

IX. THE GREAT TRADITION

I AM very happy to join with you in the celebration of the thirtieth anniversary of this great institution, the *New Masses*. I should really have been permitted to be a listener this afternoon, not a talker. One should not speak at such an important occasion, at such a great gathering without adequate preparation. I came here without that necessary preparation. I will therefore speak quite at random and extemporaneously. My remarks will largely be my spontaneous reactions to the magnificent program given to us here this afternoon and that magnificent anniversary edition of the *New Masses* issued this week.

As I sat here this afternoon, I asked myself the question: What is it that makes these meetings distinctive, something that could not be reproduced by any other group of people in America? What is it that brings this audience, the readers of the *New Masses*, together and makes this institution live, although according to the prevailing standards of our society, it should be a financially bankrupt institution, tottering on the edge of the abyss every moment of existence? What is it that brings you supporters of this paper together and enables this magazine to surmount every crisis—and it has a crisis on the average of twice a week? What is it that makes one proud to think to himself: I helped save the *New Masses*? And there are tens of thousands of us and we are all congratulating ourselves at one time or other that each of us has saved the *New Masses*.

We are a unique group; we are searching for truth, and that binds us together with a bond that transcends most ordinary bonds,

that gives us a power to do things that ordinary aggregations of humanity cannot do, and out of this fellowship that has been built up over the years and grows stronger and stronger, we have created an institution in which we are collectively not only the direct producers of the magazine, but its readers, a great broad grouping that is identified with this institution. We have created that atmosphere, or, better still, we have fertilized the American soil out of which has been able to grow most of the living manifestations of American culture today.

It is not an accident that even the decrepit and decaying American bourgeoisie, in order to conduct its struggle against us, has to borrow its weapons from our arsenal. It is no accident that the Republican National Convention, in order to make any kind of a cultural face, had to put on Earl Robinson's *Ballad for Americans*. That is typical, and even if they want to produce a great best-seller for the bourgeoisie, they have to resort to someone who had sneaked into our midst and had been kicked out. This great best seller of the day—what is the name of it—"Out of the Sewer"?—that is a symbol of the culture of the American bourgeoisie today, a real symbol that stands for the cultural level to which the rulers of this country have descended. The whole machinery of the great American society, the most powerful nation in the world, is put to work to spread that book over the face of America.

We have our best seller. Our best seller this year is the Dean of Canterbury. That is a symbol of the cultural life that we are bringing to America. Let the two camps be judged by their best sellers—capitalism, with its "Out of the Sewer"; socialism, with the Dean of Canterbury's *The Soviet Power*.

These contrasts run throughout every phase of life. We have already registered in various publications in the past period the development of this profoundly reactionary current in American history and literature, the bourgeois revaluation of its own past and its repudiation of its own past. Years ago when we first began to speak in clear and definite tones in our claim as the inheritors of the American revolutionary tradition, as the modern representatives

of Washington, Jefferson, Paine and Lincoln, some people thought that this was merely a sort of protective coloration put on by those terrible Reds who wanted to tear down this American tradition and, in order to do it, hid themselves in a Trojan Horse and disguised themselves as advocates of the American tradition. If anyone has any lingering suspicion of that any more, just let him look around at what the thinkers, writers, spokesmen and ideologists of our ruling class are doing and saying today. The most significant history that they brought out in this past period was the debunking of Washington and the raising of General Conway to the position of the misunderstood genius of the American Revolution; Conway of the notorious Conway cabal! One of the most serious historical studies they have brought forward has been the belated recognition of Benedict Arnold and his restoration to the galaxy of American heroes! One of the most significant efforts which is gaining great recognition and influence in our history circles is to restore Aaron Burr as a model for the youth of today!

The greatest literary effort of the bourgeoisie in the past period has been *Gone With the Wind*, a "great effort," eighty years after the Civil War, to refurbish the glories of a slave society and to drag down the great tradition of Lincoln and the emancipation struggle. One of the current efforts of the great movie trust is the "epic" picture *Sante Fé Trail*, built upon the thesis that the great John Brown was a dirty little Red, a fanatic advocating force and violence, an enemy of society, of all that is good and gracious in culture; the thesis that the representatives of human dignity, decency and culture of that day are not John Brown or Abraham Lincoln, but the flowers of the slave system. The great general is Robert E. Lee, in charge of the hanging of John Brown. I don't know why they did not also bring in one of his assistants at that hanging, John Wilkes Booth, who is unquestionably also one of the heroes that they still keep in the closet and who will be revealed to us in the second dispensation of the new culture that the bourgeoisie is giving to America today.

As in all of these other things, so in our political life we are being

given one of the most profoundly reactionary regimes that not only America but the world has ever seen, covered with the tawdry trappings of a cheaply bought progressive reputation. American politics today are so completely reactionary, corrupt and degenerate that even Burton K. Wheeler, who four years ago was the leader of the reactionary camp in the fight around the Supreme Court, stands out in that swamp in Washington as a sort of progressive giant.

The only voice, clear and uncompromising, that we hear in the official circles of America is the lone American Labor Congressman, Vito Marcantonio.

A great wave of reaction has engulfed America. In appearance it is overwhelmingly strong, and we are a puny handful who stand up and brave the lightning of their storms, apparently doomed to utter annihilation. That is the appearance. But behind this surface appearance the reality is something else. This great gathering of the forces of reaction, this unlimited offensive against everything that is honest and decent in American life is a sign not of the strength of reaction in America; it is a sign that the whole ruling class today is becoming conscious of its own doom. It is a sign that the American bourgeoisie has read its own death warrant and is in a hysterical fit of resistance to the inevitable. And we, though small in numbers today—and the future always first presents itself not with the majority but with a small minority—we represent the future of America. We represent the American search for truth; we represent the American tradition of democracy, of government of, by and for the people. We represent honest thought and culture; we represent the search for beauty; we represent the creative power of the masses. And that is why the future belongs to us. If the bourgeoisie still dreams that in America they can continue their bankrupt and decrepit system by adopting the new technique of Adolph Hitler, let them take a second thought. That is a false hope. They did not begin the job quickly enough. Already there is such a growing opinion, knowledge, culture, understanding, intellectual

power in the masses of America that the most powerful reactionary regime can never cut it out.

In 1939 we already had a best seller, a great book, the *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. Close to two hundred thousand copies of that book were sold. No American Hitler will ever be able to cut out of American society the seeds that were sown with the distribution and the study and the reading of that book in every nook and corner of America. That lesson has been absorbed deep into the consciousness and the subconsciousness and the blood and bones of America. And now there has been sold the first quarter of a million of the Dean of Canterbury's great book, *The Soviet Power*, which is not a Communist book, by the way—indicating that people don't have to be Communists to come to us any more; all they have to be is honest and decent and they have no other place to go. And when as against this great instrument the bourgeoisie is able to put up only such puny weapons, it is really a pitiful spectacle. They have completely departed from everything that was once great in their tradition. They are corpses, socially and politically speaking, waiting for an aroused and organized working class to bury them and remove the stench that now poisons the atmosphere of our country.

The *New Masses* represents this great creative movement of the people in its broadest aspects. Therefore we know that the thirtieth anniversary of the *New Masses* is not going to be the last. The *New Masses* will go ahead; it will move forward in the forefront of this great gathering movement of the people, and the banner of the *New Masses* will be standing at the celebration of the final victory of the people over all exploiters and oppressors, and that will not be in the next thirty years of the *New Masses*. History is traveling fast now. Thirty years ago we did not have the radio and the airplane; today we have them and many other factors speeding up the process of history, and the minds of men are speeding up.

Millions of Americans are already absorbing the lessons of the new society, understanding that the old has nothing but death and

destruction for them; they are beginning to see the flower of the new and its tremendous promise for our land, and we will realize that promise because this generation and the masses of America are going to bring our America to the flowering of socialism.

Speech delivered at the thirtieth anniversary celebration of the New Masses, February 16, 1941.