

But Stonawski does not fully assent to Sesan's militant cry that "to debate is death," that Rasch is wrong. In the long run, Stonawski asserts, Franz is right, even if he has let "a sentimental sense of loyalty to the council overcome his loyalty to the fleet" (in other words, a too intense dedication to democratic principles overcomes loyalty to the revolution); Stonawski tells the impatient Sesan that "I'd rather have it his way, bad as it is, than yours." (p. 79) In the end despite his vacillation, Rasch emerges most heroically. He adamantly refuses to accept the captain's terms and exhorts the sailors to keep revolutionary faith: "Comrades! You have mutinied--struck the first blow at the old power. With the third blow--or the fourth, the fifth--wreck it!" (p. 106) His final statement in the face of defeat was the slogan with which the exiled Wolf was himself greeted when he arrived in Moscow: "Comrades, next time--better!" (p. 109)

Although the play was generally well received in the radical press there were those who recognized the dangerous

implications of Wolf's tactical equivocations. Burnshaw wrote in the New Masses, "Wolf . . . has failed to indicate the need for politically developed leadership, such as the Bolsheviks gave to the revolting sailors and soldiers of Czarist Russia. . . . The successful Bolsheviks . . . realized that in every revolutionary endeavor leadership must be delegated to politically clear individuals and groups guided by principles of the revolutionary vanguard."⁴⁷ But the superior quality of the Sailors of Cattaro was so manifest that even this objection was not too strenuously pursued.

Erwin Piscator pointed out that Wolf took his place with the "dramatic" contents of the drama, in opposition to Brecht's "epic" theatre: "By the dramatic principle we mean that treatment of the subject matter along lines of theatrical or dramatic movement which leads to its simplification, its crystallization, allowing freer stressing of political mood . . . then could the corresponding epic treatment."⁴⁸ But, he affirmed, "from time to time in political drama, the epic element has seemed more immediate, more indispensable, than the dramatic." And in its presentation of Brecht's Mother (1935), the Theatre Union offered one of the first American epic theatre productions--albeit somewhat diluted.

Much has, of course, been written of late about Brecht's esthetics, indeed perhaps more than has been written about his work itself. Just how practical the concept of alienation--"Verfremdungseffekt"--has proven in theatrical

terms is difficult to ascertain. Martin Esslin points out that it has yet to be proved that Brecht's theories have any validity apart from his own works and productions, which they were intended to explain and justify.⁴⁹ And Brecht himself towards the end of his career warned against a too serious application of his esthetic: "My theories are altogether far more naive than my way of expressing them might allow one to suspect."⁵⁰ The difficulty is, of course, the dubious concept that action has its roots in rational awareness, that a demonstration of fact--apart from emotional considerations--can result in a fundamental change in human behavior. But let us take Brecht's own counsel and not apply the concept of alienation too literally; obviously action demands emotional involvement. The question is one of primacy: emotion must be grounded in knowledge if it is to be effective. One of the best descriptions of Brecht's purpose is contained in one of the earliest discussions of his work in English. Eva Goldbeck wrote in 1935:

Whereas the old theatre tries to get below the level of the mind and to use brute emotional force on our subconscious, the epic theatre tries to make our own reason awaken and direct our emotions. The difference in emphasis and method is dictated by the difference in purpose. The theatre of entertainment, though provoking a show of excitement, really keeps us passive; the theatre of education wants us to remain as calm and collected as possible in order to arouse us to ultimate action . . . the drama has become an object lesson.⁵¹

In short, the purpose of the work of art is not merely to show the world as it is, but, by means of this demonstration, to change it.

If we are still baffled by much of Brechtian theory after twenty-five years of debate as to its applicability, imagine the reaction of the producers of Theatre Union, bred in a school of playwriting which demanded the maximum in audience identification. The forms of the Brechtian theatre were not unfamiliar--its presentationalism seemed grounded in European expressionism--but the spirit was something else. How, for example, were actors striving for believability, by virtue of their recent initiation into the mysteries of the Method, to realize Brecht's idea that the actor must not identify himself with the character, but, rather, interpret him, both as actor and as critic? Consequently, the Theatre Union's production of Mother actually vitiated the intended epic effect by making the play, within the confines of its presentational form, as realistic as possible. In fact, Brecht himself went to New York towards the end of 1935 to attempt to forestall the conversion of his epic play to conventionality, to prevent the re-insertion of the naturalistic detail he had purposely omitted. He did not quite succeed, and the performance apparently vacillated between its epic and its naturalistic elements.⁵² For example, instead of addressing the audience as a chorus always separated from the players, the singers alternated between this and participation

in the action--with the resulting mixture of style.⁵³ Brecht also complained that the mother, whom he had created as a symbolic matriarch of the proletarian masses, had been reduced to a life-size ordinary working woman, in order to gain the sympathy--not the admiration--of the spectators.⁵⁴

Mother was born of the fullness of Brecht's Marxist commitment. It is, in fact, an expansion of the brief, didactic form of the Lehrstück, whose avowed purpose was the teaching, within an almost ritualistic simplicity, of certain specific social and communal lessons. The style (more so in the original German than in Peters' adaptation) is dry and matter-of-fact; its didactic elements are ever dominant. In keeping with epic techniques, lantern slides comment upon the action by means of photos of demonstrations, prisoners, the Czar, and working men; by informative statements such as "On May first the workers of Tversk demonstrate against the wage cut," or through revolutionary slogans such as "Class Struggle," or "Exploiter." Thus did Brecht attempt to demonstrate that individual action could no longer be understood in isolation from the historical and social forces which determine it.

Freely interspersed in the play are didactic songs which uniformly expound Marxist doctrine. (The music was

composed by Hans Eisler.) A typical one is entitled "In Praise of Socialism":

The foolish call it foolish
 And the filthy call it filthy
 But it fights filthiness
 And it fights foolishness.
 The profit makers call it criminal,
 But it will put an end to their crime.
 It is not madness
 But it is the end of madness.
 It is not chaos,
 But is order.
 It is the simple thing
 That's hard to do.⁵⁵

In keeping with epic theory, Mother rejects the logically constructed well-made play. The drama of the conversion to Marxism of Pelage Vlasova is related in a series of independently constructed scenes which begin with the abortive revolution of 1905 and end with the revolution of 1917. Each situation is complete in itself: the mother distributing clandestine pamphlets by wrapping sandwiches in them, the mother educating the teacher in the ways of socialism, the mother beaten bloody in a side-walk demonstration, etc. The total effect is thus achieved cumulatively through a series of montage-like images which approximates the technique of the cinema. The unifying element is the play's didacticism, its technique. In Brechtian theatre, play and production cannot be separated. Unlike American proletarian literature, in which didacticism often seems extrinsic to the work's essential form (the form, more often than not, being utterly conventional), neither Brechtian drama nor theory can be considered apart from its "message." The message is the play.

Theatre Union's last two productions, Victor Wolfson's adaptation of Fontamara, Bitter Stream (1936), and Lawson's Marching Song (1937), were similarly Marxist in ideology. The latter, John Howard Lawson's attempt to write the model of a proletarian play, dealt with the theme of class strife in terms of a sit-down strike in an automobile town. Overtly doctrinaire in ideology, it represented Lawson at his most polemical; we shall defer detailed consideration of Marching Song until a later chapter on Lawson's dramatic development. Since Bitter Stream was never published, we can only relate the judgment of its contemporaries. Reviews indicate that although it followed closely the plot of Fontamara emphasizing the oppressive nature of fascism and Bernardo's conversion, most critics agreed that it failed to capture the scope and color of Silone's novel. Thus the record of Theatre Union productions confirms Blankfort's assertion of a political touchstone. Despite occasional sectarian criticism, beneath each play lay the Marxist substructure. The record of the group's dramatic achievement--particularly its native contribution--is unfortunately not impressive, but it does possess that most dubious of virtues, consistency.

The failure of Theatre Union was, of course, primarily financial. It is estimated that it sustained an annual deficit of over \$15,000.⁵⁶ The left press offered several reasons for the group's lack of support. It was claimed that the Union had not done what it might have in creating a

labor audience; the Daily Worker asked why the group had failed to bring its work to new audiences by using a mobile troupe for performances in union halls and settlement houses.⁵⁷ But by far the harshest criticism arose from the group's concern for the Broadway verdict.

One of the most pathetic pictures of those days was the cast of Theatre Union waiting up anxiously for the early morning papers to see how "uptown" was going to take the new play. . . . There was a continual inner struggle between the desire to do plays which would be afraid of nothing and the knowledge that such productions would be lambasted by the critics and avoided by the moneyed patrons. As a final ironic touch, the company emigrated uptown and produced its last show in the middle of the theatrical district, somehow hopeful that the gap could be bridged between vigor and violets.⁵⁸

The fact is that the brief heyday of proletarian literature was over. By 1937 the great wave of indignation had abated; liberals who had taken a both-your-houses attitude toward the major political parties found that they could, after all, find virtue in the Roosevelt administration. In fact, the Federal Theatre, in offering a low-priced (or free) theatre which did not have to worry about commercial exigencies, stole much of Theatre Union's thunder. The leftist theatre movement either collapsed or was absorbed into the mainstream; New Theatre, as well as Theatre Union, folded in 1937. Moreover, the Popular Front was breaking up. True, it remained the official communist line until the end of the second World War (save, of course, the period of the non-aggression pact), but the New Deal captured many of the

liberals, and the Trotsky purge trials alienated the socialists. It is not surprising, then, that the disbanding of Theatre Union should be shortly followed by recriminatory charges and counter-charges. For example, Mike Gold revealed in the Daily Worker the "inside" story of four members of the Union's board. Both Charles and Adelaide Walker had returned from a Soviet tour completely disenchanted, as had Liston Oak and Manuel Gomez. Oak, claimed Gold, was a Trotskyite spy sent to Russia to see "only what Charlie Walker told him to see," and Gomez had written to Oak denouncing Russian domination among the Loyalists.⁵⁹ The political honeymoon was over. The moment in American political and theatrical history which Theatre Union epitomized passed, and with it passed America's one and only professional revolutionary theatre.

Footnotes to Chapter II

1. Quoted in Anita Block, The Changing World in Plays and Theatre (New York, 1939), p. 275.
2. "Collective Drama at the Civic Repertory Theatre," Brooklyn Eagle, Mar. 29, 1936, p. 17.
3. George Sklar and Albert Maltz, "The Need for a Workers' Theatre," DW, Dec. 16, 1933, p. 7.
4. Block, p. 274.
5. The New Playwrights, founded in February, 1927 by John Howard Lawson, Mike Gold, John Dos Passos, Francis Faragoh, and Emjo Basshe, declared that their theatre should be "a clearing house for ideas and a focus for social protest" (Lawson, "The Crisis in the Theatre," NM, Dec. 15, 1936, p. 35). Their plays, invariably experimental in form and undogmatically radical in theme, included Emjo Basshe's Earth (1927), a play about the conflict between superstition and Christianity in a Negro community; Paul and Claire Sifton's The Belt, a drama about a revolt against a Henry Ford-type assembly line; Upton Sinclair's Singing Jailbirds (1928), about an IWW organizer railroaded to prison; and Lawson's The Internationale (1938). For an examination of Lawson's contribution to the theatre see Chapter V.
6. John Gassner, "The One-Act Play in the Revolutionary Theatre," The One-Act Play Today, ed. William Kozlenko (New York, 1938), p. 245.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
8. The Awakening of the American Theatre (New York, 1935), p. 23.
9. Quoted in Blake, *loc. cit.*
10. Gassner, p. 256.
11. Page 59.
12. Quoted in Gassner, p. 256.
13. "Need for A Worker's Theatre," Dec. 16, 1933, p. 7.
14. Brooklyn Eagle, Apr. 12, 1935, p. 5.
15. "Theatre Union Replies," New Theatre, Nov. 1934, p. 12. Henceforth the abbreviation NT shall be used.

16. Charles Walker, "Theatre As a Weapon," Fight, May 1934, p. 10.
17. Dec. 27, 1933, p. 6.
18. "Towards a Workers' Theatre," Dec. 12, 1933, p. 8.
19. Norman Thomas, "Timely Topics," Dec. 2, 1933, p. 8.
20. "Theatre Union Replies," p. 12.
21. DW, Dec. 30, 1933, p. 3.
22. New York Herald Tribune, Dec. 24, 1933, p. 45.
23. Margaret Larkin, New York Herald Tribune, Oct. 28, 1934, p. 37.
24. "On Becoming Acclimated to Broadway," DW, Nov. 24, 1936, p. 8.
25. "Theatre Union's Project," New York Times, Feb. 7, 1937, p. 53.
26. Emery Northup, "Meet the Theatre Union," NT, Feb. 1934, p. 9.
27. Loc.cit.
28. Loc.cit.
29. "On Becoming Acclimated," p. 8.
30. Larkin, "Social Play Gets an Audience," New York Herald Tribune, Oct. 28, 1934, p. 36.
31. Ben Compton, "Facts and the Left Theatre," DW, Jan. 3, 1937, p. 8.
32. "Collective Drama at the Civic Repertory," p. 17.
33. John Anderson, article, New York Evening Journal, Apr. 18, 1934, p. 63.
34. "Collective Drama," p. 17.
35. DW, Mar. 19, 1935, p. 8.
36. Jan. 16, 1934, p. 28.

37. Albert Maltz and George Sklar, Peace On Earth (New York, 1933), p. 27.
38. "Straight from the Shoulder," NT, Nov. 1934, p. 11.
39. Review of Stevedore, NM, May 1, 1934, p. 28.
40. Paul Peters and George Sklar, Stevedore (New York, 1934), pp. 107,109.
41. Apr. 28, 1934, p. 58.
42. Mar. 13, 1935, p. 8.
43. Apr. 2, 1935, p. 42.
44. Ibid., p. 43.
45. Albert Maltz, Black Pit (New York, 1935), pp. 104-105.
46. Quoted in Frederick Wolf, The Sailors of Cattaro (New York, 1935), p. 111.
47. "The Most Important Play in New York," Dec. 25, 1934, pp. 28-29.
48. "The Work of Frederick Wolf," NM, June 11, 1935, p. 23.
49. Brecht: the Man and his Work (New York, 1959), p.129.
50. Quoted in Esslin, p. 130.
51. "Principles of Educational Theatre," NM, Dec. 31, 1935, p. 27.
52. Esslin, pp. 73-74.
53. Stanley Burnshaw, "Theatre Union Produces Mother," NM, Dec. 3, 1935, p. 27.
54. "Brief an das Arbeitertheater Theatre Union," Stücke Für das Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, III (Berlin, 1957), 156-163.
55. Brecht, Mother (Thea. Coll., typewritten, 1935), p. 29.
56. New York Times, Jan. 26, 1936, sect. IX, p. 3.

57. Compton, "Facts and the Left Theatre," DW, Jan. 3, 1937, p. 8.
58. Robert Forsythe, "Wanted: A Theatre," NM, Oct. 18, 1938, p. 15.
59. "Change the World," DW, Oct. 9, 1937, p. 7.

CHAPTER III

THE GROUP THEATRE: THEATRE IS COLLECTIVE ART

The follies, absurdities, confusion, cleverness, or failure of our Group are far less important than what brought its people together, made them struggle, and kept them on their hectic course for ten years. The career and collapse of the Group were an episode. The thing that gave it birth is part of an epic of which the Group history is but a brief gesture.

Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years

Because the Group Theatre was the theatre of Waiting for Lefty and Awake and Sing! it has generally been viewed as a product of the radical ferment of the thirties; inasmuch as the plays and policies of the Group were directed by this ferment the designation is not inaccurate. Indeed, in its time, the Group was invariably classed with the theatres of social protest. But, in another sense, this classification is incorrect. The Group was indeed the reflection of radical ferment, but it was not--as in the case of Theatre Union--a product of this ferment. In fact, the Group actually shared fewer common aims with the Theatre Union than with the art theatres of the twenties; after all, it was an offspring of

the Theatre Guild. The Group's rallying cry was not "Theatre is a Weapon in the Class Struggle," but rather "Theatre is an Art which Reflects Life." It is in this broader sense that the Group was a social theatre; it owes its impetus not to the radical climate of the early thirties, but rather to the legacy of the new movement in theatre which had swept the playhouses of Russia, France, Germany--and to a lesser extent the playhouses of England and America--in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. The Group's forebears were not the revolutionary proponents of the agit-prop, but rather the great art theatres to which we owe the legacy of modern drama: the Moscow Art Theatre and its various studies in Russia, the Freie Buhne in Germany, the Théâtre Libre and the Vieux-Columbier in France, the Independent Theatre in England, and the Provincetown Players and the Theatre Guild in the United States. Stanislavski and Copeau, not Marx and Engels, were the Group's patron saints.

The Group Theatre shared common aims and ideals with the great permanent theatres listed above; it inherited, and adapted to its own needs, three basic ideas of what a theatre should be: (1) The idea of Theatre as Art; (2) the idea of Theatre as a Collective, and (3) the idea of Theatre as Communion.

In raising the banner of Art, the Group Theatre responded to the perennial problem of the American theatre,

that it is also "show business." The nature of the professional theatre--no less in the late twenties and early thirties than today--makes the production of any play analogous, in the metaphor of Mordecai Gorelik, to a pick-up baseball game. Each member of the theatrical production is hired separately; actors, director and designer--often of diverse background and training--unite briefly in common theatrical cause. If the play succeeds commercially the collective effort endures the length of the run; if it fails, the disparate elements are dispersed, again precipitately abandoned to the whims of a market in which--except for the favored few--supply fantastically exceeds demand. Apart from the sheer waste of artistic talent, theatrical rebels have continually pointed out, and tried to alleviate, the inevitable esthetic deficiencies of such a system (if chaos can be dignified with so orderly a word); theatrical art, they have asserted, is dependent upon the intimate relation of several diverse arts. Theatrical familiarity is not merely an esthetic luxury; it is a necessity. Stylistic coherence cannot be induced within a two or three week rehearsal period.

The Group Theatre's unique contribution to American theatre has been the development of a native "style," a style which had its roots in the concept that theatrical art is more than the sum-total of diverse arts. The play is but the beginning for the creation of the work of art. It can be

realized only through the active collaboration of each of several theatrical artists: the director, the actor, the scenic designer.

What constitutes the play, finally, is not that which may be written down as a text--these are only the words of the play--but the sum of the activities of the group under the leadership of one of its actors.¹

In short, one of the Group's essential tenets was that theatre is production, that no element in the creation of theatrical art should dominate, that the artistic whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Obviously such a concept could not survive abstractly. In order to fulfill the ideal of esthetic coherence a method was needed whereby this coherence could be achieved, a method which the Group found primarily in the theory and practice of the Moscow Art Theatre, and its founding genius, Constantine Stanislavski.

But although theatre was an art, it was also a necessarily collective art; thus esthetic questions of style and production could not be separated from the problem of a group. Clurman writes of the Group's beginning: "From consideration of acting and plays we were plunged into a chaos of life questions, with the desire and hope of making possible some new order and integration. From an experiment in the theatre we were in some way impelled to an experiment in living."² Since theatre was a necessarily collective art, it demanded a collective approach. The unity of theatrical production, Clurman pointed out, was not one that sprang out

of an abstract sense of taste or craftsmanship, but, rather, "out of unity that is antecedent to the formation of the theatre group as such,"³ a unity of feeling and thought and need among a group of people that had formed itself either consciously or unconsciously. Once this motivating force had resulted in the formation of a dedicated group, it was essential to do everything possible to affirm the group's collective nature. Thus the Group Theatre was considerably more than a play-producing unit. Its theatre artists--actors, playwrights, directors, designers--were integrated into most phases of the theatre's activity; the Group engaged in continual drives to interest new theatrical workers; it set up a number of projects to train its own members as leaders, teachers, and directors; above all, it protected its actors from the vagaries of the Broadway market by supporting a permanent acting company of from twenty to thirty performers for ten years. As Clurman stated: "The Group's inclusive philosophy adumbrated a cosmos; therefore the Group's function, even its duty, was to become a cosmos. It had to provide what society itself failed to provide."⁴

But Theatre was more than a collective in the service of art. In this the Group was at one with the radical theatre movement: art did not exist for its own sake; the development of technical facility and collective purpose had to serve a goal beyond the artistic growth of the theatre's individual members. "A technique of the theatre," Clurman

asserted, "had to be founded on life values."⁵ In the program to 1931- he published a short statement under the title "What the Group Theatre Wants":

In the end . . . the development of playwrights, actors, repertory and the rest are important only as they lead to the creation of a tradition of common values, an active consciousness of a common way of looking at and dealing with life. . . . When an audience feels that it is really at one with a theatre; when audience and theatre-people can feel that they are both the answer to one another, and that both may act as leaders to one another, there we have the theatre in its truest form. To create such a theatre is our real purpose.⁶

Theatre was, then, a communion between artist and audience. Thus the Group was dedicated to producing plays which spoke in the authentic voice of its time. (Of all its plays only one--the Case of Clyde Griffiths--was not by a contemporary American playwright.) Clurman asserted that theatrical art had to rest upon a foundation that was "humanly valuable." Actors were, after all, not merely artists; they were citizens of a community. It was the purpose of the Group to assert the artist's role as citizen not only within the theatrical collective itself, but also within the context of the artist's larger societal obligation. Ideas in the theatre did not exist in isolation; they had to be transmitted to an audience, "for it is the audience (seen as a 'community') that has given birth to its artists."⁷ Esthetic values are not self-sufficient: "the criterion of judgment for what is good or bad in the theatre--be it in plays, acting, or staging--does not derive from some abstract

standard of artistic or literary excellence, but from a judgment of what is fitting--that is, humanly desirable--for a particular audience."⁸

Thus, the Group's dedication to plays which reflected contemporary social issues sprang from its conception of theatre as a social, as well as an artistic, institution. But this social role was not conceived in any revolutionary sense; theatre was communion, but it was not necessarily revolutionary communion. The Group Theatre did not attempt to cultivate, as did Theatre Union, a proletarian audience. Although it rejected Broadway values, it is significant that it worked within the mainstream of the American theatre. The Group was committed to plays which concerned contemporary social problems, but it was not committed to any specific social solution. The Group's commitment was more moral than political; it felt compelled "to give the most expert and complete dramatic expression it could to the living forces of its day. . . ." ⁹; to raise and reflect social questions, rather than to offer a uniform solution. If the Group was informed by one generic political assumption, it was that social problems were soluble; but beyond a general affirmation of the feasibility of political action, the directors of the Group affirmed no overt political commitment.

A good play for us is . . . one which . . . is the image or symbol of the living problems of our time. These problems are chiefly moral and social and our feeling is that they must be faced with an essentially affirmative attitude, that is, in the

belief that to all of them there must be some answer, an answer that should be considered operative for at least the humanity of our times and place.¹⁰

But although the Group was not primarily a political theatre, it was impossible, considering the time of its existence, for it to remain free from the storm of political controversy which swirled around it. The life of the Group coincided with the life of the thirties, and it is inevitable that a theatre dedicated to "life values" should become necessarily embroiled in the turbulence of its decade. "Every wind of doctrine was reflected in some corresponding ripple in the flow of our lives," wrote Clurman,¹¹ and as the decade progressed the Group's lack of political specificity was to be challenged both by the orthodox Marxist press and its own small core of militants.

At the beginning of the Group's life, despite the onset of the Depression, Clurman reports that there was very little political discussion. Although the production of a Soviet play, Red Rust, was contemplated, the interest in it was more esthetic than political. Why--Clurman anticipates the objection--despite all the talk about the need of facing the times and of finding affirmative answers to the social problems of the day, did politics receive so little attention from himself, Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford, the Group's founders? He replies for himself that his training and inclination had been chiefly esthetic, and that he always demonstrated a reluctance to delve into problems while they

remained outside the range of his experience.¹² In any case, none of the founders was primarily involved, in the aftermath of the crash, with the recognition of the failure of capitalism; their major concern was the practical problem of organizing a theatre.

Clurman reports his initial contact with the radical theatre movement. Although the Marxists did not fully approve of the Group's initial production, the House of Connelly (they claimed Green sentimentalized the South), they were in sympathy with several of the "progressive tendencies" in the Group manifesto. Strasberg and Clurman were consequently invited to a symposium upon "Revolution and the Theatre" held by the John Reed Club of New York. Clurman did not anticipate either his introduction as a middle-of-the roader (as compared with the Right of the Theatre Guild and the Left of the Workers' Theatre), nor the barrage of epithets which followed his assertion that a play did not have to deal with obvious social themes in order to have social significance. Here for the first time he heard the slogan of the revolutionary theatre movement: "The theatre is a weapon." The experience, he relates, was "my first lesson in the temper of the thirties."¹³

It was by no means his last. Before the production of Lawson's Success Story, he noted a sudden preoccupation with social, economic and political matters among the actors of the company. An actress challenged his interpretation of the

play: "You seem to divide people into the sensitive and the crass," she asserted. "That is a very sentimental distinction. People are divided by economic classes. There is the capitalist class and the working class."¹⁴ Clurman replied that her distinction was less theatrically useful than his; the essential problem was not how can this play be used to demonstrate a political thesis, but how can the thesis of this play--whatever it be--best be realized theatrically.

When the Group achieved financial success with the non-political Men in White, dissatisfaction among Group actors became more pronounced. The New Masses reported that the cast fought hard to have lines inserted which would have allowed the play "to say something important about a hospital system which is kept alive by the whim of the wealthy."¹⁵ When Theatre Union was in the process of formation, Molly Day Thatcher, Mrs. Elia Kazan, is reported to have regarded it, rather than the Group, as the hope of the New Theatre. The Group, some actors feared, was becoming too involved with psychological rather than with social problems. Moreover, in contrast with Theatre Union's ticket high of \$1.50, the Group was still catering to the carriage trade at Broadway prices. A militant core sprang up within the acting company. (Odets reported to the House Un-American Activities Committee that of a total Group Theatre membership of 35 there were four or five, including himself, who were connected with the Communist Party;¹⁶ Kazan claimed a Party membership of nine.)¹⁷

But militant or not, all, in Clurman's words, "sought social knowledge." The perennial political debates on Roosevelt, NRA, Communism, and Fascism drowned out theatrical table-talk. Controversy was in the air and the actors responded. "They seemed to hanker after barricade dramatics, a sense of being in the fight rather than on the side-lines."¹⁸

When the first rough draft of Melvin Levy's Gold Eagle Guy was read to the company in 1934, the actors voices their disappointment. It was not so much that they considered it a bad play, but it did not deal with a contemporary political or social problem. Clurman was determined to answer the Group's discontent. He wrote a forty page paper in which he pointed out that the Group's aim "was not and never had been to become a political theatre, but to be a creative and truly representative American theatre."¹⁹ To the supporters of a more overt political theatre he asserted that "just as we had done the first depression play in 1931- not from any political bias but from a sense of what was going on in our day, so in the future we would do more socially conscious plays than any other theatre functioning."²⁰ But the creation of a theatre, he asserted, was a long-term proposition; it had to adapt to productional exigencies, and not attempt to hew too closely to one specific line, political or otherwise.

There were similar objections by the actors at various stages of the Group's career. Despite Clurman's assertion that the theme of Rocket to the Moon was the inability of

love to flourish in an acquisitive society, there were many who felt that Odets, in concerning himself with the amatory problems of a middle-class dentist, had betrayed his revolutionary roots. Similarly there were those who objected to Shaw's Gentle People, despite its obvious fascist parallels, on the grounds that the play might be thought cute, that the Group was indulging in quaint melodramatics rather than helping to change the world. When Clurman grew impatient with the literalness of such views and asked the dissidents what he could do concretely to stimulate the writing of more important plays, his challenge was met with the suggestion that Odets be commissioned to write a Roosevelt third-term propaganda piece. Clurman ironically reports that had such a play indeed been produced in 1940, the same actors most probably would have been quite critical of the project, for the Nazi-Soviet Pact had intervened in the interim.²¹

In many cases, the Group's self-criticism was more intense than that leveled at it by the Marxist press. Once the group had, in radical eyes, allied itself with the left by virtue of the early plays of Odets, Marxist criticism tended to be of a "corrective," rather than of a vituperative nature. After all, there was great prestige for the left in counting the Group among its supporters. Had not Lefty been produced by Group actors at a New Theatre League benefit? It was not unusual, therefore, to find the Marxists bending over backwards to affirm the revolutionary intentions of the

Group's theatrical credo. Against the charge that the Group avoided proletarian themes, Norman Stevens wrote in New Theatre: "It is possible that the richest art of our time may be developed out of the . . . attempt of the middle-class to free themselves from the fears and phobias of the past and to take their place with the workers in the struggle for a better world."²² The Group, in essence, was envisioned as a middle-class Theatre Union.

But the Group--despite its radical core--never allied itself fully with the radical theatre movement (though many of its artists participated independently in such groups as Theatre of Action and Theatre Collective). On the contrary, Cheryl Crawford asserted in a letter to John Mason Brown that the Group's philosophy was based on "the truest preoccupations of an intelligent American audience."²³ In fact, the directors of the Group found themselves in the crossfire between Left and Right, between the radicals who asserted that they were not going far enough left and the Broadway critics who often asserted that they went too far. The Group's most overtly Marxist play (along with Odets' plays), The Case of Clyde Griffiths, was severely castigated by the critics who resented its revolutionary didacticism. (Atkinson wrote: it "sounds pretty silly when it is rattling the skeleton key of Karl Marx and accusing the audience of conspiracy and high treason.")²⁴

This time the Group directors had to inform Broadway that it did not affirm any specific political doctrine, that it was not--as a theatre--responsible for the political views of its playwrights.

Certain remarks in a few reviews . . . make us wonder whether our general approach to the theatre is not being taken with an almost mechanical literalness. . . . We have produced plays by . . . dramatists of varying personalities and credos. . . . We believe in a varied, rich theatre that neglects nothing in the unmeasurable gamut of human experience and imagination, and we believe too in allowing our collaborators--playwrights as well as others--the privileges of their own idiosyncrasies, prejudices, and partisanship.²⁵

What is a social play? This was the question that was often lost sight of in the intensity of debate. The Marxists, although they often disagreed on particulars, could agree that social drama had to have at its base some fundamental Marxist criticism of capitalism; most Broadway critics, on the other hand, often merely equated the form with any dramatic didacticism. ("How combat a force without definition?" Clurman lamented. "Unlike other people, our reviewers are powerful because they believe in nothing.")²⁶ Although the group was committed to plays which dealt with contemporary social issues, its personnel did not agree on the overtness of this criticism. From the touchstone of Theatre Union, the record of Group plays reveals but five which suggest specific Marxist solutions; but if we accept as our criteria for social drama those plays which challenge basic social attitudes or institutions, which suggest social

alternatives, either reformist or radical, or those plays which demand personal or collective action in response to specific social or political phenomena (e.g., the Depression, war, fascism), then the record of the Group's social drama is not inconsiderable. In fact only three or four of the Group's 24 plays do not meet the requirements of these criteria.

The Group produced five plays which suggest specific Marxist correctives: Odets' first four plays and Piscator's Case of Clyde Griffiths. Criticism of capitalism--often from an implied Marxist point of view--is manifest in the Siftons' 1931-, in Lawson's Group plays, in Odets' later works, and in the exposé of the success myth in Gold Eagle Guy and The Big Night. Paul Green's two Group plays deal respectively with the death of the old Southern order and the absurdity of war. Robert Ardrey's two plays have for their themes "the enslavement of the individual by his job in a society in which the job for the individual is unconnected with a creative purpose."²⁷ and the necessity of facing the problems of the world. Irwin Shaw's Gentle People relates a fascist parable, and his Retreat from Pleasure and Odets' Night Music mirror the mood of young Americans in the period of the phony war. Nellie Childs' Weep for the Virgins deals with the theme of proletarian frustration. Even Men in White and My Heart's in the Highlands, although basically unconcerned with social

problems, are contemporary in subject matter. It cannot be said of the Group that it evaded the issues of its day.

Much of the Group's reputation for being a radical theatre arose because of the phenomenon of Odets. The emergence of Lefty and its subsequent critical success on Broadway created the image of a theatre of militancy. But this image was, in fact, illusory. Surely the Group was proud that the foremost revolutionary talent of the day had emerged from within its own midst, but Odets' work was not produced because it was consciously revolutionary. Had Odets' viewpoint been reformist and his dramatic talents still manifest (one of those hypothetical conjectures thwarted by the uniqueness of art), the Group, unlike Theatre Union, would still have produced him. Odets' subsequent dramatic contributions affirm this assumption. Clurman rejected The Silent Partner not because of its proletarian subject matter, but because he felt that it needed more work. It was Odets' dramatic, not his revolutionary voice that the Group cherished.²⁸ But there can be no denying that there was strong sentiment in the Group for the production of leftist plays. Although Clurman's standards were ultimately esthetic, one cannot imagine the Group having done a politically conservative play. One wonders what reaction the Group personnel would have made had its theatre, rather than the Federal Theatre Project, scheduled the production of Murder in the Cathedral.

Thus the Group spoke in several political voices, all, however, left of center. At the far left were Odets' militant playlets and his allegories of middle-class decay (all produced in 1935), and Piscator's adaptation of Dreiser's American Tragedy, produced under the title, The Case of Clyde Griffiths (1936). Produced but a few months after Theatre Union's version of Mother, Clyde Griffiths similarly employed epic technique, and was just as heartily disliked by the critics (although the Group's physical production was more solidly praised).

The play is overtly presentational in style. As in Mother, a Speaker continually points out the revolutionary implications of the successive scenes. At the very outset the didactic nature of the work is stressed.

Attention, ladies and gentlemen! You will see this evening a play that has been made from a novel, which its author, Theodore Dreiser, calls An American Tragedy. But we are concerned not so much with the naked reiteration of the novel or the simple dramatization of its incidents. The tragedy is as international as the problem of Class-Contrast, Class Distinction from which the story arises. We are here to solve a mathematical problem that shows that the fate of man today is as inexorable and absolute as was his fate in the old Greek tragedies. We might term it: The Law of Labor, or better yet, of Capital.²⁹

Clyde Griffiths follows the basic line of Dreiser's work, but Piscator, exploiting epic didacticism, loses no opportunity to make explicit in Marxist terms the social implications of Clyde's tragedy. As Piscator sees it, Clyde's downfall lies, like Joe Kovarsky's in Black Pit, in

class betrayal. Clyde has his chance; when the union votes to strike against his uncle, he is temporarily with them. But when confronted by the elder Griffiths he reneges, and, in the Marxist catechism, falls from grace. But Piscator is less concerned with excoriating Clyde than with drawing from his fall the social lesson that evil is a product of institutions, not of individuals. In the last scene of the play --the trial--the Speaker enters consciously into the action (rather than serving merely as commentator) in order to affirm the play's thesis. He defends Clyde against Right and Left (represented theatrically by stage right and stage left throughout the production; stage center represents the no-man's-land of Clyde's indecision). "Shall Clyde be saved?" all are asked. The Right cries: "No! He has cost us enough! He should go back to the class he came from." The Left cries: "We want nothing to do with him! He never belonged to us. You (i.e., the Right) took him up and now you must stand by him! We won't raise a finger to help him!" (p. 81) But the Speaker counsels against the adamancy of the Left's hatred. Yes, he agrees, Clyde has betrayed his class. That is his real crime--greater than murder: "He was so bewitched, so enslaved by his vision of the world of riches he saw about him that he became so morally corrupted that he shrank from nothing, not even murder in his determination to become part of it!" (p. 83).

But despite the fact that Clyde had left "the great army" of the proletariat to seek false goals, he is--no less than the exploited workers themselves--the victim of an oppressive social system. The District Attorney asserts that talk of social systems is irrelevant to the facts of the case (a judgment the reviewers enthusiastically shared), but the Speaker affirms its relevancy:

What is Clyde Griffiths without your poverty and your wealth? In him lies the longing that is in the hearts of everyone of us here for safety, comfort, beauty, happiness--and in his make-up an indictment against a world that is not capable of giving sufficient to everyone. Who is responsible for this? (p. 83)

Clyde's real crime was that he adhered too strictly to the capitalist ethic; on one side he saw the ragged poverty of the exploited poor; on the other, the luxury and power of the exploiting rich. Was he so guilty to desire to leave the class which had nothing but degradation and misery to offer him? Hadn't he merely accepted the logic of the successful, that progress resides in the rise of the clever? Clyde's crime, from the point of view of capitalism, was that he overreached himself by committing murder. But once having committed himself to the desire to rise, had he any other alternative? The only distinction between Clyde's crime and capitalist exploitation was that his murder was officially unlawful. The play's moral is unequivocally stated. Mrs. Griffiths laments that Clyde "dies as a sacrifice to his restless, longing heart, but he will be forgiven!" The

Speaker, however, denies her religious fatalism: "He dies as a sacrifice to society. And that will not be forgiven!" (p. 87) Of all the Group plays only Lefty ends on such a note of forthright radicalism.

In answer to actors' complaints about the lack of socially-conscious scripts, Clurman had pointed out that the Group had produced the first Depression play in Claire and Paul Sifton's 1931-. The play is particularly interesting because, while it points the way toward the proletarian drama of the mid-thirties, it retains umbilical connection to the expressionistic social drama championed by the New Playwrights, to which the Siftons had belonged. The drama of the New Playwrights--as reflected in such plays as Lawson's Internationale, Dos Passos' Airways Inc., and the Sifton's Belt--presented apocalyptic visions of social protest based upon the chaos the authors feared capitalism might breed; in the context of the twenties their visions were necessarily prophetic. After all, prosperity reigned supreme. Radical in style, undogmatically radical in politics, the work of the New Playwrights was a true product of the experimental ferment of its age. In the words of Gilbert Seldes, the plays "all seemed to be built on the idea that labor troubles, economic troubles, political troubles, ended in a jazz dance."³⁰

But in 1931 the Jazz-Age had been interred, and the social apocalypse indeed seemed to be at hand. 1931- is

significant because, while it is conceived structurally in the semi-expressionistic style of the New Playwrights, thematically its social protest is based upon contemporary reality, not undefined prophesy. Structurally, the play consists of fourteen scenes which comprise one line of action--the plight of a modern everyman, Adam, in the grip of social and economic forces which threaten to destroy him--and interspersed with this personal drama, ten interludes which occur as flashes between the scenes, and which comprise the drama of the group to which he belongs. The alternating rhythm of the scenes and interludes is progressively accelerated until the two lines finally converge, and the drama of the individual is seen in the light of the drama of his group.

The interludes are conceived cinematically as brief vignettes which progressively record the growing fact of class struggle in response to economic deprivation. At first the jobless are "silent and motionless as death, tense as a loaded gun,"³¹ but slowly their desperation in the face of growing unemployment intensifies: "they are . . . a little more frightened, a little hungrier, a little more anxious. . . ." (Interlude II) Then their protest explodes into violence: "there is a silent, frustrated movement in the crowd, then a yowl of protest . . . then a blind, instinctive surge against the [factory] gate, to force it in. It holds." (Interlude IV) Finally, genuine class strife results as the police attempt to break up the workers' protest (Interlude

VIII); and the last interlude, with which the play concludes, ends on a note of solidarity in the face of police terror.

. . . onto the stage spills a streaming crowd of men and women . . . they walk steadily across, eyes ahead. Halfway across, gunshots start. Two fall. Two waver, turn and run. The others go on; more shots; still they go on.

As they near the other side, machinegun fire begins. (p. 172)

It would seem from the progress of these interludes that 1931- is an uncompromisingly Marxist play. But the thesis of class awareness is not stressed in the play proper. It is true that Adam does join the militant marchers at the end of the play, but this "conversion," if so it may be characterized, occurs precipitately in the play's last seconds. Nowhere does Adam himself demonstrate any class consciousness, nor any of the other familiar attributes of the proletarian hero. The Siftons are primarily concerned with the horror of his situation, and the fact that it must be alleviated; they are more concerned with affirming that something must be done than in offering specific remedies. "Christ, why do they make us want what we can't afford," Adam cries to his girl, "why do they make us love and have kids . . . when we can't get the money to make them decent." (p. 111); and this cry strikes the essential note of 1931-. The play offers--in its progressive delineation of Adam's degradation--the rebuttal to the executives' claim that "there's no unemployment except among men who don't want to work." (p. 37) In short, 1931- is, in the Sifton's own words,

"concerned with an individual in the tidal movement of a people caught in a situation which they can neither explain, escape nor exercise."³² It attempts to record the horror of this bewilderment, the horror bred by the recognition that the great economic machine had, in reality, broken down. The spectres on the bread-lines challenged the American conscience.

Oh, God, give me a job--Anything that pays wages.
 . . . Anything so's I can live. Make it dirty as
 hell, I don't care. . . . Money. That's every-
 thing: eats, sleep, a woman, kids . . . every-
 thing you think about when you haven't got it;
 everything, a fellow's got to have to stand up
 and look a man in the eye. Money . . . not a hell
 of a lot, but regular . . . regular as hell. . . .
 I've got a right to live! I've got a right to
 work! Whaddeya say? (pp. 141-44)

One of the perennial themes of the Group plays-- particularly in the early plays--was the emptiness of the myth of success. Success Story (1932), Big Night (1933), Gold Eagle Guy (1934), Golden Boy (1937)--all had as their protagonist a man who sells out his better self in order to achieve financial gain. In the plays of Lawson, Odets and Powell the lesson was obvious: the capitalist ethic had--as in the case of Clyde Griffiths--proved corrupting. The social criticism, if not manifest, was at least implicit. In the case of Melvin Levy's Gold Eagle Guy, however, there were those within and without the Group who felt that the portrayal of the robber baron, Guy Button, was altogether too sympathetic. It was not that Levy had failed to show his protagonist's ruthlessness and avarice, but he had,

either consciously or otherwise, infused him with a tremendous vitality and zest for life which seemed, if not to justify his actions, at least to render them diabolically fascinating. Button's evil is of such a magnitude that, in the manner of the great Elizabethan villains like Barabas or de Flores, it seems to rise beyond any facile psychological or social motivation. I am, of course, not implying any invidious comparison; Levy's play hardly merits comparison with those of Marlowe or Middleton. I am, however, attempting to define, within the limitation of the play, why many objected to Levy's portrayal. Button, unlike Sol Ginsberg or even Joe Bonaparte, seemed less the product of social forces than the manipulator of them. His final destruction does not follow inevitably from the corruption of his character by zealous avarice, but is the result of an act of God: he is killed in the famed San Francisco earthquake. As one critic remarked, Levy had created a character of such stature that it took a physical catastrophe to get rid of him. And surely Guy departs on a note of heroic defiance; as the walls around him quake he breaks into a wild, ecstatic dance, his hands lifted to heaven.

I called on You to destroy my enemies. You heard me Lord, and did my prayer and didn't touch one hair of me. . . . You can pull in the horns of your wrath now, Lord. . . . Don't You take no chances of doin' harm to me, Lord. You're too smart for that. Guess You ain't no man's fool.³³

Guy Button so dominates Levy's play that, despite his evil, he transcends human limitations. No wonder that the Marxist critics chided that the play did not "resolve class issues," and that Levy (who, paradoxically, had himself chastised Lawson for the indecision of the latter's Gentlewoman) and the Group had strayed from its "serious and social purposes."³⁴

But if Gold Eagle Guy did not "resolve class issues," it did at least present a figure who was clearly--despite his size--a class symbol, and on these grounds some defended the play's revolutionary intentions.³⁵ The fact of "class" was one that few American dramatists escaped in the thirties; man was primarily a social, not a psychological, animal. Thus Paul Green in his drama of southern decadence, the House of Connelly (1931), is less concerned with the forms of this decadence than with the juxtaposition of a healthy alternative. It was, as we have seen, not an uncommon device in the drama of the period. Odets and the Marxist playwrights posited the revolutionary alternative to middle-class decadence; Lawson (in Gentlewoman) and Rice (in Between Two Worlds) contrasted the sterility of the old order with the vitality of the new; even the ordered worlds of Behrman and Barry admitted new social intruders.

We might profitably contrast the South of House of Connelly with the South of Tennessee Williams. As Green paints the decay of the old order it seems, at first, in the

manner of Williams: "now the grace of hospitality is gone, the jovial host is gone, gone is the slave. The furniture is falling to pieces, . . . The dead Connellys in their frames wait for the end."³⁶ The living Connelly's exist in a past world of Belle Reeves and Blue Mountains; the old order is crumbling before the onslaughts of new social forces, and the Connelly clan, like the Sartoris, can only rail against the powerful upstarts.

That's it! a Yankee or a Jew, I don't know which is slickest. The Yankees first sold us nigger property, then took it away from us in the name of Christianity and paid us nothing for the loss. But they kept the money they'd got for the trade, b'God!

So far so good. Now were Tennessee Williams proceeding with the play, the old order, however infinitely decadent, would still be preferable to the new. After all, is there not a virtue in the posture of gallantry? Will Connelly, the scion of the clan, would hardly display the energy to cry: "From this day we're going to change. . . . I'm going to work--we're all going to work." (pp. 72-3) He would most probably drink until the click in his head drove out dire images of castration. Surely there could be no rapprochement between the old order and the new. And yet this is Green's theme: "out of this death and darkness--into the light!" (p. 63) Will recognizes that he cannot resuscitate a dead past, that the old, aristocratic order is gone forever. He finds in Patsy, the daughter of a tenant farmer, hope for the

creation of a new future, and despite the cruelty of the choice (Patsy is bitterly resented by the older Connellys) he is convinced by her that it must be made.

That's the way it has to be, Will. To grow and live and be something in this world . . . you've got to push other things aside. The dead and the proud have to give way to us--to us the living. We have one life to live and we'll fight for it to the end. (p. 118)

The premise that resides at the heart of House of Connelly is that decadence is a fact of institutions and classes; in the work of Tennessee Williams corruption is existential. The first premise makes the concept of social action meaningful, the second declares all social gestures essentially irrelevant.

Green, in his second play for the Group, Johnny Johnson (1936), departs from his familiar regional environment, but he is again concerned with asserting a social thesis: in this case, the insanity of war. The method he employs--the juxtaposition of a supremely sane man against the organized absurdity of conventional institutions--has been employed more recently for purely comic effect in such military comedies as No Time for Sergeants and At War with the Army. But Green's purpose in Johnny Johnson is completely serious. As the play proceeds it becomes increasingly bitter in tone, until at last the laws of sanity apply only within the confines of an insane asylum. Why had Johnny been committed? Merely because he had acted upon the "mad" conviction

that human beings were reasonable creatures, that mankind would not willfully destroy itself.

Green's ironic fable (which came out of the Group's "suggestion, stimulation, and actual assistance")³⁷ is not primarily concerned, as is Peace on Earth, with the causes of war; it is rather concerned with its ultimate absurdity and its devastating horror. "Yeah, there's legs and arms scattered all around," Johnny observes, "Young arms and legs that used to throw rocks and walk about."³⁸ In the name of country, religion, family, mankind forgets its common humanity and acts more viciously--because its actions are gratuitous--than the most vicious animal. Johnny's crime is that he demands a reason for fighting. In the play's first scene war is declared in the midst of the unveiling of a statue dedicated to Peace. All rush for arms, forgetting the pacifist slogans of the last moment. Only Johnny naively muses: "Why--I thought we were all for peace." (p. 142) Finally he consents to fight when he is told that this war will end all wars, but he soon discovers, in the horror of the grime and dismembered bodies, that this reason is a lie. For the powers that control the destinies of the men who fight do not want peace. Johnny offers it to them, but the precious gift is denied; only a madman could believe that war could be ended by rational discussion, they conclude, and turn back to the abstract patterns on the planning board which represent the life-blood of millions of men. Green,

through Johnny, passionately states the case of the common man who dies in wars not of his making:

We were meant for something better, I tell you!
 We want to live, and you could let us live! We
 want to be let alone to do our work in peace--
 to have our homes--to raise our families. . . .
 what sense is there in human beings trying to
 cut and tear and destroy one another like wild
 beasts in a jungle? There's no sense in it, is
 there? You're our leaders--end this killing--
 end it now. Do it! Do it! (pp. 173-4)

Johnny Johnson is a cry against the ultimate absurdity of war; the paradox of Green's play resides in the question: in a world governed by insanity must the forces of sanity be eternally suspect? The leaders of the "civilized" world reject Johnny's pacifism as madness; the inmates of the asylum accept his leadership and unanimously create a League of World Republics. But Green does not end the play on a note of despair; Johnny, when released from the asylum, again sees the warclouds gathering, and again hears the familiar rationalizations: "Daddy says that we're in for a terrible war and all the people have got to be ready to keep the enemy from destroying us." (p. 190) But Johnny, when faced with the recurrence of mankind's perennial blight, does not lose his unconquerable optimism, his faith that sanity shall ultimately prevail: "Even so, Johnny Johnson is not hushed by the strange voice booming through the world. As he disappears down the long street that leads from the great city into the country and beyond, he begins whistling his song again--a little more clearly now, a little more bravely." (p. 190)

Paul Green's dramatic contribution to the Group canon raises wistful considerations of the dramatist he once was. As his career progressed the intense regionalism, which in the twenties and thirties was illumined by social and psychological insight, degenerated into the hollow formalities of spectacle. The playwright who had shown himself capable of In Abraham's Bosom, House of Connelly, Hymn to the Rising Sun and Johnny Johnson abdicated in favor of the scenarist for such confederate flag-waving extravaganzas as Wilderness Road, The Founders, and The Confederacy. Surely this record does not indicate that social concerns distorted Green's accomplishment; his recent total dedication to patriotic spectacle of the most obvious banality ("The Confederacy is now our Lost Cause, but the ideals we served are not lost." "Yes. Yes.") raises the unfortunate apprehension that like the Confederacy, Paul Green's dramatic seriousness will not rise again.

We have observed that at the end of the thirties the threat of fascist belligerency jolted many liberals from a pacifist position into a realization of the possible necessity of force to combat it. It is not surprising then that two of the Group's plays for the year 1939--Irwin Shaw's The Gentle People and Robert Ardrey's Thunder Rock--should take for their themes the necessity for man to face the outbreak of social evil and act in order to eradicate it. Both plays face the issue obliquely--The Gentle People through the

means of whimsical allegory, and Thunder Rock through the means of fantasy--but both leave no doubt as to their implications. Both Shaw and Ardrey significantly accept the phenomenon of social evil; they are not concerned with its causation. The problem they raise is: how can man accommodate himself to this evil? Both answer similarly: he cannot evade the necessity of action.

Shaw's play reveals the reversal of the liberal position on war. In 1936 Shaw had composed Bury the Dead, one of the most famous short plays of the decade, for a New Theatre benefit. In this pacifist piece, the soldiers senselessly killed in an exploiting war refuse to be buried despite the threats and cajoling of officers, politicians, family and friends. In mood and ironic savagery it approached the intensity of Green's Johnny Johnson. However, in 1939 war did not appear so completely senseless. It was obvious to most liberals that Hitler could not be placated rationally, that a stand against him was inevitable. The Gentle People does not treat this theme directly; it deals in parable, and the difficulty with parable is that if it is too obvious it may lose all specificity and credibility on its primary level (e.g., Rice's American Landscape); and if it concentrates too intensely on the detail from which its allegorical implications are to arise, these implications may well be lost (Miller's the Crucible). There were those who professed to see in The Gentle People nothing beyond the whimsy of its

Brooklyn environment, an obtuseness which astounded Clurman who saw the play clearly as an allegory concerning fascism and the common people.³⁹

The parable which Shaw relates is simply stated. Two gentle Brooklyn fisherman are "shaken-down" by a gangster who not only demands protection money, but who also infatuates the young, headstrong daughter of one of the men. The gangster's creed is simple: the strong shall derive their sustenance from the weak.

Read the history books. . . . There are superior people and there are inferior people. . . . The superior people make the inferior people work for them. That is the law of nature. If there is any trouble you beat 'em up a coupla times and then there is no more trouble. Then you have peace.⁴⁰

But peace cannot be bought at such a price. Philip, one of the gentle people, maintains that Goff, the gangster, must be paid because "he is a man who is not afraid to kill other men," (p. 45) and for a while the men indeed pay. But Goff will not be appeased; his demands grow continually larger, and soon the men realize that they must make a stand against him. The common man, eternally persecuted, realizes that there must be an end to running. "I was pushed out of Russia, out of school, out of business, out of a house that cost me \$8000. We're getting old. . . . We must take up a stand . . . before we're pushed right off the earth." (pp.40-1) The men take their complaint of blackmail to court; but Goff is too clever and they have insufficient proof. The only

satisfaction they receive is a beating at the gangster's hands. Finally, they have no alternative; they must take the law into their own hands. There is only one way to combat the evil that Goff represents; man must fight it with its own weapons.

Finally . . . if you want peace and gentleness, you got to take violence out of the hands of the people like Goff and you got to take it in your own hands and use it like a club. Then, maybe, on the other side of the violence, there will be peace and gentleness. All my life . . . I have believed in reason. I convince you, you convince me. Can you convince airplanes with bombs and men with guns in their pockets? (p. 149)

The answer is obvious, and Shaw's parable ends optimistically, considering the time of its composition, with the triumph of his gentle people over the embodiment of fascism.

The dilemma which Robert Ardrey poses in Thunder Rock is not that man is afraid to act, but that he fears the ultimate futility of such action. His protagonist, Charleston, has been engaged in the vital struggles of his time; but the spectacle of misery which he has witnessed has destroyed his faith in political solutions: "When all a man can say is this: we can't find answers for our problems because our problems haven't any answers--then he makes a poor crusader."⁴¹ The values of civilization have slipped out the window: "Truth. Freedom of speech. Human dignity. Democracy. . . . they'll never come back again. . . . Society itself is a lost cause." (p. 21) Consequently Charleston retires to cultivate his garden; he removes

himself from the society of men, and, in the ivory tower of a remote lighthouse, constructs a private strife-free world peopled with the ghosts of ship-wrecked immigrants. But as the creatures of his fancy become progressively more defined, it becomes clear to Charleston that he has not in fact escaped the problem which plagued him, the significance of human effort. Each of the ghosts had fled from social forces which had seemed in their time insurmountable; each had despaired of ever achieving his goal, goals--such as the emancipation of women and the elimination of the horrors of child-birth--which had long since been realized. Charleston finds himself, then, having to assert the faith in human possibility which he had previously rejected: "Have the vision to look ahead!" he cries, "See a world where science is a new religion. . . . See women sitting in the House of Commons--" (p. 48)

But Charleston cannot as yet see that the problems of his era may, from the vantage point of history, appear equally soluble. The horror of modern destruction makes him doubtful that the future may even exist. That the problems of the ghosts were solved guarantees nothing. But Kurtz, the ghost of a persecuted physician, points out the contemporary moral. All human problems have seemed in their time insoluble, but mankind has persevered, and in time solved them. Despite set-backs, Ardrey asserts, history records the ascending line of human progress. Each man has one question to ask

himself: what can I do to accelerate the process? "Men may lose, but mankind never! Sooner or later, tomorrow or in a thousand years, mankind finds an answer. And we have only one power--to decide just this: will it be sooner? Or will it be later?" (p. 59) Ultimately, then, Charleston recognizes that man cannot absent himself from the issues of the day; he must commit himself. He cannot surrender to the forces which threaten civilization, no matter how horrible or invincible they may appear. He cannot demand knowledge of the final outcome of the struggle. He must have faith in the lessons of history, that progress shall continue. "A man who fights for an ideal--a man who fights against poverty or ignorance or the rule of tyrants--he doesn't ask for assurance that he'll win. . . . All he asks for is assurance that he has a chance to win." (pp. 65-6).

If there is one basic affirmation which runs through the corpus of the Group plays it is this faith in man's ability to ameliorate social evil. The method of this amelioration might vary, but the social gesture, whether radical or reformist, was obligatory. This faith the Group shared with its generation; indeed the Group represented the theatrical best that its generation had to offer. Whatever the final verdict as to the durability of American drama in the thirties, there is no doubt that much of this accomplishment was due to the efforts of the Group Theatre. Observe its dramatic contribution: it produced the first efforts of

William Saroyan and Sidney Kingsley; it offered major work by such established playwrights as Lawson, Green, and Maxwell Anderson; its playwriting contest awarded public recognition for the first time to a young writer named Tennessee Williams (for American Blues); it encouraged the work of lesser writers like Irwin Shaw, Robert Ardrey and Melvin Levy; and it offered in the work of one of its own actors--Clifford Odets--the most characteristic dramatic voice of the decade. In sum, the record of American dramatic accomplishment in the thirties is very largely the record of the dramatic contribution of the Group Theatre.

The Group is dead, but its tradition survives; at least it realized one article of its theatrical faith. The Group failed because its ideals were inimical to the hard facts of commerce. It never succeeded in obtaining that which was almost an imperative for a theatre of its aims, a sustained subsidy from either public or private patronage.

Clurman writes:

Its weakness derived from the fact that while it planned to work as a theatre it operated under exactly the same conditions as the commercial producer. Its "backing" covered only single productions and most of its backers came in on its productions for the same reasons and with the same un~~understanding~~ that they might on shows produced by a manager.⁴²

It is amazing that the Group survived as long as it did when one considers that in ten seasons it produced only two hits, Men in White and Golden Boy. That the dissolution of the Group occurred when it did cannot, as in the case of

the Theatre Union, be tied too directly to changes in the winds of doctrine. It was always balanced precipitately on the edge of commercial instability. "The Group Theatre was a failure," Clurman affirms, "because, as no individual can exist alone, no group can exist alone."⁴³ But, in another sense, the philosophy which had adumbrated the Group could not survive the demands of impending global conflict. Through most of the Group plays ran "the hunger for a spiritually active world, a humanly meaningful and relevant art,"⁴⁴ and this social purpose was soon to be denied by political disenchantment and the exigencies of survival. In a sense, the Group, too, was dispossessed by history.

But the Group's legacy has not been only dramatic. It is perhaps paradoxical, but nonetheless true, that the commercial theatre, the vagaries of which the Group tried to alleviate, should have appropriated, if not the ideals of the Group (more's the pity), at least its technique. If the American theatre has indeed achieved a coherent style, it is based upon the Group's distillation of Stanislavskian technique. Despite sectarian controversy within the temple of the Method, there is no doubt that at present it is the American theatrical faith. For this the substantial achievement of the Group personnel is largely responsible. Our major directors of serious plays are undoubtedly Clurman and Kazan; the latter's influence on the development of recent American drama has been particularly crucial, as his important

collaborative role with Miller and Williams reveals. Since the demise of the road, the atrophy of summer stock, and the prohibitive expenses of Off-Broadway, the acting school has assumed greater importance for the training of theatre personnel. These schools, largely manned by Group personnel or disciples, include the Neighborhood Playhouse (directed in recent years by Sanford Meisner) and the prestigious Actor's Studio (founded in 1947 by Strasberg, Crawford, Kazan, and Lewis). In addition to these institutions, private classes have proliferated, and among the most celebrated of contemporary teachers can be found Stella Adler, Strasberg, Robert Lewis, as well as a host of Group Disciples; our most successful young actors--Brando, Julie Harris, Geraldine Page, Eli Wallach, Kim Stanley--are largely the products of Group training.

Footnotes to Chapter III

1. Harold Clurman, "Critique of the American theatre," Drama Magazine, May 1931, p. 5.
2. The Fervent Years, rev. ed. (New York, 1957), p. 38.
3. Ibid., p. 31.
4. Ibid., p. 197.
5. Ibid., p. 31.
6. Program to 1931 (Group Theatre Scrapbook, Thea. Coll.), p. 1.
7. Fervent Years, p. 30.
8. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
9. Clurman, "The Group Speaks for Itself," N.Y. Times, Dec. 13, 1931, sect. VIII, p. 2.
10. "The Group Theatre Campaigns," Theatre Arts Monthly, May 1932, p. 347.
11. Fervent Years, p. 222.
12. Ibid., p. 46.
13. Ibid., p. 61.
14. Ibid., p. 86.
15. Robert Forsythe, "Wanted: A Theatre," NM, Oct. 18, 1938, p. 15.
16. Hearings, House Committee on Un-American Activities, May 19-20, 1952 (Washington, 1952), p. 3455.
17. Hearings, Apr. 10, 1952 (Washington, 1952), p. 2407.
18. Fervent Years, p. 124.
19. Ibid., p. 127.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 222

22. "The Case of the Group Theatre," July, 1936, p. 5.
23. John Mason Brown, "Two on the Aisle," N.Y. Post, Jan. 27, 1933, p. 7.
24. Review, N.Y. Times, March 14, 1936, p.
25. Robert Garland, Article, N.Y. World Telegram, Apr. 17, 1936, p. 27.
26. Fervent Years, p. 93.
27. Ibid., p. 218.
28. For a detailed examination of the plays of Odets see Chapter VI.
29. Erwin Piscator and Lena Goldschmidt, The Case of Clyde Griffiths, trans. Louise Campbell (Thea. Coll., 1936, typewritten), p. 1.
30. "Jazz-Revolution," N.Y. Evening Journal, Dec. 26, 1933, p.
31. Paul and Claire Sifton, 1931- (New York, 1931), p. 45.
32. Ibid., p. xiii.
33. Melvin Levy, Gold Eagle Guy (New York, 1934), p. 188.
34. Leon Alexander, "The World of Theatre," DW, Dec. 4, 1934, p. 7.
35. Stanley Burnshaw, "Theatre," NM, Dec. 11, 1934, p. 29.
36. Paul Green, The House of Connelly; and Other Plays (New York, 1931), p. 23.
37. Clurman, "The Group Halts," N.Y. Times, Jan. 17, 1936, p. 51.
38. Paul Green, Johnny Johnson, in Twenty Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre, 1939-1941, ed. John Gassner (New York, 1941).
39. Fervent Years, p. 224.

40. Irwin Shaw, The Gentle People (New York, 1939), pp. 178-179.

41. Robert Ardrey, Thunder Rock (New York, 1941), p. 20.

42. "The Group Halts," Jan. 17, 1936, p. 51.

43. Fervent Years, p. 263.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

CHAPTER IV

THE FEDERAL THEATRE: THEATRE IS MEN WORKING

Congressman Starnes: Do you believe that the theatre is a weapon?

Hallie Flanagan: I believe that the theatre is a great educational force. I think it is an entertainment. I think it is an excitement. I think it may be all things to all men.

Hearings of the House Committee
on Un-American Activities, 1938

In the month of January, 1937, a terrible flood struck the city of Cincinnati. All theatres, stores, and places of business were closed; the power plants of the electric light company and those of the water works were submerged, and except for the dim glow of candles and oil lamps, the city was plunged into darkness. During the trying days of the disaster a troupe of actors joined with other civic forces to meet the emergency. In fourteen days they played forty engagements to over 14,000 flood victims; traveling by car, they joined the caravan of trucks carrying food and medical aid to the sufferers, playing wherever they were needed. They were rowed across the swollen river to stranded colonies; they played in emergency shacks and in the open, on

overturned tables, by the light of lanterns, flashlights-- even candles.¹

During the very two weeks that these actors and entertainers were engaged upon their mission of mercy, a number of seemingly unrelated theatrical events were taking place across the breadth of the country: New Yorkers were talking about Virgil Geddes' new play Native Ground and Orson Welles' dynamic adaptation of Marlowe's Dr. Faustus; they were traveling to a reconditioned theatre in Harlem to view two new plays presented by a Negro company; they and their children were applauding a puppet show entitled The Big City, and Gilbert and Sullivan's Iolanthe; Chicagoans were watching a new Ballet by Katherine Dunham; Los Angelenos saw revivals of Uncle Vanya and Redemption, as well as a Yiddish version of Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here; a new musical and a new Negro play were causing comment in Seattle; Paul Green's House of Connelly was revived in Indianapolis, as was Sidney Howard's Ned McCobb's Daughter in Cedarhurst, N.Y.; Bostonians witnessed the performance of an Italian play entitled L'Avvocato Difensore in its native language. Omaha and Peoria offered revivals of stage-worthy stock perennials.²

What possible connection could exist between these various productions and the improvised theatrics of the Ohio performers? The events were not as unrelated as first it might appear. All these theatrical activities--and a host of others too numerous to cite individually--were the work of

the Federal Theatre Project, not only the most ambitious theatrical project ever undertaken by the Federal Government, but, surely, one of the largest coordinated theatrical experiments in the history of the world. To appreciate the vast extent of the project let us note that in New York City alone the Federal Theatre operated five major units--the Living Newspapers, the Popular Price Theatre, the Experimental Theatre, the Negro Theatre and the Try-Out Theatre--as well as a host of smaller, subsidiary units--a one-act play unit, a German Unit, an Anglo-Jewish theatre, a Classical Repertory Unit, a Poetic Drama Unit, a vaudeville unit, a children's theatre, a puppet theatre, a Continental Repertory Unit.³ In one season New Yorkers saw over one hundred Federal Theatre productions, ranging from vaudeville and light comedy to W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot. Indeed, so successful were the accomplishments of the New York Federal Theatre that in May, 1936 the Literary Digest wrote: "The greatest producer of hits is the Federal Government. It has four smashing successes in N.Y., a record unequaled by any producer in eight years."⁴

But the accomplishments of the Federal Theatre were not, as we have observed, limited to New York City, although the activities of the New York Regional Theatre naturally bulked largest. The improvised performances of the Ohio Theatre were no isolated phenomenon. Across the entire United States, in thirty-five individual states, living

theatre was brought back to the people. In the Connecticut Project's first year, 421 theatre workers gave a total of 603 performances to 147,279 persons.⁵ In Valley, Nebraska, a town of eight hundred persons, one thousand citizens witnessed the first flesh and blood dramatic production ever staged in the area.⁶ In a West Virginia coal camp, the local federal unit encouraged miners to put on a play about local conditions;⁷ In Oklahoma project workers played to migrant workers;⁸ in Oregon players performed in the natural amphitheatre of an adjacent mountain ledge.⁹ The list can be extended indefinitely; all in all, during the four seasons of its existence, the Federal Theatre produced over 1200 individual productions in every section of the country employing, at its peak, over 13,000 theatre personnel. When one places this achievement against the eight major productions of the Theatre Union in a similar span or the Group's record of twenty-five productions in ten seasons, some measure of the fantastic scope of the Federal Theatre Project may be appreciated. Observe, for example, the production schedule for just one month's activity--March, 1936--in New York City:

March 2: Everyman (spot bookings)
 March 2: Woman of Destiny (Willis Theatre)
 March 4: Chalk Dust (Daly's)
 March 8: The Idle Men (spot bookings)
 March 11: Conjur' Man Dies (Lafayette)
 March 14: Triple-A Plowed Under (Biltmore)
 March 20: Murder in the Cathedral (Manhattan)
 March 26: In Heaven and Earth (Willis)¹⁰

Nor were the Federal Theatre's activities exclusively productional. Among other services which the Project offered were (1) the encouragement of local community drama and dramatic training (in the five boroughs of New York City the project fostered community drama through 390 centers in hospitals, schools and settlement houses, in which 235 dramatic coaches worked with over 40,000 members);¹¹ (2) the establishment of the National Service Bureau, which, among its many activities, read, wrote, and translated plays, sent synopses, scripts, and bibliographies to the field, and conducted theatre research; (3) the publishing of its own periodical, the Federal Theatre Magazine; (4) the creation of a Federal Theatre of the Air, which presented approximately two thousand programs a year, all released through regular commercial stations and networks;¹² (5) the development of psycho-drama experimentation in various municipal hospitals;¹³ (6) the establishment of playwriting contests in CCC camps and in colleges. Again the list can be extended. The Federal Theatre offered a myriad of services; it was conceived and operated as more than a play-producing organization. First and foremost, it had to meet, on all levels, the needs of the communities which it served.

The Federal Theatre arose from economic necessity, not esthetic theory; the noble experiment was based upon the fact of unemployment. In the spring of 1933, the most urgent problem that President Roosevelt had to face, once the banking

crisis had eased, was the stark problem of relief. There were upwards of fifteen million unemployed and nearly six million persons on state and municipal charity rolls.¹⁴ The problem of unemployment was particularly difficult for the artist, for art--within the context of breadlines and soup kitchens--must have seemed the most dispensable of commodities. It is estimated that 40,000 show folk were destitute during the Depression, and their situation was made even more desperate by the fact that they could not turn to part-time employment in anticipation of the next theatrical job--"temporary" jobs just did not exist. Thus the Theatre person, already the victim of technological unemployment bred by the rise of the motion picture, not only found job opportunities increasingly scarce (in the summer of 1933 New York sustained only five productions), but was denied the traditional economic alternatives.

To meet the relief needs of the unemployed Congress passed the first Relief Act on March 31, 1933, which, in addition to providing relief for unemployed adults, set up the Civilian Conservation Corps, the object of which was to find jobs for unemployed youth. Six weeks later Congress established the FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration) for the purpose of granting federal funds to states to assist in caring for the unemployed. On November 9, 1933, Congress established the CWA (Civil Works Administration) for the purpose of creating four million jobs for men and

women desperately in need. In all of these agencies, the emphasis was upon immediate need, and theatre people were among the recipients of this precipitate aid. From 1933 to 1935 some 450 people were employed in giving free vaudeville, marionette and legitimate shows, or in directing amateur groups. But it was also apparent that the recipients of this relief, although appreciative of the effort, were made to feel that they were charity-cases, and hence requested that their names not be used when the plays were produced.¹⁵ Some indication of the demeaning nature of the actors' situation is revealed in an anonymous report written by an actor on a CWA drama project in the pages of New Theatre: "3000 of us have applied for Work Relief; 3000 of us have had to prove that we were paupers by submitting to the Means Test. Three thousand of us admitted to ourselves that we were economically beaten."¹⁶ And of the 3000 only a few hundred finally did receive economic relief.

The inadequacy of the initial, hasty relief projects was recognized, and on April 8, 1935, Congress passed a bill authorizing a new approach to the problem of unemployment based upon the experiences of FERA and CWA. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) rejected the concept of the dole; it attempted to remove the stigma of relief by the implementation of three departures from earlier methods: (1) Only employables were to be taken from the relief rolls of the states; (2) to these employables, work was to be offered

within their own skills and trade; (3) unemployables were to be returned to the care of the states.¹⁷ Thus the preservation both of the skill and the self-respect of the worker was viewed as the corollary of the alleviation of economic want. It was deemed important not merely that the worker receive financial assistance, but that he work in the field for which he was trained. Since it had been learned upon investigation that thousands of unemployed artists were engaged in various relief activities for which they were basically unfit, it was decided to establish projects in order to provide proper work for the artists in their respective fields. Thus were created the major Federal Arts projects--in Art, Music, Writing, and Theatre.

It may be observed, then, that the Federal Theatre Project was established not because the government had finally acquiesced in the theory of subsidized theatre, but rather as one method of creating work-relief for unemployed American citizens who happened to be theatrical artists. In an official memorandum of the Washington FTP Office the functional aspect of the project was stressed.

The Federal Theatre project has three objectives: (1) the re-employment from relief rolls and the rehabilitation of professional theatre workers, thus conserving their skills; (2) contributing, in cooperation with the other arts and with the entire Works Progress Administration, varied and purposeful community services; and (3) reviving the living theatre throughout the nation, making the vital life of various communities life in plays and methods of production as essential and

significant as are the communities themselves. The Federal Theatre is a functional theatre, springing not from an art theory but from the economic facts of the American scene, past and present.¹⁸

But while the Project had its origin in economic necessity, it was soon apparent that its director, Hallie Flanagan and her subordinates (chosen, it may be noted, largely from the ranks of the non-commercial theatre) conceived of their task as more than the administration of relief. "The arts projects were being set up to deal with physical hunger," wrote Mrs. Flanagan, "but was there not another form of hunger with which we could rightly be concerned, the hunger of millions of Americans for music, plays, pictures and books? Were not these aspects of hunger a part of the same equation which it was our job to solve?"¹⁹ Elmer Rice, chosen to head the New York Project, similarly viewed the project as answering a cultural, as well as an immediate economic need: "What I saw in the project . . . is the first recognition in the country that the theatre can be something more than a means of private enterprise; that it is vested with a public interest and can conceivably have importance and significance as a social institution and a cultural force."²⁰

The directors of the Federal Theatre Project, thus, accepted the essential functional premise of the theatre's creation, but they were not satisfied with this premise. They wanted to create out of the fact of unemployment a theatre which would not only serve the entire nation in many

ways, but which would be expressive of the attitudes and needs of its age. At the heart of the Federal Theatre lay an idea which coordinated its multifarious aspects, and which made it deserving of the title of a "Theatre": that art is an integral and necessary part of the social community.

The Federal Theatre . . . is not a relief project in which artificial jobs are dealt out to people of inferior talents, but rather a plan which begins by saying: in rethinking theatrical activity in terms of the art and economics of 1935, we need theatre enterprises which will supplement our already existing splendid N.Y. stage. . . . Because it deals directly with human beings the theatre, of all the arts, should be the most conscious of economic changes affecting human beings. . . . It is time that the theatre is brought face to face with the great economic problems of the day²¹

In a very real sense, then, the Federal Theatre reflected the social ferment which gave birth to the Theatre Union and molded the development of the Group Theatre. The essential requisite of art was conceived as the fulfillment of the social need which had brought it forth. Hallie Flanagan maintained that if the theatre were to be a vital social force, it could not afford to ignore the implications of social change. The theatre, in her view, had to grow up.²²

The dual aims of the Federal theatre--the satisfaction of immediate economic need and the creation of a vital contemporary theatre--were to some extent contradictory. For one set of aims--relief, popular appeal, commercial revival --were necessarily impermanent, while the others--the training of actors, the improvement in public taste, the

stimulation of the composition of meaningful contemporary plays--were permanent. If the conflict between the relief purpose and theatrical necessity were manifest at the beginning and throughout the experimental stages, that conflict intensified when wholesale dismissals for economy forced a decision between relief cases and continuation of work by those best qualified to perform it. If the purpose of the project were solely relief, it would be logical for the competent to be discharged first, since they were most likely to find work elsewhere. But what theatre could survive on the basis of the dismissal of its most talented performers? The amazing fact is that the Federal Theatre was able to maintain the acting level of its productions despite these very basic difficulties.

The dilemma was reflected administratively; while Mrs. Flanagan and her assistants were striving to concentrate upon the permanent aspects of the theatre they were attempting to create, it was impossible wholly to extricate the Federal Theatre from the nation-wide WPA network. The WPA officials --usually businessmen pressed into civic duty--knew little of the exigencies of the theatrical profession and could not understand why the handling of the arts projects should differ in any particular from the handling of any other WPA project. In November, 1935, Mrs. Flanagan wrote an

exasperated letter to Jacob Baker, one of the national directors of the WPA:

Yesterday an order came from the New York City WPA office that hereafter no one below the professional rating can be requisitioned by name. This, when we have worked since August so that we could be ready to requisition by name and thus get competent theatre people!²³

Although it was not customary in road-building, for example, to requisition relief labor by name, the WPA directors failed to recognize that a theatre project could not operate along similar lines. It was obviously necessary to set up audition boards, review the talent (not only for performers but technicians as well), and then request by name. Moreover, in the later stages of the project distrust of the Federal Theatre arose within the ranks of the WPA itself, a distrust which occasionally manifested itself in overt or covert censorship, and in the stopping of the Federal Theatre Magazine which expressed the point of view of people on the project; with Harry Hopkins no longer in charge, the Federal Theatre found itself talking to increasingly unsympathetic ears. Thus the association of the Theatre Project with the WPA presented another series of obstacles to surmount. It is a tribute to the energy and indefatigability of Mrs. Flanagan and her co-workers that despite these difficulties the project was able to record so substantial an achievement, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

The Federal Theatre faced one other great liability: it was forbidden by law to advertise, and thus was denied

the opportunity of both informing the public of its theatrical wares and of answering the attacks of its opponents. These attacks took two basic forms: on one hand, the Theatre --and the entire WPA project--was accused of "boondoggling" and shovel-leaning, of wasting the tax-payers' money. The Arts projects were particularly susceptible to this charge, for, as the New York Amsterdam News pointed out: "In and out of depression the average person looks upon art as boondoggling."²⁴

But by far the more serious charge--the charge which was ultimately instrumental in denying funds to the Federal Theatre--was that the Theatre project was a hot-bed of radical activity, that the plays it presented were "communist-inspired." Significantly, few of the more virulent attacks upon the Federal Theatre came from the theatrical profession itself (except for a few old guard producers like Brock Pemberton). Most came from the direction of the intransigent right. Bernarr MacFadden warned that the Federal Theatre would cause revolution as certainly as Beaumarchais' Marriage of Figaro had caused the fall of the French monarchy;²⁵ the Saturday Evening Post editorially accused the project of having "produced a long series of undisguisedly revolutionary plays."²⁶ The Hearst press was a consistent opponent, proclaiming that "the Federal Theatre Project has degenerated into little more than an adjunct to the New York Leftist literary junta."²⁷

Hallie Flanagan was herself subjected to charges of communist sympathies; Harrison Fiske--like members of the Dies Committee--found tinges of Un-Americanism in Mrs. Flanagan's enthusiasm for Russian theatre: "Mrs. Flanagan has openly stated that she is not interested in the American Theatre or its methods, advocating the Russian stylized performances."²⁸ Senator Davis was likewise alarmed at the praise of Soviet Theatre in Mrs. Flanagan's book on the European theatre, Shifting Scenes. If Hallie Flanagan is not a communist, he maintained, let her disavow her past writings; for until she proves herself innocent, the Senator regretted that he would have to find her guilty of radicalism.²⁹

The fact is that because of its governmental support the Federal Theatre was particularly vulnerable to political attack. Moreover, by virtue of the WPA directive forbidding any coherent public relations policy, the project was unable to respond to its critics.³⁰ As is generally the case, the denials never caught up with the accusations. Obvious untruths were allowed to stand officially uncorrected. For example, in his attack on the Federal Theatre, Fiske wrote that "the publicity department gives out Communistic publications, which may be found on the desks of its members at any time. Communistic literature is posted on the bulletin boards. Communistic meetings are held during business hours . . . key positions are held by persons having communistic

leanings."³¹ The fact is that political activity on project time was specifically forbidden; if such activity were indeed pursued--and, considering the time, it very likely was--it was against the specific policy of the Federal Theatre and was legitimate grounds for dismissal from the project.³²

As for the charge that the leadership of the project was communist dominated, it was manifestly absurd, and recognized as such by all responsible critics.³³ No more substantial charge was ever leveled at Hallie Flanagan than the fact of her "subversive" penchant for theatrical experimentation. In fact, she repeatedly pointed out to her subordinates on the project that she would not tolerate the use of the Federal Theatre for the promulgation of any specific political platform. She objected to--but characteristically made no attempt to censor--certain of the political implications of Injunction Granted, pointing out to Morris Watson, the director of the Living Newspaper, that "I will not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, or the Communist Party."³⁴ When separate productions of Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here were in rehearsal in twenty-five different cities, the following memorandum went out to all projects throughout the country:

. . . avoid all controversial issues--political angles of any degree--special appeals--racial or group appeals--or interferences in any of these

directions since Federal Theatre is interested only in presenting good theatre, neither adopting nor assuming any viewpoint beyond presenting a new and vital drama of our times, emerging from the social and economic forces of the day.³⁵

Of course, it was to some extent naive to assume that such a vital, contemporary drama as desired by the directors of the project could totally avoid assuming any political view-point, and the Federal Theatre plays inevitably reveal various social concerns and solutions. But the tenor of its directive is clear: the directors of the Federal Theatre, like the directors of the Group, aspired to a non-sectarian social drama, a drama which affirmed the necessity of facing social issues, but which avoided a dogmatically consistent political position upon these issues. In the case of a government-supported theatre such a position was obviously a necessity. But the problem was further complicated by the scope of the Federal Theatre and its avowed principle of non-censorship (if the principle was not always scrupulously followed it was more the fault of non-theatrical WPA or governmental action than of censorship by the project directors themselves). Plays were chosen by the individual regions involved, subject to approval, rarely denied, by the Theatre's central directorate. Thus, unlike the Group, the Federal Theatre's plays were not chosen by its directors; although the National Service Bureau--the Theatre's official play-reading unit--recommended plays to the various localities, the choice was generally left to the regional directors.

Despite the fear that subsidized theatre might result in direct political control, the facts reveal otherwise.

Fortune magazine spoke for many observers of the project when it noted: "the Arts Projects have been given a freedom no one would have thought possible in a government run undertaking. And by and large that freedom has not been abused."³⁶

In essence, in the words of Hallie Flanagan, "the whole of Federal Theatre was greater than any of its parts just as it was greater than any personality connected with it."³⁷ That communists should have been counted among these parts of the project was, considering the radical ferment of the age and the inclusiveness of the project, inevitable. Since the five thousand people on the New York project were not chosen with an eye to their political or religious affiliations it would have been impossible to exclude them. Political reliability had not as yet become the yardstick of theatrical excellence.

In general, the Marxist press supported the venture (it was--again let us reiterate--the era of the Popular Front), although it still found much to criticize in the project's operation. Walter Pell complained in the pages of New Theatre that "the history of the WPA theatre is a record of unbelievable executive errors, political interference, bureaucratic red-tape and even militaristic control." He suggested specific reforms: "democratic method of operations, vested largely in the hands of the workers themselves,"

guarantees of continued employment of the whole present personnel, and compliance with trade union requirements as to hours and conditions of labor.³⁸ On the whole, however, the Marxist press found more to praise than to condemn. If it could not approve the reformist nature of most of the Theatre's New York productions, it could at least support the concept of a theatre which was making a concentrated effort to fulfill a real social need; it consistently bent over backwards (in the manner of its attitude toward the Group) to minimize the ideological short-comings of many Federal Theatre plays. For example, despite the lack of a "concrete political solution," Peter Ellis heralded the simultaneous productions of It Can't Happen Here with these words: "The mere fact that such a play is produced on such a scale under such auspices in such a historical setting should be regarded as an important victory for the friends of freedom and progress."³⁹

The fact of Marxist support in the pages of the New Masses and New Theatre was, inevitably, thrown back into the faces of the directors of the Federal project. The question rarely asked was: just what does the record of the Federal Theatre's dramatic accomplishments reveal? Had they looked at statistics, critics might have observed that less than ten per cent of the Federal Theatre productions dealt with such issues as government, politics, power, labor, etc.⁴⁰ They might have noted a few of the project's substantial dramatic

achievements: the organization of companies that presented cycles of plays by Shakespeare, Shaw, O'Neill (the latter released his plays with the statement that "I believe the WPA units are translating into action the fact that the government has an obligation to give a reasonable amount of encouragement and assistance to cultural undertakings");⁴¹ the presentation of a classical repertory that ranged from Aeschylus to Sheridan; the organization of units which presented European classics in their native tongues, the light-opera classics of Gilbert and Sullivan, regional plays by authors such as Paul Green, and plays and puppet shows for children. They might have noted such non-political successes as the first American production of Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral, a Negro Macbeth set in Haiti (so successful that it went on tour), a Swing Mikado which started a commercial trend, and Orson Welles' spectacular, scenery-less production of Marlowe's Faustus (which brought the then enfant terrible his first substantial renown); they might have observed the dramatic, rather than the exclusively political, implications of the exciting experimentalism of the Living Newspaper.

But, reversing our direction, let us ask just what the official critics of the Federal Theatre Project did observe. Of a total list of 830 separate major titles, eighty-one were criticized as to content by witnesses before Congressional committees, by members of the House and Senate on the floor of the House or Senate, during committee hearings, or in

public statements for the press or radio. Of the eighty-one titles, only twenty-nine originated with Federal Theatre; the other fifty-two titles represent thirty-three standard or stock revivals, five plays that had never been produced by the project, seven plays that originated with local community drama groups, not with the project, one children's play, one Yiddish play, one Italian translation, two pieces of Americana, and two classics.⁴² Since the range of Federal drama was so vast, consisting in large part of revivals, let us accept for purposes of evaluation a schematization based upon these officially criticized plays. Such a limitation has not been chosen arbitrarily. Inasmuch as they were cited for their specific political implications, these plays reveal most accurately the Federal Theatre's political commitment, despite the fact that they represent less than 4 per cent of the project's total production. One additional limitation: we are restricted by necessity to a consideration of those plays which survive either in published versions or in typescript. The following consideration of officially-criticized WPA drama is, therefore, if selective, not arbitrarily so.

The criticized drama falls into several categories: (1) three plays by European authors: Toller, Shaw, and Wolf; (2) new plays by American authors; (3) the work of the Living Newspaper; (4) other miscellaneous genres--a dance drama based upon Euripides Trojan Women, a children's play,

and a singularly unsuccessful musical. Of the three European plays only one, Wolf's Professor Mamlock (1937), pleased the left. Shaw's On the Rocks (1938), a parable on revolution which cited the need for a Man on Horseback to take those measures for the people's welfare which they are fearful of taking themselves, was soundly trounced in the leftist press: John Cambridge attacked Shaw's "degenerative political creed," his advocacy of neo-fascism and his slander of the proletariat; "Shaw understands as well as anybody," he concluded, "the distinction between a personal dictator and the dictatorship of the proletariat."⁴³

Similarly, Toller's No More Peace (1937)--a pacifist fantasy which placed evil within man rather than within institutions (a pessimism fulfilled by Toller's unfortunate suicide one year after the production of the play)--was criticized for its lack of a socially-conscious proletariat.⁴⁴ Professor Mamlock, however, a bitter attack upon Nazi racism was, in general, well received by liberals and the left. The play concerns itself with a loyal German Jew who, after steadfastly refusing to believe evil of the Nazi regime, finally comes to realize the bitter truth; despite increasing discrimination--his daughter is forced to leave school, he is forced to wear a sign labelled "Jew"--he clings tenaciously to his nationalistic faith. Finally, deprived of his honored position, deserted by his friends and his children, he is arrested by the Nazis; his last gesture--the fruit of his

inner betrayal--is suicide. Mamlock's final awakening assumes political proportion: he indirectly urges one of his assistants to continue the fight against a force he has finally come to recognize as evil; and since Wolf implies throughout the play that the Communists are the only really effective anti-fascist force (in each act the Party finds an apologist: a bleeding worker, Mamlock's son, ultimately the Doctor himself), the political implications of the play are manifest. But, despite the political core, the focus of Professor Mamlock remains upon the doctor himself and the tragedy of his false faith; unlike the traditional Marxist play in which racial intolerance is viewed as the necessary corollary of economic exploitation, Mamlock recognizes the intense, individualized nature of Nazi hate; the fact of anti-semitism is not necessarily tied to the logic of a dying capitalism.

Of the native American drama which was officially criticized only three plays (exclusive of the Living Newspaper) could be said to have predominantly political themes. By far the most celebrated of the trio, by virtue of the fact that it received simultaneous production in twenty-one theatres in seventeen states (the productions, by the way, were individually conceived; they were not carbon copies of each other) was the adaptation by Sinclair Lewis and John Moffit of the former's anti-fascist novel, It Can't Happen Here (1936). Lewis' play is based upon the simple premise

that "it," fascism, can happen here, but he characteristically weakens the case by presenting his indictment in the harsh colors of caricature rather than in the restrained tones of reality. Unlike George Orwell, for example, Lewis does not ground his negative utopia in the accumulated detail of the commonplace; he tends rather to scatter his shot in all directions, relying, in turn, upon devices borrowed from melodrama, romance, even expressionism. How, for example, can one accept the basic premise of the play--which is, after all, that the incredible is, in fact, only too possible--when the leader of the Corpus (the fascist group which takes over the United States) is presented in terms of the most overt, heavy-handed satire? Buzz Windrip, the Corpus leader, is a compound of Hitler and Huey Long, with the emphasis upon the latter. His speech to the people before his accession to power reveals the clumsiness of Lewis' attack:

Buzz Windrip doesn't wear a dress suit with a velvet collar but just ordinary blue jeans . . . a plain man--darn near as plain and common as that old Virginia hick farmer, George Washington. . . . Yes SIR! If in my hands be placed the sacred obligations of the Presidency, I shan't be able to conduct it one bit better than such poor white trash as Washington, Lincoln, Andy Jackson and Warren Gamiel Harding!⁴⁵

The obvious satire of Lewis' approach to Windrip's character does much to off-set the credibility of the series of suppressions and brutalities perpetrated by the victorious Corpus. The play is undoubtedly more effective when it concentrates upon the effect of the Corpus' tyranny upon a

single community and a specific individual. For this It Can't Happen Here shares with Marxist drama: it presents the conversion of a hitherto upcommitted liberal to a recognition of the necessity of action. Doremus Jessup, at the beginning of the play, scoffs at the horrors attributed to the Corpus; even once convinced of their essential evil, he is loath to combat them actively. Ultimately, however, choice is denied him; as the evil represented by the Corpus becomes more manifest in increasing brutality and suppression, Jessup joins an underground movement and undertakes active resistance. But Jessup's "conversion" to militancy is not based upon the acceptance of any specific political premise. He combats the Corpus for the simple reason that they represent a force which threatens the very foundation of liberty. Lewis offers no economic explanation of fascism. In fact, the Corpus are depicted as gangsters who swindle industrialists as well as proletarians; the manufacturer, Tasborough, who initially supported the movement, is forced into hostility by the extortion exacted from him by Corpus leadership. Lewis' reaction to fascism is primarily one of revulsion, not analysis, as Doremus' final legacy to his son reveals: How to explain the reasons for the Corpus' fascistic doctrines? "I don't understand it--any more than I understand why a cat that's full of cream tortures a mouse. Human critters seem to want power over other folks. And so they hate free

people . . ., they hate the 'free enquiring, critical spirit.'" (p. 41)

The Marxists praised the anti-fascist nature of the play, but they were critical of its ideological deficiencies. Charles Dexter complained, moreover, that the play did not drive home its lesson with sufficient force: "It should have said, sharply, clearly, forcefully: 'On to the People's Front! Don't wait till you see the whites of his eyes! Let him have it with both barrels! . . .'"⁴⁶

The Marxists were equally critical of Samuel Warshawsky's Woman of Destiny (1936) which concerned itself with the efforts of a lady-president (who accedes to office on the death of the president) to avert war. The previous president had declared war on Japan and Russia, but the "woman of destiny," the mother of a blinded veteran, stops the war simply by telephoning the Russian and Japanese leaders. This, at least, is the basic plot as revealed by reviews of the period, the play having since passed into the anonymity of history. Needless to say, the Marxists were disgusted by the capriciousness of the social solution; Jan Gerlando sarcastically noted that an act of God had conveniently ended war.⁴⁷

Barrie and Leona Stavis' The Sun and I (1937), however, raised much controversy as to its specific political implications. Taking for its plot the story of Joseph in Egypt, it alternates between a rigid adherence to the details of the

legend, and a flexible adaptation of the legend to reveal certain political ruminations. The dramatic difficulty with the play is that the political implications are essentially structural excrescences; they do not arise out of the details of the legend per se. One wonders why the Joseph legend was employed at all. The dramatic coloration in the play arises from the traditional scenes: Joseph rejected by his brothers, Joseph rejecting Potiphar's wife, Joseph--now powerful--re-encountering his destitute brethren; but the political theme--the fact that evil may often result from the attempts of reformers to do good--arises in scenes extrinsic to the play's essential development.

Yet even this theme is not unequivocally stated. Joseph is portrayed as the rebel-reformer, the man who dreams that "everyone shall have so much of the world's goods that all greed, all struggle for wealth, will cease."⁴⁸ But the philosophical Arraffi points out the dangers behind the radical dream: "Too much power in the hands of any one man is an evil thing. No matter how pure, or noble his motives are at the outset, power without check is a poison that seeps into his very marrow and putrifies." (Act I. Sc.iii. p. 12) Thus far the implications are clear; the Sun and I becomes a parable of the contradiction between revolutionary idealism and corrosive power. But the Stavises do not follow the logic of their political theme. They place in opposition to Joseph forces of such corruption and evil that he is denied

any alternative but the consolidation of power to attempt to defeat them. The priesthood, as represented in the play, is venal, opportunistic, and fascistic (it had decreed Egyptian racial superiority, forbidden foreign gods, etc.). The priests object to Joseph's irrigation project because they fear that it will prove to the people that power to alleviate disaster rests with others besides themselves. Consequently, the implications of the major theme are negated by the necessity of Joseph's action: "I am willing to abandon my irrigation project," he tells the Pharaoh, "any time the priests will produce an adequate water supply by prayer." Ultimately, Joseph takes the Pharaoh on a tour of the project, and when faced with rebellion by several of the workers on the dam, recognizes the failings of his paternalistic philosophy: "I gave them only slavery, without reasoning; . . . it is not enough to want to help the people. You must know them, understand them, be of them, and they must believe in you. . . ." (II. iii. p. 11)

If the preceding summary seems somewhat confusing the blame must rest with the authors' inability to realize their stated theme dramatically. To some extent the play seems an attack upon fascist philosophy; at other times its principle target seems to be the communists or even the New Deal. In any case, whatever the specific political opponent, the essential political implication of the Sun and I resides in the Pharaoh's statement that no political solution suffices

at present: "Time is young yet. Some day a new Joseph will be born who will teach the people to put their faith in one another, and not in the deceptive powers of rulers, or in the false promise of priests." (II.iii. p.11)

The Federal Theatre produced two plays which are at present chiefly of documentary interest for the fidelity with which they reveal the Depression malaise. Although neither Chalk Dust (1936) nor Class of '29 (1936) is concerned primarily with political themes, both evoke the involvement with political and social concerns of the Depression generation. Chalk Dust by Harold Clarke and Maxwell Nurnberg is an academic Men in White (written, however, without Kingsley's skill), which poses the inevitable conflict of love and duty within the confines of a municipal high school. Its social implications arise from the fact that one of its principal characters (though not the play's protagonist) is a crusading type who continually fights for social issues and consequently finds himself in opposition to the conservative authorities. He is, as a result, unjustly accused of amatory dalliance with the play's heroine and is ultimately transferred to another school. Told that a person with his ideas doesn't belong in the school system, he rejoins, "You're wrong . . . that's just where I do belong. You call me a trouble maker [because] I let the boys and girls talk about war and peace, strikes and share-croppers, Communism, Fascism and Democracy. I intend to go right on making that kind of trouble . . ."

until your whole school system becomes a seething cauldrom of American democracy."⁴⁹

This is about the extent of Chalk Dust's radicalism. In fact, the play is essentially a romance; it is less concerned with an exposure of the school system than with the romantic entanglements, the gossip and jealousies of the various teachers. Its significance lies in the fact that the authors felt the need to superimpose social significance upon a quite conventional love story; in a postscript to the play they revealed that the social thread was introduced after the composition of the play "to suggest the new and absorbing interest of young people in the welfare of America and its future." Could any statement be more reflective of the spirit of the time than the authors' contention that "a play that dealt merely with personal relationships no longer seemed to present a complete picture of the school life of today"?⁵⁰

Similarly Class of '29 by Orrie Lashing and Milo Hastings reveals the intrusion of social considerations in a play that is basically concerned with personal relationships. The social theme is, however, more relevant than in the case of Chalk Dust. The authors are concerned with the impact of the Depression upon a group of Harvard graduates of the class of '29. In each case their primary antagonist is the Depression itself, the necessity to find work and a way of life amid the economic difficulties which surround them.

Although one of the characters is a communist and continually spouts Marxist doctrine ("Russia's alive. They're doing things, new things, big things!")⁵¹ he is not the protagonist. The basic problem in Class of '29 is posed in personal, not political terms: how to retain integrity and self-respect though unemployed. If this dilemma seems at times hyper-stated, it is perhaps because we can no longer appreciate the reality of the social situation which invoked it. Ken, one of the young men tells his girl:

If it were a choice between you and a job I'd take the job. . . . I wouldn't need Martin to turn me into a Communist. All I'd have to do would be to knock out the partition in the middle of my brain and let the left side mingle with the right (p. 31)

The authors are less concerned with Martin's political palliatives than with the social humiliation experienced by their characters. The plot of the play springs from the attempt by Ken's father to restore his son's self-respect by paying a business acquaintance the equivalent of a weekly salary in exchange for the offer of a job to his son; the denouement arises from Ken's shattering discovery of the facts concerning his employment. Ted, another member of the class of '29, experiences a similar humiliation. A boy of aristocratic lineage, whose parents had lost all in the Crash, he cannot adjust himself to the demeaning realities of the Depression and, against his better judgment, allows himself to be kept by his girl friend. He finally tries to achieve a degree of independence by applying for relief, and, in a

scene which must have been dear to those on the project who had suffered the ignominy of admitting themselves pauperized, the authors draw a savage, satiric portrait of the case-worker who views the relief applicant as a social pariah. When asked his occupation Ted claims he is a book collector, but is forced to admit that he has never made any money at his profession; the case worker's scornful reply that, in that case it can scarcely be termed his occupation, arouses Martin to retort: "Is it the first time you ever ran into a man who needed relief, not because he had worked, but because he hadn't?" (p. 64).

In brief, Class of '29's chief significance lies in the evocation of the Depression malaise. The very title registers an ironic comment on the bright promise of the twenties which turned to dust on Black Thursday. It records certain basic characteristics of the generation of the thirties: the intrusion of economic reality into one's personal relationships; the belief that human problems are fundamentally social; the search, therefore, for social alternatives (in particular, the concern with the Marxist alternative); above all, the humanitarian concern for the anguish born of economic breakdown. The play's essential virtue rests not in dramatic excellence nor political significance, but rather in the authenticity with which it records a moment in history.

If any play produced by the Federal Theatre were above the imputation of political radicalism it would seem to be E. P. Conkle's Prologue to Glory (1938). Conkle's drama of the Salem days of Abraham Lincoln touches on few political questions; it is not even involved with the problem of slavery. Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois is a much more political play in its treatment of the theme (in Sherwood's own words) "of a man of peace who had to face the issue of appeasement or war."⁵² Conkle, however, ends his play with young Lincoln's decision to become a lawyer; his major concern is with the heroic stuff of the legend of the young rail-splitter who wins the affection and respect of the community, and the ill-fated love of Ann Rutledge. In fact, Abe's decision to remain in politics, after the initial defeat, is based not upon any political consideration, but rather on the romantic premise that this was the course that Ann would have wanted him to follow. At one point in his unsuccessful initial campaign, Abe advocates "internal improvements, a lower rate of usury, and a better system of education"⁵³--hardly a radical political platform. The Marxist press complained that Conkle had written about the wrong period in Abe's life; the real issues of slavery and secession were avoided.⁵⁴ And yet, to Hallie Flanagan's total bewilderment--Prologue to Glory was cited as a subversive play. Representative J. Parnell Thomas particularly objected to the scene in which Lincoln debated on the subject

"Resolved: that bees are more valuable than ants," and won the day by suggesting that more important issues should be placed before the forum. "It seems to me that the subjects for debate before the forum ought to be alive--subjects for action, useful in living." (p. 46) "That," the representative complained, "is communist talk." In a syndicated article appearing among other places, in the San Francisco Examiner, September 3, 1938, under the headline "REP. THOMAS BARES RED GRIP ON WPA'S THEATRE PROJECT," he made the amazing assertion that "The play, Prologue to Glory deals with Lincoln in his youth and portrays him battling with the politicians. This is simply a propaganda play to prove that all politicians are crooked."⁵⁵ Since in 1949 Representative J. Parnell Thomas--Chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee from 1946-1949--went to jail for defrauding the government,⁵⁶ we may observe the subjectivity of critical judgment.

William Du Bois' Haiti (1938) does indeed deal with the subject of revolution, but not as the conflict of social classes. The play--produced by the New York Negro unit--is rather involved with the racial nature of the conflict, with the successful attempt of the oppressed black Haitians to throw off the colonial shackles of their French overlords. The issue of race is central in the play; the plot concerns the dilemma of a mulatto woman brought up as white whether to align herself with the black or the white communities.

Ultimately, after much soul-searching, she decides to aid the slave revolt and accept the world of her father's black forbears, a choice surely applauded by the predominantly Negro audiences for whom the play was performed. But Du Bois does not stress the social implications of his heroine's choice. Haiti is less a problem play than a rousing good adventure yarn dominated by the machinery of romance--amatory intrigue, hair-breadth escapes, sliding panels, and secret lockets.

It is a paradoxical that of all the Federal Theatre plays the one with the most obvious Marxist implications should be a children's play, The Revolt of the Beavers (1936) by Oscar Saul and Louis Lantz. Whether the play's allegorical theme, the revolt of the oppressed beavers against their exploiting chief, penetrated the non-ideological minds of its non-adult spectators is a moot point. Mrs. Flanagan, defending the play before the Dies Committee, pointed out that an audience survey by trained psychologists brought only favorable reactions from children such as "teaches us never to be selfish" or "it is better to be good than bad."⁵⁷ Mary Morrow in the Daily Worker, however, maintained that not only did the children love the production, but they understood the moral as well.⁵⁸ The alarmed Saturday Evening Post claimed that the play taught poor children to murder the rich.⁵⁹ And Brooks Atkinson summarized the plot as follows: "Beavers of the world, unite! By uniting and shooting down the chief's

company police with revolvers and machine guns concealed in their lunch boxes, the hungry beavers joyfully overthrow their industrial oppressors."⁶⁰

Such a debate is now academic; however, The Revolt of the Beavers has significance for its revelation of the fact that in the thirties even the world of childhood fancy had turned grim; it is significant not because it uses child-like parable to pose a political moral for adults (in the manner of Animal Farm), but because it uses its political moral as the structure upon which its fanciful elements are hinged. The seriousness behind the fancy is immediately established: "Well, if I had a real wishing stone," the nine-year old hero states, "I would never be sad--'cause first I would wish for a big piece of chocolate--and then I would wish my father got a job."⁶¹ In fact, the play contains, in miniature, the prototypes of proletarian drama. The Beaver-Professor is satirized for his equivocation: "My favorite instrument is the fife/ But I'm also found of the fiddle/ I sit on the Left and I sit on the Right/ But my favorite spot is the middle." (Act I. Sc. ii. p. 5) Ultimately, however, he is awakened to militancy and joins the other beavers in their revolt against the wicked chief. Oakleaf, the beaver who has been expelled from Beaverland for opposing the chief, cites the necessity of social organization: "All the beavers are sad--very sad--and me too--so I got mad and said, 'why

don't we make a club for sad beavers to get glad?'" (I.ii. p. 18)

But by far the most obvious political allegory appears in the chief's explanation of the economics of Beaverland. Mary asks the chief why the beavers are all working to exhaustion, and what they are making on the wheel.

Chief: They make bark. A beaver can't live without bark. . . .

Paul: Why don't they take the bark off the trees in the woods?

Chief: What d'y think this is, the olden times? . . . We can't eat raw bark. We gotta fix it on the wheel.

Mary: Is it hard to pull the lever?

Chief: No its easy.

Mary: Then why don't the beavers pull the levers and keep the bark themselves?

Chief: Then they'd own both the wheel and the bark. And its my wheel and my bark. (I.iii.pp. 13-14)

And so the beavers, aided by Paul and Mary, rise against the wicked chief and his goons and with the aid of Zippo guns, sling shots, and bean shooters stolen from the chief's arsenal kick out their exploiters and establish a truly democratic Beaverland: "There's bark for every beaver/who swings a cleaver/ or pulls a lever/ There's not a barkless beaver/ In all of Beaverland." (III. i. p. 14) The allegory is not ambiguous, but one wonders to what extent its unsophisticated spectators were roused to militancy by the play's example.

Curiously, one finds on the list of critized plays no mention of two works by avowedly revolutionary playwrights. In the case of George Sklar's Life and Death of an American

(1939) the oversight may be explained by the play's lateness of production; it was the last production of the New York Federal Theatre. But Battle Hymn by Mike Gold and Michael Blankfort was performed early in the project's existence (1936) and contains unmistakably revolutionary sentiments. The legend of John Brown serves the authors as a parable of the inadequacy of pacifist resistance to tyranny, and as a lesson in revolutionary tactics. Brown, at first, is portrayed as a man of deep non-violent convictions who is forced into a position of militancy by the oppression and brutality of the slave system. True, the revolutionary implications are couched in the Americanism so consistent with the Communist Party's United-Front policy of the time (the platform of 1936 stated that "Communism is twentieth century Americanism. The CPUSA continues the tradition of 1776, of the birth of our country"),⁶² but the play's contemporary political significance is continually affirmed: "For each his turn, and for each his generation, performing each his task."⁶³ When Oliver Brown tells his brother that "You're either for slavery or against it" (p. 29), he is asserting the leftist battle cry of the thirties: Which side are you on? Perhaps it is too much to expect consistency of the political mind, or perhaps the explanation for the omission of Battle Hymn rests in the simple fact that criticism of the project was seldom based on a knowledgeable evaluation of the Federal Theatre's actual dramatic record.

By far the greatest barrage of criticism was leveled at those plays produced by the Living Newspaper unit of the Federal Theatre Project; considering the basic concept behind the form--the theatrical treatment of serious contemporary social problems--such criticism was inevitable. The Living Newspaper was the product of the dual aspects of the project, economic necessity and social purpose. The immediate cause for the initiation of the form was the necessity of dealing with a problem peculiar to the project, a surplus of manpower. Unlike almost every other theatrical group the Federal Theatre had the problem of using the thousands of actors and technicians on the relief rolls; even if twenty plays were in rehearsal in one city simultaneously, with an average of thirty in each cast, only a fraction of the personnel would be employed. At the very moment that the directors of the project were pondering this dilemma, the Newspaper Guild of New York City was looking for a way to absorb some of its own unemployed in the Federal Theatre.⁶⁴ Out of this dual necessity arose the decision to produce dramatizations of the news with living actors, light, music, and movement. Such a form was ideally suited to the needs of the project: first, it solved the problem of the use of personnel; second, its emphasis on production allowed the directors to minimize the deficiencies of some of the acting talent available; third, it appealed to the project's spirit of dramatic experimentation by creating a unique theatrical form; and, fourth, it

served the project's social ideal of speaking articulately upon contemporary social problems.

From a technical point of view the form of the Living Newspaper was not a complete innovation. As several commentators pointed out, precursors of the form were to be found in the agit-prop and the epic theatre, in the cinematic documentary, in the political cabarets of the Parisian and Berlin cellar theatres, in the al fresco varieties put together by Chu Teh's propaganda division in Red China.⁶⁵ But these examples were not before the directors of the Living Newspaper when they were molding a workable style; the exigencies of each individual production continually modified the shape that the form assumed. Several critics pointed out the affinities of the Living Newspaper to the then current film documentary series, the March of Time, but, as several of the directors noted, the Living Newspaper differed not only in the presentation of a different social point of view ("The March of Time is put out by a rich magazine and a rich advertiser; the Living Newspaper is written, edited, staged and acted by people who struggle for their living"),⁶⁶ but in its approach to current news. The March of Time was essentially concerned with the dramatization of a news event; because of its social purpose and productional exigencies (governmental delay caused the directors to fear that news items of the moment might be dated before actual production) the Living Newspaper was invariably concerned with the

dramatization of a problem, composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, "all bearing on the one subject and interlarded with typical but non-factual representations of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance."⁶⁷ In essence, the Living Newspaper viewed its function as primarily editorial.

The form of the Living Newspaper varied from play to play. In Ethiopia, the Loudspeaker--The Voice of the Living Newspaper--served in the role of narrator, "a kind of non-participating date line which introduced the various scenes."⁶⁸ But in One Third of a Nation, the Loudspeaker served as *raisonneur*, inquiring, cajoling, polemicizing, pointing the moral of the dramatic action. In the "pure" form evolved in Triple-A Ploughed Under, Power, and One Third historical characters spoke only direct quotations, and "creative" scenes were introduced to point the effect of the given situation upon the average man. In Spirochete, however, the dramatist took greater license, and constructed imaginative scenes involving historical personages. In general, the technique of direct quotation was followed, with the quoted dialogue broken up only for dramatic effect. For example, compare the following news item from the New York Daily News with its dramatic recreation in Triple-A Ploughed Under:

Mrs. Sherwood walked into the police court with the baby in her arms and said, "He's dead, I just drowned my son because I couldn't feed him and I couldn't bear to see him hungry. . . . I just let him wade in the creek until he got tired. Then I

led him out into the middle and held him there until he stopped moving. I had only five cents and he was hungry. I just thought it had to be done, that's all.⁶⁹

.....

Mrs. Sherwood: He's dead. I drowned him.

Police Lieutenant: You what?

Mrs. Sherwood: I just drowned my son. I couldn't bear to see him hungry. I let him wade in the creek until he got tired. Then I led him out into the middle, and held him there until he stopped moving.

Lieutenant: John! Take the body. Book this woman for murder [Policeman takes child. Blackout]

Loudspeaker: Why did you do it?

Mrs. Sherwood: I couldn't feed him. I had only five cents.

Loudspeaker: Your own child. Did you think you were doing the right thing?

Mrs. Sherwood: I just thought it had to be done, that's all.

Loudspeaker: How could a mother kill her own child?

Mrs. Sherwood: He was hungry, I tell you. Hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry, hungry!⁷⁰

Though heightened, the essential drama of the scene resides in actuality itself. The Living Newspaper was particularly successful in translating abstract concepts into concrete visual action, and in making its editorial point through the use of theatrical device. In Power the complexities of a holding company are reduced to the simple act of a man creating pyramids of different colored boxes; in One Third of a Nation the fact of slum congestion is transmitted through the farcical device of a great number of persons crowding onto a small rug. Satire was expressed theatrically by various devices: a capitalist consulting himself by rapidly running from one side of a desk to the other, to indicate the monopolistic power of the holding company;

actors equipped with puppet-like strings to designate the control of the Louisiana legislature by Huey Long.

The Living Newspaper attempted to create the theatrical equivalent of the film documentary, another characteristic genre of the period; in its case, however, the material of art was not the juxtaposed celluloid images of reality, but rather the formal verbal recreation of this reality through fact and comment theatrically expressed. Light, music, staging--these were the formal media through which it worked. The durability of the form from an esthetic point of view rests not in the various plays which were presented, for these, being living newspapers, were intended to serve only an immediate function; the form's durability rests in its theatrical principle, in the conception of news theatrically expressed. The validity of the form remains. Why not contemporary Living Newspapers on Castro, or the African situation or nuclear disarmament?

The Living Newspaper's first production, Ethiopia, never received public performance. The State Department, hearing that the play severely criticized the Mussolini regime, exerted pressure so that a ruling was sent down from Washington forbidding the dramatic representation on any Federal Theatre stage of any living foreign ruler. Although the directors explained that only direct quotations were being used, the fear of international embarrassment caused the cancellation of the production--and the resignation of

the then regional director of New York City, Elmer Rice. Yet Rice's resignation, and the furor that the issue of censorship raised, had beneficial effects. The project was assured that on any American subject it would have complete freedom of expression. And the subsequent record of the Living Newspaper testifies that this principle was, in general, maintained.

Considering the freedom afforded the staff of the Living Newspaper, it is not surprising that four of the five New York "editions" were officially criticized. Significantly, the one which escaped censure, Highlights of 1935, was by common agreement of critics and project workers the weakest example of the genre. Since dramatic interest and continuity could not be sustained by plot or protagonist, the lack of a coherent subject or editorial thread caused 1935 to appear diffuse and meandering; its series of dramatic recreations of events of the past year was unified solely by chronological proximity. On the other hand, the four other New York editions demonstrated that an audience could be held by traditionally undramatic material. Triple-A Ploughed Under (1936) and Injunction Granted (1936) dealt with the problem areas of the economy, agriculture and labor; Power (1937) and One Third of a Nation (1938) were concerned with problems arising from the power utilities and the housing situation. All shared a strong reformist bias; all were sharply critical of the practices of private enterprise; all

cited the need for specific governmental action; all criticized to a greater or lesser degree certain aspects of the administration's social programs--but none advocated any revolutionary alternative.

If Triple-A Ploughed Under had any special ax to grind, it was simply the observable fact that something had to be done to alleviate the economic situation of the farmer. In a series of quotations and recreated vignettes, the play traces the farmer's plight from the inflation of the first World War through the deflation which immediately followed it to the Depression; during this time, as the Voice of the Living Newspaper reveals, the plight of the farmer progressively worsens: "farm incomes fall five and one half billion dollars, unemployment rises seven million, five hundred and seventy eight thousand." (p. 14) The play then records the farmer's growing unrest, his determination to take matters into his own hands, culminating in the destruction of produce and the dumping of milk. Finally, with the enactment of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, conditions are somewhat improved, as the government, through Secretary Wallace, promises "to subdue the habitual anarchy of a major American industry, and to establish organized control in the interest of not only the farmer but everybody else." (p. 28) But the AAA is killed by the Supreme Court, and conditions again worsen, aided by the fact of widespread drought. At the time of the play's composition the government was considering

circumventing the Supreme Court decision through the provisions of the Soil Conservation Act, and Triple-A ends on the note of hope that some remedy will indeed be forthcoming:

"We need help, not words!" shouts one of the farmers, and it is this cry which constitutes the basic theme of Triple-A.

In order to point out to an urban audience that the farmer's problems are not remote from its own, the play concludes with the affirmation that all are in the same economic boat:

Farmer: We need help! . . .
 Unemployed: We need food! . . .
 Woman: We need a decent standard of living!
 Farmer: Then all our problems are the same.
 Unemployed: Jobs.
 Farmers: We can't harvest.
 Women: We can't buy.
 Unemployed: We can't eat! (pp. 55-56)

Triple-A was basically a documentary record of the farmer's plight, albeit with a strong note of protest; it was constructed so that its finale could be adapted to accommodate new developments in farm legislation. Injunction Granted, however, was more overtly polemical. Its recounting of the development of unionization and history of labor strife was more editorially selective than Triple-A's history of the farm problem; indeed, it went back to the seventeenth century in order to trace the history of working class exploitation. The play assumes the necessity of class strife between capital and labor (Heinz' remark that "labor and capital are partners" is satirically presented). The history of labor conflict is duly recorded: Bacon's rebellion, the Haymarket riots, the

Pullman strike, the Danbury Hatters, the U.S. Steel strike, the Gastonia strike; in each case the resistance of vested interests to the workers' demands is observed. But despite the acceptance of the class nature of industrial struggle, despite capital's use of the injunction to thwart the unionization of labor, it is significant that Injunction Granted presents the history of labor relations in the United States as a progressive development, culminating in the triumph of John L. Lewis and the CIO. The Marxist analysis of class conflict is accepted, but the revolutionary moral is rejected. Although the play is sharply critical--much more so than Triple-A--of governmental policy, of the NRA, of General Johnson, and of the anti-labor attitude of the courts, its ultimate plea is for increased unionization.

The New Masses noted the ideological deficiencies of Injunction Granted: "Now for a play to be artistically integrated . . . some solution of the political question of the workers versus the state power had to be supplied. It wasn't. Instead, the final 'answer' of the play was a pure-and-simple trade unionism answer of the CIO drive for powerful industrial unions in steel and elsewhere. But that was not an answer which solved the problem of the political conflict."⁷²

If John L. Lewis and the CIO are the heroes of Injunction Granted, George Norris and the TVA are the heroes of Power. Again the staff of the Living Newspaper makes a

strong indictment of private enterprise--in this case, the target is the public utility; and, again, a strong plea is entered for direct governmental intervention to correct social abuses. In fact, the play strongly suggests the necessity for the nationalization of power; it points out that monopolistic control of power has already denied the premise of free competition, and notes favorably the accomplishments of the TVA:

All up and down the valley
They heard the glad alarm;
The government means business--
Its working like a charm.
Oh see them boys a-comin',
Their government they trust,
Just hear their hammers ringin'
They'll build that dam or bust!⁷²

But again the Marxist did not find the thesis strong enough. Charles Dexter pointed out that Arent--the "editor" of the work--had given too much emphasis to the point of view of reactionary politicians. He had over-praised the TVA, failing to view it as "merely a small step forward"; and he had missed the real social point, the fallacy of reform. The play did not point out the "shortcuts to true government ownership of power through political action by the plain people, the farmers and workers of America."⁷³ If the Living Newspaper went too far in the direction of radicalism in the eyes of its conservative critics, for the Marxists it did not go nearly far enough.

One Third of a Nation, in the simplicity of its dramatic line and in the ingenuity of its theatricalism, was by

far the most effective of the Living Newspapers. It shared the basic elements of Triple-A and Power: the presentation of the history of a social problem (in this case, housing), the emphasis upon the inadequacy of free enterprise to deal with the problem, the support, therefore, of governmental intervention, and the final admonishment that present action was not sufficient. Its success (it played for an entire season in New York) may be attributed to the direct relevancy of its subject to the lives of its spectators, to its spectacular production (an entire tenement was engulfed by flames nightly on the stage of the Adelphi), and to the maturation of the Living Newspaper form itself. The play utilized the most successful elements of its predecessors: notably, it carried over from Power the use of an Everyman whose enlightenment becomes the task of the play. The relationship between the little man, bewildered by the fact of his own inadequate housing, and the Loudspeaker thus becomes that of student and teacher; and the disparate elements of the play are unified by the progress of this relationship. By appealing to the audience through the identifiable symbol of the average man, the play rejected the direct frontal assault of the Brechtian Lehrstück. Its didacticism was more effective for being oblique.

The theme of One Third of a Nation is, again, the affirmation that something must be done about a perennial social problem. The Loudspeaker comments that the days of

laissez-faire are gone: "those were the good old days when nobody did anything about anything."⁷⁴ The history of slum conditions is traced from the last century to the present, again with an emphasis on the facts of economic exploitation. Interspersed with the play's historical narrative are dramatic vignettes of the evil effects of slum conditions: crime, vice, delinquency, disease. The point is made that housing represents an area in which the principles of the free market have never operated. The poor tenant has no choice; as the landlord tells him, "If you don't live here, where are you going to live?" (p.65)

It is a significant fact that the Living Newspaper continually stressed the need for intervention in those areas of the economy in which the New Deal had formulated specific social programs. The premise of One Third, like those of the other Living Newspapers, was essentially reformist. Nathan Straus is quoted within a favorable context: "There is no reform within my memory that has not been attacked as an invasion of private rights and as contrary to economic laws." (p.105) The wife of the play's Everyman voices a familiar administration complaint when she protests limitations on housing legislation for purposes of economy: "Balance the budget? What with? Human lives? Misery? Disease?" (p.119) The plea that ends One Third is similar to the farmer's complaint in Triple-A: the principle of social reform is fine but it has not been translated into

effective action. What is the social answer? Articulate protest:

You know what we're going to do? We're going to holler. And we're going to keep on hollering until they admit in Washington its just as important to keep a man alive as it is to kill him! . . . Can you hear me--you in Washington or Albany or wherever you are! Give me a decent place to live in! Give me a home! A home! (p.120)

There can be no doubt that enemies made by the Living Newspaper were powerful ones, instrumental in the final closing of the project. Had the Federal Theatre played it safe and avoided all political controversy, it might have received a more sympathetic hearing from the distributors of the nation's funds; but it would also have abrogated one of Mrs. Flanagan's basic concerns, that "our plays . . . concern themselves with conditions back of the conditions described by President Roosevelt."⁷⁵ It is curious that while Congressional critics were complaining of the Federal Theatre's political preoccupations, several professional drama critics, who could hardly be accused of radicalism, criticized the project for not concerning itself more exclusively with contemporary social issues. Burns Mantle, for example, wrote of the production of Faustus: "It seems to me that the people's theatre would be better employed, considering the greatest good, in producing plays of timely significance. . . . We are passing through times of social stress, of which WPA is an expression. More serious devotion should be centered on the problems of the people it seeks to serve."⁷⁶ This, by the

way, from the dramatic critic of the New York Daily News.

The Federal Theatre did not die a natural death; it was killed by Act of Congress on June 30, 1939. The ostensible reason for the denial of funds to the Arts Projects was economy, but this reason is belied by several facts: all the Arts Projects used less than three-fourths of 1 per cent of the total WPA appropriation, and the appropriation was not cut one cent by the end of the Federal Theatre; the money was simply distributed among other WPA projects.⁷⁷ It was ended not because of opposition from the theatrical profession itself; letters and telegrams poured into Washington from the greatest names in the American theatre urging the continuation of the project. Actors' Equity, the Four A's, Theatre Arts Committee, the League of New York Theatres, the Tri-Guilds in Hollywood, the Federation of Art Unions organized mass meetings to demonstrate the support of the commercial theatre.⁷⁸ New York's drama critics sent a joint letter to Congress maintaining that "the theatre project in New York . . . has been on the whole an institution of great value to the life of the community."⁷⁹ The project was ended primarily for political reasons, because administration enemies saw in the issue of communism within the project a means of embarrassing the New Deal. And the administration itself, fighting hard for its social program, could not risk the sacrifice of much of this program by demanding the continuation of the Arts Projects. That the accusations against the

project were largely unfounded was not important to its critics; they were not concerned with the record, and, in fact, resolutely refused to accept the theatre's invitation to attend performances of its plays.⁸⁰ The following exchange between Representative Starnes of the Dies Committee and Hallie Flanagan, who had petitioned repeatedly to be allowed to answer the charges brought against the project, clearly reveals the caliber of the attack:

Congressman Starnes: (quoting from Hallie Flanagan's book, A Theatre is Born) "the workers' theatres . . . intend to remake a social structure without the help of money and this ambition alone invests their undertaking with a certain Marlowesque madness."

You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?

Hallie Flanagan: I am very sorry. I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.

Starnes: Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper reference, because that is all we want to do.

H.F.: Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare.

Starnes: Put that in the record, because the charge has been made that this article of yours is entirely Communistic, and we want to help you. Of course we had what some people call Communists back in the days of the Greek theatre. I believe Mr. Euripides was guilty of teaching class-consciousness also, wasn't he?

H.F.: I believe that was alleged against all of the Greek dramatists.

Starnes: So we cannot say when it began.⁸¹

Implicit in this exchange is another reason for the demise of the project. Art, in puritan eyes, is eternally suspect, the devil's instrument. Congressman Dies was shocked by the "vulgarity and profanity" that had been

pointed out to him in several of the project's productions.⁸² Representative Everett Dirksen called the work of the Federal Theatre "salacious tripe."⁸³ That taxpayers' money was being utilized for the propagation of radicalism and blasphemy was obviously not to be endured. Nor were Southern Congressmen happy about the non-discriminatory policy of the project, the creation of Negro units in many large cities, and the anti-racist themes of several project plays.

In short, normalcy was returning. As the decade came to its close, as the economy improved, the social forces which converged to create the Federal Theatre were dissipated. As the relief aspect of the project diminished there were those who proposed its continuity on a permanent basis. A Federal Arts Bill was introduced for the creation of a Department of Science, Art, and Literature.⁸⁴ But the ideal was short-lived; the belief that the government had a responsibility towards the arts was, with the Federal Theatre itself, plowed under.

Footnotes to Chapter IV

1. "Entertaining Flood Sufferers," Federal Theatre Magazine, II, No. 4 (1937), 13.
2. Hallie Flanagan, Arena (New York, 1940), pp. 380-430.
3. Elmer Rice, "The Federal Theatre," N.Y. Times, Jan. 5, 1936, sect. IX, pp. 1, 3.
4. May, 1936, p. 25.
5. "Connecticut Begins Its Second Year," Federal Theatre Magazine, II, No. 4, 25.
6. "Unemployed Arts," Fortune, May, 1937, p. 172.
7. Arena, p. 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 297.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
11. Willson Whitman, Bread and Circuses (New York, 1937), p. 5.
12. Arena, p. 268.
13. Whitman, p. 68.
14. Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, p.71.
15. Arena, p. 15.
16. "I Work on the Drama Project," May, 1935, p. 14.
17. Arena, p. 16.
18. Memorandum (Federal Theatre Project Office, Washington, n.d.), p. 1.
19. Arena, p. 19.
20. "The Federal Theatre," N.Y. Times, Jan. 5, 1936, sect. IX, p. 1.

21. Flanagan, "The Federal Theatre Project," Theatre Arts Anthology (New York, 1950), pp. 96-97. Originally written in Nov. 1935.
22. Arena, p. 46.
23. Ibid., p. 53.
24. Apr. 25, 1936, p. 15.
25. "Inciting to Riot," Liberty, May 23, 1936, p. 4.
26. "Once Upon A Time," June 26, 1937, p. 22.
27. Quoted in Whitman, pp. 100-101.
28. "The Federal Theatre Doom-Boggle," Saturday Evening Post, Aug. 1, 1936, p. 71.
29. Congressional Record, 80, Part 6 (Apr. 27, 1936), 6155-6166.
30. Arena, p. 256.
31. Fiske, p. 72.
32. Arena, p. 58.
33. See, e.g., Fortune, May, 1937.
34. Arena, p. 73.
35. Ibid., p. 121.
36. "Unemployed Arts," p. 168.
37. Arena, p. 205.
38. "Which Way the Federal Theatre?," Apr. 1937, p. 7.
39. NM, Nov. 10, 1936.
40. Arena, p. 361.
41. Whitman, p. 164.
42. Arena, pp. 432-433.
43. "The State," DW, Jan. 31, 1938, p. 9.
44. John Cambridge, "Toller's Play," DW, Jan. 31, 1938, p. 9.

45. Sinclair Lewis and John Moffit, It Can't Happen Here (Thea. Coll., typewritten, 1936), p. 47.
46. DW, Oct. 29, 1936, p. 7.
47. DW, Mar. 9, 1936, p. 7.
48. Barrie and Leona Stavis, The Sun and I (Thea. Coll., typewritten, 1937), Act I, Scene iii, p. 13. Paginated by acts and scenes.
49. Harold Clarke and Maxwell Nurnberg, Chalk Dust (New York, 1936, pp. 2-3.
50. Ibid., p. 97.
51. Orrie Lashing and Milo Hastings, Class of '29 (New York, 1936), p. 11.
52. Quoted in introduction to Abe Lincoln in Illinois, in Modern American Dramas, ed. Harlan H. Hatcher (New York, 1941), p. 268.
53. E. P. Conkle, Prologue to Glory, in Federal Theatre Plays, II, ed. Pierre de Rohan (New York, 1938), 60.
54. John Cambridge, "Lincoln's Youth and Love," DW, March 21, 1938, p. 7.
55. Arena, p. 173.
56. N.Y. Times, Dec. 10, 1949, p. 1.
57. Arena, p. 342.
58. Review, May 24, 1937, p. 9.
59. "Once Upon A Time," p. 22.
60. Review, N.Y. Times, May 21, 1937, p. 51.
61. Oscar Saul and Louis Lantz, The Revolt of the Beavers (Thea. Coll., typewritten, 1936), Act I, Scene 1, p. 2. Paginated by acts and scenes.
62. DW, June 29, 1936, p. 1.
63. Michael Gold and Michael Blankfort, Battle Hymn (New York, 1936), p. 12.

64. Morris Watson, "The Living Newspaper," NT, June, 1936, p. 7.
65. Arthur Arent, "Technique of the Living Newspaper," Theatre Arts Monthly, Nov. 1938, p. 820.
66. Watson, p. 33.
67. Arent, p. 821.
68. Ibid., p. 822.
69. N.Y. Daily News, Aug. 21, 1935, p. 4.
70. The Staff of the Living Newspaper, Triple-A Poughed Under, in Federal Theatre Plays, I, 42.
71. Alexander Taylor, "Injunction Granted," Aug. 4, 1936, p. 29.
72. Staff of the Living Newspaper, Power, in Federal Theatre Plays, I, 69.
73. "Revolt of the Share croppers," DW, Jan. 21, 1937, p. 5.
74. Staff of the Living Newspaper, One Third of a Nation, in Federal Theatre Plays, II, 41.
75. "Not in Despair," Federal Theatre Magazine, II, No. 4, 5.
76. Quoted in Arena, p. 188.
77. Ibid., p. 334.
78. Ibid., p. 357.
79. Ibid., p. 354.
80. Ibid., p. 346.
81. Hearings, House Committee on Un-American Activities, IV (Washington, 1939), 2857-2858.
82. Ibid., p. 2873.
83. Quoted in Arena, p. 337.
84. Ibid., p. 326.

COMMITMENT AND THE PLAYWRIGHT

CHAPTER V

THE ROAD TO MARXIST COMMITMENT: JOHN HOWARD LAWSON

"If you want to engage yourself," writes a young imbecile, "what are you waiting for? Join the Communist Party."

Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature?

An artist who takes his place with the working class begins to outgrow the split personality, because his life and work are integrated. His creative activity is logical and objective. He is no longer concerned with timeless achievement, because he has real work to do in the real world.

John Howard Lawson "Art is a Weapon"

In A Part of Our Time, an attempt by a member of the Depression generation to exorcise the ghost of his radicalism, Murray Kempton relates an incident in which John Howard Lawson was being introduced at a May Day rally in 1951. A young communist turned to the crowd and intoned into the microphone, "And now I want to introduce a great anti-fascist, a great fighter for peace, a man you all know." He then stopped, turned to his superior, and without bothering to put his hand over the microphone, asked for all to hear, "What did you say his name was?"¹

The price of fame--and notoriety--is dear, and if the name of John Howard Lawson has faded even among the remnants of American radicalism, it has all but disappeared from the consciousness of the current generation of playgoers. And yet Lawson once filled an honorable page in the history of American drama; he was at one time considered by Harold Clurman the hope of the Group Theatre,² and Joseph Wood Krutch, among others, was "thrilled by the passionate beauty of his Processional."³ Roger Bloomer was indeed the first native expressionistic play, and the aforementioned Processional employed jazzorganically within a theatrical context almost thirty-five years before Jack Gelber's The Connection. As an exponent in the twenties of a new experimental social theatre, Lawson was involved in the formation of the Workers Drama League and the New Playwrights, precursors of the social theatre of the thirties; and as the dramatic doyen of the revolutionary movement he wrote one of the most militant proletarian dramas of the thirties.

And yet if the name of Lawson has any currency it is in quite another context from that of experimentalist or social dramatist. The image of Lawson retained--already somewhat dimly--by our generation is that of unfriendly witness. It is the image of a man angrily refusing to answer questions from the House Committee on Un-American Activities concerning his communist affiliations, the image of a man who with nine other recalcitrant screen writers served a term

in jail for contempt of Congress because of the adamancy of this refusal.

But the very role of unfriendly witness has significance for us in that it indicates the intensity of Lawson's political commitment. Unlike others of his generation-- Cowley, Dos Passos, Wilson--Lawson did not relinquish his Marxist commitment; he was the one that stayed. For us, however, the interest in Lawson lies not in his steadfastness, but rather in the consequences of his road to commitment in terms of his role as dramatist.

For in the work of John Howard Lawson the conflicting demands of artist and ideologist are manifest. From his earliest plays onward, one senses this ambivalence; the necessity of social commitment hovers uneasily over the work of the jazz age experimentalist. The shadow of Karl Marx falls among the gallery of Freudian portraits. Both "bourgeois" and Marxist critics were at one in applying to Lawson's work that cruelest of epithets, confused. And most certainly there is a legitimacy in their verdict. But this confusion was not merely the result of technical inadequacy; the confusion manifest in Lawson's work lay at the very root of his personal, as well as his esthetic, dilemma. For if Lawson was at one with the Jazz Age condemnation of the "booboisie," he diverged in the intensity of his need to substitute positive values for the negative ones rejected; in fact, to commit himself. As the Jazz Age came to an end,

he was no longer sustained by his earlier experimentation, and yet found himself unable either to terminate his indecision or to give it coherent esthetic form. With the catalyst of the Depression, however, Lawson found himself--as one of many of his generation--faced at last with what seemed to him the possibility of choice.

Thus Lawson's experience is crucial to our investigation of the implications of commitment for the dramatist. Lawson, perhaps because of the fact that his talent was never of the highest rank, was particularly susceptible to the forces and movements of the decades in which he lived and worked. He was never possessed by the personal, all-conquering vision of an O'Neill, which rendered its possessor seemingly impervious to the vagaries of social conflict and enabled him to account only to the bitter demands of his individual, tragic microcosm. Lawson represents the man who was always conscious of his role in society, of his debt to it, and also of its encroachments upon his individual conscience. He reflects the dilemma of the Lost Generation in an age in which one could not afford to be lost. Lawson, as many of his generation, had to come to terms with the Great Depression; he is important for our purposes because he represents the defeat of the values of the old generation by the values of the new. And yet we are also interested in Lawson as an individual playwright, a man of considerable

talent, whose dramatic promise was never fulfilled. In the last analysis, for all its analogues, his road to commitment was his own.

Lawson was a charter member of the Lost Generation; he served the traditional apprenticeship: in 1917 he joined the volunteer American ambulance service with the French Army, and later with the Italian Army on the Italian front. In this service he was associated with men whose reputations have not suffered his eclipse, John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, and E. E. Cummings. He acknowledged his debt to this experience in 1956: "This European experience was the root and beginning of the cultural development of my generation."⁴ And Roger Bloomer, his first major play (he had had two plays produced in the summer of 1916), was started before his return to the United States in 1920. Of all Lawson's plays it is perhaps most definitively of its age, reflecting two trends explicit in the literature of the twenties: the tremendous impact of European experiment upon the American consciousness, and the young American's rejection of business morality and his tortured search for spiritual maturity.

Expressionism reflected both the impact of Freudian psychology upon art and the breakdown of traditional standards--in morality and esthetics--in the aftermath of the Great War. It made its post-war debut in the United States through such films as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920), and such theatrical productions as Kaiser's From Morn to

Midnight (produced by the Theatre Guild in 1922). Roger Bloomer (1923), produced but a few days before our most durable example of American Expressionism, Rice's The Adding Machine, used the essential characteristics of the form derived from these European examples: type characters (in the play, A Ragged Man, a Street Walker, a Judge, etc.); abstract characters, who represent not a class or type, but rather aspects of character or the personification of social or psychological forces (the Grotesques, who represent in Roger's dream the objectification of the Freudian death-wish); telegraphic dialogue and telescopic characterization, whereby people who play similar roles in the protagonist's life are often made up to appear identical (the Judge and the College Examiner); anti-naturalism and the reinstatement of the soliloquy and the aside; kaleidoscopic dramaturgy, whereby scenes are conceived cinematically; and, as a consequence, décor, which, through its sparseness and distortion, enhances both this fluidity and the nightmare quality of the entire effect.

The essence of expressionism lies, then, in the conception of the monodramatic; all technical devices, all characters and situations are designed to reflect the psychological workings of the mind of the hero, or as the case may be, the anti-hero. Caligari, the most celebrated cinematic example of the genre, displays this monodramatic quality in a melodramatic context: the narrator-protagonist is

discovered at the end of the film to be mad; the beautiful garden in which he relates his tale of sonambulistic horror is revealed as the garden of an insane asylum, and the nefarious villain, Dr. Caligari, turns out to be, in actuality, a benevolent psychiatrist.

Roger Bloomer displays all the characteristics of the expressionistic genre. If these devices are not original with Lawson, it is still no small distinction to have been among the very first Americans to employ them in an indigenous context. For Roger Bloomer, within its expressionist form, reflects the adolescent yearning for maturity which is at the heart of much of American writing. If, in comparison with the work of our expatriate experimentalists such as Pound and Eliot, it seems at times almost unbearably naive in its rejection of bourgeois values and its absolute awe in the hallowed presence of Sex, it is nonetheless extremely American precisely because of these limitations. The world that Roger rejects is Winesburg, Ohio, as well as Excelsior, Iowa; his groping toward maturity is one of the basic metaphors of American literary experience.

Roger Bloomer's odyssey is the familiar one of every fresh-faced adolescent who arrives in the metropolis with the hope of finding the self-realization impossible in the stultifying atmosphere of his home town. Having failed his college entrance examinations because of the authoritarian bullying of his examiner, Roger had cried that he was "able to refuse"

the values of his culture. Significantly this refusal is based less upon hostility to oppressive authority than on the threat to the young man's virility. It is the sexual quest which continually illumines his rebellion. In a scene with Eugene, the defender of American ideals, Roger acknowledges his sexual inexperience, but sexuality represents to him more than physical release; he is obsessed with the female principle as the one meaningful fact in the universe; he must possess it: "I want the impossible, I want to change things, I want women's souls--and I'll never be satisfied with less. I swear . . . Never!"⁵ He finds himself alone, but it is not the loneliness of the political rebel in conflict with authority, but the loneliness of the adolescent imprisoned by his passion:

I stand alone, with my passion alone!—Asking my everlasting why! Wanting to find out everything, to see, to know, to touch life, to lay both hands upon it as if it were a woman, crush it to me with my fingers in the warm flesh lovingly--(p.233)

Roger finds the incarnation of the female principle in the person of Louise, a young girl who is similarly discontented, but attempts to escape the horror of her existence by living most strenuously by the ethic of acquisitiveness. "There's one thing that beats out Hate," she cries, "sets you above tiredness--money!" (p.251) But behind her facade of toughness lies an instinctive tenderness which draws her to Roger; and the young couple, alone in a hostile world, cling together for protection.

But the relationship cannot be fulfilled; Louise is possessed by a fear of sex which prevents her from fully loving Roger, and as a final sacrifice, to free Roger from the prison of her passionless domination, she commits suicide. And Roger, in jail pending investigation of the cause of death, by means of a nightmare of pursuit which coalesces and unifies the disparate elements of his mind, i.e., the play, finally achieves his long-sought-for maturity. In the three strophes of the dream--the first full scale Freudian dream in American drama--"all the figures of the play, representing the conventions and proprieties, surround Roger threateningly," engage in a "mocking orgy of Sex and Obscenity" behind which lurks the Freudian death-wish, and are finally dispelled by Louise, the Life Force, "the dream that will not die," who rises to protect Roger and set him free from the bondage of sex. "I've given you yourself, take it. . . . Laughter is not enough, denial is not enough. . . . In yourself you must find the secret." (p.295) And as her image fades into the darkness the attendant unlocks Roger's cell and sends him into the world outside.

The search for maturity which lies at the heart of Roger Bloomer, while primarily a personal quest, also reflects Lawson's condemnation of the values of a society in which Roger has no place. In this condemnation of materialism Lawson is not at odds with his generation. However, what characterizes his work, even in his first play, is the

intensity of this condemnation, and the awareness, albeit implied in Roger Bloomer, that personal salvation is not enough, that there is something radically wrong with the fabric of society which the resolution of sexual difficulties will not alter. Roger is afflicted by more than personal anguish; he is constrained by the Babbitry represented by his father and Eugene, by the values of acquisitiveness which help destroy his love affair with Louise. Even at the moment of his greatest introspection, Lawson felt compelled to fragment his vision; as Roger wanders the streets of New York, homeless and penniless, he has eyes for more than his own despair:

In the grey pit of the streets pass the gray millions--and all these that pass are hungry . . . starving men and women. . . . What doom will come on this place, what doom oh, hungry city? . . . Death will come in a whirlwind breaking your sky towers-- and the hungry will shout for joy! . . . I am yours, oh, city of slaves . . . I am one of the millions, servants of death and time, hungry, moaning for bread! (pp.257-58)

Roger senses that the turmoil is both within and outside himself. He is tortured by the universal torment of adolescence, a torture independent of class, and yet he senses that his turmoil has more than personal roots. Already at the outset Lawson's dilemma is delineated. For Roger Bloomer fails as a play precisely because Roger's personal anguish is in only a small sense activated by the oppressions of his society. The fault lies not in his being a member of an exploited class, or even in the possession of false values, like Mr. Zero. His values are good,

and his search for realization would occur in any social system. Woman, Sex, the Life Force--this is what frees Roger from his adolescent bondage, and it is in no way dependent, in the context of this play, upon the follies of capitalist morality. Lawson's focus is thus obscured: on one hand, salvation lies in the search for self-realization; on the other, in the reformation of society. "I feel a doom all over the world," laments Mrs. Bloomer apocalyptically, "people breaking things . . . carelessly . . . churches falling down!" (p.260) The old order is crumbling--this intuition lies beneath the surface of the play. And Roger, at the moment of his sexual liberation, is chosen heir to the new order: "Away! Away, ghosts of yesterday," chants the dream-image of Louise, "for the young are coming marching, marching; far off, listen, the tread of marching people singing a new song. . . ." (pp. 294-95) And in 1937, John Howard Lawson wrote a revolutionary play called Marching Song.

Processional (1925), Lawson's second play, deservedly his most famous, possesses an authentic originality; for in this play Lawson attempted to use the stock devices and figures of American vaudeville and the drive and power of the then recently discovered indigenous music, jazz, as the means through which he could create a panorama of American life. He called his play a "jazz symphony of American life," and

attempted to employ several expressionistic devices in a native context:

I have endeavored to create a method which shall express the American scene in native idiom, a method as far removed from the older realism as from the facile mood of Expressionism. It is apparent that this new technique is essentially vaudevillesque in character--a development, a moulding to my own uses, of the rich vitality of the two-a-day and the musical extravaganza.⁶

Although several expressionistic devices are still in evidence (the Man in the Silk Hat, for example, is in the tradition of abstract satire; the Klan scene, among others, uses taut, telegraphic expressionistic dialogue). Processional is conceived panoramically rather than monodramatically. Lawson is not concerned with the individual's struggle against the stultifying forces of modern society, but rather with the depiction of the joys and the bitterness--above all, the vitality--of American life through the means of the exuberant popular form of vaudeville.⁷

To achieve his end he employs a group of jazz-playing miners who represent the spectrum of vaudeville comic stereotypes. They include Rastus Jolly, a Stepin Fetchit, easily intimidated Negro; Dago Joe, "a sleek, greasy Italian" with an accordion; and Alexander Gore, the perennially dumb hayseed. To this gallery of racial stereotypes add Isaac Cohen, the money-conscious Jewish storekeeper, and Phillipotts, a George M. Cohan "stop-the-presses" version of a newspaperman, and Lawson's gallery of grotesques of the American environment is completed.

But while Lawson's technique is formally experimental, his subject matter concerns a situation which was to be dear to the succeeding generation; the plot of Processional concerns a bitter strike, and the play possesses many elements which were to constitute the structure of the proletarian novel and drama. For example, class lines are rigidly drawn; unlike Roger Bloomer, Processional hinges upon the fact of class strife. Among the characters is a Polish communist who continually intones the coming of the workers' revolution; and the hero, Dynamite Jim, is in what is to become the tradition of the proletarian hero--rebellious, proud, contemptuous of capitalist authority, he enacts the traditional martyrdom: he is blinded by the forces of reaction. The representatives of Capitalism--the Man in the Silk Hat, the Sheriff, the leaders of the KKK--are not merely figures of satiric contempt; they represent a conspiratorial force directed against the workers. The Man in the Silk Hat, for example, informs the Sheriff that he expects the strictest cooperation between the latter's deputies and the soldiers who have been sent to break the strike; and the King Kleagle offers satirical evidence that the Klan is not an isolated crack-pot phenomenon: "I wish to announce, the entire Congress of the United States joined the Ku Klux Klan last night." (p. 183)

All this would seem to second Murray Kempton's contention that "Lawson's was always a consciously revolutionary

voice; and Processional was a class-war piece."⁸ But just how conscious was Lawson's revolutionary voice? Although Processional contains the elements of class strife that were to distinguish proletarian literature of the thirties, it is significant that Lawson handles them humorously. Processional is hardly a play of bitter social protest. More often than not, Lawson exploits the comic possibilities of his vaudeville machinery and the racial stereotypes of Negro, Jew, and Italian. For example, after the Klan scene, both Cohen and Rastus are unmasked in Klan uniforms. The sight of an Uncle Tom Negro in a Klan outfit could hardly bring joy to the more radical of the play's viewers. Moreover, Psinski, the communist, is for all his revolutionary mouthings essentially a comic figure, at times admirable, but finally almost ridiculous. Near the end of the play he gets drunk and is berated by Phillpots: "You the revolutionist, the idealist, turned to whiskey at last.

Psinski: Go on, make a joke a'me, its all hopeless.

Phillpots: That's the Russian in you speaking.

Psinski: I ain't a Russian, I'm a Pole, an' it's all hopeless. (p. 209)

Thus, while Lawson senses the underlying class struggle manifest in American life, his voice at that time was hardly consciously revolutionary. The strike is not won by the organized demands of militant workers, but rather through the generosity of capital, because the powers that be sense the publicity value of stopping the hostility. As Phillpots says to Psinski: "the laugh is always on you." (p. 212)

That Lawson recognized the revolutionary deficiencies of Processional is reflected by the changes that he made in the script when the Federal Theatre revived the play in 1937. Although Variety reported that few revisions had been made in the script, an examination of the revised version shows this to be untrue. For one thing, Lawson, presenting the play to a Depression audience and as an active member of a revolutionary party, could hardly allow the racial stereotypes to remain. This is most manifest in the complete revamping of the character of Rastus Jolly, the Negro minstrel. He is now called Joe Green, and where he had previously been characterized as "one lonesome nigger . . . with a heart full of care an' desecration," (p.58) forced by Dynamite Jim to assist in the latter's escape from jail, he is now almost a militant Negro worker, assisting Jim voluntarily. Psinski does not undergo so striking a metamorphosis, but all elements of ridiculousness are expunged from his character, and he emerges almost wholly admirable.

There can be no doubt of Lawson's intentions: Processional (1937) must conform to the demands of proletarian drama, even at the expense of the play's vaudevillesque metaphor. The objectivity which enabled Lawson to invest even his sympathetic characters with elements of ridiculousness has been abandoned in the face of his commitment. A new speech given to the rehabilitated Psinski now all but concludes the play. Speaking of the child of Jim and Sadie, the

radical "comes forward to the footlights and speaks with quiet simplicity":

Maybe that child will stand on the last barricade, sure an' free in the face of all time. . . . An' fightin' with him will be all the people of the world, people like us, an' with 'em will come marchin' a lot o' ghosts, all the soldiers that died at Bunker Hill an' on the Marne marching to be free. . . . That's gonna be a Procession . . . an' that child will walk with them.⁹

However, despite his efforts to force the exuberance of Processional into the formal confines of proletarian drama, Lawson could not satisfy the demands of the Marxist critics. The New Masses called the revival "a disheartening and discouraging mess which casts only discredit on the Federal Theatre Project and Lawson. The sodden miner-hero, his loud-laughing and empty-headed fellow-strikers, the pompous and directionless strike leader--all these may have been moving within the original frame of mysticism and experimentalism, but today they are caricatures and libels."¹⁰

The Marxist critic sensed that there was something in Processional which could have been expunged only by a complete over-haul of the play, that the key to the play lies in the love of Sadie and Jim, that the forces of social conflict do not hold the center of the stage but form, instead, the backdrop for a drama of love and redemption. As in Roger Bloomer, Lawson alternates between social awareness and psychological determinism. It is a woman's voice that is the "kind of a song that's behind change and politics" (a

line cut from the revised version); man, the rebel, is forever dwarfed by the Eternal Woman. Even in the revised version, the last line of the play is given to Sadie, singing gently to her unborn child: "I'm agonna raise my kid, sing to him soft. . . ."

Lawson's next play, Nirvana (1926), remained unpublished and has, therefore, been permanently consigned to the dust-bin of history. All contemporary reports, as well as Lawson's personal re-evaluation, would seem to make its loss no great matter of esthetic concern. The ambivalence inherent in Lawson's earlier plays seems to have completely overwhelmed his ability; his personal confusion seems to have been projected upon the form and substance of the play.

"Take it as drama of either the past, present or future, as expressionistic or just jazzic, Nirvana is a brash, headless, groggy debauch of catch phrases and inflated situations," reads a contemporary review, "This was the easiest way for Mr. Lawson's talents to travel. And, I fear, the worst way. . . ."11

In the program Lawson called the play "a comedy of the uncertainties and aspirations of the thinking man as he confronts the enlarging universe." He was depressed because "Freud had dragged strange monsters from the bottomless sea of the Unconscious, and . . . Einstein had deposed the straight line." Therefore, he clamored for a new god of the machine to replace those deposed, a new religion, a "new and

better realization of man's relation to the electric void through which he walks."¹²

Roger Bloomer's search continues, and to demonstrate the dramatic confusion which this search entails, here is Gilbert Gabriel's summary of the plot of the play:

The first and last acts of Nirvana take place in a physician's office. The middle one is a roof garden orgy which for typically obscure reasons makes a saliverous little ado about the fancier practices of sex. With the melancholy patience of a lot of curious tom cats everyone goes around asking everyone else, "What is sex?" Several catch-as-catch can duets seem unable to supply the answer. And the question mark is only inked the darker when the little heroine leaps out of the young poet's arms and topples off the roof. Thereafter it is a matter of bringing her back to life. The doctor tries it and fails. The poet tries it with old fashioned prayers and fails. Then he tries a new credo of his own and succeeds. But only momentarily, for Christian Science, mumbled by an aunt, shatters the miracle.¹³

It is apparent that Lawson's search for an answer to the problems which afflicted him found most confused expression in Nirvana. But what is significant for us is the fact that he felt the keen necessity of substituting new gods for those deposed by Freud and Einstein. However, he had as yet not found the new religion which could satisfy his need to believe; nor had he, unlike some writers of our age, at least found a coherent form in which to express his confusion. Needless to say, Nirvana was not a success with either the critics or the public.

Perhaps the failure of the ambitious Nirvana chastened Lawson; for his next play, Loud Speaker (1927), is primarily

a farce. It is, however, a farce with a difference. First of all, its technique is experimental. Lawson has, in fact, combined various kinds of experimentalism within the conventions of farce, and, on the whole, he has done so remarkably successfully. From Constructivism he has appropriated his stage--"a constructed stage, assembled in a simple arrangement of a number of platforms and stairs, with articles of furniture suggesting the usage of various sections of the scene" (p.15)--from expressionism he has borrowed such devices as the long, revelatory monologue, and satiric stereotypes, and from his own Processional he has continued the use of jazz as leit-motif and racial, vaudevillesque caricature (e.g., the Harlem delegation which breaks into a jazz dance). The conventions of farce are observed, therefore, within the confines of experimentalism.

Secondly, the purpose of Loud Speaker is not solely to amuse, but also to comment seriously upon the very premises of life in Boom-Age America. Lawson follows Coolidge's counsel to "look well to the hearthstone, therein all hope for America lies" (the epigraph to the printed version)--and finds there futility, mendacity, pomposity, and ignorance. The ills that afflict the American hearthstone, moreover, are symptomatic of the ills which afflict the society at large; if there is one major theme in Loud Speaker, it is the deceitful manipulation of the public by the politician in alliance with the mass-media. The play is, in fact,

undiluted Menckenism. "Do the people make the papers, or do the papers make the people?" (p. 46) asks a newspaperman, and there can be no doubt of the answer: the people are led by the nose--and they are led so willingly. They would reject the truth were it offered them, for truth is a commodity to be distrusted. "If X is money and Y is bunk," claims a politician, "The answer to X plus Y is the great American public." (p. 32) And to confirm this cynical contention, Lawson allows one of his characters his moment of truth; Collins, a candidate for governor, is forced because of a family crisis to reveal himself to a radio audience as the fraud he is.

The newspapers are blah . . . the Government is blah, you folks are fed on pap that wouldn't deceive an infant in diapers . . . are you listening, you gang out there . . . to hear me slobber about honesty and good government! . . . I'm a man standing here now with truth coming out of my mouth instead of drool, but for the first time in my life I'm a man! (p. 139)

But of course, the irony is that this speech is the most endearing form of American hokum, and Collins is elected precisely because he has touched the great American sentiment for public confession. It is a criticism not without justification in our own day.

Politicians, newspapermen, broadcasters, society women trying and discarding new religions, society girls on the make--all these reflect the iconoclastic Menckenism which prevades Loud Speaker. But, again, Lawson cannot accept the

radical implications of his violent societal criticisms. Indeed, the one radical in the play is a yellow journalist who has made his peace with the false values of his society. But if Lawson as yet sees no specific political solution for the evils of capitalism which he has satirized, he again senses that change is in the wind and that it is inexorable. Characteristically, it is a woman, Mrs. Collins, who, like Mrs. Bloomer and Old Maggie (in Processional) before her, senses Lawson's familiar apocalyptic vision: "I feel a darkness coming over me and out of the darkness a voice. . . . The birth of Silence is coming, the kaleidoscope of the Future." (pp. 176-177) And Johnny, the jazz-age radical, despite his personal disillusionment, gives voice to Lawson's persistent yearning for political commitment: "This will go on for twenty years, and they we'll discover a new religion which is neither new nor religious." (p. 184) For Lawson this new non-religious religion was indeed to be Marxism, and the song of the future which he hears, now dimly, now more distinctly, in the twenties, is the "Internationale."

The Internationale (1928) is Lawson's farewell to experimentalism, a pot-pourri of expressionistic, vaudevillesque devices in the context of a play which is part farce, part musical, part melodrama, and part prophetic poem. The elements in the play are in a continual state of imbalance: expressionism vies with realism, seriousness with farce, symbolism with mystery melodrama, and if the esthetic result

is largely to be deplored, it is significant in that its very confusion articulates the crisis of Lawson's social ambivalence. For in The Internationale, Lawson comes at last to a recognition of the power of communist ideology, and while he has not as yet chosen sides, he at least attempts to define his political dilemma.

The play fulfills Lawson's earlier apocalyptic visions; it attempts to prophesy the coming of class war brought about by imperialist capitalism's attempt to obtain the oil resources of the Far East. But this social vision is cast in terms of a plot which, more often than not, reduces these implications to the intrigues of melodrama; and one has, for much of the action, the feeling that somehow one has blundered into a theatre where The Green Goddess is playing. And to complicate the situation further, throughout the play there runs a thread of Freudianism at times almost in complete opposition to the revolutionary thesis upon which much of the plot hinges.

In the character of David, the son of one of the industrialists whose machinations bring about the future war, Lawson reveals his attraction to Marxist ideology. David refuses to go into his father's business because it is based upon exploitation; having sensed the futility of poetry and art, he wants to "see the working class, be it . . . or see the world."¹⁴ Fitch, his father, hardly the stereotype of the capitalist villain, instead of disowning his radical

son, sends him off on a mission to the Far East, a mission which the capitalist recognizes may set the world ablaze; he fears that blood, not oil, may become the great purifier.

This dire vision is finally realized through the machinery of a plot too burdensome to elucidate, and with the aid of myriad characters of all nationalities and temperaments; while Lawson is merciless in his satire of French and English colonialists, it is significant that the war which finally erupts seems as much the product of Russian intrigue as capitalist imperialism. Indeed, it is difficult to weather the rapid changes of Lawson's ambivalent attitude toward the Soviet communists whom he portrays. On one hand, they are the defenders of the exploited, the harbingers of a liberating revolution; and on the other, they are rather surprisingly equated with the fascists. Aretini, the fascist, states, "I marshal my armies, floating before them the black flag of death;" and Rubeloff, the communist, rejoins, "I marshal my armies, floating before them the red flag of blood." Together they shout, "Kill! Kill! To arms!" (p. 253)

The revolution which was dimly perceived in Lawson's earlier plays has now arrived, and the moment of political choice seems at hand: "At your door crowds are singing, soldiers are dragging machine guns. . . . Which side, then, which side?" But when the revolution arrives, when the red flags are flying in Union Square, all is for nought. The workers revolution is suppressed by the capitalists in

alliance with the fascists; but Lawson does not draw political lessons from this suppression. David, the erstwhile communist, tells his girl friend that he has learned one thing from all the bloodshed and violence: "Revolution! I didn't know what it meant, I'm not sure now: but I see your eyes!" (p. 235) In short, he surrenders himself to his love for Alise, the Soviet girl, who finally rejects her militancy to love him as well. Thus, just when it appears as if Marx were conquering Freud, we find that this is not the case. At the moment of the workers' revolution, Lawson had tried to render the triumph of Marxian over Freudian principles symbolically.

Chorus: . . . We are the field waiting for the plow.

Alise: The plow is a sword!

Gussie: Open to the sword, take me, shining sword.

. . . Plow sword. . . . Plow!

[Alise rises, all the others still kneeling.
She holds up a sword with a ragged red flag
tied to it.]

Chorus: Tell us how Tell us how. . . .

Alise: It is now Now! (pp. 226-227)

The symbolic transference of the sexual sword into the revolutionary sword might well have been a coherent metaphor with which to order the disparate elements of The Internationale. But Lawson's dilemma is that he cannot as yet fully assent to this transference. Consequently his intellectual ambivalence sends the play down confusing corridors, and it is difficult to emerge from the maze with any sense of artistic coherence. Ideologically the play intensifies explicitly the attack upon capitalism reflected in the earlier plays, but behind the revolutionary mask lies the

face of futility. We have noted a number of contradictions: on one hand, the ambivalence toward communism as a specific solution to social ills; and on the other, the ambivalence concerning the ultimate efficacy of political action. In the first case, Lawson's communist characters, including his hero, are more sympathetic than their capitalist counterparts. But how is one to explain the equation of communism and fascism? If the war is indeed a class war in which the imperialists and the exploited are sharply delineated, how can one explain the sympathetic treatment of one of the instigating capitalists? It is clear that Lawson had not clearly thought out the implications of his political sniping. He seemed to be shooting at every moving thing in the vicinity.

But behind this confused, revolutionary iconoclasm, despite the attempt to dethrone Freud, it is clear that in the end it is the Woman Principle--manifested previously in Louise and Sadie--that triumphs over political zeal. Alise, the once zealous revolutionary, comes to realize that "I carry change like a serpent in my breast." (p. 274), and with the collapse of her revolutionary hopes abandons herself to her love for David. The Freudian Serpent conquers the Marxian sword: all of us, revolutionist or not, "have a mutual friend whose name is despair." (p. 82) The last line of the play perhaps most plaintively summarizes both Lawson's need for belief, and his sense of not having put all the

pieces of the puzzle together coherently: "How do I get home? Christ, for the love o' pity, where do I go home?" (p. 276)

If Lawson had not fully defined his political position in the late twenties, there can be no doubt, as we have demonstrated, of his social awareness. When, in The Internationale, he invokes the ghosts of Sacco and Vanzetti as harbingers of revolution ("suddenly the ghosts of America's martyrs, Sacco and Vanzetti . . . blacken the sky over New York!" (p. 211)), he was citing a cause in which he had been passionately involved. He had joined the Citizen's National Committee for Sacco and Vanzetti, an emergency organization the purpose of which was to bring pressure upon the Federal Government to open the files of the Department of Justice for evidence bearing on the case. Along with a number of other writers--Dos Passos, Michael Gold, Ruth Hale, Grace Lumpkin, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Dorothy Parker, Katherine Ann Porter, and Lola Ridge-- he went out on a picket line in Boston and was arrested.¹⁵ This experience was Lawson's first taste of direct political action, and he later acknowledged that "my participation in the last days of struggle to save Sacco-Vanzetti played an important part in my artistic and political development."¹⁶

Lawson's social awareness, combined with the very real need of the playwright to find a theatre hospitable to his art, involved him first in the formation of the Worker's

Drama League in the Spring of 1926 (with Mike Gold, Ida Rauh, and Jasper Deeter); and then, in February, 1927, in the formation of the New Playwrights (with Gold, Francis Faragoh, Emjo Basshe, and John Dos Passos). The group reflected the very difficulties manifest in Lawson's plays; according to Clurman, they "wanted something but it wasn't very clear what. . . . Their productions were undisciplined, amateurish, lyrical, frivolous."¹⁷ Lawson acknowledged the group's weaknesses, but claimed later that "in spite of . . . its aesthetic manifestoes and vacillating policies, it was an important forerunner of the more mature social theatre of the 1930's."¹⁸

Thus, Lawson did not come to his political commitment without previous apprenticeship. It is significant, however, that unlike many of his circle--among them Dos Passos, Cowley, Grace Lumpkin--he did not sign the Culture and the Crisis pamphlet, in which a number of prominent intellectuals urged other professional workers to vote the Communist ticket in the 1932 election. In fact, Clurman reports that in the early days of the Depression Lawson "from time to time . . . vented opinions that led us to believe that though he was definitely of progressive, even radical opinion, he was violently opposed to official communist doctrine."¹⁹

Success Story (1932), Lawson's first play of the Depression years, reveals, first of all, his abandonment of

experimentalism. The style of the play is realistic, a form surely more congenial to the method of the Group Theatre which produced it, than the lyrical expressionism which characterized his previous work. The Experimental Age was dead, and economic reality seemed to demand of all writers a stern apprenticeship to the facts of life. Lawson's attack on capitalist ethics gathers new meaning in a society in which "when you see those breadlines on Broadway, it shows how insecure everything is."²⁰ The prime target is the ethic of acquisitiveness which decrees that everything has a price, that profit and power are the only gods. Lawson's protagonist, Sol Ginsburg, the tough Jewish kid whose rise to the top of the business world is the "success story" with which the play is concerned, is possessed by a demon which drives him to destroy even those who love him. As a product of the slums of the Lower East Side, he learned at an early age that "there's no future without money," and he is determined to obtain it at all costs. Until freed from poverty there can be no room in his life for love, pity, or any of the normal human decencies. "Love's not bread and butter," claims Sol, "its champagne, fine for them that can afford it." (p. 86)

But despite his avarice, Sol Ginsburg, like his later counterpart Sammy Glick, is a man of great potential for good. Had his energy, drive, and intelligence been channelled in a positive direction, Sol might have cut quite a different figure. Lawson continually affirms that in his zeal, his

energy, and his dedication to his false God, Sol is, in reality, a revolutionary manqué. "You're a revolutionist," one of the characters tells Sol, "never content, pursuing a vision, you want to change the whole world in the image of your ego." (p. 183)

In fact, Sol had been a political radical in his youth, and throughout the play continually attempts to escape the guilt born of political disavowal. He castigates the poverty-stricken radicals at every opportunity: "I'm sick to death of radical meetings and sour-faced people and cheap gab." (p. 40) But when the chips are down and Sol, like all men, has to face what he has become, he recognizes that he had a choice, that he might have lived according to a very different ethic. He reveals this to Sara by means of a parable:

Sol: This is my story . . . this fellow Christ took me up to a high mountain and showed me the earth. . . . and He said, "Do you want the earth, Solomon Ginsburg, or do you want to join me in a cellar, sweating and plotting with a few close friends?" Well, I made my choice and somewhere Christ is in a cellar laughing at me right now--don't I know it?

Sarah: You mean the people in cellars are stronger than you are?

Sol: Stronger than all Hell because they know what they want. Maybe I'll have the laugh on them yet--maybe when I get a billion I'll hand it to the Communist Party. (p. 230)

But Sol's choice has been made and he cannot remake himself in a new image. For a moment he almost convinces Sarah that he has changed, that he has found in her, and not in the

success that he has achieved, something to believe in, "something to hold on to." (p. 235) But this change of heart is short lived; Sarah realizes that the ethic that Sol has lived by has created a monster that cheapens everything it touches, and, in the melodramatic conclusion to the play, shoots him rather than allow him to keep on destroying; and as he dies Sol clearly recognizes the viciousness and futility by which he has lived: "I bin dead a long time." (p. 242)

There is a very real dynamism in the character of Sol Ginsburg which vitalizes the play, in spite of such defects as the gratuitousness of his death, occasional scenes of almost embarrassing theatricality, and dialogue which at moments suggests the more over-ripe metaphors of Odets: "You stick me with a knife right in the pride." (p. 128) But, more significantly, Lawson has specified the target of his social criticism, and not dissipated his creative energies by exploding simultaneously in all directions. There can be no doubt in the reader's mind that Sol made the wrong choice, that the values by which he lived were immoral, that he would have lived a more meaningful life had he not forsaken his youthful radical ideals.

And yet, despite the explicitness of Lawson's criticism, the play was deplored in the Marxist press. The Daily Worker, for example, in a very short review, praised the production but denounced the play as belonging to "the Eugene O'Neill bourgeois reactionary variety, in which the audience

is asked to weep over the sexual problems of a finance-capitalist swindler."²¹ The Marxist critics were particularly disturbed by Sol's disavowed radicalism, which, in the words of Mike Gold, "proves to have been only the mask for an overwhelming craving for money and bourgeois success."²² The heretic is always more bitterly condemned than the infidel; one wonders if such criticism would have been directed against the play had it been presented after Lawson's explicit political commitment.

But if the Marxist critics deplored aspects of Success Story, they could find almost nothing to recommend The Pure in Heart, which Lawson had started in 1928. Why was Lawson "willing to finish and produce such a pretentious and middled play in 1934?" asked the New Masses,²³ and Mike Gold found in it merely "the familiar . . .maudlin speeches about futility."²⁴ Indeed, Lawson had the unpleasant experience of satisfying neither the Marxist nor the Broadway critics, and of enduring two Broadway flops in one week, for The Pure in Heart and Gentlewoman were produced within two days of each other (March 20 and 22, 1934). This double rejection seems to have been crucial to Lawson's ideological and artistic development, for it is not long after this experience that he arrives, once and for all, at his political commitment.

The adverse criticisms of The Pure in Heart were, however, quite apart from ideological considerations, most deserving. For in the play the melodramatist triumphs over

the serious dramatist, and while Lawson's social criticism is still trenchant, it is mired in a plot that contains many of the tried and true clichés of the Hollywood scenario. The tale of Annabel Sparks, the stage-struck girl who comes to the Big Town and conquers Broadway, is in the best Morning Glory tradition; and her love for the gangster-hero, Larry--a love doomed less by the pressures of society than by the exigencies of melodrama--was to become one of the dominant clichés of the genre of the sentimental gangster film, in which the hero--usually portrayed by James Cagney, Henry Fonda or John Garfield--is more sinned against than sinning. The plot is replete with melodramatic contrivance: fortuitous backers, love scenes of monumental conventionality, violent gun-play, and gratuitous death--indeed, Lawson seems to have ransacked the Hollywood bag of tricks.

And Yet, The Pure in Heart cannot be dismissed as sheer hack work, for behind the melodramatic facade Lawson's ultimate seriousness and vitality occasionally emerge. Annabel's "success story," like Sol's, is hardly the conventional one, for Lawson explicitly rejects the values which she has accepted, as does Anabel herself at the moment of truth. The world of the theatre is viewed in all its sterility and unreality as the microcosm of the larger world of which it is a part; and its inhabitants are doomed by false values to a life of absurdity and make-believe. For show business is a cynical business in which is sold "the

biggest commodity in the world--dreams, forgetfulness,"²⁵ and its cynicism is merely the reflection of the values of a society in which profit is the only morality, in which all positive values are negated. In such a world all actions are equally meaningful, and equally futile: "Making love gives us the illusion of beauty, and talk gives us the illusion of thought." (p. 59)

The Pure in Heart is, then, Lawson's farewell to the futility of the jazz age; the cynical philanderer, Goshen, realizes that his world is crumbling. Looking at New York, spread out below his penthouse window, he asks what is behind the glare of lights that symbolizes our civilization: "Crazy people all hopped up with crazy ideas, selling bad stock, passing bad checks, chasing money, chasing glory, millionaires with their brain-addled girls . . . looking for dreams . . . found in bad movies . . . a crazy show on a glaring stage. Every time I look at that skyline I want to die!" (p. 63)

The world of which Goshen is a part must, in the early days of the Depression, indeed have seemed to be dying. But the reality of social dislocation plays only a small part in The Pure in Heart. Lawson not only uses the theatrical metaphor; he succumbs to it, and the very theatricality of the machinery of the play dissipates the seriousness of his criticism. Annabel, for all her vitality, emerges as a stock heroine--the girl who retains her inner core of purity

despite the corruption of her flesh--in short, that familiar figure, the whore with the heart of gold. For in the end, Annabel forsakes all for that most precious of American commodities, Love with a capital L, and her rejection of the world of theatrical phoniness smacks of sentimental contrivance, not dramatic necessity.

Similarly, in the character of the gangster-hero, Larry, Lawson has smothered the real core of his character in stereotyped appurtenances. There is a vitality and a reality in Larry which barely survives the contrivances of plot. The implication exists that Larry's plight is social, that society never gave him a break; at the end of the play he articulates the feeling that there must be some rational alternative to the absurd world which is destroying him.

The whole works is wrong. . . . Maybe some place its different--I don't know: Where they'd keep busy working, digging, plowing, building cities too. . . . People could be happy, people could build things, work without stealing, love without going crazy. (pp. 107-108)

But Larry knows that it is too late for him and Annabel, and The Pure in Heart ends on the note of Lawson's familiar apocalyptic pessimism: the new world is coming, too late. "It's no good for us. . . . Maybe it could be different for other people. We're not the only ones, there's millions; wanting what they can't get, reaching for something way off, torn to pieces like a machine is grinding 'em. . . ." And to Annabel's query "What's that to us?", Larry answers,

"Nothing. We're out of luck, everybody's out of luck."

(pp. 108-9)

The obvious difficulty with The Pure in Heart is that its melodramatic structure is unable to sustain the weight of Lawson's social criticism. The elements of realistic motivation and social insight are indeed present, but they seem almost gratuitous; they cannot survive the triteness of the plot. One can understand why the Marxists considered the play ideologically retrogressive; despite the intrusion of the world of the Depression--an intrusion which smacks of rewriting--the world of The Pure in Heart is indeed that of the jazz age when it was begun. Unlike Success Story, it does not attempt to come to terms with issues raised by the economic crisis. It remained for Gentlewoman to make this attempt anew.

There can be no doubt of the solid anchoring of Gentlewoman in an age of crisis. Not only breadlines, but the Soviet Union, the Scottsboro case, stevedore strikes, the imminence of war, general industrial crises are matters of concern and conversation for the characters of the play. Lawson's vision is no longer prophetic; change is not imminent; it is here: "everything's changing . . . corporations crumble and die."²⁶ Social questions are no longer academic. As Dr. Golden, the psychiatrist, puts it:

The real question is whether our culture is equal to the tasks which face it. . . . Can we remake the world? Can we create a decent standard of living? Can we preserve peace? (p. 126)

Lawson frames his answer in a play which avoids the melodramatics of The Pure in Heart. He has objectified the crisis of choice incumbent upon the individual living at that time in the dual personages of the gentlewoman and her proletarian lover; for in them the struggle between the old order and the new is expressed in personal terms. But although Lawson senses that the answers to Dr. Golden's queries are uniformly "No," he cannot as yet make a full-scale revolutionary commitment. He is too much of the bourgeois world to reject it precipitately. Thus the relationship between Gwyn and Rudy reflects Lawson's social indecision: on the one hand, he recognizes that capitalism is decadent, and yet, on the other, he realizes that he is a product of this society, that in rejecting it he is rejecting himself.

Lawson's criticisms of capitalism are no longer the iconoclastic gestures of the jazz-age rebel; the bourgeois ethic is not only evil, it is unsuccessful. Gwyn's husband had lived by Sol's rule that "ethics is one thing . . . business another" (p. 161), but succeeded merely in creating a series of inflated holding corporations that collapsed like a house of cards upon his death. But while bourgeois society is portrayed as corrupt, licentious and decadent, it is significant that Gwyn, the gentlewoman, the embodiment of this dying class, is a woman of great emotional depth and integrity--all in all, one of Lawson's finest dramatic creations. Lawson's ambivalence toward his own bourgeois

status is most keenly expressed in her portrayal. Although she is unable to convince herself that politics are important, she is disturbed by the emptiness which both surrounds and is within her. "One ought to have some sort of ideal that's worth fighting for," she muses, searching for an escape from the futility which encompasses her. And in the person of Rudy, Gwyn thinks she has found the prophet to lead her from the wilderness of despair. In surrendering herself to his love, she attempts to reject her bourgeois past and create a new life based upon positive values. But she comes to realize that for her the transformation has come too late. She deliberately becomes pregnant to hold Rudy, but finally recognizes that he must be free to pursue his own destiny in his own way. For Rudy fulfillment lies "in the streets and on the docks and in the fields" where "people are carrying burdens in the night and in the heat of the sun." (p. 203) It is a world that Gwyn wants desperately to enter, but she realizes that the sum-total of her previous existence unfits her for proletarian living. She wishes she could follow Rudy's path, is desperately anxious to find "a way of life . . . that means something, that touches reality" (p. 203), but she recognizes that she cannot become "a part of the struggle," that Rudy's world can never become hers.

Ultimately she sacrifices herself--her love for Rudy --by keeping the secret of her pregnancy and sending him out to participate in the struggle free of the restriction of his

love for her. She, with the class she represents, is condemned. The future, however, will be different:

Our children won't play at life in boudoirs and offices: they'll face something different whether they like it or not . . . we're not fit for the future, we're little people, we comfort ourselves with little fears, we walk in a funeral procession --towards a red horizon; we can't see the cities burning and the marching armies--there's blood in the sky. (p. 220)

The revolutionary implications of this speech are manifest; and yet, despite his vision of the wave of the future, Lawson's attitude toward revolutionary commitment is still indecisive. It is not only that his major character is bourgeois, not revolutionary, but that his radical representative is himself tortured with doubts. Despite his proletarian background and his instinctive radicalism, Rudy is not quite sure of his position: "Maybe I'm just a bourgeois slob. . . . I bluster a lot, I used to be sure of myself . . . now I'm not clear about anything. . . ." (pp. 184-5) Beneath the surface of this bluster lies a ridiculousness which turns Gwyn's prophet into a tin god. One wonders finally if her sacrifice has been worth it; the bourgeois gentlewoman, in the last analysis, emerges as more credible and admirable than her proletarian lover. Thus the relationship between Gwyn and Rudy reflects various facets of Lawson's indecision: the need to reject the old order without the ability to fully accept the new; the recognition that the world which produced the avarice of Sol

Ginsburg also produced the nobility of Gwyn Ballantine; and, finally, the playwright's apprehension that like his gentlewoman, he may be too late for the brave new world he knows is coming.

The Pure in Heart ran seven performances; Gentlewoman lasted twelve. This dual rejection launched Lawson on a vitriolic attack upon the Broadway critics; he was particularly angered by the charge of indefiniteness. In a blistering reply to critic Bernard Sobel, Lawson wrote: "You may disagree with the thesis of the final act of Gentlewoman, the thesis that these people find a new balance and reason for their lives in communism. . . . you may regard it as absurd, subversive, or ridiculous. But I don't see how you can call it indefinite."²⁷ But, as we have demonstrated, and as the Marxist critics were to point out to Lawson, this thesis was not as obvious as he might have consciously hoped.

In any case, Lawson published the plays in a volume entitled With a Reckless Preface, and proceeded, once and for all, to wash his hands of Broadway. Like many an angry playwright before and after him, Lawson excoriated the dismissers of his art as men "whose incompetence . . . seriously hampers the normal activity of the theatre."²⁸ But Lawson did not limit himself to personal abuse; he attempted to demonstrate that the unhealthiness of the Broadway stage was fundamentally a social phenomenon, that the commercial theatre could not

tolerate seriousness because it was obliged to express "the despair and weakness . . . of the middle-class mind" which supported it. Therefore, Lawson adamantly refused to accept Broadway's terms, and decided to direct his creative energies in an alternative direction: "The only answer is to turn resolutely to the building of the revolutionary theatre."²⁹

But despite the Marxist basis of this attack and evaluation, despite Lawson's assertion that the characters in Gentlewoman found "a new balance and reason for their lives in communism," the attitude of the Marxist critics was no less hostile to the implications of Lawson's efforts than that of the bourgeois critics he had reviled. In the New Masses of April 10, 1934, Mike Gold launched an attack upon Lawson's work under the title "A Bourgeois Hamlet of our Time," which was to be crucial in Lawson's political development. Gold noted that ten years before the Theatre Guild had produced Processional, "one of the first serious attempts made on the American stage to portray industrial America," but was nevertheless obligated to report that the promise of this early play was never fulfilled. All of Lawson's subsequent plays, he claimed, were vitiated by ideological confusion:

The world has changed enormously, but this author has learned nothing. He is still lost like Hamlet, in his inner conflict. Through all his plays wander a troop of ghosts disguised in the costumes of living men and women and repeating the same monotonous question: "Where do I belong in the warring world of two classes?"³⁰

In view of Lawson's statements concerning the class bases of American theatre and society, in view of his social insight, partially revealed in his plays, Gold felt compelled to ask: "What have you learned in these ten years?" And he answered the question himself: "'Nothing. I am still a bewildered wanderer lost between two worlds indulging myself in the same adolescent self-pity as in my first plays.'" And then, the cruelest blow of all to the man who had just rejected Broadway in hopes of revolutionary fulfillment: "From the two latest plays of Lawson's presented this season, and his Success Story of last year, it seems to me that Lawson, like many other fellow travelers, is hiding from his own fervid desire for bourgeois success, and the difficulty, often, of reconciling this dross with the revolutionary conscience."³¹

The intensity of this attack from such an unexpected quarter brought an immediate reply from Lawson. But where he had previously been defiant in his replies to his Broadway critics, he was in answer to Gold contrite and humble. In the very following issue of the New Masses Lawson submitted a reply entitled "Inner Conflict and Proletarian Art," and from the outset tried not so much to contest Gold's criticisms--he admitted "the truth of 70 per cent of Mike's attack"--as to explain the reasons for his deficiencies and offer hope for change. The familiar cry of mea culpa is in evidence; Lawson is surprised not by the truth of Gold's

indictment, but by the assumption that he proceeds in ignorance of his own faults. He admits that his "work to date is utterly unsatisfactory in its political orientation," but claims in defense that it is very difficult for a person of bourgeois orientation to achieve a genuine acceptance of proletarian ideals. Moreover, he denies the charge that his preoccupation with capitalist decay necessarily implies that he is involved in this decay; he maintains that his work does demonstrate an oderly development toward revolutionary consciousness.

After the childish high spirits of Processional, I turned to a confused religious escape in Nirvana; that was the inevitable step considering my background and intellectual processes. The Internationale was a serious attempt to portray a world revolution, but my lack of a theoretical background betrayed me into many inexcusable errors and a general air of anarchistic sentimentality. . . . I believe Gentlewoman, in spite of faults, shows a considerable ideological advance. . . . It is a play about a dying bourgeois class . . . on Marxian lines.³²

In short, Lawson rebukes Gold only for not offering constructive criticism that could help him attain ideological clarity, for "Marxian criticism is the only criticism with which I am in the least concerned." There is, he affirms, no need to fear that he is drifting toward "any sort of liberal betrayal of the workingclass," for he intends to demonstrate clearly his new found ideological awareness: "Where do I belong? . . . I intend to make my answer with due consideration and with as much clarity and vigor as I possess."³³

Harold Clurman confirms Lawson's humility in the face of Marxist criticism. Clurman, as co-founder of the Group Theatre, which had produced Success Story and Gentlewoman, and as a fervent believer in Lawson's talent, accompanied the latter to a radical literary club. Lawson had accepted an invitation to speak to the members on the meaning of his plays. But before he could take the floor he was subjected to a bombardment of indictments, the burden of which was that though undeniably a writer of talent he was ideologically confused.

When Lawson rose to speak [reports Clurman] I was shocked to find him not only humble but apologetic. He talked like a man with a troubled conscience, a man confessing his sin, and in some way seeking absolution. He wanted his present critics to like him; he wanted to live up to their expectations, fulfill their requirements. He knew his plays were faulty; he was seeking³⁴ in his heart and mind for the cause and remedy.

Thus, in 1934, began what Lawson later termed "an intensive reevaluation of my work as an artist,"³⁵ a reevaluation made meaningful for him in light of the significant fact that he joined the Communist Party.³⁶ It was no longer any question of "which side are you on?" Lawson was committed; he belonged.

It has been suggested to him by his new comrades that what he needed for both ideological and esthetic clarity was greater contact with the working-classes. Lawson readily admitted this, and soon went on a trip to cover the Scottsboro

case for the Daily Worker and the New Masses. He was arrested almost immediately by the police in Birmingham, Alabama, and returned at once to New York to write about the "small but powerful groups of politicians in Georgia and Alabama [who are] . . . proceeding to Hitlerize those states in defiance of the majority of white and Negro citizens."³⁷

Thus Lawson's career as activist began. During the next decade and a half he was to involve himself in most of the Marxist and Popular Front causes and organizations of his day. He was among the leadership in the League of American Writers and was active in their congresses and conferences; he was associate editor of the New Masses, and later Mainstream, and Masses and Mainstream; he was vice-president of the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions; he was involved in the organization of the Screen Writers' Guild and served as its first president; he was one of the organizers of the Conference against Thought-Control, and participated in the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace in New York in 1949.³⁸

The intense political involvement of Lawson's period of commitment reveals him in several roles in relationship to the drama. As dramatic theorist he calls for and oversees the production of revolutionary drama, and attempts a formal analysis of dramatic technique in Marxian terms; as dramatist he writes a proletarian play, Marching Song; and as screen-writer (apart from his organizational and supervisory duties),

he writes a film on the Spanish Civil War, Blockade, which was to become the subject of intense controversy. Let us consider each of these roles in turn.

Lawson announced his commitment formally in the pages of New Theatre, the official organ of left-wing theatre, in an article entitled "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," and most significantly subtitled "The Artist Must Take Sides." The tone of self-deprecation is still present, but it is balanced by the fervor of new faith. Above all, Lawson's premises are now completely Marxist; he calls for the theatrical artist to renounce the tawdriness and futility of the bourgeois theatre and work towards the creation of a completely independent revolutionary theatre, a theatre which would reflect the realities of class warfare.

As the class struggle grows more intense and more openly apparent it is reflected more clearly in the various arts: the escapists . . . who chatter about "pure art" find that they are no longer able to hide behind their esthetic liberalism. The artist is forced to recognize the elementary facts of the economic struggle; he is forced to take sides.

. . . .³⁹

Once having begun, Lawson warmed to the task of social and dramatic critic; throughout his many pronouncements of the decade, he continually excoriated the values of Broadway drama. He attacked the Theatre Guild as too conservative for the present period of change ("an esthetic safety valve for middle-class discontent"),⁴⁰ and the Pulitzer Prize awards as a defense of the social and theatrical status quo.

And as he felt more secure in his critical position, he offered "corrective" criticism to the left itself. He attacked New Theatre "for not giving us the Marxian attack or the proletarian vitality which we (workers in all branches of the theatre trying to solve the difficulties of a revolutionary approach) need so desperately";⁴¹ and he took Theatre Union to task because its productions were not sufficiently specific in their social criticism. The effectiveness of art, he pointed out, "depends on the ability to grapple, in strictly dramatic terms, with the detailed reality of economics and politics." The artist cannot avoid partisanship; he must face the problems which the working-class itself faces. As for himself, Lawson has completely exorcised his past indecision: "I do not hesitate to say that it is my aim to present the communist position, and to do so in the most specific manner. This is what I believe to be a correct approach."⁴² Thus, in his newly acquired role as dean of the revolutionary theatrical movement, Lawson found himself by virtue of his past reputation in a position to criticize some of its methods. It was a new role for Lawson, that of the dispenser rather than the recipient of criticism, and one cannot escape the feeling that it was a role that he thoroughly enjoyed. In speeches before left-wing theatre groups, in the pages of the Marxist press, his critical voice became increasingly frequent and increasingly shrill. As the decade progressed, the ideologist in Lawson emerged ever

stronger, and his new role became progressively defined as dramatic guardian of the revolutionary faith.

But Lawson's criticisms were not entirely negative. He recognized that much of Marxist criticism was ineffective because it did not concern itself with the problem of technique; he strongly felt that "the greatest need of current dramatic criticism is a comparative method of analysis, by which art can be judged in relation to cultural trends and social pressure."⁴³ It was precisely this kind of method that he attempted to provide in the Theory and Technique of Playwriting (1936). It is significant that Lawson should begin such an undertaking at the expense of his artistic energies, for he insisted upon completing the work rather than finishing the play for which the Group Theatre had given him an advance.⁴⁴

Having been purged ideologically by his commitment, Lawson endeavored in his work to clarify himself esthetically by carefully analyzing dramatic history and technique in the light of Marxism. It is an ambitious work, simultaneously, in the words of Barrett Clark, "a preachment, a criticism of life, a practical treatise and a plea."⁴⁵ It tries not only to demonstrate the underlying historical connections between the drama, criticism, and philosophy of a given period, but also to demonstrate the more difficult thesis that the laws of dramatic construction inevitably express social purpose. Lawson's dramatic analyses attempt to answer the larger social

question of what contemporary lessons are to be learned from the dramatic experience of the past. He considers not only the historical determinants of dramatic art, but also those distinguishing elements present in all great art which transcend their historical determination. In a paper delivered at the 1935 American Writers' Congress entitled "Technique and the Drama," and written at a time when Lawson was actively engaged in research for his work, he summarized briefly, but, I feel, without violence, the thesis of his impending work:

There are three basic principles of play construction: conflict, action, unity. The application of these principles is complex, and requires careful definition and analysis . . . (a) Conflict and action involve the exercise of the conscious will toward a goal; (b) this involves social judgments and social purpose; (c) it may then be assumed that the dramatist's conception of social meaning and purpose will determine the exact form of the conflict; (d) then construction is not merely a pitcher into which the social content is poured, but is the core of the social content itself.⁴⁶

In short, Lawson affirms that "the distinction between form and content is a metaphysical distinction, which has no meaning in terms of life or art."⁴⁷ Modern drama is largely deficient technically because it is deficient ideologically; great art always came to terms with the reality of social issues in its period. The essence of great drama has always been social conflict--persons against persons, or individuals against groups, or groups against social or natural forces--in which the conscious will, exerted for the accomplishment of specific social aims, is sufficiently strong to bring the

conflict to a point of crisis. The failure of modern bourgeois drama lies in "the denial of the conscious will, and the consequent denial of growth and dynamic development."⁴⁸

In the light of these convictions--the equation of ideological and technical coherence--Lawson undertakes, in his Theory and Technique, and in his criticisms in the Marxist press, to document the failings of bourgeois drama. Eugene O'Neill's "creative consciousness and will are in conflict with the sterile thinking which destroys both art and life";⁴⁹ the sentimental romanticism which mars the work of Maxwell Anderson extends logically from his belief that "qualities of character are of final value and must triumph over a hostile environment";⁵⁰ even the radical Lillian Hellman is taken to task because, in Days to Come, she does not clearly demonstrate the inevitability of class struggle. In his most admonishing voice Lawson stresses the necessity of commitment for the artist: "Art cannot be created out of shreds and patches of beliefs and sentiments. One cannot interpret a living social process without a living social philosophy."⁵¹

In Marching Song (1937) Lawson endeavored to offer by means of demonstration how sound ideology can produce sound art. In this play, the story of a sit-down strike in an automobile town, Lawson attempted to write the model of the revolutionary drama, a play which demonstrated conclusively the decisiveness born of ideological clarity. It is, in fact, Lawson's esthetic testament of faith. He had

demonstrated in his many actions and statements the firmness of his new-found revolutionary commitment; it remained to demonstrate the validity of the thesis propounded in The Theory and Technique of Playwriting. Lawson would show that not only had he purged himself of political indecision, but of dramatic confusion as well.

Marching Song conforms structurally to the tripartite formula of overt proletarian literature: (1) the proletarian hero (or heroes--the mass is often the protagonist in proletarian literature) is, by pressure of economic exploitation, mired in defeatism and hostility; (2) the revolutionary situation--invariably a strike--arises, and the hero is not sure of his allegiance; he is fearful of (a) losing the little he has, (b) associating with "reds"; (3) the hero throws in his lot with the militant revolutionary faction and marches on to victory or heroic defeat.

In order to affirm its revolutionary implications, proletarian fiction and drama often resorted to the most obvious devices of melodrama. Thus Marching Song presents as overt a series of melodramatic villains as ever graced the pages of popular fiction. The gangsters brought in to break the strike are a uniformly sadistic and blood-thirsty crew, sketched in the colors of the comic-strip: "Enter Gunboat Gurney, a big gorilla, immaculately dressed in a purple shirt, with tie and socks to match and a black derby."⁵² The thugs are given names with a particularly unpleasant

onomatopoetic ring: Tubby, Belcher, Feiler, Binks, etc. And Doc Matthew, the local Coughlinite, is drawn in the vivid outlines of a New Masses cartoon: "I got nothing against the Jews, I say send them to Africa." (pp. 130-31)

Lawson had taken Theatre Union to task for the lack of specificity in its plays; he does not commit this error. He specifically praises the militancy of Hank's union, the Electrical Workers, and does not miss a chance to insert contemporary references and social comment. He makes the appropriate remarks on such subjects as the Scottsboro boys, women's rights, and all varieties of prejudice: against foreigners, Italians, Jews, Irish, and, most particularly, Negroes. He attempts to dramatize the foolishness of racial prejudice in the relationship between Pete and Lucky, the Negro; at the beginning of the play, when Pete is mired in defeatism, he believes the familiar racial stereotype: "I guess you don't worry about nothing," he tells Lucky, "shuffle along, laugh an' sing, happy-go-lucky, . . . don't give a hot damn, no more than a tiger in the jungle." (p.53) But when Pete has achieved class-consciousness, after he throws in his lot with the strikers, Lucky asks him: "You walk with me?" And Pete answers: "I'll walk with you, brother," (p. 149)

The development of Pete's revolutionary consciousness conforms to the dictates of the proletarian formula. We

know from the very outset that Pete cannot be a "bad guy." First of all, we learn that his name is on a blacklist, and in his first lines he defends in semi-Marxian terms his right to the garden from which he has been dispossessed,

I know what's mine and what's not mine. They told me I had no right. . . . What I planted with my hands. Can you take a mortgage on a flower? Can you foreclose on a root in the ground? Is the bank going to dig up the bulbs, put 'em in the valuts where they keep the money, keep 'em safe for another spring? (pp. 26-27)

Obviously, a man of such inherent proletarian virtue cannot be damned. So we know that despite his racism, despite his indeterminateness, he must be redeemed. And Pete's moment of truth comes when he is offered his job and home back in exchange for information as to the whereabouts of the union organizer, Anderson. Despite doubts, Pete cannot "rat." "Why would I throw away everything we wanted an' worked for?" he explains to his wife; "I had to do it. I kept thinking of the men sitting there in the plant I'm there with 'em, can't cut myself off no more'n I'd cut my arm." (p. 111) Pete, as we knew he would be, is saved.

Pete is not, however, the protagonist of Marching Song; following in the tradition of many proletarian novels and plays, Lawson's real hero is the collective group of workers who achieve militancy as the play runs its course. These include Bill Anderson, the union organizer, who characteristically is offered as a sacrificial martyr to the revolutionary cause--he is tortured to death by company thugs;

Hank and Mary McGilliguddy, the militant workers who play a large part in the union activities (Hank in fact, succeeds in turning off the power, an action which, at the end of the play, presages the workers' triumph); and Lucky, the Negro brought in to scab who remains to become a stalwart of the revolutionary cause and offers the final, militant peroration.

It is clear that Lawson's dramatic voice is now stridently revolutionary, that class warfare is his basic esthetic metaphor:

This country's a battlefield. Maine to California
is No Man's Land. No movie stuff, no fireworks in
the air at night like a movie battle, no blond
nurses to kneel over you. . . . Working stiff's got
no tin hat on his head--no bayonet in his hand--
fighting hungry death with his bare hands. . . .
(p. 49)

In such a war, Lawson affirms, the working-class must unite against its common enemy; once united it cannot help but triumph; and to confirm this fervent belief, the play ends on the note of militancy inherent in the words of the miner's song, which, as the marching song of the title, explicitly points the revolutionary moral: "Step by step the longest march/ Can be won, can be won;/ Single stones will form an arch/ One by one, one by one. . . ." (p. 84)

A play such as Marching Song is involved with the religious issues of salvation and damnation in terms of a specific orthodoxy, and thus demands a certain communion between author and audience. Much of its effect is built upon anticipation, the knowledge that some, like Pete and

Lucky, are assured of salvation, and that others, like the gangster villains, are ultimately assured of damnation. The very predictability of structure serves the work's ritualistic function; the call to arms and the marching song itself are the play's sacraments. Therefore, it is only as a political communicant that one can appreciate Marching Song, and the press in its evaluation of the play split quite logically along ideological lines. The Marxist press was uniform in its praise (the Daily Worker headlined Nathaniel Buchwald's review "Marching Song Finest Labor Play--Lawson's Drama the Most Eloquent and Poetic Dramatization of the Class Struggle In Our Time");⁵³ and the Broadway critics were just as unanimous in their condemnation.

The New Masses submitted a questionnaire to the audience at Theatre Union's production of the play asking its opinion of its merits, and found that the responses varied according to political affiliation. Of the six who liked it (only eight answered the questionnaire), four were Communists, one was a Socialist, and one was Farmer-Laborite. The "indifferent" response was from a Roosevelt supporter, and the person who disliked the play was, in the words of the Marxist critic, "obviously of an anarchistic type," because he or she had left blank those questions dealing with age, sex, trade union membership, or political affiliation.⁵⁴

Had Lawson displayed a real sense of the working-class, the reactions to Marching Song might have been less

ideologically predictable. But Lawson's difficulty (shared by many who attempted proletarian novels or plays) was that he was bourgeois, and not at home in the proletarian milieu. His working-class characters smack of contrivance, of the willful projection of certain qualities which the political mind feels should be characteristic of workers. For example, can one imagine (in the context of a naturalistic play) the following language in the mouth of an uneducated worker?

"I'd tear her flesh till she'd bleed, kiss the blood away. I had no more shame than a stallion trumpeting my strength."
(p. 35)

Obviously Marching Song was written out of the intellectual conviction of what a revolutionary play should be; it has no roots in Lawson's emotional experience. As with much of middle-class "proletarian" literature, it fails to substantiate Lawson's dramatic thesis that sound ideology inevitably produces sound art. Clurman felt the same way; he had been offered the play for the Group Theatre, but rejected it because he found it "cold, artificial . . . lacking in spontaneity." Lawson angrily countered this rejection with the query, "Don't you think proletarian plays should be written at this time?" To which Clurman replied: "Perhaps. But not by you."⁵⁵

Marching Song was Lawson's last published or produced play. He was obviously happier in the role of polemicist and critic than that of playwright. But there is one other

creative role in which Lawson was engaged during the thirties and the forties, that of screen writer; and it is in that role that he achieved his greatest notoriety. His career in Hollywood began earlier than is generally supposed; although he did not engage himself primarily as screenwriter until 1938, he was, in fact, one of the first playwrights brought to the film industry after the introduction of sound and the sudden need for dialogue, in 1928. It is significant that at no time during his career as screenwriter did he subject Hollywood to the merciless attack which he levelled at Broadway (in contrast, for example, to Odets). It was only in 1954, after his release from prison for contempt of Congress and his dismissal by the Hollywood studios, that he saw in the film capital the same capitalistic rapaciousness reflected on Broadway. In fact, as early as 1932, in an article entitled "A Dramatist's Tribute to Helpful Hollywood," Lawson attacked those writers who, after achieving some literary or theatrical success, go to Hollywood for a few months and then "hasten back to New York with a lot of amusing stories and a vow never to return to the flesh pots--a vow which is broken as soon as a new contract is offered."⁵⁶

Although the problem of the communist screenwriter concerned the House Un-American Activities Committee on the grounds of the "subversive" character of their screenplays, it concerns us from quite the opposite point of view; the question we must ask is how could the Marxist screenwriter

content himself with the sugar-coated pap and hack melodrama which he turned out?⁵⁷ Lawson's credits are better than some, but of his sixteen major films (which include Algiers, Earthbound, They Shall Have Music, Sahara, and Counter-attack), only one, Blockade, in any way touched a controversial political issue, and this, as we shall see, was hardly revolutionary. Murray Kempton's explanation is bitterly critical:

We are told now that this was a time when the communists influenced Hollywood's most passionate creative minds; if this is true, we may wonder why so few of them felt any impulse to take time off and form independent companies to produce films of deeper social content and involvement than the stuff they were fabricating for the big studios. The answer must be that they did not really care and were not fundamentally ashamed of what they were doing.⁵⁸

Perhaps Lawson was not ashamed of what he was doing, but we cannot maintain in face of the evidence that he did not care to further the revolutionary cause. Perhaps the answer lies in a compromise which he felt impelled to make, in the feeling that he could serve the Marxist cause better in his role as critic, theorist, organizer--as, in fact, leader of the Hollywood radical colony--than in his role as artist. For Mike Gold had written in his challenge to Lawson in 1934, "When a man has achieved a set of principles, when he knows firmly he believes in them, he can, like the Soviet diplomats, make compromises, box office or otherwise."⁵⁹

Lawson had achieved his set of principles; he was permitted his artistic compromise.

Lawson had one chance, however, to make a vital comment on a controversial political subject. In 1938 Walter Wanger engaged him to revamp a script that Clifford Odets had written on the subject of the Spanish Civil War. Lawson responded with an original story based upon the same characters called Blockade. It was this film which the Un-American Activities Committee cited in 1949 as particularly subversive in its content.

Inasmuch as Lawson's position on the Spanish Civil War had been typically uncompromising in its support of the Loyalists (a not uncommon partisanship, one might add), his film was eagerly awaited by radical and liberal circles. Granville Hicks writes: "I remember how excited we were . . . over advanced reports on Blockade, which, we were told, was going to strike a great blow for the Loyalist cause in Spain. But when the picture was released, it did not even indicate on which side the hero was fighting."⁶⁰ The Marxist press was, indeed, puzzled. The New Masses reviewer wrote: "The picture is, of course, without the direct reference to the Spanish situation that would make it complete and unmistakably clear. . . ." But despite the fact that "the words, 'fascist,' 'loyalist' or even 'Spain' are not mentioned," and that "the republican uniform has been disguised," and "that there is no topical reference whatsoever," the Marxist

critic felt compelled to state that "John Howard Lawson's screenplay will haunt the American people."⁶¹ In a study of Film Content, Dorothy Jones writes:

Since the film contained no symbols or terminology being used by the Communists, it cannot be said to have been Communist propaganda. Actually the primary theme of this movie was anti-war, a viewpoint widely endorsed at the time not only by liberals, but by conservative isolationists, who reviewed the picture favorably.⁶²

Obviously, Lawson's dicta about specificity did not apply to his screenplays. An examination of the script reveals it to fall not even in the category of serious anti-war protest which includes such memorable films as La Grande Illusion or All Quiet on the Western Front. Blockade is first and foremost an espionage melodrama; what "social consciousness" it contains is gratuitously grafted upon the main body of the film in speeches of generalized protest. For example, Norma, the heroine, defects to the (presumably) Loyalist side "because I've seen the eyes of the women--I've seen the children dying--it's not their war--I've seen the truth--I can't go on."⁶³ But what is the truth? It is never specified. Who indeed is behind the war? Lawson does not--or cannot--answer. Thus the real issues involved in the Spanish Civil War are evaded, and the villains, Vallejo and Gallinet, are portrayed in terms of conventional melodrama. They are not even "proletarian" villains; they represent nothing beyond their own intrinsic evil. Perhaps Lawson felt that he could get away with nothing better than

generalized anti-war protest, but his melodramatics blunt the edge even of that; Blockade is "controversial" in subject matter, nothing else.

The bulk of his work in Hollywood adds nothing to Lawson's reputation as dramatist. He found financial sustenance as a member of the Golden Ghetto, and satisfaction in his role as critic and polemicist. However, he returned to New York in 1940 to offer Clurman a new play, Parlor Magic, in which, according to Clurman, he "took some of the subjective turbulence and divided conscience of his earlier work and tried to order this material with a rational, correctly contemporary (that is, progressive) point of view. The whole thing failed to come off."⁶⁴ Lawson was bitterly disappointed by Clurman's rejection, returned to Hollywood, reconsidered the script, and decided that it contained too many stories. Although he subsequently revised it, Parlor Magic has never been produced or published.

The dramatist in Lawson was dead; the polemicist remained. He resumed his role as dramatic guardian of ideological correctness, chastening Budd Schulberg (ironically, in the light of his own Success Story) for the "negative" savagery of What Makes Sammy Run?, and Albert Maltz for his apostasy in criticizing Marxist critical orthodoxy;⁶⁵ after his term in jail the polemicist in Lawson was further strengthened. He finally finished his long study of American and European history--"the search for the real

meaning of our traditions"⁶⁶--which he had begun back in 1934. In The Hidden Heritage (1950) Lawson "tried to find the roots of culture in the life of the people, . . . in their battle against exploitation and oppression. . . . We cannot understand the role of the people in history "unless we also understand the historical illusions which misrepresent history in order to serve the interests of privileged classes. Thus culture must be studied as a weapon in the struggle of classes."⁶⁷

The weapon remains. Lawson's last published work was entitled Film in the Battle of Ideas (1953). Political stridency is its dominant characteristic; Lawson even takes himself to task for maintaining in his revised edition of Theory and Technique (1949) that there could be no permanent interference with the development of the American motion picture as a "people's art." He scornfully notes that no Marxist critic had chastised his unwarranted optimism: "I am not one of those who hold that 'the integrity of the artist' is best served by ignoring mistakes."⁶⁸ The voice of the artist is indeed silent; we hear only the chastening tones of the commissar.

Can we draw any moral from the experience of John Howard Lawson's road to commitment? Insofar as we are concerned with the dramatist and not the man, I think we can. For the unfortunate fact is that the esthetic legacy of Lawson's commitment has been largely silence; Marching Song

remains the sum-total of his committed drama. Clurman's assessment of Lawson is astute:

Lawson was now [i.e., in 1940] probably a much more practical, useful citizen than he had been from 1925 to 1935; he was no longer working as an artist. Had he "bottle-necked" himself through a too strict discipline of moral self-scrutiny, a self-imposed censorship calculated to make the old wine of his emotions pour properly into the new bottles of his social sense? Had he tamed his unruly imagination and inner drives with the self-inflicted rod of a stiff ideology?⁶⁹

The record would seem to answer Clurman's questions affirmatively. Although Lawson's talent was never major, the bulk of his work does possess a driving vitality and a passionate integrity which command respect. His dramatic tragedy was that his very real talent lay precisely in the intensity of his emotional conflict, in the documentation of the struggle between man's inner drives and his social conscience. It is this conflict which makes his early plays, for all their manifest deficiencies, significant. After his commitment, he feels intellectually compelled to write "correctly," an action disastrous for him as a playwright because his virtues were never intellectual to begin with. He makes one attempt to write what he believes should be a significant drama, but comes to realize, perhaps for the reasons Clurman suggests above, that he had best use his energies in other roles. The "bourgeois Hamlet of our time" left the stage and never returned.

Footnotes to Chapter V

1. (New York, 1955), p. 210.
2. The Fervent Years, p. 87.
3. Introduction to Loud Speaker (New York, 1927), p.ix.
4. "Biographical Notes," Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, IV, No. 1 (1956), 73.
5. Lawson, Roger Bloomer, in Drama and Theatre: Seven Modern Plays, ed. A. R. Fulton (New York, 1946), p. 233.
6. Lawson, Processional (New York, 1925), p. v.
7. Although Lawson's style in Processional seems decidedly Brechtian, there is no evidence of his familiarity with the German's work; Brecht's influence on Anglo-American drama does not begin until the international success of the Three-Penny Opera at the end of the decade.
8. A Part of Our Time, p. 185.
9. Lawson, Processional, rev. ver. (Thea. Coll., typewritten, 1937), Act III, pp. 32-33. Paginated by acts.
10. Donald Nash, review, Oct. 26, 1937, p. 28.
11. Gilbert Gabriel, review, N.Y. Sun, Mar. 4, 1926, p. 24.
12. Quoted by Gabriel, loc. cit.
13. Loc. cit.
14. Lawson, The Internationale (New York, 1928), p. 30.
15. Rideout, The Radical Novel, p. 132.
16. "Biographical Notes," p. 75.
17. Fervent Years, p. 18.
18. "Biographical Notes," p. 75.
19. Fervent Years, p. 87.
20. Lawson, Success Story (New York, 1932), p. 207.

21. Oct. 3, 1932, p. 1.
22. "A Bourgeois Hamlet of Our Time," NM, Apr. 10, 1934, p. 29.
23. Margaret W. Mather, review of With A Reckless Preface, NM, July 17, 1934, p. 28.
24. "A Bourgeois Hamlet," p. 28.
25. Lawson, The Pure in Heart, in With A Reckless Preface (New York, 1934), p. 45.
26. Lawson, Gentlewoman, in With A Reckless Preface, p. 213.
27. Quoted in Bernard Sobel's column, N.Y. Daily Mirror, Mar. 28, 1934, p. 20.
28. With A Reckless Preface, p. ix.
29. Ibid., p. xvii.
30. "A Bourgeois Hamlet," p. 28.
31. Ibid., pp. 28-29.
32. Apr. 17, 1934, p. 30.
33. Loc. cit.
34. Fervent Years, p. 125.
35. "Biographical Notes," p. 76.
36. Kempton, p. 185.
37. Lawson, A Southern Welcome (New York, 1934), p. 14.
38. "Biographical Notes," p. 75.
39. June 1, 1934, p. 6.
40. "The Theatre Guild Plays," NM, Jan. 5, 1937, p. 23.
41. "Play on Dimitroff," DW, July 23, 1934, p. 5.
42. "Straight from the Shoulder," NT, Nov. 1934, pp. 11-12.
43. "Crisis in the Theatre," NM, Dec. 15, 1936, p. 35.

44. Fervent Years, p. 148.
45. "Lawson's Technique and Reevaluation of the Drama," NM, Apr. 28, 1936, p. 25.
46. American Writers' Congress, pp. 123-124.
47. Lawson, Theory and Technique of Playwriting (New York, 1936), p. x.
48. "Technique and the Drama," p. 127.
49. Theory and Technique, p. 132.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
51. "A Comparative Study of The Children's Hour and Days to Come," NT, Mar. 1937, p. 61.
52. Lawson, Marching Song (New York, 1937), p. 127.
53. Mar. 2, 1937, p. 7.
54. "Theatre," Mar. 16, 1937, pp. 30-31.
55. Fervent Years, p. 175.
56. "A Dramatist's Tribute to Helpful Hollywood," uncited clipping, dated 1932 (Group Theatre Scrapbook, Thea. Coll.).
57. See Dorothy B. Jones, "Communism and the Movies: A Study of Film Content," reprinted in John Cogley, Report on Blacklisting, I (New York, 1956), 196-233.
58. Kempton, pp. 195-196.
59. "A Bourgeois Hamlet," p. 29.
60. Where We Came Out, p. 57.
61. Joseph Dugan, "Movies," June 28, 1938, p. 27.
62. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 208.
63. Lawson, selections from the script of Blockade, One-Act Play Magazine, Oct. 1938, p. 406.
64. Fervent Years, pp. 227-228.

65. See Lawson, "Art is A Weapon," NM, Mar. 19, 1946, pp. 18-20.

66. "Biographical Notes," p. 75.

67. Lawson, The Hidden Heritage (New York, 1950), p. vii.

68. Lawson, Film in the Battle of Ideas (New York, 1953), p. 21.

69. Fervent Years, p. 228.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROAD FROM MARXIST COMMITMENT: CLIFFORD ODETS

The artist never gives the thing
or the person; he gives only the
trend represented by the thing
or the person.

Clifford Odets, "Genesis of a
Play"

Every age destroys the idols of its predecessor. Literary idols are particularly vulnerable, for that quality which allows an artist to speak in the authentic voice of his age will also tie him inexorably to it; and the new generation, retrospectively viewing the furor of his emergence, will wonder what all the fuss was about. Such has already been the fate of Clifford Odets, the Golden Boy of Depression drama, the texture of whose work is intricately interwoven with the dislocated strands of the American thirties. Odets was the angry young man of his day, and in this very anger he represented the anguish of a new generation forced to come to terms with the most fundamental social and political questions. When in one tremendous burst Odets' voice was heard on the American stage, a wave of recognition went out to meet it. It was more than the young man's

radicalism which endeared him to his generation. Articulating the dilemma of a society frustrated by economic breakdown, above all he offered a fervent faith in the possibilities of a new world in which all mankind could awake and sing, a world in which "happiness isn't printed on dollar bills."

Clifford Odets scrawled his name across the page marked 1935 in American dramatic history. In the course of that year he had five plays produced, four of them on Broadway: Waiting for Lefty, Till the Day I Die, Awake and Sing!, and Paradise Lost. His short monologue, I Can't Sleep, was produced at a union benefit, and the aforementioned Lefty began a theatrical career that was to carry it, not only from one end of the United States to the other, but all over the world. The name of Odets became the number one topic of literary conversation, and the hitherto unknown and struggling young actor became one of the foremost celebrities of the day. The Literary Digest described his emergence:

In less than ninety days, toiling with the unrest of his times as a central theme, a young actor in the New York theatre . . . has become the most exciting spokesman the world of workers yet has produced, and he has become perhaps the most articulate dramatist available in the theatre.¹

For once the Broadway and the Marxist critics were at one in their praise. Richard Watts wrote in the Herald-Tribune, "It is pretty clear by now that Mr. Odets' talent for dramatic writing is the most exciting thing to appear in the American drama since the flaming emergence of

O'Neill. . . ."2 And the Marxist critics, despite specific reservations, found much to cheer about in the fact that the new young dramatist had emerged from their own ranks. The New Masses wrote of Lefty, "A valuable new play . . . [has] been written in the history of the American revolutionary theatre, a dramatic work with roots coiled about an actual event in the life of the New York proletariat."³

Odets' initial discovery was indeed the result of his radical affiliations. Lefty had been written in response to a contest by the left-wing New Theatre League which was looking for one-act plays on a revolutionary theme which might be easily produced. The play was written at fever heat in three days and nights, won the contest, and was produced at one of the New Theatre League's Sunday night benefit performances by members of the Group Theatre (to which Odets belonged). The performance on January 5, 1935, was one of the electrifying moments in American theatre. Harold Clurman relates its initial impact:

The first scene of Lefty had not played two minutes when a shock of delighted recognition struck the audience like a tidal wave. Deep laughter, hot assent, a kind of joyous fervor seemed to sweep the audience toward the stage. The actors no longer performed; they were being carried along as if by an exultancy of communication such as I had never witnessed in the theatre before. Audience and actors had become one. . . . When the audience at the end of the play responded to the militant question from the stage: "Well, what's the answer?" With a spontaneous roar of "Strike! Strike!" it was something more than a tribute to the play's effectiveness, more even than a testimony of the

audience's hunger for constructive social action. It was the birth cry of the '30s. Our youth had found its voice.⁴

Odets had succeeded where other revolutionary dramatists before him had failed. He had written a militant "agit-prop" drama which succeeded in appealing to unaffiliated liberals as well as to convinced Marxists. Lefty, after a series of tumultuous performances for radical audiences, made the pilgrimage to Broadway where it received, if not wholesale endorsement, at least most respectful attention. According to the Literary Digest: "the roar and surge of the propaganda . . . inflames the Communist patrons, but not once has it, also, failed to impress and give pause to those who, at heart and in their minds, are opposed to what the plays represent . . . the humanity of the plays is irresistible to all."⁵

Odets' achievement was to humanize the agit-prop, a form of drama whose avowed purpose, as we have observed, was to present political doctrine directly to the audience by means of broadly theatrical playlets. The following titles indicate the thematic simplicity of the form: Work or Wages, Unemployment, the Miners are Striking, Vote Communist. To achieve overtly didactic ends, a variety of dramaturgical devices were employed, many of them stemming from the theatrical experimentation of the twenties: choral recitation, episodic structure, satiric caricature, theatrical stylization. The form, which originated in the Soviet Union

in 1920, was introduced to the American stage a decade later, marking the beginning of the "new" social theatre movement. However, while there were over 7000 amateur agit-prop companies in the Soviet Union and two hundred similar units in Germany and Czechoslovakia in 1930, New York in the same year had only two, only one of which performed in English, the Workers' Labor Theatre (WLT) and the German-speaking Prolet-Bühne.⁶

To understand the manner in which Odets utilized the basic form of the agit-prop, let us examine a few representative samples of the genre. As an example of the agit-prop in its crudest form, John Bonn's Fifteen Minute Red Revue, which won first prize in the first National Workers' Theatre Spartakiade, will serve as well as any other. Produced by the Prolet-Bühne in German, the Revue is composed of six related sections, each of which deals with a specific problem of doctrinal awareness. For example, Part III begins by asking, WHAT IS THE SOVIET UNION? One of the workers answers that it is the land to emulate, but wonders if the Capitalists will ever surrender. At this point, Capitalism personified enters and declares that he would rather fight the Soviet Union than renounce his profits. He therefore directs his agents, Censor, Justice, Church, Press, Police, etc., to tell the proletariat lies about the Soviet Union. They unhesitatingly obey, but a new character, the Soviet Union, appears to correct the slander, and compares the truthful

Soviet press (symbolized by a worker carrying a sign labeled "Daily Worker") with the untruthful publications of the Socialist Party and the AF of L. Following a display by Soviet and American workers of the freedom and slavery which they respectively enjoy, the grand finale arrives in which the actors repeatedly shout allegiance to the Soviet Union and ask the audience for a show of solidarity. "With clenched fists raised," the spectators reply that they will fight "for the Soviet Union."⁷

Obviously we are dealing here with the crudest of morality plays. Conversion is not so much the purpose as reaffirmation of faith in terms of specific ritualistic devices; the hypnotic and magical effects of rhyme, repetition, and incantation are used emotively, not intellectually. If the form were to serve its agitational purpose, many practitioners agreed, it would have to become more sophisticated and meet some of the demands of dramatic effectiveness. Newsboy, produced in 1933 by the WLT, was perhaps the most effective of the earlier agit-props, but it too dealt only with allegorical abstraction; as an appeal to "come into the light, comrade," its agitational deficiency was that it too spoke only to those who were already "comrades."

The basic thesis of Newsboy is that the capitalist press dwells upon murder, rape, and violence in order to keep the proletariat's mind off the real social issues. The crowd on the stage, representing a cross section of

workers, has been worked up into a jingoist frenzy by the Newsboy's shouts of violence; "We need another war--war will end depression . . . war is natural." A Black Man, symbolizing militancy, shouts back at the Newsboy, "how long you goin' to stand there . . . yellin' . . . that workers should be murdered and strikes outlawed? . . . Come into the light, Newsboy, come into the light!"⁸

The symbols of capitalist manipulation are trotted on to the stage; Hearst, Huey Long, Father Coughlin, voicing war-like and anti-proletarian sentiments. Finally, however, a second newsboy appears shouting revolutionary wares: "Fight against war and Fascism. Learn the truth about the munitions racket." The crowd gathers around and reads the "truth," that eight and one-half million were killed in the last war; that ten million will probably die in the next war. The truth has set them free of capitalist lies, and they display copies of Fight, the organ of the American League Against War and Fascism, to the audience. And the Black Man, finding them converted, now turns to the audience; "Get yourself a trumpet, buddy, a big red trumpet, and climb to the top of the Empire State building and blare out the news . . . black men, white men, field men, shop men--it's time to fight war. It's time to fight fascism." (p. 5)

Newsboy was undoubtedly more sophisticated dramatically than the Fifteen Minute Red Revue; but although it contained in embryo most of the elements of the conversion drama,

it still dealt with abstractions rather than with actual human beings who could command an empathetic response. It did, however, appeal for specific action, support of the magazine Fight. This kind of appeal to direct action on a specific issue is perhaps best exemplified by a play by Art Smith and Elia Kazan called Dimitroff, which was presented at a Sunday night New Theatre League benefit as a companion piece to Lefty. As the introductory note to the play stated, "the story of this play is not primarily the story of Dimitroff. The hero of the production should be mass-pres-sure. The production play should be the account of how the pressure of the world proletariat forced the release of the class-war prisoners: Dimitroff, Taneff and Popoff. It should lead directly into the present mass struggle to force the release of Thaelmann and Torgler."⁹

The avowed purpose here is not conversion but action by the already converted to free the imprisoned German Communist Party leaders. "The workers not only of America," shouts one of the speakers in the play, "will shower the Nazi government with protest; and such protest will exert great pressure on the captors of our heroic comrades. But fellow workers, . . . we need funds to help the work of saving our comrades in Germany. Who will begin the contributions?" And the stage directions explicitly read, "Hands offering money come into the spotlight." (p. 21)

The choral antiphony with which Lefty concludes was not original with Odets. It was a common device in the agit-prop play. At the end of Dimitroff, instead of a curtain call, Dimitroff comes out in front of the curtain and speaks to the audience: "We have been saved by the world pressure of the revolutionary masses. But Torgler is still in prison and Thaelmann is held in chains. We must not falter now. We must fight fascism with undiminished strength and courage. We must free our comrades! Free all class war prisoners!!!

Audience: Free all class war prisoners!!
 Dimitroff: Free Torgler!!
 Audience: Free Torgler!!
 Dimitroff: Free Thaelmann!!
 Audience: Free Thaelmann!! (p. 24)

It is apparent that Waiting for Lefty is essentially in the agit-prop tradition. Its purpose is overtly didactic in its affirmation of communist doctrine; it is episodic in structure, cartoon-like in its character delineation, directly presentational in technique, and replete with slogans and political comment. Yet while its conclusion is strikingly similar to that of Dimitroff in its merging of actor and audience, in its militant cry to action, we may observe that Odets' plea to strike is essentially a device. The answer and response of actor and audience is not designed to achieve an immediate goal as in the case of Kazan and Smith's play, but is rather a symbolic call to arms, a demonstration of unity and achieved class consciousness.

Lefty's success lay in the fact that it appealed to the unconverted as well as to the militant; it swept all of a liberal persuasion into militant participation, at least in the theatre, by virtue of the precision with which Odets enunciated the Depression malaise. Odets' achievement lay in his ability to humanize the agit-prop without forgoing its theatricality and didacticism. He succeeded not only in presenting the conversion to militancy of a series of taxicab workers, but in forcing the audience to see in the plight of these characters a reflection of their own social predicament. Several Marxist critics, among them John Howard Lawson, objected to the designation of Lefty as a proletarian play because "the militant strike committee [is] made up largely of declassed members of the middle-class. One cannot reasonably call these people "Stormbirds of the working-class.'"¹⁰ But Lefty's strength as a conversion drama lay precisely in the fact that Odets' appeal was directed essentially to the class to which he belonged. Of the principal characters only two, Joe and Sid, are proletarians; the others represent various members of the declassed bourgeoisie: a lab assistant who refuses to become an informer, an actor who can't find work on the Broadway market, an interne who is fired because of the anti-semitism of his superiors. All are forced into militancy by social circumstances. "Don't call me red," shouts Joe, "You know what we are? The black and blue boys! We been kicked around so long

we're black and blue from head to toes!"¹¹ But Joe had not always been as adamant. He had been goaded to militancy by his wife's threat to leave him unless he organized and fought for his rights: "Get those hack boys together! . . . Stand up like men and fight for the crying kids and wives. Goddamnit! I'm tired of slavery and sleepless nights."

(p. 12)

Joe's social awakening is but one in the series of conversions that constitute Waiting for Lefty. Each episode presents the road to commitment of each of the several characters against the backdrop of various evils of capitalism: labor spying, informing, anti-semitism, economic aggression, etc. One by one the dramas of conversion are enacted: the interne finds that Jewish and Gentile capitalists are cut from the same cloth; the lab assistant recognizes that the logic of capitalism demands war; the workers, Sid and Joe, realize that the cards are stacked against the proletariat; and the young actor, turned down by a producer who cares more for his pet dog than for human beings, is taken in hand by a militant stenographer who undertakes his ideological enlightenment:

One dollar buys ten loaves of bread, Mister. Or one dollar buys nine loaves of bread and one copy of the Communist Manifesto. Learn while you eat. . . . Read while you run. . . . From Genesis to Revelation . . . the meek shall not inherit the earth! The MILITANT! Come out in the light Comrade!¹²

All roads lead to Agate's final peroration, his cry for alliance with the proletariat: "You Edna . . . Sid and Florrie, the other boys, old Doc Barnes--fight with us for right! It's war! Working class, unite and fight! Tear down the slaughter house of our old lives!" (p. 30) The basic metaphor of the play is, of course, the futility of waiting for something that will never come, the hope that somehow conditions may be alleviated by other than direct action. Fatt, the personification of the capitalist system, had counseled the workers to put their faith in "the man in the White House" in his attempt to dissuade them from striking; but half-way measures are doomed to failure. Salvation must be earned; Lefty never comes because he has been murdered--the traditional martyrdom of proletarian literature--and the act of waiting must be replaced by militancy.

Hello America! Hello! We're Stormbirds of the Working Class. Workers of the world . . . our bones and blood! And when we die they'll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces. We'll die for what is right! Put fruit trees where our ashes are! (p. 31)

The impact of Waiting for Lefty is irrevocably dependent upon its contemporaneity. In the thirties the play was a formidable weapon. Within weeks after its initial production it became the public property of left, and groups were organized all over the country to perform it. Odets later doubted if he had earned a thousand dollars out of the play: "People just did it. . . . It has been done all over the

world . . . and I have not received five cents of royalties. . . . It was at one time a kind of light-machine-gun that you wheeled in to use whenever there was any kind of strike trouble."¹³ A storm of censorship accompanied its production in many different cities. In Boston, the actors were arrested for language that was "extremely blasphemous"; in Philadelphia, the theatre in which the play was to be produced was suddenly called "unsafe," and the performance was cancelled.¹⁴ Will Geer produced the play in Hollywood despite threats and was severely beaten by hoodlums, and the voices of conservatism raised the customary hue and cry. For example, Judge Frankland Miles of Roxbury, Massachusetts stated, "Plays like this bring the mentality of the educated people down to the level of bums. What kind of audiences did you have anyway? They were illiterate and uneducated Negroes, foreigners, workers."¹⁵

The instantaneous success of Lefty at the New Theatre League Sunday performances caused the Group Theatre to present the play as one of its scheduled productions. In moving to Broadway, however, a new companion piece was needed to fill out the bill, since Dimitroff would hardly have succeeded uptown, and Odets wrote a play based upon contemporary life in Nazi Germany called Till the Day I Die. Based upon a letter in the New Masses, the plot concerns Ernst Taussig, a German communist captured by the Nazis in a raid and subjected by them to torture in an effort to force

him to inform upon his associates. Although he is never completely broken, Taussig is made to appear a traitor to his comrades. Blacklisted by his former friends, fearful of compromising the revolutionary cause, Ernst commits suicide.

Lawson objected that "the sustained conflict, the conscious will of man pitted against terrible odds is omitted. We see [Taussig] . . . only before and after. The crucial stage, in which his will is tested and broken, occurs between scenes five and seven."¹⁶ The significant fact is that the audience is never really sure whether or not Taussig was broken by the Nazis or whether or not he retained his integrity to the end. At the beginning of the play he is a convinced revolutionary fervently viewing the classless future. Has he indeed changed when he is released from his initial Nazi captivity? It does not seem so. To Tilly's query as to whether or not he was afraid Ernst answers, "A man who knows that the world contains millions of brothers and sisters can't be afraid. . . . In the cell there--I know I stayed alive because I knew my comrades were with me in the same pain and chaos."¹⁷

All the evidence of the play supports Ernst's contention that he kept revolutionary faith, that he had been forced to accompany storm troopers on their round-ups of radicals, that he was forcibly brought into court at political trials, that, in short, it was planned to make it appear as if he were an informer. Nowhere is it implied that Taussig was

actually broken. The important fact is that the issue of his innocence or guilt is not the crucial dramatic question which the play posits. It is rather involved with the problem of political loyalty; the play affirms the revolutionary contention that the individual is less important than the cause to which he is dedicated. As the Party Secretary states, "Comrades, now is no time for sentiment. This is the hour of steel. . ." (p. 146) In the best scene in the play--best because it smacks of the authentic logic of political debate--the local cell excommunicates Taussig because his comrades cannot afford to take the chance that he may be guilty; he cannot be trusted, whether he is innocent or not. Love and fraternal affection must bow before the iron exigencies of the revolutionary situation, since in a warring world "it is brother against brother." Just as the labor spy in Waiting for Lefty is exposed by his brother, Ernst Taussig is disavowed by his brother Carl:

Many a comrade has found with deep realization that he has no home, no brother--even no mothers or fathers! What must we do here? . . . We must expose this one brother wherever he is met. Whosoever looks in his face is to point the finger. Children will jeer at him in the darkest streets of his life! Yes, the brother, the erstwhile comrade cast out! There is no brother, no family, no deeper mother than the working class. (p. 146)

Ernst recognizes that there is but one action left him, and he asks his brother to administer the coup de grace. He knows that he must be cast away, that the individual is unimportant in the greater struggle, that his realization

will come through the work of his comrades; "the day is coming, and I'll be in the final result." (p. 153) Unlike the traditional martyrs of Marxist literature, whose deaths serve as the catalysts for the awakening of others, Ernst believes that he is the phoenix that will arise from the ashes of his necessary death. Thus the play ends, not with the conversion of the previously uncommitted, but with the affirmation by the committed that its existence is contained in the collective of which it is a part:

We live in the joy of a great coming people. The animal kingdom is past. . . . Now we are ready: we have been steeled in a terrible fire, but soon all the desolate places of the world must flourish with human genius. Brothers will live in the soviets of the world! Yes, a world of security and freedom is waiting for all mankind! (p. 154)

At the time of the composition of Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die, Odets' voice spoke in typical Marxist tones, maintaining that the function of art was primarily propagandistic. "It may be said that anything which one writes on 'the side' of the large majority of people is propaganda. But today the truth followed to its logical conclusion is inevitably revolutionary."²⁸ It is not surprising, then, that the author of such a statement should be, in fact, a member of the Communist Party, having been recruited by the small core of communists within the Group Theatre. Years later, in the familiar purgative drama of

the fifties, Odets related to the House Un-American Activities Committee the circumstances of his enrollment:

In a time of great social unrest many people found themselves reaching out for new ideas, new ways of solving depressions or making a better living, fighting for one's rights. . . . These were . . . horrendous days . . . there was a great deal of talk about amelioration of conditions, about how should one live. . . . One read literature; there were a lot of . . . pamphlets. . . . I read them along with a lot of other people, and finally joined the Communist Party in the belief, in the honest and real belief, that this was some way out of the dilemma in which we found ourselves.¹⁹

Odets testified that he remained in the Party "from toward the end of 1934 to the middle of '35, covering maybe anywhere from six to eight months."²⁰ It is not our purpose here to scrutinize the motivations which resulted in Odets' disavowal. We are concerned primarily with the dramatist not the individual; however, we may observe that Odets' act of disaffiliation in 1935 is in no way clearly obvious from either his public statements or his dramatic work. As the counsel for the Un-American Activities Committee pointed out embarrassingly, Odets continued to affiliate with left-wing groups throughout the Depression and war years. Perhaps the answer lies in the intellectual climate of the mid-thirties, the era of the Popular Front. Unless one was, as an intellectual, directly involved with the vagaries and variations of social doctrine (e.g., Edmund Wilson, Sidney Hook), it was quite possible to drift away from overt commitment without the painful process of the clean break.

Thus Odets' Marxist commitment was very different from that of John Howard Lawson. The latter came to his political beliefs, as we have seen, after a long period of conflict and indecision; once he made his commitment, Lawson became a political man, his role as artist receding behind the ideological facade. Odets, however, did not arrive at his radicalism after a long period of intellectual debate. He was, in a sense, born to it; radicalism was in the air his generation breathed. Since his commitment was never primarily intellectual, he never formally rejected it in the manner of the intellectuals who, having made themselves political men, one day awake with horror to a sense of betrayal and find it necessary to destroy their radical roots.

We cannot, therefore, discover any crucial moment of commitment or disaffiliation in the life and work of Clifford Odets. For whatever reasons he left the Party, there can be no denying the pervasive influence of Marxism upon the great bulk of his work. Surely Odets' temperament, particularly after his sudden access to fame and his defection to Hollywood, was unsuited to political obligation. He was too concerned with his own problems ever to assent fully to the role of party member. But since his commitment to Marxism was essentially more emotional than intellectual, he retained, throughout the Depression, umbilical connection to the radical movement. It is interesting that despite Odets' statement to the Un-American Activities Committee that he left the

Party in 1935 because "it came to the point of where I thought . . . I can't respect these people on a so-called cultural basis,"²¹ in the preface to his Six Plays (1939) Odets was still talking in terms of the social "usefulness" of art. He admitted a preference for Paradise Lost, although acknowledging that "two of the other . . . plays are more immediately useful. . ." He stated his esthetic aim as follows: "Much of my concern during the past years has been with fashioning a play immediately and dynamically useful and yet as psychologically profound as my present years and experience will permit." This is the artist's great problem "since we are living in a time when new art works should shoot bullets. . ."²²

Odets' aggressive Marxism of the mid-decade is reflected in a short monologue, I Can't Sleep, written for performance at a benefit for the Marine Workers Industrial Union in 1935. It, too, is a party play in that it overtly considers the greatest of revolutionary sins, heresy. It is reminiscent of the Grand Inquisitor sequence in the Brothers Karamazov, in which the silence of Christ forces the Inquisitor into self-revelation. Odets' hero--played originally by Morris Carnovsky--rejects a beggar's gesture for charity, and finds himself imprisoned in a cell of guilt constructed by the disavowed radicalism of his youth. He initially answers the beggar's unpitying stare with belligerence--"Listen, don't be so smart. When a man offers you

money, take it!"--but soon he turns from aggressive self-justification to personal revelation: "All my life I was a broken-hearted person. . . . I'll tell you the truth: I don't sleep."²³ He tells of his inability to communicate with his wife, of the gulf of misunderstanding which separates him from his children, of all the bitter frustrations of the petit bourgeoisie, symbolized by the ever-present fact of his insomnia. Consumed by loneliness, he yearns to cry "Brother" to his fellow man but is constrained by the fear of appearing a fool.

And slowly the last layer of artifice is pulled away and the true cause of the man's depression is revealed: "I spoke last week to a red in the shop. Why should I mix in with politics? With all my other troubles I need yet a broken head? I can't make up my mind--what should I do? . . . Join up, join up. But for what? For trouble?" This question reaches the heart of the man's dilemma, and in a torrent of words he reveals the source of his guilt, the renunciation of his working-class roots, his acceptance, against his better nature, of the capitalist ethic:

Last week I watched the May Day. Don't look! I hid in the crowd. I watched how the comrades marched with red flags and music. You see where I bit my hand? I went down in the subway I shouldn't hear the music. Listen, I looked in your face before. I saw the truth. I talk to myself. The blood of the mother and brother is breaking open my head. I hear them cry, "You forgot, you forgot!" They don't let me sleep. All night I hear the music of the comrades. Hungry men I hear. All night the broken-hearted children. Look at

at me--no place to hide, no place to run away.
 Look in my face, comrade. Look at me, look,
 look, look!!! (p. 9)

The image which sustained Odets' initial works was, in his own words, that of "a football game with two teams in the field,"²⁴ and there can be no doubt that Odets was betting on the side with the red jerseys:

I want my plays to fill the audiences with the feeling that this is a dislocated world and that men must snap it back into place. Plays should express convictions, not opinions. . . . Here people have no chance to realize their potentialities. Look at pictures of Russian children, happy, determined. They say, "I want to be a doctor. I want to be an engineer."²⁵

Like many others of revolutionary conviction, Odets had his brief moment of political glory. He went on an ill-fated mission to Cuba as head of a delegation whose avowed mission was "to investigate the situation of the Cuban people under the military dictatorship and to bring greetings to the Cuban people, to tell them the American people are their friends and will help them."²⁶ The Cuban police, however, took a dim view of the proposed commission, promptly arrested Odets and his companions, and put them upon the swiftest available return boat. Despite his intention to "make a fight about" the indignities to a group "whose sole purpose was to lend encouragement to Cuban intellectuals and college students" who were the subject of "fierce repression,"²⁷ Odets never renewed his personal warfare with the Cuban government. The Cuban episode remains his one formal effort in the arena of political activity.

The source of much of Odets' strength as a "proletarian" playwright lay precisely in the fact that he did not force himself to write about the proletariat. Unlike other middle-class writers of Marxist persuasion, he had the esthetic sense to write about areas of his direct experience. In his early days in the Group he started several plays, one in particular on the subject of his much beloved Beethoven. A diary entry of the time reveals his dissatisfaction with these early attempts: "Now I see again in myself flight always flight. Here I am writing the Beethoven play, which when it is finished may not be about Beethoven. Why not write something about the Greenberg family, something I know better, something that is closer to me?"²⁸

The resultant play, initially entitled I Got the Blues, was started in a cold water flat on West 57th Street, New York City, and finished at Warrensburg, New York, during the rehearsals of Men in White. It was finally produced by the Group, after the success of the subsequently written Lefty, under the title of Awake and Sing! In it the Greenberg family emerged as the Berger family of the Bronx, and Odets revealed himself not only as a young writer of intense revolutionary fervor, but as a skillful recorder of the pungent detail of Jewish lower middle-class life.

The basic image of Awake and Sing! is resurrection, the emergence of life from death. For the life of the Berger family in Depression-age America is spiritual death,

dehumanized by a thousand irritants, frustrated by the exigencies of economic breakdown. Yet precisely because the sources of the Bergers' malaise are primarily social, Awake and Sing! is an essentially optimistic play; dangers are without, not within, and they may be combatted. The fundamental activity of the Bergers--"a struggle for life amidst petty conditions"²⁹--is a noble one; nor is it meaningless. Significantly Odets changed the title of the play from I Got the Blues--a statement of the Depression malaise--to Awake and Sing!--and the imperative commanded by the exclamation point is no accident. "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust," he is crying, the American blues can be eliminated. But the play is not a direct call to militancy; its strength rests in the depiction of the social dislocation of the middle-class and the skill with which this dislocation is personalized in the several characters.

At the core of all of the characters in the play, even of the capitalist Uncle Morty, lies the possibility of what they might have become. Bessie, the matriarch, is driven to cruel action by the very intensity of her desire to protect her family, to prevent its decay at all costs. If she breaks up Ralph's romance, if she forces Hennie to marry a man she does not love, it is always from the single motivation that is the core of Bessie's being, the family must be preserved: "If I didn't worry about the family, who would?" (p. 95) The intensity of Bessie's maternalism is

reinforced by the abdication of her husband, Myron, from the role of head of the family. Unable to cope with the present, he lives by the dream of the wind-fall, the horse player's fervent hunch that the big killing is just around the corner. Thus he is perennially entering contests with the faith that "someone's got to win. The government isn't gonna allow everything to be a fake." (p. 87)

But Moe Axelrod knows that "there ain't no prizes," that everything around him is fake. In a world in which everything is a racket, he is determined not to be a victim; like Sol Ginsburg he is convinced that in life there are only two kinds of people, the exploited and the exploiting, and he is determined not to be found in the former category. But Moe's bitterness is, in actuality, a protective veneer. Hating the futility of a world in which he gave his leg for a phony cause, he has "learned his lesson"; he will not be soft. It soon becomes apparent that Moe has been more sinned against than sinning. "Was my life so happy?" he shouts at Hennie, "Chris', my old man was a bum. I supported the whole damn family-- . . . I went to war; got chopped down like a bed bug; . . . What the hell do you think, anyone's got it better than you?" (p. 98) Moe's plea to Hennie is to live-- to run away with him before both are totally crushed: "there's one life to live! Live it!" (p. 99)

Awake and Sing! is not merely a catalogue of frustration. In the character of Uncle Jacob, the family radical,

Odets provides the play with its explicit social commentary without violating the demands of character. Throughout the early action Jacob serves as a kind of chorus, drawing the Marxist moral from the statements and activities of the other characters. When his somber social analyses are laughed at by his family, particularly by his business-man son, Morty, he responds: "Laugh, Laugh . . . tomorrow not." (p. 72) It is in the hope of achieving this tomorrow in the person of Ralph, the young son of the Berger household, that Jacob commits his sacrifice of leaping to his death so that Ralph might have his insurance money as a means to escape the strangle-hold of the family and society.

Look on me and learn what to do, boychick. . . .
It's enough for me now that I should see your
happiness. This is why I tell you--DO! Do what
is in your heart and you carry in yourself a
revolution . . . act. (pp. 77-78)

When Ralph learns of the old man's sacrifice he vows that it will not have been in vain. Jacob's legacy is not money, which Ralph in fact rejects, but social awareness. To his mother's justification of life in America, he retorts, "It don't make sense. If life made you this way, then it's wrong." (p. 95) Bessie answers, "So go out and change the world if you don't like it," and Ralph affirms "I will! And why? 'Cause life's different in my head. Gimme the earth in two hands. I'm strong." (p. 95) Jacob's books, his ideas,

are Ralph's real inheritance, and he has become infused with the old man's revolutionary fervor:

Get teams together all over. Spit on your hands and get to work. And with enough teams together maybe we'll get steam in the warehouse so our fingers don't freeze off. Maybe we'll fix it so life won't be printed on dollar bills. (p. 97)

And the play ends on the note of resurrection. "The night he died," states Ralph about Jacob, "I saw it like a thunder-bolt! I saw he was dead and I was born! I swear to God, I'm one week old! I want the whole city to hear it--fresh blood, arms. We got 'em. We're glad we're living." (p. 101)

Thus, despite the effectiveness of realistic detail, it is apparent that Awake and Sing! still retains strong agit-prop roots. But instead of appealing directly for revolutionary action, it attempts to demonstrate the thesis of revolutionary awareness in the relationship between Jacob and Ralph against the family background of middle-class decay. Its success is dependent upon this conjunction of thesis and detail. Odets never was a genre painter; his strokes are broad, his dialogue heightened. What he succeeded in delineating was the specific images of social dislocation. The importance of the Marxist premise from a dramatic point of view does not lie in its specific truth or falsity; it serves rather as a dramatic metaphor which orders the disparate elements of the play, which relates the images of frustration and dislocation to a guiding thematic concept. The spine of the play is the conviction that the world of the Bergers must

be changed if human potentiality is to be realized. For Odets at that time this faith was affirmed by Marxism; far from marring the play, the Marxist metaphor gathers the various dramatic strands and relates them to the basic theme of social resurrection.

Odets, then, was never primarily a realist. Awake and Sing! and his next play, Paradise Lost, are essentially allegories of middle class decay. It was the inability to recognize this fact which was primarily responsible for the critical furor which attended the production of the latter play. The Broadway critics, who had greeted Awake and Sing! in uniformly commendatory tones ("a triumph for the Group and . . . Mr. Odets," "Something of an event, not to say a miracle," "a stirring play") now turned their guns upon Odets' new play: "instead of going out and looking at the middle-class," wrote Richard Lockridge in the New York Sun, "to see how they were behaving in human terms, Mr. Odets made up a group of people and made them up, as nearly as I can tell, out of whole cloth."³⁰ Not all the critics were quite as harsh, even though most found the play marred by "frowzy characterization, random form and . . . inchoate material."³¹ Nor did Odets receive any consolation from the radical press. For the most part, the Marxist critics rejected the play on the grounds of unsound social analysis. Stanley Burnshaw, for example, questioned the validity of Odets' portrait of the American middle-class. He maintained that the American

bourgeoisie "is not a homogeneous group withering into oblivion. . . . Overwhelming numbers of middle-class people . . . are part and parcel of the advancing social group. . . . Can their life be truthfully conveyed by such symbols as sexual impotence, heart disease . . . barrenness and arson, larcency, racketeering, cuckoldry, feeble-mindedness and sex neuroses?"³²

The Marxist attacks were predicated on a literal interpretation of the dissolution of the Gordon family as a result of economic pressures. Under such an interpretation it is obvious that physical disease cannot fairly be credited to capitalism. But as Clurman, the play's director, noted, neither in direction, acting nor set design was Paradise Lost naturalistic: "The 'reading' I have given the script gives the play a definite line or what certain reviewers would call a propagandistic slant."³³

At the beginning of Act III of Paradise Lost, Clara Gordon relates to her dying son, Julie, the parable of the golden idol:

Well, Moses stayed in the mountain forty days and forty nights. They got frightened at the bottom. . . . What did those fools do? They put all the gold pieces together, all the jewelry, and melted them, and made a baby cow of gold . . . Moses ran down the hill so fast. . . . He took the cow and broke it into a thousand pieces. Some people agreed, but the ones who didn't? Finished. God blotted them out of the book. Here today, gone tomorrow!³⁴

Paradise Lost is itself Odets' parable of the decadence of contemporary capitalism, and his idolators are as surely condemned as those who worshipped the golden calf. The characters in the play are all condemned--some by disease, some by economics--but they are all presented as denizens of a world made unreal by false hope and futile illusion. The image is starker than that of Awake and Sing! because the seeds of redemption, although present in the play, are not allowed to flower. Ralph, Moe, Hennie escape to attempt to create a better world; despite his realization that he must do the same, Leo's final affirmation has come too late. He, too, is condemned. Thus, redemption must come from without, in the creation of a world unmarred by the abortiveness and sickness which dominate the world of Paradise Lost.

Such a vision is unquestionably grim, and Paradise Lost is a grim play, relieved but briefly by the humor that characterized much of Awake and Sing! The several characters, despite particularization, are more overtly allegorical; all represent to a greater or lesser degree the smothering of the individual by capitalist society. For example, Ben, the oldest son of the Gordon family, is, like Biff Loman in Death of a Salesman, destroyed by the illusion of facile success and by his inability to accept the fact that this success is not forthcoming. The world, he states, is on his doorstep, but in reality he is condemned. Once a champion runner, the doctor has told him that he can run no

more, and this medical verdict symbolizes the general failure which awaits him. Married to a cheating wife, he allows himself to be shot down in a desperate attempt to obtain money by robbery. In his final scene he reveals his will to die: "Are we living? . . . the world is flat, like a table-- Columbus was wrong--we're being pushed over the edge." (p.204)

One by one, Odets pushes his characters over the edge. Sam Katz, Leo's aggressive business partner, hides his impotence behind the mask of avarice; the love affair between Pearl and Felix is doomed by economic realities; even the radical spokesman in the play, Pike, is condemned because, although he is able to diagnose the malady of his civilization, he is unable to provide the necessary remedy. Although articulate in his condemnation of capitalism and war, when he is asked by Leo the most vital of all questions, "what is to be done?" Pike does not draw the revolutionary moral. "I don't know," he answers confusedly, "I mean I don't know." Odets seems to be implying that protest is not sufficient; Pike's accusations lead nowhere, or rather to extinction, to a resting place "at the bottom of the ocean" where "the light is soft, food is free." (p. 192)

The image which informs Paradise Lost is the "sweet smell of decay." The world of the Gordons is a microcosm of the "profound dislocation" of the middle class in capitalist society. Leo Gordon, a man of fundamentally noble instincts, comes finally to recognize that he is the representative of

a dying class. Throughout the play he is appalled by the misery which he sees around him and is determined not to build his happiness on the exploitation of others. But his fortune and his family are crushed by personal tragedy and his refusal to recoup the loss of his business by approving an arranged insurance fire. "So in the end," he laments, "nothing is real. Nothing is left but our memory of life." (p. 244) But, despite his condemnation, he is allowed one glimpse of the new future that will replace the false paradise:

No! There is more to life than this! . . . There is a future. Now we know, we dare to understand. . . . I tell you the whole world is for men to possess. Heartbreak and terror are not the heritage of mankind! No fruit tree wears a lock and key. . . . The world is in its morning . . . and no man fights alone! (pp. 229-230)

Despite dramaturgic preparation, there can be no denying that this peroration is inconsistent with the basic metaphor of Paradise Lost. Perhaps Odets feared that if he did not explicitly state what was generally implied in the play, it might have been open to the criticism of "negativism." And yet, even without the obviousness of Leo's final awareness, it is apparent that the very frustration which dominates the play implies a social protest. As John Gassner has pointed out, "Airing one's discontents is a patent form of rebellion, dramatization of frustration is already a form of acting out, exposing a situation is criticism and often a challenge to action."³⁵

The very unreality which critics of the play objected to is a reflection of the dream world constructed by the middle class in its attempt to escape economic realities; neither the play nor the production attempted to portray a slice of life. Clurman defended his approach in these words:

The world of the ruling class is real in the sense that the rulers know where their interests lie . . . the world of the working class is real because its struggle is so primitive and plain that there is no mistaking or avoiding it. But the middle-class carries out the orders of the ruling class with the illusion of complete freedom. . . . There is no "enemy" in the middle-class world except with one's own contradictions--and real life (the life that both the upper and lower classes know in their opposite ways) enters upon the scene like a fierce, unexplained intruder.³⁶

Thus the Marxist metaphor lies at the heart of Paradise Lost; it is basic to its very conception. The very title implies that there is a paradise to be regained. The play also represents the end of Odets' period of overt political commitment, the last expression of the bitter years of anonymity which preceded his emergence. Downcast by the bad critical reaction to the play, which has remained his favorite, he wrote a short biographical piece in which he lamented the vagaries of sudden success:

The young writer comes out of obscurity with a play or two. Suppose he won't accept the generous movie offers. Why, that means he's holding out for more. Suppose he accepts--he's an ingrate, rat, renegade. . . .

If he's written two plays about the same kind of people everyone knows that's all he can write about. But when he writes about a different class, he is told to go back where he came from and stick to his caste (or casts). . . .

If the reviewers praise him Tuesday, it's only because they're gentle, quixotic fellows. But watch them tear him apart on Wednesday! . . . The young writer is now ready for a world cruise!³⁷

And as Clurman pointed out, "for a New York playwright this means almost inevitably Hollywood."³⁸

The problem of artistic integrity is inevitably difficult to define; it invariably mires the critic in the quicksands of the intentional fallacy. But biographical concerns are not necessarily extrinsic to an evaluation of literature. In the case of Odets, for example, it is crucial to an understanding of much of his later work--in particular Golden Boy and The Big Knife--to recognize the ambivalent attitudes which he displayed toward the symbol of American success, Hollywood. Indeed, we are faced here with a not unfamiliar problem: if the roots of an artist lie in the fact of his knowledge of an environment which is economically deprived, how is he to prevent the withering of these roots by the fact of his new-found success? Is the artist, by virtue of his status as celebrity, now cut off by this very status from the sources of his previous vitality?

In the case of Odets, Hollywood meant not only separation from the roots of New York radicalism, but separation as well from his theatre, the Group. Odets' debt to the Group was manifest: it produced all of the plays that he wrote in the thirties. Odets is one of the few playwrights of our time to have a theatre which enabled him to speak in

a consistent voice. In the direction of Clurman and the acting talent of the Adlers, Carnovsky, Bromberg, Garfield, Cobb, et al., he was fortunate in having a well-trained ensemble which offered the perfect medium for the expression of his dramatic vision.

Perhaps for several reasons--the failure of Paradise Lost, the lure of the fantastic salary of \$2500 a week, the desire to explore that most powerful of mass media--Odets, to the dismay of the Group, went to Hollywood in 1936 to "look around"; as he himself stated to Clurman, he had a need "to sin."³⁹ Thus began a tortured love affair between Odets and the film capital which has lasted to the present day. Alternately praising and reviling Hollywood, Odets has never been able either fully to accept or reject its values. He has viewed the cinema alternately as a medium particularly suited to the dramatist because of its directness, fluidity, and universality, and as a medium which, because of its subjugation to commercial exigencies, vitiates and destroys artistic integrity.

This ambivalence may be observed in Odets' many conflicting statements. In late 1935 he offered the following justification of defection from Broadway:

Why should playwrights, actors and directors stay on Broadway instead of flying to Hollywood? Except for a sentimental regard for "theatre," there is obviously no reason. Any theatre person, of any department, would have to have the following three reasons for excluding Hollywood from his yearly schedule: money, one; a viewpoint, an ideal . . .

which shouts inside him for constant . . . stage expression, two; self-recognition of steady and progressive improvement in his work both as craftsman and artist, three. The decline of the theatre is a symptom expressive of a cause, the cause being the lack in our theatre of the above three points.⁴⁰

The values of Broadway and Hollywood are thus equated. But, on the other hand, Odets offers the justification that Hollywood, by virtue of its fantastic salaries, may serve as the new patron which will free the writer for his more creative work: "If every playwright could spend two or three months in Hollywood each year, he would make enough to go back home and write the kind of plays he wants to write. In my eleven weeks here I have made enough to go to New York and devote the rest of the year to writing and producing the Silent Partner which will be my next play with the Group Theatre."⁴¹

The Silent Partner--Odets attempt to write "the best labor play ever produced in this country or in any other country"⁴²--was never produced. Perhaps the recipient of a \$2500 a week salary found it difficult to reestablish true proletarian ties. Odets recognized that isolation was the artist's real danger: "Success tends to isolate, and it seems to me there is where the fight is. . . . A good thing always, it seems to me, is for the writer to go and be where the masses are or wherever the sources of his material are."⁴³ Ironically, less than a year before he found himself a member of the Golden Ghetto, Odets had written: "Shortly I'm getting to the coal fields and the textile centers. Let New York see

the rest of the country. Hollywood too. Play material enough to keep six dozen writers going. . . ."44

Odets' major, and only, dramatic effort for the year of 1936 consisted of the film, The General Dies At Dawn; it was eagerly awaited by radical circles in the hope that the fair-haired boy of leftist drama had succeeded in striking a few blows for the revolutionary cause. Sidney Kaufman reported upon the film's progress in the New Masses: "This melodramatic yarn rings like a coin from the nickelodeon mint," he admitted, "but, godalmighty, what a different face it wears."⁴⁵ This different face was for Kaufman reflected in several speeches of implied social consciousness. An examination of the script, however, reveals them as hardly inflammatory. Judy (played by Madeleine Carroll) has decoyed O'Hara (Gary Cooper) into a train compartment.

Judy: Why do they make these attempts on your life?

O'Hara: Politics. A certain honorable tootsie roll named Yang thinks he has a right to control the lives of tens of thousands of poor Chinese.

Judy: How?

O'Hara: Military dictatorship! Taxes! You put, he takes! You protest, he shoots! A head-breaker, a heart-breaker, a strike-breaker! Altogether a four-star rat!⁴⁶

And in the best Hollywood tradition O'Hara stands up to the war-lord, Yang, and states his defiance: "Your belief is in your own very limited self--mine is in people! One day they'll all walk on earth straight--proud . . . men, not animals, with no fear of hunger and poverty. That's not so bad to die for, tootsie roll." (p. 13)

The General Dies At Dawn found few champions in either the radical or non-radical camps. Bob White sadly reported in the New Masses that "the main content of the picture is slop," that the film's social significance was mired in the traditional intrigue of the Cooper-Dietrich romantic melodrama.⁴⁷ And Frank Nugent, in the New York Times, under the heading "Odets Where Is Thy Sting?", noted that while the film bore the occasional stamp of the author of Waiting For Lefty, "more importantly it bears the imprimatur of the No Offense League or What Price the Class Struggle."⁴⁸

The artist in Odets soon recognized that the media of the film and the stage were not equally hospitable to seriousness, that the powers that controlled the film industry were not interested in fully utilizing the talent in their employ. The stage, and the Group, beckoned, and Odets returned to New York with Golden Boy. But while he was anxious to be free of the encumbrances of the film colony, Odets was excited by the possibility of applying film technique and subject matter to the medium of the stage. The cinema was indeed the authentic folk theatre of America, but producers were not interested in presenting their material significantly; on the contrary, "their chief problem is the one of keeping the level of human experience in their pictures as low as possible." But the film has opened up the possibility of a true portrayal of American life by virtue of the range and color of its subject

matter and technique. Inasmuch as Hollywood will not permit the serious use of this authentic material, it remains the task of the playwright to do so within the freer confines of the stage: "It is about time that the talented American playwright began to take the gallery of American types, the assortment of fine vital themes away from the movies."⁴⁹

This is precisely what Odets attempted to achieve in Golden Boy. "Where is there a more interesting theme in this country than a little Italian boy who wants to be rich? Provided, of course, you place him in his true social background and . . . present the genuine pain, meaning, and dignity of life within your characters." In short, Odets took as his self-appointed task to infuse a typical Hollywood theme with a sense of reality, "to tell the truth where the film told a lie. . . ." ⁵⁰ The difficulty with such an approach is that the triteness of the traditional subject matter may negate the seriousness of theme. Golden Boy treads the uncertain line between cliché and seriousness. But, on the whole, one must, in the case of this play, acknowledge Odets' success in achieving his avowed purpose. Although the story of Joe Bonaparte's rise and fall is indeed sheer Hollywood--it is the stuff of a hundred fight films--Odets has succeeded in covering the bones of melodrama with sterner stuff. He has done so by reverting to his role of allegorist.

Golden Boy is not primarily concerned with the decay of a class; it is concerned with the decadence of an ideal, success. The very nature of Odets' personal situation in Hollywood offered him his theme; for Joe Bonaparte in gaining the world loses his soul, and he loses it because he relinquishes his artistic integrity for immediate success in the world of the quick buck. It is not my intention to draw any invidious biographical parallels, but it is apparent that Joe's dilemma does to a great extent parallel Odets'. The worlds of the prize-ring and the motion-picture studios betray uncomfortable similarities. Both exploit talent for specifically commercial ends; both deal in forms of mass entertainment. But in the case of Joe Bonaparte the choice is not ambiguous; the pugilistic talent which he must employ to achieve success is clearly demarcated from his ability to play the violin. The Hollywood screenwriter could bask in the illusion that he was pursuing the dramatic craft.

But whether or not the world of the prize-ring is intended to represent the world of Hollywood, it is apparent that the values of both are those which Odets had previously attacked in his early plays. The theme of Golden Boy is made meaningful in terms of a specific condemnation of the values of a society in which false values are able to pervert man's better instincts.

Joe Bonaparte's decision to fight, to show the world, is given credence by a world in which "five hundred fiddlers

stand on Broadway and 48th Street, on the corner, every day, rain or shine, hot or cold."⁵² In such a world the artistic gesture appears futile, and if success must be gained at the expense of art, then art must be sacrificed. But Joe's success, based upon false values, is doomed to prove insubstantial. Slowly he is turned into that which runs against his better nature, a killer; ultimately no longer faced with an alternative, he must fight because that is the only thing he can do:

I have to fight. . . . This is my profession!
I'm out for fame and fortune, not to be
artistic or different! I don't intend to be
ashamed of my life! (p. 298)

Joe has become a killer in spirit: "When a bullet sings through the air it has no past--only a future--like me! Nobody, nothing stands in my way!" It is not long before he becomes a killer in fact, the fit companion for the homosexual racketeer, Fuseli; in the course of a fight he knocks out his opponent and finds that the blow has killed him. Remorse has come too late; Joe recognizes that in the act of killing he has killed as well the man he might have become. Too late he realizes that it is not the kings and dictators who conquer the world, but "the boy who might have said, 'I have myself; I am what I want to be!'" (p. 315)

Joe's death in an auto crash is not gratuitous; it is the fitting conclusion to a life which he chose to lead according to the laws of the jungle. The final verdict is

delivered by Joe's union-organizer brother: "What waste!" The creative energy which might have produced beautiful music has been destroyed in a false crusade. Joe's killer instinct had been bred in a world in which such talent is highly prized. If Joe was destroyed by his false image of success, he was not entirely culpable; this image was created by a society in which man's basest instincts are glorified.

Such are the implications of Odets' parable. It is apparent that beneath the surface melodrama lies the familiar Marxist metaphor, albeit somewhat diluted by personal considerations. Odets' involvement in the problem of success, however, reveals more than merely personal concerns; it reflects his awareness of its mythic role in our society. It is significant that Joe was presented with an alternative. Although he rejected it because of the pressure of false values, the alternative nonetheless exists: to refuse to acquiesce in these values, to build a society in which art has a place. This conclusion is not directly affirmed, but it is strongly implied, particularly in the person of Frank, who serves as a foil to Joe's destructive energy. It is noteworthy that Odets should turn Hollywood subject matter and technique (the short, cinematic scenes, the use of fade-outs) against itself, in order to combat the mythic Hollywood success story (and Hollywood, in retaliation, reversed Odets' logic by putting a "happy ending" upon the screen version of Golden Boy). The moral of Odets' allegory might

not be overtly revolutionary, but it is nonetheless rooted in severe social criticism.

Odets was not, however, through with Hollywood. Over the course of the next decade he was alternately to make his peace with the film colony and then reject it anew. After his first visit, he made several excursions between the years of 1936 and 1941, once to make a film called Gettysburg and another time to write the screenplay for a film called The River is Blue, which later emerged, rewritten by Lawson, as Blockade. Finally, he went to Hollywood in 1943 for a period of slightly over four years, during which time he wrote and directed his most successful film, None But the Lonely Heart. An interview of the time was entitled "Going Their Way Now? Clifford Odets Has Given Up Tilting at the Hollywood Windmill, or So He Says."⁵² The reporter quoted Odets as saying, "Who said I was the man to revolutionize the business, anyway?"

But finally Odets returned to Broadway in 1948 after a seven year absence, and castigated the movie colony in the harshest terms possible. He deeply resented the accusations of "sell-out" which had plagued him ever since he initially left for Hollywood, and offered several explanations for his long defection: he wanted to recoup the "small fortune" he had invested in the Group in its dying years, to forget "the distress of several misplaced personal allegiances"; he was looking for a period of "creative repose: money, rest, and

simple clarity."⁵³ But Hollywood, he averred, offered few consolations beyond the monetary; since his talents were still ignored, he came to detest the lethargy into which he had fallen; he consoled himself with the plays he was going to write, "took my filthy salary every week and rolled an inner eye around an inner landscape." Back in New York, however, he was able to unburden himself:

Is it still news that a Hollywood movie is usually born on the stone floor of a bank? And that this celluloid dragon, scorching to death every human fact in its path, must muscle its way back to its natal cave, its mouth full of nickels?⁵⁴

Apparently Odets never quite escaped the sense of guilt born of accepting Hollywood gold, and was performing an act of purgation in returning to the New York theatre, "where personal affiliation with one's writing (the first premise of truth) does not constitute *lèse majesté*. Purged, I am meeting with a few serious, responsible friends who, like myself, are seeking a continuity of healthy theatre work on a modest but sturdy platform."⁵⁵

Odets' specific act of contrition was represented by his play The Big Knife (1949), in which he attempted to expose the mendacity of Hollywood and the corrosive effect of its guiding ethic. "The big knife," he stated, "is that force in modern life which is against people and their aspirations, which seeks to cut people off in their best flower,"⁵⁶ but, we must ask, in what precisely does this force reside? For the difficulty with the play is that we are never exactly

sure what the playwright is railing against. In Golden Boy, Odets used some of the conventions of melodrama in order to construct an allegory which depicted the pernicious effect of a destructive ethic; in The Big Knife he attempts much the same thing, but fails to demonstrate the play's thesis through dramatic action. Joe Bonaparte is destroyed because society has made him a killer; why does Charlie Castle destroy himself? Hank, the New York writer who symbolizes the man of integrity, presents Charlie's eulogy: "He killed himself . . . because that was the only way he could live." Charlie's suicide was "a final act of faith."⁵⁷ Faith, however, in what? Castle's predicament, as revealed in the play, seems magnified beyond all dramatic credibility precisely because it is forcibly wedded to melodramatic circumstance instead of arising inexorably from a genuine moral dilemma. The real issue involved is simple: should the artist, luxuriating in material splendor at the expense of his artistic integrity, chuck it all to return to a meaningful existence? Stated in these terms, the issue seems hardly one to induce suicide. But Odets obviously felt that the problem was not dramatically sufficient, and therefore felt constrained to project this dilemma in terms of a plot which deals with intrigue and suggested murder. The difficulty with this scheme from a dramatic viewpoint is that the real issue--the acceptance or rejection of Hollywood values--is in no way related to the machinery of the plot. If Charlie Castle is blackmailed into

signing his contract, what happens to the element of choice which is crucial to the larger, more serious, dramatic issue?

Thus the prevalent tone of The Big Knife is hysteria. Odets attacks many evils of the Hollywood scene--the malicious gossip-monger, the amoral aide-de-camp, the hypocritical, vicious producer--but he fails to achieve what he succeeded in accomplishing in Golden Boy, to related these specific evils, and the drama's basic structure, to a guiding metaphor which clarifies the main lines of the intended allegory. The boxing world becomes, in Golden Boy, a microcosm of the larger society of which it is a part; Hollywood, in The Big Knife, fails not only as a microcosm, but as a realistic portrayal of the film capital. God knows there are sufficient grounds for criticism without implying that producers and agents are would-be murderers.

The crucial fact is that Golden Boy presents a social alternative; The Big Knife does not. "Does the man in your book get out of here?" cries Charlie to Hank; "Where does he go? What, pray tell, does he do? (bitterly) - Become a union organizer?" This alternative, objectified in the person of Frank in Golden Boy, has become unthinkable. (p. 112)

Charlie's anguish springs from the recognition that he is a part of the world which he wants to reject. The problem with the play resides in this very ambivalence. Odets--in the character of Castle--alternately villifies and accepts Hollywood captivity. Charlie wants to reject the malicious

world of which he is a part, but feels unable to substitute another. Although he recognizes that "everyone needs a cause to touch greatness" (p. 137), he has lost his capacity to believe in causes. He has, as Hank points out, sold out, and is consequently tormented by guilt: "Look at me! Could you ever know that all my life I yearned for a world and people to call out the best in me?" (p. 140) In short, although Odets has a theme, he is unwilling to face its direct implications. For the real question, left unanswered in The Big Knife, is in what or in whom does the responsibility lie for the destruction of Charlie Castle? In society? In his own weakness? Perhaps Odets was too personally involved in Charlie's dilemma to objectify it truthfully. As Clurman noted, the play "is neither the true story of Odets nor the clear account of a freely conceived Charlie Castle. Its subjectivity is muddled by its pretense of objectivity; its objectivity is compromised by the author's inability to distinguish between his creature and himself."⁵⁸

The importance of Odets' political commitment from a dramatic point of view resided in its affording him an intellectual substructure upon which to construct his several dramas. Since Odets' virtues were never primarily intellectual, his social orientation enabled him to relate his characters and themes to a coherent world-view. Either explicit or implicit in all his dramas of the thirties lies the metaphor born of his Marxist commitment. At first overtly stated, it

later becomes the philosophical undercurrent which relates his several portraits of frustration to a gesture of protest. The Marxist eschatology provided the dramatist with a structural referent, for implicit in the dialectical struggle is an essential drama, the vanquishing of the old class by the new. It is this dialectic which informs Odets' Depression dramas; either explicitly in Waiting for Lefty or implicitly in Rocket to the Moon, they all offer the hope of the future against the frustration of the present. The structural failure of The Big Knife lies in Odets' inability, after the loss of political commitment, to substitute a suitable unifying dramatic metaphor. With the absence of the substructure of social protest, the drama flounders in a sea of hysteria. I am not implying the necessity of a social metaphor in drama, but merely pointing out the crucial role it played in Odets' career as dramatist. Odets has lost his status as major dramatist because, unlike Tennessee Williams, for example, he has failed to suggest in his latest dramas that he is presenting us with a vision of reality which transcends his several plays.

The consequences of the loss of metaphor may be observed in a comparison of two domestic dramas written in the thirties and the fifties respectively. Rocket to the Moon (1938) is not an overtly political play. In fact, the Marxist critics complained that "Odets has stopped listening to the people he knows so well."⁵⁹ It is concerned with the

frustrations of a middle-class dentist and his futile love affair with his young secretary. But despite Odets' essentially personal concerns, despite his emphasis upon psychological rather than social factors, there can be no denying that beneath the play resides the basic social metaphor.

The very positing of the metaphor of the rocket to the moon--the illusion of escape--has meaning because it is an illusion, because there is an alternative. Cleo, the young secretary, rejects both Stark and Prince, the denizens of a dying world, to seek fulfillment elsewhere:

Yes, if there's roads, I'll take them. I'll go up
all those roads till I find what I want. . . .
Don't you think there's a world of joyful men and
women? Must all men live afraid to laugh and sing?
Can't we sing at work and love our work? It's
getting too late to play at life; I want to live
it.⁶⁰

Thus Rocket to the Moon, despite its psychological emphasis, is still structured by the redemption motif which characterizes Odets' earlier plays. And the redemption resides both in an affirmation and a rejection, since the one predicates the other. The play succeeds, therefore, in relating the confusion and frustration of its major characters to the larger world of which they are a part; Stark, Prince, Belle, and Cleo speak in the authentic voice of the Depression generation, reaching, grasping for a way out. But personal problems are grounded in a larger social context; Ben Stark cannot really love because his bourgeois world is rooted in

futility and illusion. Odets draws the social moral--the moral Clurman chose as the "spine" of his production of the play:

Who's got time and place for "love and the grace to use it?" [asks Stark] Is it something apart, love? . . . An entertainment? Christ, no! It's a synthesis of good and bad, economics, work, play, all contacts. . . . Love is no solution of life! . . . The opposite. You have to bring a whole balanced normal life to love if you want it to go! (p. 404)

It is revealing to compare Rocket to the Moon with Odets' later domestic drama, The Country Girl (1951). Although in the latter play Odets again treats the themes of frustration and redemption, he does so this time within a self-contained personal world removed from social causation. Odets formally acknowledged his restriction of emphasis in an interview in the New York Times. In omitting "social significance," he admitted that he may have taken "a step backward" as a playwright. However, by insulating his characters from the raging complexities of the world beyond their own private heartbreak, he believed that he was able to write more proficiently than ever before. He deliberately undertook to limit himself to but one aspect of life, the search for personal values. He acknowledged the self-imposed limitation, but mused, "It may be that limitation is the beginning of wisdom."⁶¹

The Country Girl is endowed with virtues hitherto unassociated with Odets; it is neat, well-ordered, and theatrically sound--a pièce bien faite. "I wanted to take

simple elements and make something sharp and theatrical about them. I stated a fact, the story of these two people, rather than speculated about the fact."⁶² But in restricting his scope, Odets robbed the play of his salient virtue, the necessary connection between the characters on the stage and the world of which they are a part. Frank Elgin's redemption is portrayed but it is never related to any specific cause. The key questions, left unanswered, are why did he go to pieces and why was he saved? The esthetic difficulties in The Big Knife resulted from Odets' inability to realize Charlie Castle's real anguish in effective dramatic terms; the esthetic difficulty with The Country Girl is that one is never fully convinced of Elgin's anguish. Since he remains the skeleton of a character rather than its flesh and bones, his redemption by his faithful wife seems, in the context of the play, almost gratuitous. He might well have gone on another bender and failed to achieve his theatrical triumph. At the end of the play Georgie, the country girl of the title, herself admits that "neither of us has really changed," but none the less discerns some "new element of hope," although she is not sure what.⁶³ Neither are we as audience or reader convinced of this new possibility of hope because we are never presented with any dramatic alternative except that of the conventional backstage drama: will Frank Elgin succeed in making a come-back or not?

Insofar as there is a theme, it involves the fact of human responsibility, the necessity of looking forward not back. Georgie attempts to make Frank look life in the eye, to emerge from behind the myriad of evasions with which he has buttressed his life. But this theme is itself evaded because the roots of Frank's irresponsibility--symbolized in his alcoholism--are never explained. Responsibility implies a correlative: responsibility to what, and evasion of what? Frank's theatrical triumph does not arise out of the fact of his coming to terms with himself; it is merely presented. The last scene of the play might well have demonstrated his inability to cope with the responsibilities of opening on Broadway without marring the essential logic of the play.

In Rocket to the Moon the outside world continually intrudes, but in The Country Girl the social metaphor has been eschewed, exposing the bare bones of theatrical contrivance. It is as if Odets were saying to Broadway: "you want me to meet you on your terms? Very well, I'll show you that I'm able to do so." But in accepting Broadway's terms--an acceptance rewarded by commercial success--he surrendered the very real virtue which distinguished his earlier work, the adamant refusal to be confined by the structure of the conventional Broadway play, the fervent desire to change the theatre, and ultimately the world outside it.

Odets, in losing his political commitment, enacted the drama of his generation. It is not inappropriate that disenchantment with Marxist principles should have specific esthetic results, for Marxism had indeed attempted to create a specific esthetic. We have observed that although Odets never adhered rigidly to the strict logic of the doctrine of proletarian literature, none the less his Depression dramas are rooted in the metaphor of the Marxist dialectic. Thus the theme of redemption or resurrection is wedded to the concept of the necessary vanquishing of the old class by the new. Odets' problem as a dramatist, although never explicitly viewed as such, was to find a substitute metaphor to order the various elements of his artistic experience. Once the Marxist metaphor had lost its validity, once the substructure of the Marxist dialectic no longer sufficed, Odets lost the structural framework upon which he had consciously or unconsciously built.

The consequences of the absence of this framework may be observed in an examination of Odets' last play with the Group, Night Music (1940). Although certain persistent Odetsian themes appear in the play, in particular the redemption of the young by the old, they are no longer related to a guiding, thematic concept; instead Odets attempts to substitute an esthetic metaphor, musical structure, for thematic structure, and the resultant play is characterized by a general diffuseness and uncertainty which robs its social

implications of any vitality. In attempting to portray contemporary homelessness and uncertainty, Odets committed the esthetic mistake of being himself uncertain and erratic.

Odets possessed an aural rather than a visual imagination; his plays have always been characterized by the specific quality of their dialogue, the authentic sound of colloquial, urban speech. In commenting on New York City, he once noted that "I don't see it visually--though it's beautiful enough--so much as I hear it and feel it."⁶⁴ And in the story of Steve Takis' erratic weekend on the town, Odets attempts, in Night Music, to record the sounds and music of twentieth-century New York and, by extension, America. But the myriad variations of the play serve to muddy rather than to clarify the theme. Hearing the sound of crickets, Fay, the young heroine, remarks, "Night Music . . . if they can sing, I can sing. . . . We can sing through any night!"⁶⁵ But this faith in the ability of the human being to transcend his difficulties is, at best, most generally stated. True, the play raises some specific social issues. Steve's predicament, for example, is given an economic base, since his aggression is motivated by the fact of his deprivation. The "big international question" for him is still "when do we eat?" (p. 178) But a sense of man's inability to confront reality and change the world vitiates the social implications of Night Music. If there is one essential theme it is that

of homelessness, the individual's inability to find someone or something to belong to. Although Steve Takis is indeed a proletarian, despite occasional outbursts of indignation, he displays no real sense of class. He is a boy without credentials, the "All American bum," striking back at friend and foe alike with a defensive hostility. It is apparent that this aggressiveness is merely a mask for his sense of homelessness: "why don't I kill myself? What am I good for? Who needs me? Who wants me? . . ." (p. 177) The theme of Night Music is, thus, not the determination of the economically deprived to gain their deserved rights, but rather a despairing acknowledgment of the futility of gestures of protest. Not merely Steve and Fay, but all the characters in the play, regardless of class, are characterized by this similar sense of dislocation. Where previously dislocation had served Odets as a class image, it now informs all strata of society.

Odets seems to acquiesce in the mood of futility which informs the play. His attempt to dispel it, in the person of the Guardian Angel, the detective Rosenberger, is so generalized in its optimism as to be fundamentally unconvincing. For Odets' answer seems to be nothing so much as to affirm a blind faith in man's possibilities. Rosenberger's role in the play serves merely to demonstrate the gratuitousness of his solutions; whenever the young couple finds itself in difficult straits, he appears to set the situation right, and

to present them with his optimistic gospel: "Where there is life there is hope, in my humble opinion. Only the living can cry out against life." (p. 168)

It is precisely this sense of false solution--of conquering life by merely living it--which provides the play with the Saroyanesque note that many of the critics noted ("Now that Odets writes like Saroyan," wrote Atkinson, "doomsday is near"). Rosenberger's relationship to Steve is not unlike that of Jacob to Ralphie, but whereas the latter's redemption was predicated on the acceptance of a specific road out of the frustrations of the present, Steve's redemption is based upon his acceptance of the vaguest kind of social philosophy. Rosenberger's legacy is expressed as follows:

Remember this--you are the people. Whatever you want to say, say it! Whatever has to be changed, change it! Who told you not to make a new political party? Make it and call it "Party-to-Marry-My-Girl"! . . . Go, go with love and health--your wonderful country never needed you more. (pp. 235-36)

In short, "in the time of your life, live." Although Saroyan's particular talent was able to inform this false optimism with a kind of wistfulness and nostalgia which made it work theatrically, Odets' talent did not lend itself to such manipulation. Ultimately, despite his attempt at wistfulness, his world is a real one, and demands real solutions. Night Music is one of those works which catches a specific moment in history; the spirit of the thirties had disappeared,

employment was up, and the European war hovered ominously on the horizon. The major social issue was soon to become the simple act of survival. In such a world, in which catastrophe appeared imminent, it is not strange that the playwright should turn to themes of uncertainty, despair, and a desperate optimism. But Odets' dramatic dilemma was to find a means of structuring these various themes. He failed, despite the musical metaphor, because the implications of the various elements in the play continually led him in different directions. Thus the play is alternately wistful, nostalgic, bitter, farcical, optimistic, and despairing. The theme of redemption seems gratuitous because it does not seem warranted; if there is any moral in Steve's redemption, it lies in the cliché, love conquers all. How else are we to read the implications of Rosenberger's advice to "make a Party-to-Marry-My-Girl"? The seriousness of much of the play makes us unwilling to accept the rest of it light-heartedly. Even as a comic statement, it is significant that Odets' specific political solution to Steve's problems should be marriage.

In Clash By Night (1941) the vision of uncertainty and homelessness which found whimsical reflection in Night Music has turned stark and grim. The war clouds which had appeared on the horizon in the earlier play now seemed poised to drench the American landscape, and, in fact, less than one month after the play was produced in November, 1941, the Depression era found its violent interment in the cataclysm of world war.

The mood of the play may be gathered from Odets' diary notes pertaining to its genesis. The entry for July seventh reads: "I am like a rooster scratching around in a yard, as aimless, as variable, as unconcentrated. . . ." The following excerpts indicate how he tried to give this aimlessness form through the medium of "the trio play," which emerged as Clash By Night:

July 10: The trio play is going to be interesting.
Brutal, too, I think.

July 27: The climate of the trio play will be exactly that of the weather here. Muggy, foreboding, the never bursting open sky. Why? I feel it must be that way. It is weather in which anything can happen. All courses of conduct are possible, men and women may suddenly weep, reverse their entire lives under this leaden sky; relaxed amiabilities, hatreds, exquisite tenderness . . . sudden murderous wrath, all may happen. . . . Out of a long chain of seeming dull trivia is born a shattering explosion that is the line of the new play.

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August 8: The theme is taking shape in my mind, intensely personal but generally significant feeling behind it. The theme . . . has to do with the need of a new morality, with a return to voluntarily imposed morals, to voluntarily assumed forms in a world . . . where there are no forms but plenty of appetite and irresponsibility.

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October 21: Part of the theme of this play is about how men irresponsibly wait for the voice and strong arm of Authority to bring them to life. . . . Nothing stands for Authority and we wait for its voice! . . . The children are looking for the father to arrange their lives for them!⁶⁸

Clash By Night represents Odets' final testament to the themes which informed his earlier dramas. The vision which had celebrated human possibility has turned sour, and

the image of redemption is overshadowed by that of death. Like Odets' early characters, the people whose struggles are recorded in Clash By Night are frustrated by circumstance. Mae, like Hennie, is trapped in a loveless marriage; Earl's bluster, like that of Moe and Steve, masks a basic insecurity; the good-hearted Jerry wants nothing so much as to feel that he is needed. The dream of love, the desire to escape a life which is devoid of joy--"a life lived on the installment plan"--these pathetic gropings set the stage for the enactment of the love triangle which constitutes the plot of the play. But where Hennie, Moe, and Ralph were able to escape, Jerry, Mae, and Earl are condemned. Earl cries to Mae, "Let's get outa here. . . . If we have a dream we live it! If we have a hope we chase it!"⁶⁷ But there is no escape afforded them; Jerry, goaded by the fascistic Kress, is overwhelmed by jealousy and kills Earl rather than lose his wife.

Odets attempts to use the redemption theme by posing, in opposition to the tragedy of his major characters, the healthy relationship of a young couple, Joe and Peggy. Unlike Earl or Jerry, Joe "knows his address," he is not torn away from the roots of life. He states what, we may assume, Odets intended as the moral of the play:

We're all afraid! Earl, Jerry, Mae, millions like them, clinging to a goofy dream--expecting life to be a picnic. Who taught them that? Radio, Songs, the Movies . . . paradise is just around the corner. . . . But . . . we know the facts, the anti-picnic facts. We know that Paradise begins in responsibility. . . . Yes, its a time to learn, a time to begin--its time to love and face the future! (p. 218)

We must ask in what manner this theme is realized in Clash By Night. Despite this statement, and Mae's final advice to the young couple--"You're young and strong, you got a future" (p. 241)--it is apparent that Odets is merely going through the motions. He had become so acclimated to the structural support of the Marxist-redemption metaphor that he used it in this play as a dramatic device even though it is never validated. The drama of Earl, Jerry, and Mae is in no way logically connected to the drama of Joe and Peggy. Indeed, the latter might well have been eliminated without impairing the play one iota. Nowhere in the play is it implied that the dilemma of the principal characters is motivated by the false ideals which they have learned from society. Nowhere is the corrosive influence of radio, songs, and the movies manifest. Mae, Jerry and Earl are trapped by circumstances, by the inexorable fact that in a love triangle someone's fingers must be burned. Is the desire to escape from the frustration of the present necessarily a false ideal? Nowhere does Odets imply this. The metaphor of social redemption which served as a dramatic aid as long as Odets accepted the implications of Marxism, serves, in the case of Clash by Night, to falsify the play; for all elements of the play enforce the conviction that there is no escape. The world is seen, in Arnold's image as "a darkling plain . . . where ignorant armies clash by night." All the characters in the play confirm this pessimistic view, even the

untormented Peggy, who states, "It's a nervous world, a shocking world. I don't understand it, I just don't understand it." (pp. 122-23)

The ritual of violence which Odets enacted in Clash by Night was soon enacted in the world at large, and the world war which inaugurated the forties fittingly ended both the decade and the Great Depression itself. We have already traced much of Odets' subsequent career. Like many of his generation he was unable to replace the faith which had made him one of the most representative dramatists of the Depression era; and what is more significant for his art, he was unable to find a new dramatic metaphor to replace the one born of his political commitment. The failure of The Big Knife brought forth the compromise of The Country Girl, in which the rebel in Odets deferred to the Broadway craftsman. And yet his dissatisfaction with the compromise is attested by the last play to date, The Flowering Peach (1954), in which we find the playwright groping towards a new metaphor.

Once again, Odets is concerned with an allegory of redemption; but redemption in this case is not born of a specific act of faith, but rather the attempt to replace the loss of faith. For in The Flowering Peach Odets attempts to define the dilemma both of his generation and of his own art. It represents that moment in an artist's career when reassessment seems to be demanded, when the artist must stop and take stock of his personal and esthetic resources. "I'm

not a kid anymore," Odets acknowledged to a Times interviewer, "I'm 47. And at this age I began to ask myself, what happened? Do you want to begin all over again? Who are you and where are you?"⁶⁸

The significance of the play lies in the fact that Odets finally attempted to come to terms with the esthetic consequences of the loss of his political commitment. It was an acknowledgment long overdue, for, as we have observed, the attempt to exploit the structural advantages of the Marxist metaphor after rejecting its meaning vitiated Odets' post-Depression plays. The essence of The Flowering Peach is the acceptance of the loss of political faith. If there is one key line in the play it is perhaps Rachel's cry to the idealistic Japheth: "There is idealism now in just survival."⁶⁹ Odets affirmed this conviction in the Times:

When you start out you have to champion something. Every artist begins as if he were the first one painting, every composer as if there were no Beethoven. But if you still feel that way after ten or fifteen years, you're nuts. . . . I couldn't have written The Flowering Peach twenty years ago. As you grow older, you mature. The danger is that in broadening, as you mature, you dilute your art. A growing writer always walks that tight rope.⁷⁰

Odets' utilization of the Noah myth is not subject to a one-to-one allegorical interpretation. There can be no doubt, however, that the play represents an intensely personal statement. Odets is basically concerned with man's reaction to cosmic injustice, his attempt to construct a means whereby

he can accept this injustice. It is this concept of acceptance which dominates The Flowering Peach. Despite everything, Noah accepts the will of God, the fact of human destruction. The rebel, Japheth, prefers to remain off the ark rather than accept the divine edict, but Noah knocks him unconscious and carries him aboard; thus man, Odets implies, must accept the inequities of life; the gesture of protest must not be carried to extremes. And yet the rebellious gesture is not futile. It is Japheth's insistence that the ship have a rudder, his skill in fixing leaks, which saves the ship from foundering. Man must not merely accept, he must act. He cannot assume that God will necessarily prevent catastrophe; he must have faith in himself.

Noah: Sonny, why don't you use your judgment
 . . . you know, to fix . . .

Japheth: To use my own judgment, Pappa, I'd have
 to trust myself.

Noah: So really . . . why don't you trust yourself?

Japheth: Because you don't permit that!

Noah: But we can't do too much as God don't want
 it, can we?

Japheth: I don't know what you're talking about
 and I don't know what God wants, do you? (p. 200)

But Noah does know what God wants. He wants to prevent the extinction of life, to provide the basis for the construction of a new world. The necessity of this preservation--and the acceptance of the capriciousness of divine law--transcends the meaning of Japheth's gesture of protest. Ultimately, he too must accept the way of the world. The rebel may attempt to guide his destiny, but he cannot change it.

Significantly, the world which is renewed at the end of the play, it is implied, will not be very different from the world which was destroyed. Shem, who symbolizes man's acquisitive nature, has not been changed by the catastrophe. At the beginning of the play he was loath to accept Noah's demand to aid in the construction of the Ark because it meant the sacrifice of his worldly possessions; during the voyage he had planned for the future by saving the manure of the animals in anticipation of the time when fuel will be needed and he can sell dried manure briquettes. But Noah, who had previously berated Shem's avariciousness, finally, and significantly, comes to live with it. Previously Noah had attacked Shem's desire to live again by the principle of exploitation, but after his initial anger at his son's attempt to "begin a new world . . . with manure," at the risk of endangering the safety of the ark, Noah finally comes to accept his wife's logic: "Shem made a useful thing from nothing. . . . Why kill the man with brains? No, make him use it for the family!" (p. 197) Ultimately it is not the rebel, Japheth, that Noah goes to live with in the new world; it is Shem. "Why? It's more comfortable." (p. 203)

Thus, the rebel in Odets came to accept the futility of the radical gesture; there is sufficient idealism in the fact of survival. "You say to the eagle, fly!" cries Noah to God at the moment of his designation, "Even to a little

bitty of an eagle like me, fly, fly, higher and higher! **But** You have shrunked away his wings and he couldn't do it! Why did You pick me?" (p. 184) But every man is chosen, and every man must face the contradiction between his aspirations and his achievements. The fire of youth is gone, the desire to change the world is gone; but the world endures. And what has Noah learned from his journey through catastrophe? "To walk in humility, I learned. And listen, even to myself . . . and to speak softly, with the voices of consolation." (p. 204)

Thus redemption is ultimately born of acceptance, not protest; Agate Keller had cried in Waiting For Lefty that "when we die they'll know what we did to make a new world! Christ, cut us up to little pieces . . . put fruit trees where our ashes are!" But Noah accepts a small branch of the flowering peach as a "precious gift . . . from the new earth." Regeneration indeed, but this time without the ashes of man's effort.

Footnotes to Chapter VI

1. Apr. 6, 1935, p. 18.
2. Mar. 31, 1935, p. 25.
3. Stanley Burnshaw, review, Jan. 29, 1935, p. 27.
4. Fervent Years, pp. 138-139.
5. Apr. 6, 1935, p. 18.
6. See Chapter II.
7. John Bonn, "Fifteen Minute Red Revue," trans. B. Stern and George Lewis, Workers' Theatre, June-July 1932, pp. 11-14.
8. Gregory Novikov, Newsboy (Thea. Coll., 1933, typewritten), p. 5.
9. Art Smith and Elia Kazan, "Dimitroff," NT, July-Aug. 1934, p. 20.
10. Review, NM, July 2, 1935, p. 39.
11. Clifford Odets, Waiting For Lefty, in Six Plays (New York, 1939), p. 7.
12. Odets, Waiting For Lefty, in Three Plays (New York, 1935), p. 42. The stenographer-actor sequence, present in both the original production and the first published version of the play, was omitted from the version included in the 1939 edition of Odets' Six Plays. Obviously by 1939 Odets had retreated somewhat from his doctrinaire militancy of the mid-decade.
13. Hearings, House Committee on Un-American Activities, May 19, 1952 (Washington, 1952), pp. 3484-3485.
14. N.Y. World-Telegram, Apr. 10, 1935, p. 28.
15. Quoted in Charles Hatchard, "When Lefty Came to Boston," NM, Apr. 30, 1935, p. 27.
16. Review, NM, July 2, 1935, p. 40.
17. Odets, Till the Day I Die, in Six Plays, p. 138.
18. N.Y. World-Telegram, Mar. 19, 1935, p. 36.

19. Hearings, p. 3456.
20. Loc. cit.
21. Ibid., p. 3462.
22. Preface, p. ix.
23. Odets, "I Can't Sleep," NT, July, 1936, p. 8.
24. Odets, "Some Problems of the Modern Dramatist," N.Y. Times, Dec. 15, 1935, sect. XI, p. 3.
25. Odets, untitled clipping (Odets file, Thea. Coll.), Apr. 6, 1935, n.p.
26. Carleton Beals and Clifford Odets, Rifle Rule in Cuba (New York, 1935), p. 11.
27. N.Y. Times, July 7, 1935, sect. II, p. 2.
28. John McCarten, "Revolution's Number One Boy," New Yorker, Jan. 22, 1938, p. 25.
29. Odets, Awake and Sing, in Six Plays, p. 37.
30. Review, Dec. 14, 1935, p. 25.
31. Brooks Atkinson, review, N.Y. Times, Dec. 29, 1935, p. 19.
32. "Paradise Lost: An Obituary," NM, Feb. 11, 1936, p. 28. See also Jay Gerlando, "Odets and the Middle Class," DW, Feb. 7, 1936, p. 7.
33. "Interpretation and Characterization," NT, Jan. 1936, p. 21.
34. Odets, Paradise Lost, in Six Plays, pp. 219-220.
35. "Paradise Lost and the Theatre of Frustration," NT, Jan. 1938, p. 8.
36. "Interpretation and Characterization," p. 21.
37. Quoted in Fervent Years, p. 158.
38. Loc. cit.
39. Ibid., p. 159.

40. N.Y. Herald Tribune, Nov. 3, 1935, p. 43.
41. N.Y. Times, Apr. 3, 1936, sect. X, p. 4.
42. "Revolution's Number One Boy," p. 27.
43. Arthur Pollock, interview, Brooklyn Eagle, May 17, 1936, p. 19.
44. N.Y. World Telegram, Mar. 19, 1935, p. 32.
45. "Odets' First Film," July 28, 1936, p. 12.
46. Selections from The General Died At Dawn, NM, July 28, 1936, pp. 12-13.
47. "The Screen," Sept. 8, 1936, p. 29.
48. Sept. 6, 1936, sect. IX, p. 3.
49. Odets, "Democratic Vistas in Drama," N.Y. Times, Nov. 21, 1937, sec. XI, p. 1.
50. Loc. cit.
51. Odets, Golden Boy, in Six Plays, p. 257.
52. Barbara Perch, interview, N.Y. Times, Aug. 27, 1944, sect. II, p. 3.
53. Odets, "On Coming Home," N.Y. Times, July 25, 1948, sect. II, p. 1.
54. Loc. cit.
55. Loc. cit.
56. Seymour Peck, interview, N.Y. Times, Feb. 20, 1949, sect. II, p. 1.
57. Odets, The Big Knife (New York, 1949), p. 146.
58. Lies Like Truth (New York, 1958), p. 52.
59. Ruth McKenney, "The New Odets Play," NM, Dec. 6, 1938, p. 28.
60. Odets, Rocket to the Moon, in Six Plays, p. 416.
61. Elliot Norton, interview, N.Y. Times, Nov. 5, 1950, sect. II, p. 3.

62. Quoted in Frederick Lumley, Trends in Twentieth Century Drama (London, 1956), p. 224.
63. Odets, The Country Girl (New York, 1951), p. 122.
64. "The Three New Yorks," N.Y. Times, Mar. 31, 1940, magazine sect., p. 6.
65. Odets, Night Music (New York, 1940), p. 160.
66. "Genesis of a Play," N.Y. Times, Feb. 1, 1942, sect. X, p. 3.
67. Odets, Clash By Night (New York, 1941), p. 171.
68. Herbert Mitgang, interview, N.Y. Times, Dec. 26, 1954, sect. II, p. 3.
69. Odets, selections from The Flowering Peach, in The Best Plays of 1954-55, ed. Louis Kronenberger (New York, 1955), p. 193. Since The Flowering Peach was never published, the quotations in this study are from the excerpted, synopsisized version in the Best Plays series. My critical judgments, however, are not based solely upon this version, but also upon my recollection of the original Broadway production.
70. Mitgang interview, p. 3.

CHAPTER VII

S. N. BEHRMAN: NO TIME FOR COMEDY?

It is relieving, if not morally profitable, for an American writer to contemplate people who can recreate the semblance of gaiety in the face of lamentably inappropriate circumstances.

Robert Sherwood, Preface to
Reunion in Vienna

Manner--divorced from justice--
the Hell with that!

S. N. Behrman, No Time for Comedy

The American temperament has never been particularly hospitable to high comedy; our wit has always remained too plebeian to accommodate the epigrams and mots of a leisure class. It is not surprising, then, that S. N. Behrman in his attempt to produce an American comedy of manners should look to British examples, nor that the comic world which he in fact created should be peopled perennially with the flower of the Anglo-American theatrical aristocracy: the Lunts, Laurence Olivier, Jane Cowl, etc. Nor should we burden ourselves with a too intense search for the sounds and smells of a specific locale. Behrman's world, whether it be London, or New York, or Mexico, or Maine, is always the same; the drawing room is always elaborately furnished and the grand

piano offers perpetual solace for world-weariness. Against the backdrop of this fashionable world the perennial intrigues of sophisticated comedy are enacted. Love is always the prime mover, but it is never ventured into precipitately, for this would impede the flow of wit released by the continual discussion of its complications. In the world of high comedy articulateness is all.

I do not wish to denigrate the genre, but merely, in affirming several of its salient features, to indicate the paradox in which S. N. Behrman was necessarily involved. For it is extremely important in the world of sophisticated comedy that situations appear more portentous than they in fact are. High comedy thrives on trivia; dependent upon a core of dramatic conventionality which serves as the framework upon which the playwright embroiders verbal witticisms, it is concerned less with the demonstration of human folly and absurdity than with the witty comment upon them. Comedy of manners is, therefore, dependent upon a very specific set of social values. The laughter which it provokes has its roots in Bergsonian superiority. Gaucherie, maladroitness, pretension--these are the salient vices of its world; cleverness, articulateness, savoir faire--these are the prescribed virtues. Above all, the wit must preserve a degree of detachment from the follies which he witnesses and assails verbally. Involvement would be fatal; it might, after all, demonstrate the ridiculousness of his own position.

For these several reasons one would not expect the genre to flourish in a period of intense social dislocation. In a world of crises, in which old values are crumbling and new ones asserted, it would seem that its very foundations would be undermined. In a world which demands action, the necessarily static and detached form of high comedy might well seem anachronistic. For witty laughter is apt to seem most trivial in a world of insecurity, and the surface mannerisms of social life may appear supremely unimportant in the context of social conflict.

And yet S. N. Behrman's major comedies of manners were written during one of the most convulsive periods of recent history. If there was ever a time unpropitious for high comedy, it would appear to be the thirties. The world was deadly serious; it was, as Behrman himself observed, "no time for comedy." Drama was illumined by the flame of social protest, not by the fire of wit. And yet, as Behrman has consistently affirmed, it is precisely in such a period that laughter is most needed; for when man loses his ability to laugh at himself, he has most surely surrendered to his more ignoble instincts.

This then was Behrman's esthetic dilemma: his forte was undeniably sophisticated comedy, and yet the world seemed to strike at the very roots of the genre by destroying the possibility of detachment. How was the serious comic dramatist to retain the genre and still express a necessary

concern with the vital issues of the age? Note the qualifying adjective "serious"; had Behrman been merely a hack there would indeed have been no problem. His task would quite simply have been to turn out quite pleasant trifles within the dictates of an established formula. But Behrman, despite the closeness with which he toed the Broadway line, was much more than a hack in the thirties. Clurman wrote wistfully of "the poet buried in him that he himself hardly knows,"¹ and this "poet" emerged time and again to challenge the Broadway craftsman. Despite his dedication to well-made comedies, Behrman's major plays have demonstrated a consistent involvement with serious themes.

It is not our purpose to pursue the reason why Behrman continued to utilize the conventions of high comedy to express his very serious opinions upon the social upheavals of his age. Surely, these concerns with fascism, communism, and liberalism strain the genre at times almost to the breaking point. Perhaps he felt that laughter must be provoked at all costs in a humorless world; or perhaps he recognized, quite realistically, that his particular talent was best expressed through the forms of high comedy. What concerns us is that Behrman was determined to retain the genre, and yet deal seriously with serious problems. What emerges dramatically is, therefore, a unique hybrid. The form is still that of high comedy, since most of the traditional conventions are retained. Lovers are still wonderfully

articulate, and mots are uttered at the drop of a martini. But although the world delineated is still that of the leisure class, it is a world besieged. Social philosophy as well as amorous intrigue affords food for table talk. Young radicals appear--sometimes in the form of the young scions of the upper class itself--to drag most disquieting subjects into the drawing room. But although ideas abound, Behrman never attempts to create a Shavian comedy of ideas. In Shaw ideas themselves determine the form of drama. Comedic devices are utilized insofar as they facilitate and embody the clash of various intellectual or social positions. Shaw runs the comic gamut from high comedy to burlesque, continually adapting forms to his specific intellectual and dramatic needs.

Behrman, on the other hand, although he is involved with ideas, continually attempts to make them conform to the dictates of a specific genre. He is never the farceur; in his plays situations themselves are rarely comic; they are in fact most serious, for were they otherwise the world of wit might abdicate before the world of low comedy. Behrman is determined to use ideas as he uses dramatic situation, as the means for the exploitation of wit. He attempts to make ideas and social conflict conform to high comedic demands by never forgoing the essential qualities of the form. Thus the very seriousness of the ideas involved continually threatens to destroy the trivial base upon which his wit is perched.

One is asked to accept the triviality of his characters as well as the seriousness of the problems in which they are involved.

In Behrman's pre-Depression plays this problem does not present many difficulties. In The Second Man (1927), for example, we are not compelled to accept anything extrinsic to the demands of high comedy. We are fully aware that Storey's problem--whether to marry his wealthy mistress or a young ingenue--is the stuff of comedy. We are not asked, nor do we aspire, to accept Storey's dilemma as very portentous. We acquiesce in its triviality because we accept the rules of the game. "In the end everything is reduced to cliché."² This is Clark Storey's credo, and it is the credo of The Second Man. But, as we have indicated, plot cliché is essential to the unbridling of wit, and in the character of Storey, Behrman has created a perfect comic mouthpiece:

What this country needs is a dilettante class,
interested in art with no desire to make money
out of it. Why shouldn't there be an amateur
class in art, as there is in sport? (p. 12)

.....

Real emotions and real feelings are destructive.
I've learned to do without them. That's civili-
zation. (p. 70)

But the exploitation of verbalisms and the familiar amatory intrigues are not the only stuff of The Second Man. There is a theme, and it is expressed in the very title of the play. Storey reveals to Monica that cynicism is contrary to his better nature: "There's someone else inside

me--a second man--a cynical, odious person, who keeps watching me, who keeps listening to what I say, grinning and sophisticated, horrid. . . . he never lets me be--this other man. . . ." (p. 48) But we cannot accept Storey's protestation very seriously; it is apparent that this theme is itself a device. Storey is never humanized, nor should he be, for were his dilemma a real one the play would assume a decidedly uncomic tone. Thus from the very outset although Behrman demonstrated his ability to exploit elements of seriousness, these elements are in The Second Man confined within the limits of the genre. Storey's attack of integrity is, in the context of the play, about as important as Monica's spurious pregnancy. Both move the machinery of plot and allow the wit room to maneuver.

One element which characterizes this and Behrman's subsequent plays, and which demonstrates his tendency to exploit dramatic conventions for the purposes of wit, is the puritanism which lies behind the facade of his characters' sophistication. Time and again, Behrman's major characters are faced with either marriage or abandonment. Rarely does the possibility of a casual affair seem to be entertained. Storey, for example, despite his man-of-the-world stance, states, "If I were a cad I should have an affair with Monica. But regrettably I am a Puritan. Can't help it. It's in my blood." (p. 63) Lael, the heroine of Rain from Heaven,

similarly says, "though I'm intellectually sympathetic to any indulgence, emotionally I'm fastidious and even puritanic."³ And Paula to her boy friend, Will, in End of Summer: "What a Puritan you are!"⁴ Even Gaylord in No Time for Comedy: "Damn it, Linda--I've got to marry Mandy or somebody because its the only way I can be unfaithful to you!"⁵

One might well question the accuracy with which Behrman delineates the mores of the upper classes, and inquire why this continual assertion of the puritanic nature of most of his major characters? Perhaps the playwright recognized that without their puritanic morality his characters would be totally inert. Were they casual in their love-making, Behrman would be deprived of his perennial plot device, the momentousness of amatory choice. In Behrman's plays the machinery of plot is perpetually wedded to sentimental premises. As in much of popular art, the glamour of illicitness is exploited within the strict confines of public morality.

We are not overtly troubled by these premises in the context of The Second Man or Serena Blandish (1929) or Brief Moment (1931); they are essentially trifles. It is in the context of Behrman's later plays that his devices become bothersome, for Behrman seems dramatically unwilling to forgo the formula with which he had achieved success in The Second Man. The Behrmanian formula might be stated as

follows: take a man or woman of the world (elegantly played either by Alfred Lunt or Ina Claire), make him or her the object of the attention of several worthy suitors of the opposite sex; add the fillip of indecision (the various suitors present different virtues) and sprinkle generously with the spice of witty self-analysis. Needless to say, this formula is hardly original with Behrman. What Behrman attempts is to retain his successful commercial formula and yet use it as a means whereby he can take a serious look at the issues of his time. The technique suffices as long as he can retain the detached position of the wit; one can comment even upon a changing world. The difficulty arises when Behrman himself becomes involved, when the pressure of events --in particular the rise of fascism and the persecution of the Jews--dislodges him from the position of uninvolvedness. It is then that the foundations of sophisticated comedy begin to crumble and the machinery of device to appear insubstantial.

The intrusion of social concerns into the world of high comedy may be first seen in Biography (1932), in which Behrman introduces for the first time a characteristic figure of the decade, the radical. In Richard Kurt, Behrman draws the portrait of a type he comes to dislike thoroughly. It is not the radical's viewpoint on social issues which disturbs Behrman, since he is, in fact, in substantial agreement on many particulars. The quality possessed by Kurt in Biography --and later Chris in Wine of Choice--which Behrman disavows

is an inhumanity born of dogmatism. The radical, Behrman continually affirms, is "really at home only in protest."⁶ He will not allow his better instincts to break through the facade of his toughness, for this would threaten the simplicity of his world. Thus Kurt will not allow himself to fall in love with Marion. Although the relationship between them is drawn within the confines of comic intrigue (Nolan and Kinicott compete with Kurt for Marion's favors), a new note has intruded. Marion and Kurt's liaison is a genuine social misalliance. He resents her unconcern with the social facts of life: "God, how I hate detachment!" he cries (p. 149) In rejecting Marion he is rejecting the world she represents as well: "You're superficial and casual and irresponsible. You take life, which is a tragic thing, as though it were a trivial, bedroom farce." (p. 148) But Marion maintains that he simplifies everything unduly; "it is a defect of the radical and the young." (p. 148) The difficulty with the radical temperament is that in its condemnation of society it really seeks confirmation of firmly entrenched ideas. The radical knows what is right and just, and in the singleness of his vision is apt "to overlook much that is noble and generous and gentle." (p. 151) Kurt's fanaticism leads to the rejection of his basic goodness, and Marion recoils before this rejection. "Studying you," she tells him, "I can see why so many movements against injustice become such absolute tyrannies." But the political man cannot afford the luxury

of sentimentality, and Kurt wryly rejoins, "That beautiful detachment again. . . ." (p. 173)

In Biography Behrman maintains in the face of social change the necessity of such detachment. He cannot assent to the fervor of radicalism. Nolan, the stuffed-shirt Senator, and Kinicott the conservative publisher are objects of amusement, not contempt. Marion voices the liberal's revulsion in the face of radical fanaticism.

No . . . it wasn't your anger that troubled me. It was ourselves--the difference between us--not the years alone but the immutable difference in temperament. Your hates frighten me, Dickie. These people--poor Bunny, that ridiculous fellow Kinicott--to you these rather ineffectual, blundering people symbolize the forces that have hurt you and you hate them. But I don't hate them. I can't hate them. Without feeling it, I can understand your hate but I can't bring myself to foster it. (p. 179)

Thus Behrman initiates his attempt to write a form of comedy which takes cognizance of contemporary social issues, but which does not depart from the necessary detachment of wit. Although he retains the form of The Second Man, he attempts to infuse it with the life blood of social comment. Above all, in the face of an intolerant world he tries to raise the banner of sanity, to demonstrate that wit is still possible--in fact, necessary. If one villain emerges from the corpus of his work, it is the authoritarian fanatic--either communist or fascist--who, like Kurt, denies the humanity of both himself and others.

Yet Kurt is not totally unsympathetic; on the contrary, within the context of the plot he is, indeed, the hero. Behrman rejects his means, not his ends. In Wine of Choice (1938), however, the radical prototype is thoroughly excoriated. For Chris, the proletarian novelist, has drowned almost all his humanity in class hate. Wilda, the young ingenue who falls in love with him, notes that Chris does not judge those outside his class as human beings: "You wrote about us exactly as if we were all wild animals or foreigners. . . . As though, for you, we were in a different category altogether--a non-human category." And Chris answers, "Perhaps for me you are."⁷ Kurt, at least, was not completely humorless. His aim in publishing Marion's biography was "to laugh the powers that be out of existence in a great winnowing gale of laughter." (p. 150) Bitter laughter indeed, but at least laughter. Chris, however, has no respect for any humor, ameliorative or otherwise. "Humor is a vice," he asserts, "it cushions suffering." (p. 86)

Having rejected the capitalist world, Chris is ready to write its denizens off completely. They are members of a dying class and will hardly be missed. He rejects in toto all the values which seem to him an irrelevance, and which to Behrman represent qualities the world can scarcely do without: charm, grace, tolerance. The following exchange

between the liberal, Ryder, and Chris reveals Behrman's disavowal of the radical position:

Ryder: I read somewhere in the letters of Lenin that he hated music even when it beguiled him because it made life endurable.

Chris: The delights of the world are an affront because they make tolerable an insupportable world.

Ryder: You want to sweep away the delights--

Chris: I have no time for them.

Ryder: I want to keep them--only make them accessible to more people. (pp. 131-32)

The world which Chris wishes to destroy is not without its virtues; although the aristocracy is indeed an anachronism in an age of social change--"on the one hand inhibited by a code, on the other emasculated by charm" (p. 166)--as represented in the person of Laddy, for example, it is not vicious.

Ryder, the play's *raisonneur*, points out that if he must fight in order to defend the worthwhile values of the old order against Chris he will do so: "You make me feel suddenly that there is something marvelously worth preserving in Laddy. Against you and your kind I would preserve not his indolence but his chivalry--not his indifference but his generosity--" (p. 134)

Yet Ryder recognizes that the old order, with all its many virtues, can no longer avoid the facts of social change; he affirms that charm is no longer enough, that the time has come to make a new start. He attacks Laddy for enduring a friend's parasitism:

You support him in his miserable . . . self-indulgence to divert you from the horrors on the

surface of which you live. The spirit of man causes him to brave fires and snows for the divine impulse to truth that burns in him. . . . but to Binkie [the friend] . . . this is an eccentricity! To him and to the society which he represents this immolation is an eccentricity, a lapse in style. (p. 50)

Obviously style in itself no longer suffices. If the virtues of the world of grace and charm are to be retained, they must be grounded in the new virtue of social justice.

Thus Wine of Choice represents Behrman's most overt espousal of what he terms "the skepticism of Democracy." Although Ryder recognizes that change is necessary, he cannot accept Chris' revolutionary alternative. Therein lie the pitfalls of fanaticism and greater evils than the ills of the old order. For in the name of the ideals of justice the dogmatist is willing--almost obliged--to commit the gravest acts of injustice. Ryder tells Chris:

You are locked deep in the cold fastnesses of theory--on that surface nothing can take hold . . . neither love nor friendship nor affection. I see now how people like you can condemn to death their best friends--because equally well you can condemn yourselves to lovelessness, to abnegation, to death. (p. 205)

To Chris's assertion that Ryder's liberalism is sentimental, the latter replies that it is he himself who is sentimental. "Your sentimentality is the most perverted of all because it ignores the most powerful impulse in people--to be free--to choose. . . . Against you and your kind I shall struggle to keep alive a world in which choice will still be possible--without dictation." (p. 207-7) True, mankind can be con-

vinced of the stupidest of follies; it can behave cruelly, absurdly, viciously, but the answer does not reside in acting inhumanely ourselves. There is always an alternative: "We suffer and succumb to our suffering. We are capricious, we are adolescent and fallible. But we emerge from our weakness and retain our dream." (p. 208)

At the other end of the political spectrum from communism lay, for Behrman, an even more vicious threat to man's humanity, fascism. As the war-clouds loomed ever nearer, Behrman became increasingly concerned with the nature of the authoritarian personality until, in the plays written during the war years, it becomes his major dramatic concern. Behrman demonstrated an early interest in the power-ridden fanatic; in his early play, Meteor (1929), he explored the personality of a man who rises inexorably and ruthlessly to the top of the financial heap in boom-age America. Raphael Lord, guided by a conviction of infallibility, justifies economic ruthlessness on the grounds of necessity: "There's a lot to be said for blood and iron. If Russian Communism is a success, it'll be because the leaders are first-rate executioners--the first Utopians who knew how to handle machine guns."⁸ But Lord is not a radical; he has, in fact, but one obsession, the possession and enjoyment of power. It is this obsession which distinguishes Behrman's proto-fascist from his radical characters. The latter possess specific ideals which in themselves are not reprehensible.

In fact, several of his radical characters are treated quite sympathetically; for example, Will in End of Summer and Avis in The Talley Method. Behrman does not reject the radical's humanitarian ideals, but fearing that the use of inhumane means may well pervert these ends, he proposes instead the liberal's gradual route to social reform. But Behrman's proto-fascist figures are intoxicated with the possession of power for its own sake. They are rarely presented, as are the communists, as ideologists. When they are--such as Hobart in Rain from Heaven--the portrait is apt to be drawn in the simple outlines of caricature. Behrman is less concerned with the specifics of fascist doctrine than with the psychology of fascist mentality, with the anatomy of the will to manipulate, to possess, and to destroy. Lord, drawn before the advent of Naziism, is the prototype of this figure, which reappears in Behrman's later plays in Dr. Rice in End of Summer, Clay Rainier in Dunnigan's Daughter, and, in less extreme form, Axton Talley in The Talley Method.

Behrman's most successful portrayal of the fascist mentality is Kenneth Rice, the charlatan psychiatrist in End of Summer (1936). Rice uses the jargon of psychoanalysis and his own not inconsiderable charm to present a facade of calm detachment, behind which lies a core of ruthless opportunism. He cynically woos Leonie in order to obtain her fortune, the money necessary to realize his dream of power. Rice has no use for liberal or radical ideals; he is firm

in his conviction that in a predatory world, only the fittest survive:

When I hear the chatter of your friends, it makes me sick. While they and their kind prate of cooperative commonwealths, the strong man takes power, and rides over their backs--which is all their backs are fit for. Never has the opportunity for the individual career been so exalted, so infinite in its scope, so horizontal. House painters and minor journalists become dictators of great nations. Imagine what a really clever man could do! See what he has done! (p. 358)

As Behrman states in a stage direction, "This man is the enemy." (p. 359) Paula, Leonie's daughter, to whom Rice makes this self-revelation, comes to a similar recognition and is determined to stop him from marrying her mother. To achieve this Paula traps Rice, who has confessed a passion for her, into revealing this passion to Leonie. The revelation dooms his scheme, and Rice exits fuming. Thus we may observe how Behrman utilizes the stock devices of high comedy (in this case, the unmasking of the philanderer) in order to comment seriously upon a social phenomenon. As Paula states to Rice, "I suppose you're going to tell me this isn't cricket. Well, don't, because . . . to live up to a code with people like you is only to be weak and absurd." (p. 362) The dramatic difficulty, however, lies in the fact that the conventional machinery does not seem to sustain the weight of Behrman's purpose. The rejection scene, in the context of the seriousness which preceded it,

smacks of artifice, and we cannot fully assent to the summary disposal of the hitherto all-powerful psychiatrist.

Yet whether completely successful or not, we cannot deny the seriousness which lies at the heart of End of Summer. Behrman attempts to anatomize the fascist danger. In an age of unrest, the ruthless cynic may offer the illusion of security; but these panaceas can only be achieved at the expense of human freedom. Will, the young radical in love with Paula, in attacking Rice, points the moral:

Some men are born ahead of their time, some behind, but you are made pat for the instant. Now is the time for you--when people are unemployed and distrust their own capacities--when people suffer and may be tempted--when integrity yields to despair--now is the moment for you! (p. 348)

Curiously, in the light of the portrait of Chris in Wine of Choice, if there is an antidote to Rice's cynicism it lies in the fervor of the young radical, Will. In fact, the money which was initially to finance Rice's sanatorium eventually goes to subsidize a radical paper which Will and a friend are contemplating. But then, Will is not presented as a doctrinaire communist; in fact his position is not far removed from Ryder's liberalism. It is the dogmatism into which radicalism often degenerates which Behrman rejects, not the radical premises themselves.

The relationship between Will and Paula is another in the series of romantic misalliances which characterize Behrman's work. Again, as in the case of Marion and Kurt in Biography, we are presented with a relationship between an

upper-class woman and a man of lower social position. But whereas Marion and Kurt were of conflicting temperaments, Paula shares Will's social faith. "Don't you realize," she tells him, "that since I've acquired your point of view about things, my life has had an excitement and a sense of reality it's never had before." (p. 286) The difficulty between them (and again we must ask if this difficulty is not deliberately intensified in order to satisfy the exigencies of plot) lies in Will's refusal to accept her money, and the dependence which he feels such an acceptance would entail.

Supposing you weren't rich? Is it a world in which, but for this, I'd have to sink? If it is, I'm going to damn well do what I can to change it. I don't have to scramble for the inheritance of dead men. . . . I don't want this damn fortune to give me an unfair advantage over people as good as I am who haven't got it. (p. 363)

It is apparent that Behrman presents Will's fervor as the foil to Rice's cynicism. The world which Leonie represents is dying; she herself, in her acceptance of Rice, demonstrates her desperate need to find meaning in her life. Above all, she wishes "I could dedicate myself to something --something outside myself." (p. 369) In the end money is more of a curse than a solace; it "gives the illusion of escape--but always you have to come back to yourself." (p. 364) In contrast to Behrman's other female characters --who usually embody his most cherished virtues--Leonie is the victim. Behrman seems to be sounding the death knell

of the class she represents, and speculating as to whether Rice or Will reflects the image of the future. Although he fervently prefers the triumph of the latter, Behrman fears that we are living in the Age of the Charlatan. The gratuitous defeat of Rice almost seems to represent an act of deliberate exorcism.

Behrman drew his last portrait of the fascist mentality in Dunnigan's Daughter (1945). In the person of Clay Rainier, the playwright finally succeeded in exorcizing the figure. Rainier, like Lord and Rice, worships power for its own sake, and has, as the others, again abdicated his humanity. Again he sees himself above the common herd: "Men like myself are hobbled constantly by these little snivelings who are obscurely jealous of us, because we perform while they whittle down, we contribute while they hamper. . ."⁹ If human beings, inevitably weak and fallible, were not led by the strong man, the result would be anarchy. "The mass is an animal that can be led in only two ways--a feed bag in front, a stick from behind. Power can't be distributed." (p. 133) And the enjoyment of power is the "most continuously satisfying" emotion. (p. 131) In short, Rainier operates on the theory of human maliciousness. The reforming instinct is doomed to failure because man is innately evil.

The historians write their books on the principle that there is an unending impulse to be good, a kind of perpetual motion of virtue. They don't reckon with an impulse of evil. . . . People shocked because . . . everybody's at each other's

throat. . . . What do they expect them to do?
That's human nature. They'll always be at each
other's throat. (p. 134)

But Clay's impulse to possess human beings and objects is not merely socially destructive; it is personally destructive as well. In the end, he is deserted one by one by the individuals whom, in his perverse way, he loves: Enid, his finance, and Zelda, his daughter. The last view we have is of a deserted, broken man. But the principle which Clay embodies is perpetually dangerous, even if temporarily thwarted. Although fascism may be defeated, Behrman implies, mankind must be ever vigilant against its recurrence, for "we live in a time when one warped individual with a grievance, provided he has the knowledge and provided he has the power, can destroy the world." (p. 123) Even at the moment of defeat Clay warns Jim, his liberal antagonist: "Easy to snipe at power, when you haven't the responsibility of it. All right, I give it to you. . . . Achieve Utopia. . . . if you do, it will be historic because it will be for the first time. You see, the unpleasant fact is . . . you have the dreams, I have the know-how. I'll be watching, and I'll be waiting." (p. 183) The fascist danger perennially lurks in man's fallibility.

To counteract this danger it is necessary to affirm the liberal, humanitarian dream, for knowledge without responsibility will again "blow the roof off the world." (p. 183) The difficulty lies in the recognition that while

"evil is mobilized, goodness is not." Goodness is confused, irresolute, and forever susceptible to defeat by fanatic evil. Man must, then, recognize his fallibility--"the serpent in the garden of Eden"--and build upon the foundation of this recognition. But in this very recognition there is, as Miguel asserts, a form of grandeur. Clay maintains--as do the frustrate who inspire evil to feed their own inadequacies--that without power man is nothing. Miguel counters with the following affirmation of faith in man:

Look at this poor creature--man. He knows he is insignificant, yet can conceive to be noble. He knows that he is mortal, yet can dream into the infinite. He knows that he is evil, yet can hope to be good. He is loveless and alone--yet feels the need of love and the need of his kind. Is this what it is to be nobody? (p. 179)

Behrman's detestation of fascism arises time and again to destroy the pose of his detachment. He is quite capable of retaining this pose in his consideration of the radical temperament; he sympathizes with the radical gesture but offers the corrective of wit against its dogmatic excesses. But against the threat of fascism he is unable to remain uninvolved; he feels compelled not merely to anatomize the fascist mentality but to take sides actively against it. In Rain from Heaven (1934), for example, he was aroused by an incident in the persecution of the Jews to write a play which might depict the human consequences of this persecution. The incident in question concerned a meeting between a Jewish music critic, Alfred Kerr, and the famous German playwright,

Gerhardt Hauptmann. Kerr had been partially responsible for Hauptmann's early reputation, and in time of danger went to his old friend for help and advice. The Grand Old Man, however, had embraced Naziism and turned his back on his former friend, as he did on all his previous associates who did not measure up to the new standards. Behrman saw in this confrontation the essential horror of fascist perversion, and, in his own words, was "condemned to write" Rain from Heaven. For there in Hauptmann's study lay the betrayal of nobility.

In the great man's quiet study, one might hope for the emergence of a spirit and an understanding transcending the clamors and ferocities of the marching, lustful mobs. Here . . . might arise an emanation so distilled and powerful that miraculously it might delethalize those other and headier exhalations from . . . the heated breaths of the demagogues. Because if not from this room, from where else? That it did not come--this for me--was the essential tragedy.¹⁰

Note the word "tragedy." The comic spirit, if not the comic machinery, is overwhelmed in Rain from Heaven by the intensity of Behrman's involvement with the tragedy of surrender to fascist brutality. And yet the form of the play remains that of sophisticated comedy. The plot again centers upon amatory intrigue: Phoebe, who is married to Hobart, is in love with Hugo, who is in love with Lael, who is, in turn, loved by Rand, etc. The crucial incident of the rejection of the Jew, represented in the play by Hugo, is never presented on stage; it is narrated in passing. Again Behrman, at home only in the leisured world of high comedy, seems unwilling to essay

new dramatic forms. Thus Rain from Heaven alternates between scenes of conventional sophistication and scenes of serious import. The very seriousness of the latter causes the former to lose much of their comic effectiveness.

Behrman affirms that involvement cannot be avoided. Hauptmann, for him, symbolizes those who in the guise of practicality make their peace with evil by attempting to ignore it. Hugo Willens, in the play, had precipitated himself into trouble by consciously attacking the Nazis' anti-semitic policy in a pamphlet entitled "The Last Jew," in which he related a parable of the extermination of the Jews (in 1934 direfully prophetic). When all the Jews but one are killed, the fascists realize that this survivor is the most valuable man in the country, since the government's entire policy is based upon the use of the Jew as a scape-goat. "Let this man die and their policy is bankrupt. They are left naked, without an issue, without a programme. . . . the Jews gone and still no millennium." (pp. 204-5) Hugo himself is not Jewish, although he acknowledges a Jewish great-grandmother, but the Nazi "chromosome hunt" and his pamphlet had forced him into the world of the exiled.

But Hugo does not acquiesce in this exile. At the end of the play he decides to return to Germany to fight the evil on its own home-ground. Lael tries to persuade him to remain: "You're an artist, Hugo. What have you to do with feuds and hatreds and rebellions? Can't you try to see it

as I see it? . . . I believe in muddling through. I believe . . . that in the main people are reasonable and corrigible and sweet. . . ." (pp. 271-72) But Hugo will not accept Lael's gradualism; the artist cannot exempt himself from man's suffering and inhumanity. He must face the cruel facts, and act:

No, I'm determined at last to view the world--including myself--completely without illusion. It's a matter of life and death. I see now that goodness is not enough, that liberalism is not enough. I'm sick of evasions. They've done us in. . . . (p. 272)

Behrman's pose of detachment is shattered, and Rain from Heaven represents his most intense anti-fascist statement. It is not sufficient to recognize the evil of fascism; it must be actively combatted. For Behrman--as for others, Jew and non-Jew alike--the madness of racism presaged the wholesale destruction of humanity, the Jew being merely the first victim. Unless racism were combatted wherever it appeared, the fascist danger would necessarily increase. In the name of economic order Hobart champions a native fascist movement. Therein lies the real danger: that we ignore the enemy within. "You think its because you killed Christ that we fear and hate you," Hobart tells Hugo. "No! It's because you gave birth to Lenin!" Thus the fascist justified anti-semitism on the grounds of anti-communism.

By the time that Behrman wrote The Talley Method in 1941 it indeed appeared that man's darkest apprehensions were being fulfilled. With the outbreak of the European war the

Age of Terror had most certainly arrived, and The Talley Method--although it too goes through the motions of sophisticated comedy--is too bitter, too involved with the spectacle of human destruction to be legitimately termed comedy at all. "These days, I'm afraid, charm isn't enough," says one of the characters (p. 53), and it is apparent that Behrman's comic vision has turned most grim. The veneer of flippancy has all but disappeared: "We live in a time when the truest voices are struck dumb by the loudest." (p. 43) If there is one persistent note struck in the play it is the insensitivity of humanity to man's suffering.

In Rain from Heaven Hugo returned to Germany to fight, but such a gesture is no longer possible. Manfred, the refugee writer in The Talley Method, finds himself rejected by all sides and takes the one road left to him, suicide. He is the victim of a world dominated by cruelty. "Why is there so little kindness?" Philip, the younger generation, asks Enid, the older. She answers, "Perhaps because cruelty is at the heart of things. . . . We won't admit it. Our voices are modulated and that deceives us. 'We are beasts of prey,' the German philosopher keeps repeating. 'We are beasts of prey. . .'"¹¹

But man cannot accept the immutability of cruelty. He must continually strive to transcend it. "I know there are no facile consolations," Enid tells Talley, "but it is true, I think, that often the victims survive their murderers.

I must cling to that belief--or I'll sink." (p. 167) Talley, humane only in his professional capacity, represents the individual who has immunized himself to human suffering. That is, in fact, the Talley method: detachment from anything not specifically germane to one's personally limited goals. Talley can feel no sympathy for Manfred's plight. "If those people couldn't control a system they despise, they must take the consequences. . . . As they took no interest until it was too late about . . . who should govern them and how--why should we now pull their chestnuts out of the fire for them?" (pp. 150-51)

But in the end the Talley method is ineffective; it cuts Talley off not only from humanity in general but from those he loves as well, Enid and his children. But while Talley's situation seems to parallel Clay Rainier's exactly, it is apparent that there is a vital difference. Talley is not, like Rice or Rainier, obsessed with power; he is not motivated by the desire to manipulate. His sin is indifference, the refusal to involve himself with the problems of human beings other than in a professional capacity. In the end, however, indifference as well as opportunism achieve the same result. In a world of global conflict no man is an island; evasion is no longer possible. Manfred surrenders, but Enid affirms, "We will not! We . . . are still free." (pp. 166-67)

Thus Behrman's esthetic dilemma is again asserted: although, on one hand, he desires to retain the form and detachment of high comedy, on the other, he feels compelled to deal with tragic themes. It takes all his dramatic skill to permit him to walk the tightrope between these conflicting aims. That he himself was aware of his dilemma is apparent from his play No Time for Comedy (1939), in which he attempts, not uncharacteristically, to exploit it for comic purposes. He is successful in that the play is consistent; the serious core does not, as in Rain from Heaven, run away with the play. In forcing his very real dilemma to serve the purposes of sophisticated comedy (in much the same manner that the issue of integrity is exploited in the Second Man), Behrman answers Gaylord Esterbrook's dilemma (Is there indeed time for comedy in a humorless world?) with a resounding "yes." But, significantly, he does not do so within the context of the play. Gaylord's decision to continue to write comedy does not result from any intellectual realization; it seems based upon his romantic preference for Linda rather than Mandy. The perennial triangle is the dramatic core of the play. Behrman's answer lies, cleverly, not in any overt demonstration of the need for comedy, but rather in the fact of the comedy itself.

But, as we have seen, Behrman does not persevere in this detachment. If in No Time for Comedy he is able to

exploit Gaylord's dilemma for the purposes of comedy, at other times he seems to acquiesce in his self-deprecation:

While I'm imagining these charming variations . . . people are dying--the innocents are being slaughtered. . . . No . . . I must get something clear and outside myself to be enlisted for. I'm sick of the triviality, sick of ringing changes on what I've already written, sick of the futility theme. . . . (p. 105)

The problem of detachment from or involvement in the social and political issues of one's time--in short, the problem of political commitment--thus plays a crucial role in the drama of S. N. Behrman. From one point of view this involvement adulterated the form of Behrman's art; sophisticated comedy could not completely withstand the seriousness of the issues involved. Yet from another point of view Behrman's concern with the social issues of his age raised his drama beyond the level of triviality and made him, in fact, a more serious dramatist than he perhaps intended to be. Surely Behrman's subsequent dramatic record does not confirm the assertion that social considerations vitiated his art. Since the war Behrman has been almost exclusively concerned with adaptations: The Pirate (1942), based upon Ludwig Fulda's Die Seerauber; Jacobowsky and the Colonel (1944), a collaboration with Franz Werfel; I Know My Love (1949), a vehicle for the Lunts based upon Marcel Archard's Auprès de ma Blonde; Jane (1952), based upon a story by Maugham; Fanny (1955), based upon the plays of Marcel Pagnol; and, finally, The Cold Wind and the Warm (1959), a nostalgic reminiscence of his

boyhood based upon his own The Worcester Account. In all of these the Broadway craftsman is dominant; the very choice of other people's material indicates Behrman's abdication from serious playwriting. Some men are born serious and others achieve seriousness; perhaps Behrman had seriousness thrust upon him.

Footnotes to Chapter VII

1. Lies Like Truth, p. 37.
2. S. N. Behrman, The Second Man, in Four Plays (New York, 1955), p. 75.
3. Behrman, Rain from Heaven, in Four Plays, p. 216.
4. Behrman, End of Summer, in Four Plays, p. 326.
5. Behrman, No Time for Comedy (New York, 1939),
p. 101.
6. Behrman, Biography, in Four Plays, p. 94.
7. Behrman, Wine of Choice (New York, 1938), p. 84.
8. Behrman, Meteor (New York, 1934), p. 127.
9. Behrman, Dunnigan's Daughter (New York, 1945),
p. 82.
10. Behrman, prefatory note to Rain from Heaven (New York, 1934), p. 11.
11. Behrman, The Talley Method (New York, 1941), pp.
161-162.

CHAPTER VIII

ELMER RICE AND THE SERIOUSNESS OF DRAMA

The pressure of commercial theatre may become a tyranny. In that event the artist can know but one relationship to it: the relationship of antagonism. In such an era the playwright is either a rebel and an artist or a yes man and a hack.

Eric Bentley, The Playwright As Thinker

If S. N. Behrman questioned the appropriateness of comedy in an age of crisis, Elmer Rice questioned the very credentials of drama itself. Unlike Behrman, Rice was not committed to a specific dramatic genre; he was not faced with the problem of accommodating harsh social realities within the context of a frivolous form. On the contrary, he had demonstrated his ability to utilize such divergent forms as expressionism, naturalism, melodrama, and farce. The dilemma which confronted Rice in the mid-thirties was more fundamental: could American drama, as represented on Broadway, rightfully claim the virtue of seriousness, or did formal and economic exigencies render it, in fact, sub-literary? The issue is not without contemporary significance; our most influential literary critics, by virtue of their total unconcern with American drama, have affirmed the latter half

of the question; and even our more astute dramatic critics, such as Eric Bentley and Francis Fergusson, have concentrated their interest upon European drama. It is not our purpose to pursue this debate, but it is surely significant that American dramatists themselves have time and again raised the issue of the seriousness of the genre in which they are engaged. (The latest playwright to do so has been William Gibson, who, in The Seesaw Log, ironically relates the compromises necessary to achieve Broadway production.)

That Elmer Rice should, in the thirties, raise his voice in protest against the conditions that Broadway imposed upon the dramatist is particularly revealing; for Rice, throughout both his previous and subsequent theatrical career, presents us with a body of work which is perhaps unique in American drama in its inconsistency, its alternation of seriousness and conventionality. On one hand, we have such serious plays as The Adding Machine, The Subway, Street Scene, We the People, and Not for Children; on the other, such conventional Broadway products as On Trial, Cock-Robin, Wake Up Jonathan, and The Grand Tour. That Rice himself was never quite sure of his role is revealed by his different public statements. In 1934 he wrote, "I was disenchanted with the commercial theatre long before I was ever in it. . . . I have always been, and still am, interested in the drama as an art form, a social force and a medium for the expression of ideas."¹ However, in 1938 we find this

statement: "Fortunately for myself, I have never had a very high opinion of myself as a dramatist, nor have I ever thought of myself . . . as a candidate for the suffrage of posterity. . . . This youthful recognition of my own limitations . . . made it possible for me to devote myself to the utilization of what . . . is a pretty definite talent for constructing plays."²

Significantly--and not surprisingly--Rice's period of most intense concern with the problem of the seriousness of drama coincides with the early thirties when the Depression was at its worst and social solutions seemed imperative. Rice, like many liberals, allied himself with the radicals as a gesture of protest against the social chaos which prevailed, and his condemnation of Broadway--melodramatically proclaimed in the New York Times under the heading "Elmer Rice Says Farewell to Broadway"--was quoted favorably by Joshua Kunitz in the New Masses. For Rice, the drama could not treat life seriously because the powers that control the theatre will not allow it to do so:

The theatre is in the hands of business men, of real estate operators and entrepreneurs, whose chief interest is to capitalize the creative talents of the authors and actors and turn them into dollars and cents. . . . And so the drama, once the high priestess of religion, becomes the bond maiden of commerce. Between the creative artist and his potential auditors stands the sordid and ugly barrier of the commercial theatre. Here, as everywhere in our civilization, the profit system stifles the creative impulse and dams the free flow of human vitality.³

But Rice never completely assented to Marxian analysis. His "Farewell to Broadway," despite its Marxist tinge, never uses the familiar communist vocabulary; the words "bourgeois," "proletariat," "masses" are conspicuous by their absence. In fact, Rice's analysis of the deficiencies of the dramatic genre--as revealed in the introduction to and the play Not for Children--considers economic pressure as but one of the factors which prevent the drama from fulfilling its serious potential. Indeed, although Rice condemns both the "idle and frivolous amusement seekers" and "the artist who . . . panders to the tastes of the ruling class," he does not offer the familiar revolutionary corrective. The lot of the dramatist is not necessarily happier in those countries where the philosophy of individualism is not in favor and where the machinery of the theatre is under governmental control of regulation. "Here, commercial enterprise gives way to political expediency. The theatre becomes an arm of the state and we find that the criterion is no longer box-office value but political orthodoxy."⁴

The difficulties which assail the serious dramatist are not merely economic, but inherent in the dramatic form itself. The dramatist cannot present his vision of reality directly to the audience, as can the painter or writer; he must work through the cooperative efforts of a series of transmitting artists: the actor, the director, the scenic designer. The physical limitations of his playhouse impose

specific restrictions on the scope of his imagination. He is bound by temporality, by the necessity of creating a theatrical illusion instantaneously; he is never permitted to ignore the collective psychology of his audience, and, as Rice points out, "the collective behavior of a crowd varies greatly from the customary private behavior of the individuals who compose it." Thus the playwright is denied the artistic prerogative of expressing himself seriously upon political, racial, economic, religious, or sexual problems, for "doubts and heresies which are freely held and expressed by hundreds of thousands of individuals are greeted by an audience with the frightened hostility of a panic-stricken herd."⁵

These several factors, which combine to rob the drama of its requisite creative freedom, present the playwright with his "real dilemma": "Like every other artist, he is interested in projecting reality as he sees it. But he finds himself dependent upon an interpretative medium which is essentially artificial, conservative and conventional."⁶

Rice attempted to give this dilemma dramatic form in Not for Children (1934), the very title of which revealed his conviction that most American drama was infantile. The play attempts to combine Shavian intellectual comedy and Pirandellian illusionism, unfortunately not very successfully; for in using the device of having two characters both comment upon and participate in the stage action, Rice has not

succeeded in balancing these dual functions; the commentary, rather than the participation, becomes the play's *raison d'etre*, and one emerges with the feeling that perhaps Rice might have dispensed with the "play proper" entirely. Unfortunately Rice does not demonstrate either Shaw's ability to make ideas work theatrically, or Pirandello's skill in balancing illusion and reality. What concerns us, however, is not so much the esthetic success of Not for Children as its assertion of Rice's belligerently anti-theatrical attitude. It may be noted that even at the moment of his most intense disillusionment with drama, Rice feels compelled to express this disillusionment dramatically.

In Not for Children Rice personifies his esthetic dilemma in the personages of Ambrose and Theodora, who function as a dual chorus in commenting upon the play proper, which is a Berhmanesque comedy of manners. Theodora presents the pro-theatre point of view, while Ambrose upholds the negative. In answer to Ambrose's contention that the theatre can no longer be taken seriously, she rejoins:

You complain that the theatre is unrelated to reality. It is precisely that which gives the playhouse its charm. Reality is harsh, forbidding, painful, confused. But in the theatre all is neat, orderly, pre-arranged and . . . readily apprehended by a bright child of eleven. How delightful that is. . . . How restful, how satisfying, how reassuring.

But it is soon apparent, from the sheer weight of dialogue if nothing else, that Rice is in sympathy with Ambrose's point

of view. It was not a time for delight, rest, or reassurance. The theatre stands condemned, in Ambrose's words, "because it is so essentially false. Because it is so unrelated to reality. Because its emotions are so hollow, its characters so two-dimensional, its speech so hackneyed, its intellectual pretensions so ludicrous, its puppets so mechanical, its philosophy so trite." (p. 9) Or as Rice himself stated in his "farewell," "The theatre game as it is played on Broadway is so pitiably adolescent. . . . It is a trivial pastime, devised by 'grown-up children' for the delectation of the mentally and emotionally immature."⁷ Thus Rice's moral is unequivocally stated in a play specifically aimed "not for children": "The more nearly a play is good theatre, the less likely is it to be a reflection of reality. In short, the theatre and life are antithetical." (p. 124)

Obviously Rice, in this last statement at least, surrendered to overstatement born of his reaction against the triviality of the commercial theatre. As a firm admirer of Shaw, Ibsen, Hauptmann, he could scarcely uphold the proposition that the theatre and life are necessarily antithetical. The significance of the polemic from our point of view lies in Rice's vehement assertion of the serious playwright's dilemma: if he wishes to comment seriously upon the world of which he is a part--and for Rice, as others in the thirties, this inevitably implied social comment--can he do so in the context of a frivolous theatre? Lawson threw his energies

into criticism and political work; Behrman effected a tenuous balance between frivolity and seriousness. Rice was too much a man of the theatre to forsake it, and he, too, effected his theatrical compromise.

But theatrical compromise was nothing new to Elmer Rice. His work, as we have indicated previously, is supremely inconsistent. It is curious that his fervent condemnation of the commercial theatre should come from one whose talent has always been best expressed within its confines. It is at the craft of the theatre that Rice has always excelled; although he has been equally at home in many dramatic forms, this formal experimentation seems less the result of a desire to expand the bounds of conventional drama (as in the work of O'Neill) than the delight of the craftsman in demonstrating his technical facility.

Rice's eclecticism may be observed in his use of expressionism (The Adding Machine, The Subway), naturalism (Street Scene), sophisticated comedy (The Left Bank), psychological drama (Cue for Passion), allegorical fantasy (American Landscape), and the list may be extended. Perhaps the most persistent (and the most commercially successful) of Rice's forms has been the court-room melodrama; he has continually exploited his legal background for theatrical purposes. On Trial, It is the Law, For the Defense, Judgment Day, all derive their form from the court-room trial; and Counsellor-At-Law owes much of its success to its behind-the-scenes

revelation of the life of a big-time lawyer. Except for the court-room melodrama, Rice has scarcely employed the same dramatic form twice. Such versatility is not only admirable; it is almost unique. Most dramatists have been content to develop facility in but a few forms, usually moving logically from one to another. Ibsen, Strindberg, and O'Neill pass from realism to symbolism when they have, from their point of view, exhausted the possibilities of the former. But Rice fails to afford the dramatic critic any such orderly development. It is difficult to find in the sum-total of his work the consistent dramatic vision which informs the work of the major dramatists. As with many other minor writers, his significance appears to be seismographic; The Adding Machine, We the People, Flight to the West, and Cue for Passion, seem less the work of a consistent artistic personality than the faithful reflection of the intellectual climate of the twenties, the thirties, the forties, and the fifties.

But it is not merely the change of view-point which makes a critical evaluation of Rice's work difficult. The very issue which he raises in the thirties concerning the seriousness of drama must be considered in our critical judgment, for Rice himself has continually vacillated between seriousness and conventionality, many of his plays springing, in his own words, from "no nobler impulse than a realistic desire to make a comfortable living."⁸ Although this mundane consideration need not, of course, invalidate a work of art,

an examination of the bulk of Rice's work soon reveals that much of it is unworthy of serious consideration. Yet the serious core remains as a worthy contribution to American drama. Indeed, in The Adding Machine Rice succeeded not only in absorbing the form of expressionism, but in creating a character, Mr. Zero, who came to epitomize the contemporary anti-hero. And in Street Scene he drew a slice of New York life with such fidelity and compassion that it is still convincing.

If Rice's salient virtue is indeed seismographic, there can be no denying that his serious plays of the twenties reflect the contemporary concern with the de-humanization of man by society. In The Adding Machine (1923), The Subway (1929), and Street Scene (1929), we find variations upon that not uncommon theme of the age, reflected elsewhere in such plays as Lawson's Roger Bloomer, Sophie Treadwell's Machinale, Kaiser's From Morn to Midnight, and Toller's Masse-Mensch. In each of the plays man is crushed not so much by an oppressive social system as by the sheer weight of modern industrial civilization. From a social point of view, it is significant that Rice poses no political alternatives. We do not find the sense of class division which informs the early work of John Howard Lawson. Zero, Sophie, Mrs. Maurant are destroyed by a de-humanized society. Zero is dwarfed by the gigantic adding machine he finally is condemned to operation; Sophie by the mechanical monster which

hurls itself through man-made subterranean caverns; Mrs. Maurrant by the huge tenement which denies her the elemental freedom of privacy.

In the Adding Machine Zero is condemned not merely in life, but in death as well. He can never be free because he is a product and, consequently, has meaning only insofar as he is useful. Nurtured on hatred of "dagoes, catholics, sheenies and niggers," brutalized by the mechanical function he must perform, tortured by inaccessible dreams of sex, he represents man as victim. He cannot accept the possibility of freedom offered in the Elysian fields; he is troubled by the very air of serenity which prevails, and nature appears beautiful only in relation to the standards of a mechanized world. "Look at the flowers!" shouts Daisy, Zero's potential paramour, "Ain't they just perfect! Why you'd think they was artificial, wouldn't you?"⁹ Brutalized in life, Zero remains in death prey to the perverse puritanism represented by Shrdlu, who cannot understand why the Elysian fields are peopled, not by the defenders of religious morality, but rather by men who "spend all their time . . . telling stories and laughing and singing and drinking and dancing. . . ."

(p. 101)

Zero cannot accept life's joys because he has never experienced them; he remains a perpetual suppliant to the God of the Machine, eager to serve again by operating with the big toe of his right foot a lever which will set in motion

the "superb, super-hyper-adding machine" which represents the nightmare of the technological future. It is only when faced with the truth about himself that Zero rebels. Although he wants only to serve, he is told that even in this service he is a failure:

You're a . . . waste product. A slave to a contraption of steel and iron. The animal's instincts, but not his strength and skill. The animal's appetites, but not his unashamed indulgence of them, . . . the raw material of slums and wars--the ready prey of the first jingo or demagogue or political adventurer who takes the trouble to play upon your ignorance and credulity and provincialism. (p. 107)

Zero, when faced with the bitter truth, begs to remain in the world of the dead, but is persuaded to return to the endless cycle of futility by the illusion of Hope in the form of sex. Thus man palliates his servitude and remains the eternal victim.

Similarly, in The Subway, Rice uses a modified form of expressionism to present another victim of modern mechanization. Sophie Smith, like Mr. Zero, also responds to the forces which are crushing her with an act of violence. But it is an act performed upon herself; she offers herself as a sacrifice to the God of the Machine by throwing herself in the path of an incoming subway train. What better symbol of the animistic power of the machine? "A monster of steel with flaming eyes and gaping jaws, . . . the beast of the New Apocalypse. . . ." ¹⁰ The image which informs the play is that of "all mankind joining the mad mechanistic dance . . .

bondsmen to the monsters they have created . . . slaves to steel and concrete." (pp. 94-95)

Rice's vision, like that of the New Playwrights, is apocalyptic. In The Adding Machine Charles ironically relates the tortured history of evolution which for millions of years labored through plants, reptiles, amphibians, and mammals to achieve that paragon of animals, Mr. Zero. In The Subway the artist relates a parable of destruction in which scientists of a future age uncover the relics of our present civilization:

They dig down to the subway . . . down to the bones of these civilized millions. . . . Nothing but bones and a glass eye and some false teeth and a handful of blackened coins and a steel key that unlocked a steel box in a steel vault . . . and a pair of jade earrings from the five-and-ten cent store, . . . all that remains of Western Civilization. . . (p. 97)

The subway, far beneath the surface, reflects man's remoteness from nature. Significantly it is not nature that is cruel (as in the works of Stephen Crane, for example). Zero denies the Elysian fields, and Sophie yearns for a house in the country "with flowers . . . violets and roses and daisies. . ." (p. 51) The horror of modern life resides precisely in its denial of the forces of nature, of love and beauty, of sunlight and fresh air and room to breathe and the ability to live one's own life. In Street Scene, a play in the quite different form of naturalism, Rice emphasizes, though not so overtly, the same theme. Sammy, despairing of

his life in the New York slums, cries to Rose, "Everywhere you look, oppression and cruelty! It doesn't come from nature, it comes from humanity--humanity trampling on itself and tearing at its own throat."¹¹

Inasmuch as the form of Street Scene is naturalistic, Rice is less concerned with the indictment of society than with the specific detail of slum life. But the forces which built the adding machine and the subway also built the slums, in which life is similarly dehumanized. Although Mrs. Maurant's appeal for simple human understanding is denied, Rose and Sammy represent those who will not be content to become victims. They will rise above the sordidness which surrounds them. Rose, unlike Sophie Smith, leaves the slum in an attempt to find "a chance to breathe and spread out a little" (p. 187), and Street Scene does not end on the note of hopelessness which characterizes Rice's expressionistic plays.

Rice's serious plays of the twenties, then, accurately reflect the prevailing fear that machine civilization was succeeding in dehumanizing mankind. It is not surprising that most who presented this indictment should, with the onset of the Depression, turn towards political radicalism, for their initial attack was essentially a gesture of protest. The villain became not the machine, but the owner of the machine, and mankind's victimization was seen, not as an

immutable fact of the law of social evolution, but rather as the deliberate act of an exploiting class.

Although Rice never fully accepted Marxist theory, his need for social protest caused him to affiliate with many left-wing causes. He refused to join an organization dedicated to the elimination of "un-Americanism" with these words: "I prefer to take my stand with that 'vicious radical element' which clamors for a new social order, based not upon the preservation of the property rights of the predatory few, but upon the satisfaction of the human needs of all."¹² But throughout his fellow-traveling Rice always retained his liberal attitude. His public stands have invariably concerned the issue of censorship. From 1930 until the present day he has continually spoken out when forces of repression seem to threaten the civil liberties of the theatre or society. In 1931 he denounced J. S. Sumner, Cardinal Hayes, and Dr. Manning for their views on stage decency; in 1936 he resigned as regional director of the Federal Theatre because of the government censorship of the Living Newspaper production of Ethiopia; in 1945 he resigned as director of the New York City Center because of the banning of Trio; in 1953 he protested the ban on The Moon is Blue; in 1955 he urged amnesty for sixteen communists imprisoned under the Smith Act; in 1956 he attacked the "subtle censorship" by pressure groups which represented, in his view, a serious menace to "complete freedom of expression."¹³

In short, from the thirties onwards, Rice has been un homme engagé; he has been perennially involved with social and theatrical questions, and has consistently registered his protest against encroachments upon civil liberties. He has, moreover, been involved in various attempts to provide an alternative to Broadway. In 1933 he proposed the establishment of a People's Art Theatre which would "attempt not only to set the leaven of art at work in the masses but to drag the artist into the forum, face to face with his times." Rice's proposed theatre would have a social base; every play to be presented would be judged not only according to its dramatic and literary merits but also according to its social value. "No play would be presented which, in a general sense, does not possess social significance." But Rice was quick to indicate that he was not proposing a doctrinaire theatre:

The People's Art Theatre would not be committed to any specific policy or economic program, nor would it be animated by any doctrinaire philosophy. It would be an organ of propaganda only insofar as its general policy would favor the establishment of a new social order in which existing economic and social justice is eliminated.¹⁴

It is not surprising, then, that with the formation of the Federal Theatre Project in 1935 Elmer Rice should have been selected as regional director for the New York area. In reporting upon the project, Rice optimistically predicted the demise of the commercial theatre: "The rugged individualism so beloved by Mr. Hoover is now a museum piece. It is no

longer a part of the social scene. The old system in the theatre is finished."¹⁵

In what manner were these social concerns reflected in Rice's dramas of the thirties? His concern with the seriousness of drama is consistent with the articulate protest born of his renewed social conscience. But Rice could not fully ally himself with the revolutionary theatrical movement; he could not, for example, turn toward the composition of proletarian plays. Although infused with social indignation, he could not acquiesce in the communist solution. He has continually voiced his suspicions of the adverse effects of doctrine upon art. And yet he is compelled to involve himself with social issues. Each of his plays of the thirties (except Not for Children which, as we have seen, is concerned with the fundamental problem of the legitimacy of the dramatic form) has at its core a social problem. We the People is Rice's most slashing attack upon the social chaos bred by the Depression; Judgment Day condemns the Reichstag fire trial and Nazi injustice; Between Two Worlds presents the conflict of the old social order and the new; and American Landscape affirms American liberalism's answer to fascism and social injustice.

"You couldn't live in the Depression and fail to be touched by it,"¹⁶ Rice told an interviewer in 1958, and surely We the People (1933) represents an almost documentary attempt to portray the image of America during the early thirties.

But Rice is not content to record; he must protest, and We the People is his most overtly didactic drama.

We the People was not written for Broadway. [he wrote defiantly in the Times]. . . . It was written for the people who believe that the theatre can be something besides a place of entertainment and forgetfulness, that art can serve a useful social function, that the stage is a legitimate forum for the discussion in emotional and dramatic terms of problems that affect the lives and happiness of millions. . . .¹⁷

Rice's method of attack is panoramic. During the course of twenty scenes, he attempts to demonstrate how every area of American life has been affected by the Depression. Not restricting himself to class, he penetrates into the inner sanctums of big business and big education, as well as into the factory, the school, the farm. He attacks, from a basically Marxist point of view, every social abuse that he can discover: the plight of the worker dispossessed by unemployment; the tenuous economic position of the white collar worker; the impoverishment of the farmer; the use of the Jew, Negro, and foreigner as economic scapegoats; the inability of young people to live a normal life because of lack of money; the relationship between war and economics; the failure of organized religion to provide adequate social answers; the impact of the failure of the banks; the denial of academic freedom to dissenters; the connivance between the police and the ruling classes; the shooting down of demonstrating workers; the conspicuous consumption of the rich while the poor starve. If his fervor is vitiated it is because of the

furious indiscriminateness of his attack, for no sooner does he raise one social issue than he must counterpose another. Consequently, from a dramatic point of view, he presents rather than demonstrates his indictment.

There can be no denying, however, the implication of his attack. We the People--two years before Waiting for Lefty--is almost an agit-prop; but it differs from the communist agit-prop in that its call to action, despite the catalogue of social evils which the play reveals, is not revolutionary. The play represents, rather, the aroused liberal's cry of protest against social injustice, against the misery of the poor: "They ask for bread and for peace and they are given only starvation and war. . . . So that a few people can have a thousand times what they need, millions must live in darkness and hunger. And we must be silent. I shall not be silent. . . . I shall protest, protest, protest!"¹⁸

The final words of the play are spoken by Carter Sloane, scion of an old American family, who has sided with the oppressed and resigned his university job in protest against the suppression of academic freedom. He speaks at a public meeting, which, in the agit-prop tradition, allows the dramatist to address the audience directly. His appeal is not a call to revolutionary action, but rather to a return to the original principles of Americanism, "the ideals of freedom,

of justice, of equality of opportunity, of those inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

I find it necessary to take this platform, in order that I may raise my voice against acts that are committed in contravention of those ideals and those rights, . . . The right to live . . . that is all any [man] asks. And no social system that denies him that right has a claim to a continuance of its existence. In the name of humanity, ladies and gentlemen, in the name of common sense, what is society for, if not to provide for the safety and well-being of the men and woman who compose it? . . . We are the people, ladies and gentlemen, we--you and I and every one of us. It is our house: this America. Let us cleanse it and put in order and make it a decent place for decent people to live in! (pp. 252-53)

We have observed that the two social conditions in the thirties which forced many individuals to commit themselves politically were the Depression and the rise of fascism. It is appropriate, therefore, that Rice should follow his militant call for social justice in We the People with a bitter attack upon Naziism in Judgment Day (1934). Protest did not force, however, formal consistency upon the playwright; the form of Judgment Day in no way resembles that of We the People. In fact, Rice uses the familiar form of the courtroom melodrama in order to present his indictment. In the machinations surrounding the burning of the German Reichstag in February, 1933, Rice had, in real life, a plot replete with melodramatic intrigue and chicanery. He even had a ready-made hero, Georgi Dimitroff, the Bulgarian communist whose defiance of the mock-trial electrified the world. And

he also had a happy ending, because the Nazis, still insecure of their political position in 1933, were not able to ignore either the facts of the case or the pressure of world public opinion, and so freed the defendants. In fact, the difficulty with the play is that Rice's re-creation (he set the play in an undesignated Balkan country and changed various details of the actual case) pales in comparison with the documentary facts.

At the end of Judgment Day Judge Slatarski, one of the few presiding judges who will not bow to totalitarian pressure, shoots Vesnic, the thinly-veiled version of Adolf Hitler, and cries, "Down with tyranny! Long live the people!" This act, coupled with the surprise appearance of a character presumed dead, unfortunately melodramatizes a situation which, in reality, was already replete with sensation. The act of wish-fulfillment in destroying the Hitler figure serves to remove the entire play from the realm of actuality. Rice thus damages his indictment by making the very real facts of the case appear equally incredible. A perusal of contemporary accounts reveals no need to heighten reality to achieve dramatic effect, as the following excerpt from an eye-witness report by Eva Lips indicates:

. . . a workman named Felix . . . told of a Party meeting in Freienwalde. They had brought along ordnance maps, lanterns for code signalling, and revolvers. They had intended to form units to attack the counter-revolution if it should march upon Berlin.

"The counter-revolution," pipes Büngrer.
 "What was that?"
 "The Nazis," whispers Dimitroff to the
 microphone.
 "I forbid you to use that word," roars
 Werner.
 "Beg pardon!" says Dimitroff politely,
 "The National Socialists. . ."
 "Hold your snout!" from the Judges table.
 Dimitroff's hand moves in a gesture of pained
 resignation.
 "Proceed witness! . . . Take your eyes from
 Dimitroff!"
 "Excuse me, I can't go on," groans workman
 Felix. He is led off clinging to his two guards.¹⁹

Yet even if the actual facts of the case were more dramatic than Rice's presentation, Judgment Day was an effective weapon against Naziism. Scheduled productions in France and Holland were cancelled at the insistence of the Hitler government, and in Norway performances were prevented by rioting by the Norwegian Nazis. Rice's indictment was obviously strong enough to arouse fascist ire. In the character of George Khitov, the Dimitroff figure in the play, Rice had a ready-made raisonneur; for Dimitroff himself had used the trial as a public forum in which to condemn fascism openly. He knew the eyes of the world were upon Leipzig, and he spoke to influence world opinion beyond the confines of the court-room. Eva Lips writes: "Dimitroff has perceived the one means of escape; he speaks into the ear of the world, not into that of the presiding judge. That would be deaf to his loudest tones--but the world hears and understands his

low-spoken words."²⁰ Thus Rice uses Dimitroff-Khitov as the mouthpiece for his fervent indictment of fascism:

I stand here [states Khitov in his final defense]
 . . . to charge Gregor Vesnic . . . with tyranny,
 cruelty ruthlessness, and wholesale slaughter.
 . . . I charge him with destroying the precious
 heritage of our science and our art and with send-
 ing into exile the flower of our intellectual life.
 I charge him with sowing the seeds of terror and
 hatred. I charge him with racial and religious
 fanaticism, with deliberately endangering the peace
 of the world. I charge him with the murder of the
 thousands of innocent men and women who have per-
 ished on the scaffold, in the torture chamber and
 in the concentration camps.²¹

Rice, like many liberals of the time, respected the communists for their anti-fascist fervor and made common cause with them on many issues. But he, like Behrman, distrusted their dogmatic intensity. Again like Behrman, he was attracted to Marxist ideals, but repulsed by Marxist methods. Rice, as We the People indicates, strongly felt the need for a new social order to replace capitalism, but he was unwilling to throw out the baby with the bath. As a convinced libertarian, he could not deny basic freedoms even to those he detested. Thus in Between Two Worlds (1934) he presents the clash of representatives of the old world and the new, and suggests the need for a rapprochement which would combine the social fervor of Marxism and the individual liberties of capitalist democracy.

Again Rice portrays a cross-section of humanity, but this time within the confines of an ocean liner bound for Europe. It is apparent from the outset that the playwright

has little sympathy for most of the first-class passengers whose activities he chronicles. They are a frivolous, useless group, with little wit or charm to redeem their vulgarity. Rice centers his attention upon a few of the passengers who represent various contemporary types: Elena, the Czarist exile, who represents a social order that is past; Lloyd, the young esthete, who yearns for a world of gentility and charm; Edward, the liberal advertising man, who hates himself for accepting the debased values of a business culture; and, finally, the two protagonists, Margaret, who like Lawson's gentlewoman and Behrman's Leonie represents a leisure class that recognizes its futility, and Kovolev, the communist film director, the blunt, unsentimental harbinger of a new order.

Although the relationship between Margaret and Kovolev is the key plot element in the play, Rice is concerned with more than the conventional ship-board romance. Margaret comes to recognize that there is a great deal of truth in Kovolev's indictment of her class: "You, who have produced nothing, may have whatever you desire, while those who toil must struggle all their lives for a crust of bread and a bit of shelter."²² Part of Kovolev's fascination for Margaret lies in his possession of what she lacks, a strong sense of social purpose, a cause in which to believe. Acknowledging her feelings of guilt in the face of poverty, she tries to explain to him that she has never wilfully exploited anyone. She is the product of her class: "Everything's always been

made so easy for me. I've never had any responsibilities or any real problems. You may think it's just a pose on my part, but I'd honestly and sincerely like to do something useful in the world." (p. 215)

Elena clings to the illusion of a world which is dead, and Margaret and Edward feel that their world may be dying. "We're seeing the end of an era, I tell you," Edward shouts to a group of revellers, "We're living in a society that's tottering on its foundations. All it needs is a couple of good sound kicks in the backside and it's finished." (p. 232) Margaret has no choice; she is the product of a society which cultivates uselessness. But Edward has deliberately betrayed his own talents: "Parasites, that's what we are. . . . Look at me. Do you know what I am? An advertising man . . . next to a stockbroker, practically the lowest form of animal life. . . . A first class whore, that's what I am." (p. 233)

Although the alternative which Kovolev represents has many virtues, in the very intensity of its attack upon the values of the old order it has sacrificed the essential human trait of tolerance. The following exchange between Margaret and Kovolev points up the dangers of the radical's dogmatic faith:

Margaret: What's your idea? . . . To level everybody down, until we're nothing but a lot of machines?

Kovolev: To level, but not down. To use machines to liberate the oppressed classes and to build a classless society.

Margaret: Yes, and I suppose it doesn't matter how many people you torture and kill while you're doing it.

Kovolev: It is all a question of which people you kill.

Margaret: There's no justification for cruelty and cold-blooded murder.

Kovolev: You call it murder--we call it class-justice. It depends upon whether you are killing or being killed. (pp. 203-04)

But the brief romance between the Russian director and the American girl does have a positive result. She emerges with a renewed sense of social purpose, and a clearer picture of the wrongs which she has previously ignored. He recognizes that in one's desire to alleviate social evil one cannot completely negate the factors of tolerance and pity. He explains that he, too, has been conditioned to deny his feelings: "We have suffered much, sacrificed much; we are not willing to give up what we have fought for. . . . It makes us fierce. We cannot allow ourselves to deviate. . . . Do you understand?" (p. 298) Social fervor without regard for the value of the individual can itself degenerate into oppression. Rice affirms the liberal position: he wants a new world, but not one built upon the ashes of the old.

Rice returned from his self-imposed theatrical exile in 1938 with American Landscape, a play which he characterized as "a plea for tolerance, for freedom of the mind and spirit, . . . an affirmation of the American tradition of liberty and of the American way of life."²³ The form which Rice now assays is that of allegorical fantasy--a half

realistic, half fantastic parable of the return of the ghosts of the American past to defend the traditions which they died for. Again Rice the polemicist knows no half-way measures; in We the People he attempted to encompass all contemporary social evil, and in American Landscape he allegorizes simultaneously the plight of the American home, farm, and factory. If the structure of the play seems cut to measure, perhaps it is again the fault of Rice's overzealousness; but, from an historical point of view, it once more indicates Rice's sensitivity to the intellectual climate of his time. The wave of protest which in the early thirties had thrown many liberals into the radical camp had waned. The vogue of Americanism had begun (Paul Green's work demonstrates this transition admirably). The liberal had become somewhat disenchanted with communist intransigence (although the real disenchantment was still to come with the Nazi-Soviet pact), and affirmed a native liberalism born of America's tradition of freedom. Looking to the American past, the new liberal patriotism--reflected in such plays as Abe Lincoln in Illinois and Prologue to Glory--found in our tradition much that was worth defending: our revolutionary origin, our heterogeneous population, our Bill of Rights, our tradition of dissent.

American Landscape uses as its symbol of America the estate of the Dales, a New England family rich in tradition. The present scion of the Dale clan, Captain Frank Dale, is

determined to sell the family factory rather than submit to unionization, a social innovation he finds repugnant to his paternalistic concept of employer-employee relations. He also intends to dispose of the family farm, for it, too, is not making money in an economically precarious age; and finally, he is contemplating an offer by a native Nazi group to purchase the old homestead for use as a youth camp for the training of young fascist adherents. To prevent this dissolution of family property and tradition the ghosts of the illustrious Dale past return to attempt to dissuade Captain Frank. The property must not be abandoned:

Cousin Frank, this is an old house. Many generations of our kinsmen have dwelt here. It is . . . hallowed by the ideals of liberty and self-respecting labor and the sacredness and dignity of the individual soul. It has been shaped by those who have lived here, but in turn it has shaped them too, one by one, it has given them up. But none has ever given it up. Will you be the first?²⁴

Rice affirms in a time of crisis that America's tradition of freedom must be retained. Changes are indeed needed; old concepts of rugged individualism, as represented by Frank's point of view, must be replaced by new social theories; thus Connie the youngest member of the family falls in love with Joe, a proletarian who is involved in the fight for unionization. Captain Frank--and America--must recognize the facts of economic change, and build upon them. But if the factory, and the welfare of its workers, is threatened by economic conditions and Frank's refusal to accept new

economic solutions, the threat to the homestead is far greater. For Stillgebauer, the Nazi, is determined when in control of the Dale house to remodel it drastically: "the house, in its present condition . . . is in many respects very oldfashioned, very inconvenient. . . . Our modern German-Americans prefer that everything should be more up to date and comfortable." (p. 81) The fascist threat, from within and from without, can conquer if America betrays its fundamental principles. "How many wars must we fight," asks the ghost of a World War I soldier, "before we stamp out the Napoleon breed?" (p. 68)

Obviously, the Dale property cannot be sold; the American cannot abrogate his heritage. Captain Frank dies before he can make his decision, the property passing on to the younger generation, the old order replaced by the new. And the new generation is strengthened in its determination to put the factory and the farm back on a paying basis by instituting long-needed social reforms. The Dale heritage reaffirmed, the play concludes with the ghosts of the past warning the present that if it wishes to assure the continuity of the ideals it cherishes it must be ever vigilant:

Beware of those who seek to enslave you and to force you and your children into uniform, whether of the body or of the mind. You have sharp brains and strong hands. Use them to create, to build, to make things grow--not to slaughter and destroy. And remember this: let no man, no creed, no panic fear make you forget to call your souls your own.
(p. 141)

Above all, the tradition must be preserved:

I leave you a tradition that is rich and deep and alive: a tradition of freedom and of the common rights of humanity. It's a priceless heritage. Cherish it! . . . And be prepared to defend it. . . . The past exists only to serve the future, and the future is in your hands. (p. 142)

That the principles of freedom would, indeed, very soon have to be defended by force is an unfortunate fact of recent history. As war erupted in Europe and the Nazis engulfed one free nation after another, the defense of America seemed even more imperative. In Flight to the West (1941) Rice chronicles the end of an era. Again he presents a cross-section of contemporary types within a confined locale; but unlike Between Two Worlds this time the journey takes place on an air-plane bound from Europe to the United States. In the earlier play the two worlds presented were a malfunctioning capitalism and a resurgent communism; in Flight to the West the two worlds are simply the world of slavery and the world of freedom.

Rice articulates the liberal's dilemma in the face of incipient world conflict, Although he had been nurtured on the concept that war was essentially an imperialistic device for the obtaining of new markets,²⁵ now there seemed no alternative to the fascist threat. A young liberal seeks counsel from an elder spokesman of the generation of the thirties:

You taught us how some old men in Washington shut us out of the League--and then what happened

afterwards. And it made us resolve that no old men were ever going to lead us down the path of war. So we joined up with something called the youth movement. We had the red tag pinned on us, though most of us weren't reds at all, but just young people who wanted the right to lead lives in which war had no part.²⁶

But the rape of Finland and Norway and France have changed all that. Since the young liberal, Charles, has seen the horror of aggressive war at first hand, pacifism no longer seems tenable. But if the young man is confused by the change in his views demanded by the world situation, the old liberal, Ingraham, finds it necessary to revise the intellectual convictions of twenty years:

A man doesn't readily throw overboard the convictions of a lifetime. For twenty years, I've devoted myself to decrying war and the war makers, agitating for disarmament, for a world commonwealth. But more and more, I began discovering to my horror that my facts and my arguments were being used in ways that I never intended, by the rabid isolationists, by the critics of democracy, even by the Nazi propagandists. And . . . it's knocked the props from under me. (pp. 22-23)

Ultimately, however, in the course of the plane journey, in which the Nazi consul, Walther, reveals clearly the imminent danger of the fascist threat, both Charles and Ingraham have their confusion dispelled. There can be no compromise with evil; one cannot do business with Hitler as the businessman, Gage, suggests. The only answer is to combat it in the name of liberty. Symbolically, Charles, who is Jewish, throws himself impulsively in the path of a bullet intended for Walther, thus affirming the free man's defense

of the individual, however, much he may be detested personally. Ingraham points the moral: "I see clearly now something I only sensed before: that rationality carried to its ruthless logical extreme becomes madness, because man is a living and growing organism and not a machine. . . ." (p.150) Ingraham's final advice to Charles and his pregnant wife is that they should not fear to bring a child into a world torn by strife. In fact it is upon their children that the future of mankind depends: "Bring your child into the world with . . . a faith in the future and in the eventual triumph of sanity and decency. Because your faith and your courage will help make it come true." (p. 151)

The thirties had demanded seriousness, and Elmer Rice, acutely attuned to the intellectual vibrations of his age, had responded. Yet his dramas of the decade survive less as works of art than as social documents; he was never quite able to forge a form which could dramatize rather than present his social convictions. Did the deficiency lie in the fact of his commitment or in the simple lack of art? Surely one cannot escape the feeling that ideas lie on top of his work, that they are never fully imbedded in the fabric of the play. Only in The Adding Machine has he been successful in fully integrating form and idea; and in that case he had before him sturdy European forbears. But Rice demands respect for the fervor with which he involved himself in the

conflicts of his age. One senses that at heart he recognizes his esthetic limitations, but continually yearns to transcend them. A talented craftsman, he has continued to demand that American drama rise above facile craftsmanship. A paradox: but we are richer for its being posed.

Footnotes to Chapter VIII

1. "Elmer Rice Says Farewell to Broadway," N.Y. Times, Nov. 11, 1934, sect. IX, p. 1.
2. "Apologia Pro Vita Sua," N.Y. Times, Dec. 25, 1938, sect. IX, p. 1.
3. N.Y. Times, Nov. 11, 1934, sect. IX, p. 3.
4. Elmer Rice, Not for Children, in Two Plays (New York, 1935), pp. x-xi.
5. Ibid., p. xv.
6. Ibid., p. xii.
7. Loc. cit.
8. "Apologia," p. 1.
9. Rice, The Adding Machine, in Seven Plays (New York, 1950), p. 95.
10. Rice, The Subway (New York, 1929), p. 95.
11. Rice, Street Scene, in Seven Plays, p. 146.
12. "Elmer Rice Answers John J. Raskob," NM, Feb. 18, 1936, p. 15.
13. See N.Y. Times: Jan. 25, 1931, p. 25; Jan. 24, 1936, p. 20; Feb. 26, 1945, p. 21; Oct. 16, 1953, p. 33; Dec. 21, 1955, p. 20; July 6, 1956, p. 14.
14. "Project for a New Theatre," N.Y. Times, Oct. 8, 1933, sect. X, p. 1.
15. "Rice Sees Theatre Improved by WPA," N.Y. Times, Dec. 11, 1935, p. 29.
16. Murray Schumach, interview, N.Y. Times, Nov. 23, 1958, sect. II, p. 1.
17. Letter to the Drama Editor, N.Y. Times, Feb. 12, 1933, sect. III, p. 3.
18. Rice, We the People (New York, 1933), pp. 249-250.

19. "Fire in Leipzig," Germany: A Self-Portrait, ed. Harlan Crippen (New York, 1944), pp. 324-325.
20. Ibid., p. 326.
21. Rice, Judgment Day, in Seven Plays, p. 369.
22. Rice, Between Two Worlds, in Two Plays, p. 214.
23. "Apologia," p. 5.
24. Rice, American Landscape (New York, 1939), p. 100.
25. See We the People, pp. 17-18, 70, 72, 236.
26. Rice, Flight to the West (New York, 1941), pp. 21-22.

CHAPTER IX

THE POLITICAL PARADOX OF MAXWELL ANDERSON

I have to believe
there's something in the world that isn't
evil
I have to believe there's something in the
world
that would rather die than accept injustice--
something positive for good--that can't be
killed--
or I'll die inside.

Key Largo

. . . This thing that men call justice,
this blind snake that strikes men down in
the dark,
mindless with fury, keep your hand back
from it,
pass by in silence--let it be forgotten,
forgotten!

Winterset

Whatever one's final verdict as to Maxwell Anderson's dramatic contribution, there can be no denying the integrity with which he practised his art. With the sole exception of O'Neill, no American playwright so consistently affirmed a personal dramatic vision within the confines of the commercial theatre, nor as steadfastly refused to compromise his dramatic faith. For him the drama was nothing if not serious:

Unless you and your play have a dream--or a conviction--and unless you can defend that conviction against death and hell and the wiles of experienced tricksters, your play isn't worth producing.

Unless you are willing to make nearly every possible business and artistic concession to the play-producing set-up, you will probably never get your play on at all.

But if you let these concessions touch and injure the dream (or conviction) that animates your play (and those you deal with will try their damndest to get at it) it isn't worth putting on your play at all.¹

But art, like hell, is paved with good intentions, and respect for a writer's integrity does not, unfortunately, necessarily predicate respect for his work. The sad fact is that much of Anderson's work now seems less experimental than derivative, and while one must credit his attempt to revitalize verse drama, one cannot help wishing that his not inconsiderable literary talents might have included a poetic ear. But it is not our purpose to analyze Anderson's poetic deficiencies; we are concerned, after all, with the playwright's involvement in his art with the social and political issues of his age.

At first glance, Anderson might seem a particularly uncommitted playwright. Most of his plays, after all, are historical, not contemporary; his very attempt to reinstate verse drama represented a reaction against the "journalistic social comment"² which, in his view, dominated American drama in the thirties. Moreover, Anderson was always a confirmed rugged individualist; he never felt comfortable within the confines of a specific political ideology. He distrusted and inveighed against all political organizations, whether Communist, Fascist, Democrat, or Republican. The political man,

his plays and essays have proclaimed, is invariably a scoundrel and opportunist. And yet, despite his suspicion of political action, it is significant that Anderson never avoided political issues; on the contrary, man, as he emerges from Anderson's work, is essentially a social, not a psychological animal. Most of Anderson's plays, particularly those written in the thirties, are involved with the problem of man in conflict with social and political forces. The persistent dichotomy which rings throughout them is a political one: the lust for power in conflict with the desire for freedom; the rebel-reformer--Essex, Rudolf, McLean, Macready, Gregor, Mio--is one of his perennial protagonists.

Anderson's work, despite his formal attempt to write historical verse tragedy, is inextricably bound with the social forces of his age. "A playwright," he has declared, "is driven more directly than any other writer or artist to make up his mind about his world or be silent until he can make up his mind."³ And Anderson has never been silent; indeed he has been amazingly prolific. The testament of his work has been a ceaseless attempt to define the boundary between man's acknowledgment of the immutability of social evil and his faith in the ability to change or transcend it. This is the paradox that must be faced: man sees evil born of man himself, and despite his desire to eradicate it, is forced to recognize the futility of the effort. And yet without the attempt man has abdicated his humanity. "The

concepts of truth and justice are variables approaching an imaginary limit which we shall never see; nevertheless, those who have lost their belief in truth and justice and no longer try for them are traitors to the race, traitors to themselves, advocates of the dust."⁴ Thus Anderson recognizes the necessity of the gesture of protest while simultaneously proclaiming it invalid.

And yet the gesture must be made; despite his pessimism, Anderson never accepts social injustice. The difficulty arises in attempting to determine how much social evil resides in transformable institutions and how much in the black heart of man. It is the continual shifting from one emphasis to another which obscures Anderson's dramatic vision. There can be no denying that despite his abhorrence of political dogma, Anderson does affirm a political position. Time and again he asserts the destructive influence of all organized government, the inevitable tyranny of authority, and the necessary resistance to all organized authority in defense of personal freedom. In short, Anderson's position is anarchistic, a compound of ideas derived from Rousseau (a benevolent primitivism and a sporadic faith in the goodness of man), Proudhon (property is theft), Thoreau (civil disobedience as the corollary of freedom), and Jefferson (that government is best which governs least). But Anderson is never, in the tradition of Kropotkin or Bakunin, a revolu-

tionary anarchist; one of his perennial themes is the futility of revolutionary action.

Thus we have stated Anderson's essential paradox: he was continually engaged in the struggle against social injustice (as revealed personally in his defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, his loss of academic position because of pacifist opinions, and his vocal opposition to Hitler and Franco). Since he invariably attributes this evil to the coercive and brutalizing effect of organized authority, the logical result of this position is political action against encroachments upon man's individual freedom. And yet, behind the necessity of this action lies the recognition that all action is essentially futile. Behind the anarchist resides the fatalist: "the writer of tragedy knows that there is no immediate way out. He knows that the burning questions of reform are all old, that men have sought the answers since the morning of history, and that the answers will not be found in his time, that nothing final will come of anything he does or says."⁵

The paradox may be observed in Anderson's two plays based upon the Sacco-Vanzetti case. In Gods of the Lightning (1928) written shortly after the execution of the two anarchists, the prevalent tone is that of protest. As in Rice's Judgment Day, the playwright takes considerable liberties with the facts of history. Although Vanzetti is more or less accurately delineated in the person of Capraro,

Anderson chooses for his fellow victim, not another foreign-born anarchist, but rather an American Wobbly, Macready. Mac is, in fact, unlike either Sacco or Vanzetti, a militant radical portrayed as actively engaged in an attempt to bring off a strike. But Mac's radicalism is a far cry from the Marxist variety, and while in many ways he presages the militant hero of proletarian drama, he is not imbued with class consciousness. In a characteristic polemic he attacks not only organized government and religion, but the cowardice of the working class:

The government's . . . a police system to protect the wealth of the wealthy. . . . That's why the boys voted to end the strike in there. They've been taught to be slaves till they don't know enough to take what's their own. We had the strike all won for them, and they throw it all away because they owe a little money at the corner grocery and they're scared of the police!⁶

The character of Macready enables Anderson to articulate a militant anarchism not reflected in the public utterances of either Sacco or Vanzetti. And Anderson uses Capraro, his Vanzetti figure, as the spokesman for a pacifism born of the conviction that belligerent patriotism is the camouflage for economic exploitation: "When we are young boys we look on the flag and believe it is the flag of liberty and happy people--and now I know it is a flag to carry when the old men kill the young for billions." (p. 79) Thus Anderson's use of both Macready and Capraro as more articulate foes of social evil than either Sacco or Vanzetti

reveals a desire to reinforce the social lesson which he drew from the celebrated case: the men were condemned, not because their opinions were non-conformist, but because organized society could not tolerate threats to its oppressive authority. Yet, while Anderson takes liberties with the characters of his protagonists to reinforce his social analysis of their martyrdom, his version of the actual mechanics of the trial sticks closer to the record. But again Anderson underscores the conspiratorial aspect. The district attorney, Salter, and Judge Vail (Anderson's recreation of Katzman and Thayer) are portrayed as willfully distorting the processes of justice in order to assure condemnation of the radical defendants.

To affirm further the fact of frameup Anderson introduces another character, who has no counterpart in the actual case. Suvorin is indeed a strange figure; Dostoyefskian in his mixture of prophetic fervor and criminality, he serves as the counterbalance to Macready's militancy. Mac operates on the theory that society is evil and that it must be changed; Suvorin operates on the theory that society is evil and it can't be changed. Equally anarchistic, Suvorin reveals the core of fatalism at the heart of Anderson's radicalism:

The world is old, and it is owned by men who are hard. Do you think you can win against them by a strike? Bah! They own this government, they will buy any government you have. I tell you there is no government--there are only brigands in power who fight for more power! It has always been so. It will always be so. Till you die! Till we all die! (p. 34)

It is, in fact, Suvorin who was involved in the murder of the paymaster for which Macready and Capraro are on trial. And at a crucial moment he confesses his deed. Yet even in the face of that confession, the state cannot allow its victims to escape. It merely implicates all three in the murder, affirming Capraro's conviction that "there is no answer to the anarchist who says the power of the State is power for corruption." (p. 92)

Thus the paradox of Anderson's dilemma is asserted. In the face of evil man must protest; he is impelled to social action. As one of Mac's acquaintances puts it, "Christ, when I look at dem--de paid hirelings of de unjust-- I kin feel strengt' coming back in me, de strengt' I lost! If I was worthy to do it I could break dem all--I could break dem and bring dem down." (p. 101) And Rosalie, Mac's girl friend, voices a plea for action in the face of his imminent execution: "why do we wait for other people to do something! It will be too late soon--and then we'll think of what we might have done! We've had all day to help--we've had days and weeks--and years!" (p. 104)

But behind the protest lies Suvorin's mocking recognition that all human action is condemned to failure. Protest, if you will, but realize that you cannot succeed in changing the way of the world. The last lines of Gods of the Lightning, spoken by Rosalie after the news of the execution, sum

up the paradox: "Shout it! Shout it! Cry out! Run and cry! . . . Only--it won't do any good--now." (p. 106).

In Winterset (1935) the core of protest remains, but it now serves as a symbol upon which Anderson attempts to construct his first contemporary verse drama. The heat of the moment has dissipated, and Anderson is less involved with the social implications of the Sacco-Vanzetti case than with the eternal problems of justice, redemption, and faith. But the issues raised by Gods of the Lightning have not disappeared. In the opposition of Mio's fervent desire for justice and Esdras' talmudic fatalism we find reenacted the essential conflict of Macready and Suvorin. Mio's life is dedicated to the vindication of his father. It is the faith by which he lives.

Will you tell me how a man's
to live, and face his life, if he can't believe
that truth's like a fire,
and will burn through and be seen
though it takes all the years there are?
While I stand up and have breath in my lungs
I shall be one flame of that fire;
its all the life I have.

But Esdras' answers, not unlike Suvorin's, is that life is based upon the fact of injustice: "There's not one title to land or life, / even your own, but was built on rape and murder. . . ./ it would take a fire indeed / to burn out all this error." (pp. 70-71) And Mio's answer is the cry of the reformer who cannot accept an evil world: "then let it burn down, / all of it!" (p. 71)

The conflict is thus defined; but the difficulty with Winterset is that Anderson does not follow the logic of this conflict. In the end it is Esdras' fatalistic vision which prevails, and which Mio accepts: "We live our days / in a storm of lies that drifts the truth too deep / for path or shovel. . . ." (p. 121) But by what path did Mio arrive at this conviction? He had come determined to vindicate his father, to prove conclusively his innocence, and he had, in fact, received the information that he desired. For a time Judge Gaunt almost makes him doubt his cause, but the intervention of Trock and the reappearance of Shadow leave no doubt about the actual perpetrators of the crime for which Romagna, the Vanzetti figure, died. Thus the fact of injustice is proven, and Mio's resolution to vindicate his father should, if anything, be strengthened. The fact that he is thwarted by evil--represented by Trock and his hoodlums--might well symbolize Anderson's view of the impotence of individual protest; but, considering the logic of the play, why is the gesture of protest itself denied? Mio, instead of being confirmed in the righteousness of his cause by the fact of his father's innocence, has "lost . . . my taste for revenge." His love for Miriamne has replaced his desire for vindication, and his death--in the light of his rejection of the meaningfulness of his cause--smacks almost of gratuitousness.

Perhaps Anderson tried too consciously to follow a formula of what he conceived the ideal tragedy to be. In the preface to Winterset he writes: "A play should lead up to and away from a central crisis, and this crisis should consist in a discovery by the leading character which has an indelible effect on his thought and emotion and completely alters his course of action."⁸ But the problem in Winterset lies in the fact that the central crisis presented--the recognition scene in which the truth about the Romagna case is revealed--leads logically not to an alteration of Mio's passionate resolve but rather to its affirmation. Had it been discovered that Romagna had indeed been guilty, Mio's alteration would have made more dramatic sense. Thus Anderson asserts a fatalistic position without demonstrating it.

Unlike the protagonists of classical tragedy, Mio is destroyed less by his inner contradictions than by external realities. One of the basic themes in Winterset is the oppressiveness of authority. Mio's friend, Carr, states that the State is always right because it can't afford to admit it is wrong: "I don't think of anything you can't buy, including life, honor, virtue, glory, public office . . . and all kinds of justice." (pp. 28-29) And Judge Gaunt stands as the symbol of guilt born of an oppressive legality. The forces which afflict man are more often without than within, and Anderson's tragedies--despite their attempt to follow

classic patterns--are more of his age than he might have acknowledged.

The playwright's involvement in the social and political issues of his day may be explicitly observed in two non-verse dramas written in the thirties. In Both Your Houses (1933) and Knickerbocker Holiday (1938) Anderson is at his most polemical. The target in both instances is again organized government. In the first play, as the title indicates, Anderson surveys the political situation and finds in both parties nothing but graft and corruption. In the second he takes for his specific target the paternalistic government represented by the New Deal, and makes a fervent appeal against the tendency towards increased governmental control. In the preface to Knickerbocker Holiday, he leaves no doubt as to his anarchistic position, a position which he consistently reaffirmed. He states unequivocally that "the gravest and most constant danger to a man's life, liberty, and happiness is the government under which he lives.

. . . a civilization is a balance of selfish interests, and a government is necessary as an arbiter among these interests, but the government must never be trusted, must be constantly watched, and must be drastically limited in its scope, because it, too, is a selfish interest and will automatically become a monopoly in crime and devour the civilization over which it presides unless there are definite and positive checks on its activities.⁹

In Both Your Houses, produced two days after Roosevelt's initial inauguration, Anderson has as yet no specific

political target. He rakes all politicians unmercifully in an attempt to demonstrate that all government has its roots in corruption. Each member of the House Committee on Appropriations is engaged in an attempt to saddle a forthcoming appropriations bill with his own pet scheme, and while the Congressmen attempt to legitimize their personal projects on the basis of national need, Anderson leaves no doubt that their motives are hardly grounded in altruism. In the character of Sol Fitzmaurice, the politician who has made his pact with the devil but who knows it, Anderson excoriates the avarice of our lawmakers and the governmental system which breeds this avarice. Sol knows that he has sold out his ideals, and resents more than anything else those who mask their own venality behind high-sounding phrases:

Sol: The whole damn government's a gang of liver flukes, sucking the blood out of the body politic-- and there you sit, an honest liver fluke, arranging the graft for everybody else and refusing to do any bloodsucking on your own account! God, it makes me sick.

McMurty: Mr. Fitzmaurice--there are some of us here who would rather not be compared to animal parasites--and moreover, the government is here for the good of the people! It does a great deal of good--

Sol: It does a four billion dollar business in taxes, and I'll say that's pretty good. For God's sake why don't you folks admit it, and take your bribes like men and go home and invest them?¹⁰

That government is best which governs, and taxes, least is Anderson's perennial refrain, and to illustrate his thesis

he sends his own Mr. Smith to Washington, in the person of Alan McLean, to take on the nest of nepotistic vipers. McLean, an intellectual idealist, had been appointed to the Committee on the assumption that he would support the appropriations bill, but the members had not counted upon the young man's intransigent honesty. Plagued with inner doubts, McLean had investigated his own election and had come up with disquieting facts not only about his own supporters but about those of the other members of the committee as well. He comes to the conclusion that the appropriations bill will benefit no one but the congressmen and their supporters, and consequently is determined to defeat it. Anderson's political solution for the ills of the Depression is strictly one of laissez faire; Alan attacks the bill in these terms:

I come from an agricultural district . . . where the farmers haven't got any money, and they're taxed beyond what they can stand already. . . . And the whole country's like that. Nobody can buy anything, at any price. Now I was elected . . . because I told my people I'd do what I could to reduce taxes and cut down even necessary expenditures. And there's nothing in this bill that can't be done without. (pp. 48-49)

But Alan's political efforts to defeat the bill by overloading it with useless expenditures fail; and, unlike Mr. Deeds and Mr. Smith (Frank Capra's cinematic representatives of the average man against organized society), he comes to realize the impotence of individual idealism. He has learned a bitter lesson: "Our system is every man for himself--and

the nation be damned!" (p. 176) But Sol sees a perverse virtue in this fact. Since the United States was built by brigands and plunderers, perhaps the spirit of the robber barons will raise the country from its economic depression: "They stole billions and gutted whole states and empires, but they dug our oil wells, built out railroads . . . and invented prosperity as they went along! Let 'em go back to work! We can't have an honest government, so let 'em steal plenty and get us started again." (p. 176)

Sol's answer is not completely facetious. Beyond the fact of economy Anderson offers no specific political solution. "Who knows what's the best kind of government?" asks the disillusioned Alan, "maybe they all get rotten after a while and have to be replaced." (p. 178) Anderson's political platform seems to consist of one strongly-held plank, turn the rascals out--all of them: "There are a hundred million people who are . . . disgusted enough to turn from you to something else. Anything else but this." (p. 179)

But the American people had turned to something else, the New Deal; and as the decade wore on Anderson found this alternative even more repugnant than the last. At least corruption, because of the clash of selfish interests, was inefficient. Government may have been robbery, but it was not despotism. "Whatever the motives behind a government-dominated economy," writes Anderson in the preface to Knickerbocker Holiday, "it can have but one result, a loss

of individual liberty in thought, speech and action." (p. vi)
 And in the play itself he attempts to demonstrate through the
 usually frivolous medium of the musical comedy the dangers
 inherent in the New Deal.

Knickerbocker Holiday represents Anderson's attempt to
 write an American Threepenny Opera, and his musical collabor-
 ator was in fact Kurt Weill. Many of the ballads, following
 the Brechtian tradition, are political, but whereas Brecht's
 principal target was the social inequality bred by an oppres-
 sive economic system, Anderson's target is the philosophy of
 benevolent despotism:

One touch of alchemy
 Transmutes our age to gold;
 Would you be rich and free?
 Then do as you are told.

 No man shall want for food,
 Nor ditto any wife;
 All hail the bright, the good,
 The regimented life!

 All hail the political honeymoon
 Sing the news to the hoi polloi,
 Of each individual man his boon
 In an age of strength through joy! (pp. 43-44)

In the character of Pieter Stuyvesant, the benevolent
 despot who comes to usher in "the age of strength through
 joy," Anderson draws a figure for whom it was not difficult
 to find a contemporary parallel. "My dear fellows," counsels
 Stuyvesant in Anderson's parody of the Roosevelt manner,
 "under my system there is no such thing as ruin, and no such
 thing as bankruptcy; there is only a slight financial

sophistication supported by unlimited government credit." (p. 85) And Anderson leaves no doubt that such a doctrine can only lead to dictatorship. Stuyvesant states that the government, in extending credit, will naturally become a partner in any business which it guarantees, and as a result taxes will have to be rather high to support it. A man objects, "But maybe we couldn't pay dem high taxes and high wages, so nobody works, so nobody buys anyting, so nobody makes any profit, so it stops going!" (p. 86) In that case, Stuyvesant maintains, the government would naturally have to take over. As Anderson explicitly states in his preface: "Social Security is a step toward the abrogation of the individual into that robot which he has invented to serve him-- the paternal state." (p. vi)

In opposition to the benevolent despotism represented by Stuyvesant, Anderson juxtaposes the rugged individualism of Brom Broeck, who embodies the Andersonian political virtues, "A person with a really fantastic and inexcusable aversion to taking orders, coupled with a complete abhorrence of governmental corruption." (p. 30) That, for Anderson, characterizes the American genius:

He does his own living, he does his own dying,
Does his own loving, does his hating, does his
multiplying
Without the supervision of a governmental plan--
And that's an American! (p. 32)

Brom, a born rebel, recognizes the fact that "all governments are crooked, vicious and corrupt," but at least a democracy

"has the immense advantage of being incompetent in villany and clumsy in corruption." (p. 100) Anderson's defense of democracy is based upon the theory of the lesser evil. Since by his definition all government is evil, the less government the better. Tyranny may substitute the illusion of order but only at the expense of man's most cherished liberties. In actuality, the "order" of totalitarianism is only superficial; it is merely "efficiently vicious and efficiently corrupt." Thus Anderson's political answer is to "throw out the professional and go back to the rotation of amateurs! Let's keep the government small and funny, and maybe it'll give us less discipline and more entertainment!" (p. 101)

But despite the fervor of his political beliefs, Anderson was never primarily an anarchistic muck-raker; on the contrary he consistently denigrated the theatre of social protest. His effort to reinvigorate poetic drama may be observed as a direct reaction to the challenge of the prosaic leftist theatre. It is, I suspect, no accident that Anderson's career as verse dramatist should exactly coincide with the decade of the thirties. His first major poetic play is Elizabeth the Queen in 1930; his last, Journey to Jerusalem in 1940. None of the Anderson's pre- or post-thirties plays are written in verse, not even those on historical subjects (such as Anne of the Thousand Days, Joan of Lorraine, or Barefoot in Athens). Anderson's effort, then, represents a conscious attempt to re-emphasize the role of individual

heroics in a world--and in a theatre--in which the individual seemed to exist only as a representative of larger social forces. In the world of Anderson's dramatic imagination, the protagonist is invariably a man or woman of high station fighting a losing battle against hostile--usually evil--social forces.

Even in Anderson's early poetic dramas--particularly in the Tudor plays, Elizabeth the Queen and Mary of Scotland (1933)--the playwright is continually concerned with the problem of power. In both plays the machinations of statecraft prevent the protagonists from following the free dictates of their passion. The love affair between Elizabeth and Essex is thwarted by the intrigues of Cecil and Raleigh as surely as the love affair between Mary and Bothwell is thwarted by Elizabeth herself. Both plays are commentaries on expediency and political survival. Elizabeth survives, according to Anderson, because she is willing to sacrifice her love to the dictates of power; Mary is defeated precisely because her tolerant personality is unable to credit the clever machinations of her enemies.

Both Essex and Mary lament the fact that love is thwarted by expediency. "I can tell you that if there had been no empire," Essex tells Elizabeth, "we could have been great lovers."¹¹ And Mary says to Bothwell, "Would God I'd been born / Deep somewhere in the highlands, and there met you--/ A maid in your path, and you but a highland bowman /

Who needed me."¹² But romantic love--the symbol, after all, of free choice--cannot survive in the world in which the lovers are enmeshed. Again Anderson views government as the quintessence of selfish intrigue, a world in which no one can be trusted. The images of the jungle are its appropriate metaphors:

Lord Cecil . . .has filled his court with his rat
 friends, very gentle,
 White, squeaking, courteous folk, who show their teeth
 Only when cornered; who smile at you, speak you fair
 And spend their nights gnawing the floors and chairs
 Out from under us all!¹³

And Elizabeth concurs in Essex's evaluation: "Aye . . . the snake-mind is best . . . / To the end / Of time it will be so . . . the rats inherit the earth." (p. 121) The fate of Mary of Scotland is described in similar terms: "you have heard of the sheep who nursed the wolf pups till they tore her to pieces." (p. 81)

Elizabeth survives because she is able to accommodate herself to this bestial world. In Elizabeth the Queen it is apparent that she loves Essex, but she also recognizes that he is a born rebel, a man who can never be content with but a portion of power. A blunt, honest man, he himself tells the Queen that he is a threat to her position: "As water finds its level, so power goes / To him who can use it, and soon or late the name of King follows where power is."

(p. 101) Elizabeth comes to recognize that his martial temper would not only embroil England in useless wars which

would be a drain upon national resources, but that Essex's lust for power would ultimately cause her own deposition. This she cannot endure, and sacrifices her passion for political survival. The objection might be raised that Anderson, in opposition to the data of history, has magnified the role of passion in political conflict. Surely both Tudor plays are unabashedly romantic--a romanticism which rings hollow against the backdrop of Websterian intrigue which informs the general world of these plays. The criticism is not without validity, and it is significant that in several of his later verse dramas Anderson deemphasizes, though never completely eschews, the power-passion dichotomy, and shifts his dramatic emphasis to the conflict between power and liberty.

Even in romantic terms Anderson is involved with the contradiction between freedom and authority. The Elizabeth that emerges in Mary of Scotland has completely committed herself to the laws of expediency. It is as if Anderson were describing (in opposition to chronology) the hard, passionless woman that the Queen had become because of the disillusionment of her affair with Essex. Remorseless, adaptable ("Aye, times have changed,/ And we change along with them"), she skillfully baits the trap into which the unwary Stuart is led. Although younger than the Elizabeth

of Anderson's previous play, she is infinitely older in political wiles.

. . . I'm so old by now
 In shuffling tricks and the huckstering of souls
 For lands and pensions, I learned to play it young,
 Must learn it or die. Its thus if you would rule;
 Give up good faith, the word that goes with the
 heart,
 Give these up, and love
 Where your interest lies, and should your interest
 change
 Let your love follow it quickly. (p. 142)

Mary Stuart is destroyed because she lacks Elizabeth's political resiliency. Her credo--"to rule gently is to rule wisely"--cannot survive in a world of vipers. Her tragedy lies in her distaste for power and her hatred of intolerance. She refuses to placate the fanatic, Knox, and instead chides him for his messianic fever: "Do not confuse yourself with Lord God again! There's a difference!" (p. 77) A lover of beauty, a hater of violence, she affirms her faith in the triumph of good, a faith which unfortunately is not justified:

This is my faith . . . that all men
 Love better good than evil, cling rather to truth
 Than falseness, answer fair dealing with fair return;
 And this too; those thrones will fall that are built
 on blood
 And craft, that as you'd rule long, you must rule
 well. (p. 37)

But at the murder of her favorite, Rizzio, Mary comes to the fatal realization that goodness is not enough, that the fact of evil is an inescapable element in the universe:

Now I see it. Before I reign here clearly
 There will be many men be so for me
 Slain in needless quarrel. Slain, and each one
 With blood to spill but once, like his. And yet

One steps on into it--steps from life to life
Till the heart faints and sickens, and still goes on
And must go on. (p. 93)

In Anderson's early historical verse dramas--in the Tudor plays and Night Over Taos (1932)--he attempted to utilize history as myth: that is, the materials of history served as the framework upon which he attempted to construct traditional tragedies according to Aristotelian dictates. The result is inevitably pastiche, and is saved from inconsequence by Anderson's romantic theatricality (which undoubtedly explains much of his considerable commercial success) and, what is more significant, by his own bleak vision of the paradox of power. But as the decade wore on and the threat of totalitarianism seemed to Anderson more manifest in both domestic and foreign affairs, he became less concerned with history as myth and more concerned with history as prophecy. The facts of history no longer served as the backdrop upon which classical tragedies were to be reconstructed; they now seemed to point a direful lesson, and the playwright was determined to reveal the moral. Consequently, many of Anderson's later historical dramas assume the double vantage point of past and present. His protagonists--often famous historical figures--invariably display prophetic vision; and inasmuch as the subject matter of Anderson's dramas more often than not deals with rebellion, the prophetic vision which they reveal is inevitably the same, the revolution betrayed.

Not only has Anderson continually exploited the theme of rebellion in his historical tragedies (indeed the only historical play written in the thirties which does not touch the theme is Wingless Victory, which deals with the problem of racial intolerance), but he has written dramas which explicitly treat of the most momentous revolution of the modern era: the French, American, and Russian revolutions. In the first and last instances, Anderson's theme is the betrayal of revolutionary idealism, and even in Valley Forge, his drama of the American Revolution, the forces of betrayal, as we shall shortly see, almost succeed.

In The Feast of Ortolans (1937), a group of French intellectuals and liberal aristocrats gather on the eve of the French Revolution to celebrate the annual ceremony of the Pompignan family. True children of the Enlightenment, they look forward to the realization of man's illimitable potentialities as prophecied by the philosophes. "The new era . . . of freedom and reason" is about to begin, man will be freed of institutional evil. Phillippe of Orleans envisages a government which will reform social injustice and hearken to all legitimate grievance:

Whatever the human mind has conceived in the way of freedom of the spirit or of the mind should be inaugurated, even the more experimental. Jean-Jacques Rousseau has given us our religion of liberty, and we should carry it out, even to the recognition of the social contract, the responsibility of the state for the people's welfare.²⁴

Lafayette also affirms a Rousseauistic faith: "Men in themselves, / Unspoiled, are men of good will. The natural passions / All tend toward justice and mercy." (p. 13) He envisages a brave, new world based upon social justice, in which "the few whose trade it is / To live by their wits on others" (p. 13) have no place.

I tell you we now stand
On the threshold of a world in which all men
Are equal under law as in the sight
Of God himself. (p. 12)

But it is soon apparent that this optimistic faith is to be denied. Resorting to his role as prophet, Anderson uses the character of La Harpe to intimate the disaster that is to befall all present. Lafayette had dreamed the anarchist's dream of a world in which "there will be no kings, / No capitalists, no nobles, and no armies" in which "men will keep their own peace." (p. 15) But this dream, La Harpe prophesies, will not come to pass: ". . . the revolution will devour its children, / And those who fostered it." (p.20) Condorcet, Bailly, Desmoulins, Chenier, Lafayette will all be either executed or driven into exile. In the name of the ideals just enunciated the greatest barbarities will be committed. It will be a crime to have been or to have spoken with an aristocrat; it will be a crime to oppose the government in any way, or to speak one's mind. In the name of tolerance, intolerance will reign supreme.

Those who rule
Will be philosophers, and will repeat
All you have said about the bright new world

In which men are free; in that world's name
 You and your children will be put to death,
 Till the executioners are wearied out
 With chopping . . . and men
 Are thrown to the mobs for butchery. (p. 21)

And the final result will be a greater tyranny than that
 overthrown. On the tide of violence and chaos, a new leader
 will ride in who "will set himself to master all the world /
 By preaching our own doctrines . . . till he make himself /
 An emperor, and all his brothers kings." (p. 24) Thus the
 revolutionary dream ends in Napoleonic tyranny; and, to con-
 firm La Harpe's dire prophesy, the woodcutters presage the
 bloodshed that is to come by murdering the host and ending
 for all time the feast of the Ortolans.

Similarly in Second Overture (1938) Anderson describes
 the betrayal of the ideals of the Russian Revolution. Gregor,
 who had participated in the abortive revolution of 1905,
 counsels a group of Russian aristocrats, with whom he has
 been accidentally imprisoned, that they need not fear for
 their lives because the triumph of the Bolsheviks will
 ensure "free speech, civil rights . . . and the abolition of
 arbitrary and tyrannical power, such as was exercised by the
 Czar. . . . The safety from oppression which was never
 vouchsafed us under your regime you shall receive under
 ours."¹⁵ But Charash, once Gregor's fellow revolutionist
 and now the officer in command, explains that although the
 aristocrats have technically committed no crime, they are

still guilty by virtue of their class and must be executed. He defends the necessary bloodshed on the grounds of expediency. In order to fulfill the revolutionary dream all vestiges of the old order must be expunged.

We have caught
 A vision of the earth, with men set free
 Where men share equally and humbly all
 The fruits of labor. . . . Against this vision
 The old creeds, and the members of those classes
 Who live by selfish interests . . . will wage
 The war against us till they die. (p. 17)

Thus in the name of the final ideal, the most reprehensible means are justified. "The task now," the communist asserts, "is a cleansing of the empire of the filth of a thousand years." And the revolutionary credo is expressed in terms of the famous Marxist either/or postulate: "those who are not for us are against us." (p. 17)

Gregor, however, cannot accept Charash's logic. He observes that evil means cannot produce virtuous ends, that in the name of the highest ideals of justice, Charash is contributing towards a tyranny greater than the Czar's.

You strangle with your own hands
 All hope for the revolution. . . . Justice--
 To attain justice you revoke all justice--
 To attain mercy you repudiate
 The principle of mercy--blood will breed murder
 Murder breed blood--the evil means we use
 For a good end, will bring down only more evil
 And curses at the end. (pp. 16-17)

At the end of the play Gregor helps the aristocrats to escape, although he himself remains behind. He is willing to die because in the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals

he has lost his reason for existing. The revolution is dead and he is content to die with it.

Anderson further treats of the theme of revolutionary failure in his reworking of the Rudolf-Vetsera affair in Masque of Kings (1937). But the ill-fated romance of the lovers of Mayerling is not the major subject of the play. The dramatic conflict is not, as in Elizabeth the Queen, between power and passion, though at times it might seem so. The essential conflict of the play rests in the contrast between the wily, politic monarch Franz Joseph and the idealistic young rebel, Rudolf. The romantic elements, as in much of Anderson's work, tend to obscure rather than clarify his main theme, which is again the failure of the revolutionary dream.

Rudolf, like the French philosophes, dreams of a society in which man is naturally free. He acquiesces in revolutionary intrigue against his father in the hope of enacting necessary social reforms: the granting of autonomy to the Hungarian provinces, the opening of the franchise to all men of voting age, the elimination of restrictions on free speech and press, the release of political prisoners, the abrogation of arbitrary parliamentary power, and, finally, the relegation of monarchy to an exclusively advisory capacity. Like most of Anderson's rebel-heroes he has a passionate dislike for authority, an inner yearning to be his own man in a world removed from the vicious

intrigues of the powerful: "I want no guards round me / no authority, no rank; I want to sink / my roots outside this hothouse. . . ."16

But the Emperor is the champion of real-politik; he is not a vicious man, but he recognizes the logic of authority. In the play's most crucial scene, after Rudolph's successful seizure of power, Franz Joseph logically demonstrates to his son that the consequences of power cannot be avoided, that his revolutionary ideals are doomed to failure if he is, in fact, determined to rule. He explains to Rudolf that if he would be king thousands of men in both Hungary and Austria must be killed, including the king himself. They cannot be safely imprisoned because "while they're alive they'll fight, and they'll have friends" who will assist them. Very well, Rudolf acquiesces, let them die. But the Emperor points out that Rudolf is too idealistic to kill indiscriminately; he will let some live, and "being alive, / and having no inhibitions of your sort, / they'll rip you up." (p. 102) Again Rudolf agrees; he will be thorough. Franz Joseph's logic cannot be denied, and already the ideals of freedom begin to crumble.

Sceps, the radical journalist, protests that "these are murderous tactics, unnecessary to the establishment of authority," and promises to write and publish against such tyranny. Which leads to the second betrayal: "in that case," Rudolf affirms, "You'll publish nothing till we give you

leave." (p. 103) Franz Joseph's expedient logic begins to prevail: "Your reign begins / to shake off dreams, and may in time emerge / as the age of iron." (p. 104) He does not relinquish his advantage. What will Rudolf do with the property of the men he will be forced to execute? Again Rudolf swallows the bait: it will be distributed among supporters of the rebellion.

Thus the Emperor progressively forces Rudolf to recognize the logic of power. One cannot rule innocently. As Rudolf agrees to one suppression after another, Franz Joseph ironically congratulates his supporters "on the accession of an emperor / who'll give my reign, in retrospect, the air / of a golden age. . . ." (p. 105) To Rudolph's claim that his only desire is to set men free, the Emperor rejoins: "I see. / You have two hands; with one you set men free, / with one you shut them up. That's as it should be. That's as it always is." (p. 108)

At last Rudolf recognizes the corner into which he has been inexorably driven. An honest man, he sees he has been led to Franz Joseph's conclusion that "all reforms are counters in the game / of government, played to get what you want. . . ." (p. 110)

I see in one blinding light
that he who thinks of justice cannot reach
or hold power over men, that he who thinks
of power, must whip his justice and his mercy
close to heel. . . .

I have been taken upon a crest of time
and shown the kingdoms of the world, those past,
those present, those to come, and one and all,

ruled in whatever fashion, king or franchise,
dictatorship or bureaucrats, they're run
by an inner ring, for profit. Its bleak doctrine. . . .
but its savagely true. (pp. 111-112)

Like Gregor, Rudolf cannot surmount the dashing of his ideals, and he willingly surrenders his power back to his father. Thus revolutionary idealism is forever compromised by the logic of power, and the anarchist's dream of a Rousseauistic millenium is shattered by the Hobbsian conviction that the evil in man will triumph over the good.

In only one revolutionary situation is this social pessimism denied, the American Revolution. But is significant that Anderson's dramatic recreation in Valley Forge diverges from his other parables of revolutionary failure only in the vital fact of outcome. Again the anarchistic dream is almost thwarted by the intrigues of politics; again the representatives of government, both British and American, are depicted in terms of the greatest contempt; again the idealist's vision is countered by the facts of commercial aggrandizement. In fact, from all points of view the dramatic logic of Valley Forge leads toward the inevitable defeat of Washington and the dream he represents. Anderson saves the revolution--after all, an historical necessity--not by the logic of character and situation, but, rather, by a cheap, theatrical trick. Mary Phillips is introduced gratuitously into the barren camp at Valley Forge much in the same manner that Dolores del Rio was smuggled onto the

Pequod in the early film version of Moby Dick. Not merely does she intrude an incongruously romantic note, but her final revelation to Washington that the French have decided to enter the war (the crucial dramatic fact: for Washington is about to acquiesce to Howe's terms) is not even dramatically justified (Howe had made a conscious effort to keep the news from her). Thus the dénouement of Valley Forge is totally spurious, and Anderson resorts instead to the most flagrant forms of sentimentality and flag-waving.

The play collapses because Anderson cannot accept the logic of the situation he has presented; he is obviously tied to the facts of history. Surely the subject matter of the American revolution might well serve as the symbol of a necessary fight for libertarian ideals, and Anderson affirms that this is his aim. But the situation which he presents works towards a quite contrary conclusion. Congress is described, and depicted, as a group of selfish merchants concerned only with economic advantage. Tench, one of Washington's most militant subordinates, states:

I'd see the Congress damned in hell, before
I'd let them ruin our campaign for us! Who is
it sits at York doling supplies out? A pack of
puling grimsers with one testicle among them to
keep their wives in order and run the state!
A school of prissies thwarting the war and
cadging on the side to fur their gowns!17

Washington concurs: "If Congress had wanted me to fail, had set / itself to favor the English, it couldn't have played its hand more neatly." (p. 104) The fact is, as Anderson

presents it, the American Revolution was essentially a trade war, not a libertarian uprising. Harvie, the Congressman, bluntly tells Washington that "this war began to protect our trade," (p. 18) and since the continuation of hostilities could only have the most disastrous results, it would be better to reach a settlement with the English. Howe concurs; he has no stomach for violence and is willing to compromise. Indeed he is depicted as a true child of the Enlightenment.

What beasts we've been,
we English-speaking brothers, to gash and stab
and drill each other's brains out all these years
over one kind of government or another
when they're all the same! I'm a liberal myself,
want to see men free. . . . but good Lord,
when has a king balked freedom, when has the lack
of a king guaranteed it? (p. 50)

Is this statement inconsistent with the philosophy of government which Anderson has continually asserted? Tench reiterates almost the same view:

They're all alike, and have one business, govern-
ments,
and its to plunder. This new one we've set up
seems to be less efficient than the old style
in its methods of plundering folk, but give them time;
they'll learn to sink their teeth in what you've got
and take it from you. (p. 63)

Since both sides are in fundamental agreement as to the aims and practices of government, what reason is there for the war to continue? Anderson asserts the idealist's dream "that men shall bear no burdens save of their own choosing, / shall walk upright, masterless, doff a hat to none, / and choose their gods!" (p. 164) But beyond the

postulation of this ideal--an ideal which in his work has continually been thwarted by the very forces he presents in Valley Forge--he demonstrates no dramatic reason why it should triumph. Washington shares all the traits of Anderson's other rebel-idealists--the dream, the distaste for authority, the basic anarchism; but unlike Rudolf or Gregor he triumphs almost by the sheer effort of will (and theatrical contrivance). Although he continually disclaims despotic ambition, Washington, as Anderson presents him, emerges as a Man on Horseback, the symbol of popular anti-governmental discontent--the kind of man who, by virtue of his personal magnetism and abhorrence of legally constituted authority (after all, Washington refuses to accept orders from his legal superiors) might well fall into the very dictatorial pattern that Anderson abhors. Thus the anarchist dream, by its denial of governmental alternatives, may facilitate the very tyranny it detests. The mere assertion of democratic faith does not suffice when the premises of democracy are themselves undermined.

As Anderson progressively delineates the features of the world about him, either directly or through the device of historic parable, he likes what he sees less and less. On all sides he finds individual liberty in danger; man's most cherished libertarian ideals crumble in the face of authoritarian betrayal. As the decade of the thirties advances, Anderson recognizes that he must face the problem of how to

cope with the social evil he sees accumulating. What is man to do in a world in which his individual freedom is being increasingly restricted? In High Tor (1937) and Key Largo (1939) he presents different answers to the question. In the first instance the playwright proposes escape; in the second, confrontation.

Van Van Horn represents the last defender of the faith of rugged individualism; he embodies the traditional Andersonian virtues. The mountain, High Tor, his refuge from encroaching materialism and authority, is being threatened by speculators who want to cut it up "like a pie" for commercial purposes. At the outset Van steadfastly defends his right to live as he pleases and turns down all offers for the rights to his mountain. He despises industrialism and the regimentation it inevitably creates:

Look at it . . .
That's the Chevrolet factory, four miles down,
and straight across, that's Sing Sing. Right
from here
you can't tell one from another; get inside,
and what's the difference? You're in there, and
you work,
and they've got you.¹⁸

The vision which Van, and Anderson, champions belongs to the past, to an agrarian society of small, autonomous communities in which man has maximum individual freedom. But while Van is unable to retrieve the past, however much he might desire to do so, Anderson, by virtue of his creative prerogative, can do so imaginatively; the ghosts who inhabit

High Tor are the playwright's symbolic testament to the superiority of the past to the present. Mankind has become a race of "quick, fierce wizard men / . . . [who] come to drive / machines through the white rock's heart." (p. 54) But the ghosts are of the past and, consequently, do not have to accept this brave, new world; as Lise points out to Van "this is your age, your dawn, your life to live." (p. 109) He cannot avoid the fact that the world he envisions is rapidly disappearing. De Witt, another ghost, is thankful that he is not part of Van's age, "an age of witches/ and sandwiches, an age of paper, an age of paper money / and paper men. . . ." (p. 110)

Van himself realizes that perhaps his entire way of life is as anachronistic as that of the ghosts or of the ancient Indian who is waiting to die.

Maybe I'm a ghost myself
 trying to hold an age back with my hands;
 maybe we're all the same, these ghosts of Dutchmen
 and one poor superannuated Indian
 and one last hunter, clinging to his land
 because he's always had it. (p. 113)

Van wishes to have High Tor back the way it was before the speculators and the gangsters and the authorities came, but he realizes that he is condemned to his age. So, in the end, he capitulates; High Tor is not worth a fight. He accepts the Indian's counsel:

let them have the little hill, and find your peace
 beyond, for there's no hill worth a man's peace
 while he may live and find it.

Anderson's fatalistic vision prevails: in the final analysis the creations of man are as illusory as the ghosts of High Tor. The Indian again points the moral: "Nothing is made by man / but makes, in the end, good ruins." And Van, having relinquished his mountain, finds comfort in this thought: "Well, that's something. . . . I can hardly wait." (p. 142)

But the basic dramatic situation in Key Largo arises from the guilt that obsesses King McCloud because he relinquished his mountain. In the Prologue to the play, it is related how McCloud refused to fight with his men on a hill during the Spanish Civil War. The Loyalist cause has been lost, and King suggests that there is nothing to do but pull out before the Rebels attack and destroy them. But the men refuse to leave even though they realize that a stand will result in their deaths. Monte maintains that although it wasn't their fight, they had, by volunteering, made it their fight. Although the men have few illusions about the Loyalists, they have committed themselves to the battle and they will remain. King tries to convince them that such a stand is foolhardy. "Was there ever a crusade without an ignominious end?" he asks. He asserts Anderson's familiar thesis of the betrayal of all revolutionary ideals:

. . . If you win
 you never get what you fight for, never get
 the least approximation of the thing
 you were sold on when you enlisted. No, you find
 instead that you were fighting to impose
 some monstrous, bloody injustice, some revenge
 that will end in another war.¹⁹

King's political disillusionment is complete; he can see no logic in dying for a lost cause.

. . . all the formulas are false--
and known to be false--democracy, communism
socialism, naziism--dead religions
nobody believes in. . . . let it end--let them end it
these idiot ideologies that snarl
across borders at each other. . . .
Why should we die here for a dead cause, for a symbol,
on these empty ramparts, where there's nothing to win,
even if you should win it?

But Victor points out that without some faith, even if at bottom it is illusory, man cannot live: "I have to believe there's something in the world / that would rather die than accept injustice . . . or I'll die inside." (p. 21) He is willing to die to prove that man will continue to struggle against evil. His faith is not only in himself and in what men are, but in what they may become.

King McCloud leaves the men to their martyrs' deaths, and the main body of Key Largo becomes a drama of his expiation and redemption. The play, in fact, denies the thesis of High Tor: that no hill is worth a man's peace. King comes to realize that one must take one's stand against evil, despite the knowledge that evil will never be entirely vanquished. McCloud is tortured by guilt because "there never came a time / when I could say to myself, make a stand here." (p. 63) Ultimately he is presented with a second chance. The gangster, Murillo, represents the personification of totalitarianism. But at their initial confrontation, King again cannot act; he is still tormented by the

fatalistic vision that all ideals are equally invalid;

"Christ hangs dead on the cross, as all men die, / and Lenin legislates a fake paradise." (p. 111)

But d'Alcala echoes the faith of his dead son, Victor, that man must accept the challenge of existence: "to take this dust / and water and range of appetites / and build them towards some vision of a god / of beauty and unselfishness and truth. . . ." (p. 112) And King finally comes to recognize that Victor and d'Alcala were right, that without this faith man is nothing; that to live without combatting evil is to acquiesce in all evil.

. . . In the last analysis one dies because its part of the bargain he takes on when he agrees to live. A man must die for what he believes--if he's unfortunate enough to have to face it in his time--and if he won't then he'll end up believing in nothing at all--and that's death, too. (pp. 117-118)

King sacrifices himself in order to destroy Murillo, and in this act achieves his redemption. Thus Anderson, faced with the monstrous evil of fascism, affirmed that man must act after all. Even if he recognizes the basic futility of all action, in order to survive as a human being he must affirm the possibility of what mankind can become. By this very affirmation Anderson denies his social fatalism, and again we observe the basic paradox of his philosophy. On one hand, Rousseauistic man dreams of a world in which institutional evil is eradicated, in which the coercion of authority is not permitted to thwart man's essential goodness;

on the other, Machiavellian man creates ever more complex instruments for self-aggrandizement and oppression. In fighting political evil, man must face the contradiction of becoming that which he detests. And yet he must fight; for to avoid the battle means the abrogation of humanity. It is no accident that this paradox should be most manifest in Anderson's dramas of the thirties. Not only the social dramatists faced the crucial social issues of their time: "it's all of us / in this age of dying fires."²⁰

Footnotes to Chapter IX

- p. 76.
1. Maxwell Anderson, Off Broadway (New York, 1947),
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
 4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 5. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
 6. Maxwell Anderson and Harold Hickerson, Gods of the Lightning (New York, 1928), p. 26.
 7. Anderson, Winterset, in Eleven Verse Plays, 1929-1939 (New York, 1940), p. 70. The plays are paginated individually.
 8. Reprinted in Off Broadway, p. 59.
 9. Anderson, Knickerbocker Holiday (Washington, 1938), pp. v-vi.
 10. Anderson, Both Your Houses (New York, 1933), pp. 42-43.
 11. Anderson, Elizabeth the Queen, in Eleven Verse Plays, p. 129.
 12. Anderson, Mary of Scotland, in Eleven Verse Plays, p. 58.
 13. Elizabeth the Queen, p. 43.
 14. Anderson, The Feast of Ortolans, in Eleven Verse Plays, p. 11.
 15. Anderson, Second Overture, in Eleven Verse Plays, p. 5.
 16. Anderson, The Masque of Kings, in Eleven Verse Plays, p. 50.
 17. Anderson, Valley Forge, in Eleven Verse Plays, pp. 60-61.

- 10-11. 18. Anderson, High Tor, in Eleven Verse Plays, pp.
- p. 17. 19. Anderson, Key Largo, in Eleven Verse Plays,
20. Ibid., p. 89.

EPILOGUE

If prosperity really does come back, life is going to be an awful bore for us revolutionists.

Lashin and Hastings, Class of
'29

Granville Hicks, a survivor of the political vicissitudes of the thirties, titled the retrospective memoir of his intellectual development "Where We Came Out," and it is appropriate that we should attempt, at the conclusion of our investigation, to make a similar discovery. Although the intensity of political debate has diminished, the issues raised by the dramatists of the thirties have by no means vanished. Indeed, as we indicated in the Prologue, the problem of political commitment represents a revival in contemporary terms of the primary esthetic debate of that troubled decade. In raising the problem in our time, the contemporary debaters, whether affirming the virtues or the liabilities of political commitment, have frequently looked to the thirties for corroboration of their hypotheses. Having investigated the drama of that period, we are, therefore, in a position to attempt to offer a few hypotheses of our own. We must, however, point out the dangers of generalizing from the results of our investigation. Since literary

history unfortunately lacks the precision of science, its findings cannot always serve the function of prophecy; they are at best tenuous predictions, serving as analogues, rather than blueprints, to the future. Thus our conclusions concerning American drama of the 1930's cannot be expected to circumscribe completely all facets of the problem of political commitment.

But let us return to the problem as defined in the Prologue to this study. We defined political commitment in terms of the artist's conscious involvement in the social and political issues of his age, and of the specific political obligations which he assumes in consequence of his involvement. What light has our investigation cast upon these dual aspects? First of all, the evidence seems to indicate that the act of involvement is not primarily volitional. Although the contemporary supporters of the necessity of political commitment thunder their denunciations of the absence of social concerns in modern art, their voices will continue to resound in the wilderness until issues are such that the artist feels compelled to consider them, until the necessity for political action again raises the moral imperative over the esthetic. The evidence of the 1930's indicates that the artist was involved with themes of Depression, war, tyranny, because they were too momentous to be ignored; the drama, in particular, reveals that the artist was committed because he could not avoid so being. Each of the dramatists we have

investigated, even those who were not initially concerned with social and political issues, reflected in his art the political upheavals of his age. It is particularly revealing to consider the cases of those dramatists whose work spanned the decades of the twenties and the thirties. John Howard Lawson, despite a social fervor atypical of the Jazz Age, was at first primarily an experimentalist; with the onset of the Depression, however, he was compelled towards political action and made the strongest possible political gesture by joining the Communist Party. Elmer Rice and S. N. Behrman, however, were primarily men of the theatre, non-political men to be sure. And yet their plays of the thirties similarly reflect the compulsion towards political commitment characteristic of the age. Rice's dramatic interests shifted abruptly in social directions; his subjects became the crucial contemporary social events--the Depression, the rise of fascism, the imminence of war. S. N. Behrman's dilemma was how to accommodate social and political themes within the formal confines of the genre of high comedy. Perhaps in no other playwright of the age is the problem of political commitment so manifest; although Behrman would not relinquish the genre in which he obviously excelled, he felt the need to involve himself in the serious social issues of his age. If at times the genre of high comedy was strained to the breaking point by these concerns, it was, nonetheless, enriched considerably by them; for, as

we have attempted to demonstrate, Behrman's plays of the 1930's represent the height of his dramatic achievement.

Even Maxwell Anderson, eternally suspicious of political action, was involved inevitably in social preoccupations. His work reveals a perennial conflict between the activist's compulsion towards commitment and the fatalist's recognition that at bottom all political action is futile. It is surely significant that Anderson's political paradox is most manifest in his plays of the 1930's--precisely (to add a further paradox) in those plays which attempted to reinstate historical verse drama in place of "journalistic, social comment."

And in an age of intense theatrical activity, the major theatre groups of the period similarly found themselves rooting their theatrical ideals in political and social considerations. At one extreme, Theatre Union attempted to create a doctrinaire Marxist theatre; at the other, the conservative Theatre Guild produced an unprecedented number of social plays. The productions of the Group Theatre revealed that although it did not offer, as did Theatre Union, a specific ideological program, nevertheless it was concerned perennially with basic social issues in an attempt to live up to its credo of founding a technique of the theatre on "life values." Perhaps the interaction of social and theatrical factors was most manifest in the government's unprecedented venture into the dramatic arts, the Federal Theatre Project. Essentially a product of social necessity, the Federal Theatre

continually recognized its social responsibility, attempting to meet the needs of the communities it served on all levels. Although social plays constituted but a small percentage of its prolific record, the phenomenon of the theatre was itself indicative of a social atmosphere in which art and political responsibility were intimately interrelated.

Thus the record reveals that in a period of intense social conflict the act of political involvement was almost inescapable for the dramatist. He rose to social issues because the issues themselves seemed to exigent to be avoided. Insofar as the playwright was serious and not a mere hack, his work inevitably was involved with the serious issues of his time; to have ignored them would have been to have abrogated his serious purpose. Indeed, as far as the issue of involvement is concerned, the evidence of the 1930's seems to warrant the conclusion that the serious dramatist really has no choice. Where the issues are pressing, he is automatically involved or he ceases to be serious.

But in our investigation of the problem of political commitment we have been concerned with more than the act of involvement; we have attempted to discern what specific political obligations this involvement assumed, and what were the esthetic consequences of such obligations. In regard to the former consideration, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the qualifying adjective "specific." If the artist's involvement takes the form of

an abstract commitment to life or to the mere efficacy of action, it is necessarily incomplete. Since involvement implies concern and concern implies action, the committed artist is led logically from political involvement to political obligation. In regard to the esthetic consequences of the artist's specific commitments, however, the record is not uniform. Many contemporary American critics, as we have indicated in the Prologue, have affirmed the liabilities of political commitment. Political concerns, they have maintained, inevitably vitiate the work of art. And certain portions of our demonstration do seem to corroborate this contention. Surely the work of John Howard Lawson reveals that the Marxist commitment was fatal to his career as dramatist. Lawson's very real dramatic talent was obviously allied to his inner conflict, the vitality of his pre-Marxist plays deriving from the intensity with which he objectified his psychological and political indecision. Plays such as Roger Bloomer, Processional, and Gentlewoman, for all their manifest deficiencies, command respect because they are infused with a genuine vitality; the playwright succeeds in the primary task of involving us in the plights of his characters. Marching Song, however, Lawson's one "committed" play, is so obviously a creature of his will, of his conscious desire to write the model proletarian play, as to lack any spark of life at all. We may respect the playwright's seriousness of purpose, but we are unable to become

involved in the reality of the characters or the issues presented; at the core, Marching Song is hollow. Lawson himself seems to have recognized that the Marxist commitment was not dramatically beneficial in his case; after his commitment, he almost completely deserted the theatre and retreated ever further behind the facade of ideologist.

Similarly the work of Theatre Union reveals the esthetic liabilities of commitment to ideology. Theatre Union was so dominated by political concerns that it could barely function as a theatre. Since each script had to pass the acid test of political "reliability," it was constrained in a manner that the Group Theatre, for example, was not. Harnessed to the yoke of its commitment, the Union disappeared when the specific political atmosphere which created it had been dissipated. Indeed, the success of the Group points up the hazards of Theatre Union's intense political commitment. Although the Group was involved throughout its existence with political and social issues, it was not committed to any one program or solution. Consequently, it did not have to submit its scripts and productions to the test of Theatre Union's political "touchstone." Since esthetic rather than political considerations governed the Group's theatrical policy, it was able to draw from a much wider range of theatrical and dramatic talent than Theatre Union. The Group produced Odets, Anderson, and Saroyan; the latter

two would surely have been rejected by Theatre Union's play-reading committee as "reactionary."

But despite the cases of Lawson and Theatre Union, not all the evidence affirms the liability of political obligation. In the case of Odets, for example, we have attempted to demonstrate that his success as a playwright was to a great extent dependent upon his use of the Marxist myth as a dramatic metaphor. This judgment is corroborated by dramatic history; if any of Odets' work still enjoys currency, it is precisely that which is most overtly committed. It is as the dramatist of Waiting for Lefty and Awake and Sing! that the name of Odets survives; the author of Clash by Night and Night Music has been largely forgotten, and his last play, The Flowering Peach, was never even published. After the loss of his Marxist commitment, Odets lapsed into a minor dramatist, largely because he had lost his comprehensive dramatic vision. Although he attempted briefly in The Flowering Peach to find a new dramatic metaphor to replace the Marxist myth of social resurrection, his failure is suggested by the fact that he has been completely silent since the production of that play in 1954. Perhaps the same judgment might be made of Odets that Martin Esslin makes of Brecht in Brecht: The Man and His Work:

Brecht's commitment to Marxism and to the party did have a beneficial effect on his writing: it gave his anarchic and nihilistic tendencies a rigid framework of intellectual discipline. . . . The act of engagement . . . can therefore be seen as having

been of considerable importance in the mechanism of his creative process. It gave him the reason, the justification, and the incentive to work.
(p. 239)

Similarly, in the case of S. N. Behrman, we have observed that social concerns raised his work of the decade to a level of seriousness it had not attained before and has not attained since. When Behrman decided to take a stand against fascism in his plays, the genre of high comedy--too insubstantial to bear the weight of his anger--came close to crumbling. But despite their inconsistencies, plays like Rain from Heaven, End of Summer, and Dunnigan's Daughter must be taken seriously, which is more than can be said for Behrman's major products of the post-war era: Jane, Fanny, and I Know My Love. The act of commitment was hardly detrimental to Behrman's art.

Where then have we emerged in regard to the dramatic consequences of political obligation? We may observe, first of all, that mere volition cannot produce a successful work of art. The committed dramatist could choose consciously his specific political alternative, but he could not similarly will esthetic success. Although Lawson yearned to write the perfect revolutionary play, his talent and temperament were obviously unsuited to the task. Odets, on the other hand, in using the Marxist metaphor to condemn the social dislocation caused by the Depression, articulated the malaise of his time, and he did so with sufficient intensity to win

the enthusiastic praise of those who did not accept his political solution.

The work of the other dramatists and theatre groups we have considered similarly reveals the disparate effects of political obligation. Behrman's plays, as we have pointed out above, clearly demonstrate its beneficial effects. The case of Elmer Rice, however, is more ambiguous. None of Rice's plays of the decade is particularly effective. Yet it is difficult to determine precisely how much of this ineffectiveness rests in the playwright's reformist commitment. From one point of view, there seems to be legitimacy in the Marxist critics' attack upon the absence of specific solutions in Rice's protest plays. Surely both We the People and Judgment Day suffer from diffuseness of attack; in the former play, Rice clearly attempts to encompass too many social injustices; his protest is vitiated because no sooner does he itemize one social evil than he passes on to another. Indeed, the abstract affirmation of Americanism with which the play concludes is anti-climactic, since the social situation, as presented dramatically, seems so bleak as to demand concrete solutions. And in Judgment Day, Rice dilutes the effectiveness of his anti-Nazi position by melodramatizing the sufficiently sensational circumstances of the Reichstag fire. By removing the play to a fictitious Balkan country and by concluding with the sudden assassination of the Hitler figure, Rice unwittingly minimized the reality of the

Nazi menace. Yet the accusation of vague generality cannot be applied similarly to Flight to the West and Between Two Worlds. They are ineffective mainly on dramaturgic grounds. Thus the record in Rice's case is not clear cut; we cannot definitely determine the esthetic consequences of his political commitment.

The case of Maxwell Anderson presents other difficulties peculiar to the very paradox in which the playwright was involved. Insofar as Anderson was committed, his obligation took the form of anarchism, a political position which contains an explicit contradiction. Since all political organization and activity is suspect, the anarchist is necessarily barred from obtaining his goal of a decentralized society, for social reform can be achieved only through political action. The anarchist may thunder his condemnations of contemporary society, but if he attempts to realize his goals, he is violating his basic philosophy. Anderson's plays demonstrate the contradiction of the anarchist position, a contradiction which leads the playwright not illogically into a fatalistic assertion of the futility of all political action. Insofar as his plays objectify Anderson's dilemma effectively, they are enriched by his political confusion; but insofar as Anderson's political paradox sends his dramas in opposite directions (as in Gods of the Lightning), it has had an unfortunate dramatic result.

The drama of the three theatre groups we have investigated also reveals the diverse effects of political obligation. The cases of Theatre Union and the Group Theatre, as we have pointed out, are complementary. The Union's Marxist commitment imposed the test of political reliability upon its playwrights with unfortunate dramatic results. The Group, however, uncommitted to any specific political program, could encourage talent wherever it was found and, as a consequence, accepted for production plays by such diverse authors as Odets, Kingsley, Piscator, Saroyan, Maxwell Anderson, and Paul Green. The record of original Federal Theatre drama is not very impressive; the project's main dramatic contribution was the Living Newspaper, a genre which was necessarily ephemeral. There seems to have been little incentive for major dramatists to write for the project, perhaps because of their fear of bureaucratic control and because commercial outlets were sufficient to absorb their energies. The project's main contribution was theatrical, not dramatic--in the principle rather than in the results of government-sponsored drama. Since most original federal drama was second-rate, it is difficult to determine how much blame can be placed upon the authors' specific political obligations.

I think we may conclude, then, that political commitment in itself is an inadequate test of esthetic effectiveness. The Marxist condemnation of art which is not a weapon is obviously absurd; yet so too is the contrary assertion

that all art which demands political action has abrogated its function. The crucial fact is how the playwright utilizes his commitment: whether, as in the case of Lawson, it is an obvious excrescence which has little relation to the artist's experience, or whether, as in the case of Odets and Brecht (and we might add Silone and Malraux) the organic structure of his work is dependent upon and rises from the artist's political convictions. The act of political obligation has apparently been disastrous for many artists; it has imposed upon their work considerations alien to their authentic talents. But in other cases political commitments have served to order the artist's anarchic tendencies, to offer a structural framework upon which to build.

Perhaps we might clarify the problem by considering for a moment the analogous problem of religious commitment. Surely one need not take new vows in order to appreciate a work by an artist of a religious persuasion different from one's own. Even the most zealous religionist would hardly maintain that only Catholics can enjoy Claudel, Protestants Milton, and Jews Sholom Aleichem. When we read a successful literary work, one in which the artist's commitment is intrinsic to his experience, we briefly become his fellow communicants. If the artist's vision of life is genuine, if it is authentically his own, we are obligated to accept it on his terms. If we do not do so, if we demand that art conform to our particular beliefs and prejudices, then we find

ourselves in the predicament common to those who endeavor assiduously, and absurdly, to prove that Shakespeare was either a secret Catholic or a pre-Marxist social rebel. Gerard Manley Hopkins was a good poet; Joyce Kilmer was not; although both were good Catholics, the success of their poetry bears no direct relation to the degree of their personal piety. Both Lawson and Brecht were avowed Marxists, but the latter's literary stature has steadily increased, while the former's has steadily declined. Thus, let us not ask to what the artist is committed, but rather how he is committed. Although neither sound ideology nor sound theology can fill the void of esthetic deficiency, let us not commit the contrary heresy of damning those works whose commitments we reject.

In conclusion, let us once more briefly review the results of our investigation, cautioning, however, that the evidence of the 1930's cannot settle finally the problem of political commitment. First of all, the act of involvement seems to be demanded by social circumstance. If the artist is serious, he will be involved when social issues demand consideration. Second, the act of obligation has differing esthetic results depending not upon the artist's specific commitment, but rather upon the quality of the commitment--

how it relates to his genuine vision of reality. Although the debate concerning political commitment will no doubt continue to resound despite our admonitions, let us hope that its tone will diminish in polemical intensity.

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