

"O Workers' Revolution . . . The True Messiah"

The Jew as Author and Subject in the American Radical Novel

WALTER B. RIDEOUT

LAWS AND PROPHETS

Left-wing political movements in the United States have not always been hospitable to Jews. The Populist movement of the late nineteenth century, for example, was distinctly tinged with "native Americanism," and some of the novels that grew out of it have anti-Semitic overtones. In Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1890), that lurid predecessor of George Orwell's *1984*, the proletariat of most of the civilized world is pictured as being enslaved in the late twentieth century by a cruel and arrogant aristocracy composed, it is said, chiefly of Hebrews who had survived Christian oppression and, by a Darwinian development, had become strong enough to persecute their former persecutors.¹ Marxian Socialism was hospitable to Jews, however; and, historically, immigrant German and Russian Jews were among those who helped Marxist ideology to take root in America.

Students of political movements have long been aware that, though the stereotype of the Jew as Bolshevik is as erroneous as that of the Jew as World Financier, certain parallel elements in Marxism and Judaism made it easy for Jews skeptical of their ancestral faith to transfer their devotion to this secular substitute. Thus, dialectical materialism, that inevitable and all-powerful historical process, took the place of God; the International declared

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¹See "Edmund Boisgilbert" (Ignatius Donnelly), *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: F. J. Schulte & Company, 1890), p. 37. From the context it is clear that Donnelly also accepted the notion of the Jewish financial world overlord, but his antagonism toward Jews is qualified by a sense of guilt for their mistreatment by Christians.

the unity of the human race; and the Proletarian Revolution was the true Messiah that would restore an ideal kingdom on this earth and bring world peace. Both Judaism and Marxism, at least as Karl Marx conceived it, insisted on a morality of individuals free from any form of tyranny; and the social idealism and hatred of injustice found in the utterances of the best Socialist leaders resembled those of the great prophets of ancient Israel, even to some extent in phraseology. One might extend these parallels more tenuously: the body of Marx's writings could be considered a substitute for the Law; the enormous volumes of Party literature became a kind of Talmud exhibiting a similar subtlety of analysis; while the conception of a small disciplined Party possessed of the Truth had a psychological correspondence with the concept of the Chosen People.

For the Jewish immigrants to America, or rather for the actually small percentage of them who were Socialists, Marxism had further values. It helped them to construct order out of a bewildering experience, to maintain a sense of continuity with their European homes, and to remain secure in their sense of "otherness" both as Jews and as newcomers. Soon Jews were assuming leadership in the radical movement. Morris Hillquit and Meyer London, to name only two immigrant leaders on New York's East Side, played an important part in the formation, in 1901, of the American Socialist Party, when splinter groups from Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party united with the Social Democracy of Eugene V. Debs and Victor L. Berger. From that time on, the history of radicalism in the United States has been centrally a history of the Socialist and, later, Communist Parties and their offshoots.

That Hillquit and London, unlike many political leaders, were both highly literate men is an instance of how radical immigrant Jews contributed to the development in the major urban areas, where they of course tended to settle, of a milieu out of which writers of all sorts might come; and one gets a sense in reading memoirs of the times that New York's East Side, scarred though it was by the most hideous poverty and squalor, was at the same time enlivened by a fairly widespread interest in the arts. Paradoxically, the man who wrote the first radical novel in twentieth-century America came from quite different circumstances. Isaac Kahn Friedman was

born in Chicago in 1870 of wealthy, well-established parents, was educated at the University of Michigan, and had even started on specialized studies in political economy when he became interested in Socialism and in the harsh life of laborers in Chicago’s steel mills. His novel *By Bread Alone* (1901) was the result.

THE TRUE MESSIAH

Despite a certain amount of sentimentality and melodrama, *By Bread Alone* remains surprisingly readable even now. It is a strike novel, based in the main on the violent events at the Homestead, Pennsylvania, plant of the Carnegie Steel Company in 1892. The book’s two major achievements are the depiction of the terrible working and living conditions in an early twentieth-century steel town and the dramatization of the forces on both sides of a management-labor dispute that produce actual warfare. These two achievements are all the more unusual for the reason that Friedman, in more ways than one, was writing as an outsider; he had observed the conditions of work and life carefully, but had not grown up under them, and he was clearly opposed to violence by either party in a strike. In his selection of characters, he again had to work from the outside. Apparently he picked as his central figure a young man with the non-Jewish name of Blair Carrhart less to conform to middle-class Protestant literary convention than to be socio-economically accurate, since Blair’s rapid advancement from job to job — whereby, of course, the widest variety of conditions could be exposed — in itself reveals the favored treatment of the “native American” over the immigrant in the mills. The only important Jewish figure in the book, in fact, is the villainous anarchist, Sophia Goldstein, late of St. Petersburg; but her characterization as an apostle of wicked violence seems intended as an attack on Emma Goldman, whose passionate advocacy of philosophic anarchism was as misunderstood and abhorred by moderate Socialists as by any capitalist. Friedman’s volume, then, is not significant in the fiction produced by American Jews for any picture of Jewish life, but rather for the fact of its authorship, its place of priority in the tradition of the radical novel, and its considerable literary merit.

Not all the half dozen novels written by Jews during the period of the Socialist novel (roughly from 1901 to 1919) are as memorable as *By Bread Alone*, but three of them have at least documentary value as re-creations of the life of Jewish immigrants in New York in the early years of this century. Both *The Nine-Tenths* (1911) by James Oppenheim and *Comrade Yetta* (1913) by "Albert Edwards" (Arthur Bullard) describe the desperate poverty, the oppressive sweatshop conditions, and the sense of uprootedness experienced by newcomers to America. Both novels base many of their fictional events on that opening battle of the five-year "Great Revolt" (1909-1914) in the garment industries — the battle known as the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," when the shirtwaist and dressmaking girls won a victory after three months on the picket line.² In addition, *The Nine-Tenths*, an inferior book by reason of its sentimentality and open propaganda, dramatizes the fire at the Triangle Waist Company on March 25, 1911, in which 146 workers died, mostly Italian and Russian Jewish immigrant girls.³ In these books — and sometimes as a minor theme in Socialist novels by non-Jews — the portrait of the Jewish immigrants is partly that of the victim who is intended to symbolize by his fate the experience of all workers under capitalism. The victimization of the immigrant is particularly poignant, however, because of the contrast between his expectations of freedom and economic security in the land behind the Statue of Liberty and the jungle world that he actually finds. So, in *Comrade Yetta*, Yetta Rayevsky's father talks of a benevolent Democracy, but dies so poor that the youthful Yetta must go to work at once in a sweatshop.

If part of the image of the Jew is as victim, there is, nevertheless, another part: the Jew as secular prophet and leader, a Socialist Moses destined to lead an enslaved proletariat out of the Egypt of capitalism. The hero of *The Nine-Tenths* is a non-Jew, though there are a number of Jewish secondary characters, but the heroine of *Comrade Yetta* embodies both parts of the Jewish image; at first a victim of the

² For a history of "The Great Revolt," see Melech Epstein, *Jewish Labor in the U. S. A.: An Industrial, Political and Cultural History of the Jewish Labor Movement, 1882-1914* (New York: Trade Union Sponsoring Committee, 1950), Chapter 22.

³ A recent account of this disaster may be found in Tom Brooks, "The Terrible Triangle Fire," *American Heritage*, VIII (August, 1957), 54-57, 110-11.

economic structure, she develops into a gifted strike leader and finds fulfillment in Socialism. In a somewhat similar way, Emil Witte, of Elias Tobenkin's *Witte Arrives* (1916), endures poverty and religious discrimination, yet eventually achieves fame by writing a Socialist *Uncle Tom's Cabin* against wage-slavery.⁴ The "way out" for the Jewish immigrant, according to all these novels, is neither an acceptance of the American standard of financial success, nor a reaffirmation of Judaism. The true Messiah is the workers' revolution, which will bring in universal social justice as peacefully as possible by the legitimate means of the strike and the ballot.

DESCENTS TOWARD FAILURE

Witte Arrives, the story of one immigrant's experience, is an earnest but tedious tale. Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), on the other hand, is a book that remains fresh and illuminating even now, thus proving its right to be called a minor classic in general American, as well as in American Jewish, literature. With the sure sense that comes from intimate knowledge of his material, Cahan chooses a protagonist who is at once an individual and a type. His first eighty pages sketch the early life of David Levinsky, scholar of the Talmud, in the ghetto of Antomir, Russia — his poverty, his acquaintance with anti-Semitic violence, his growing religious skepticism, and his passage to America as one unit in the great Russian Jewish immigrations that began in the 1880's. Striving to assimilate himself to an environment which he only gradually understands, he drifts away from Judaism — he returns to it when a success, but solely for prudential reasons — works as a peddler and then as a cloak operator with the purpose of

⁴ This image of the Jew as victim and/or heroic leader appears incidentally in a number of other Socialist novels by non-Jewish authors. For instance, one of the radical mentors eventually found by Jurgis Rudkus, protagonist of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, is Ostrinski, a Pole who had suffered both as dedicated revolutionary and as "a member of a despised and persecuted race." (*The Jungle* [New York: The Jungle Publishing Company, 1906], p. 374.) Discrimination against Jews specifically as Jews rather than merely as immigrants is occasionally mentioned and deplored by non-Jewish Socialist novelists, whose heroes and heroines are typically American-born, middle-class Protestants; but more frequently these writers are concerned with defending the rights of all immigrants of whatever nationality or faith.

going to City College,⁵ his new Temple, and then is deflected into becoming a garment manufacturer. His protagonist's steady, unscrupulous rise to a great fortune allows Cahan to sketch in naturally the development of the garment trades, the economically-based conflicts between German and Russian Jews, the growth of labor unionism and of Socialism, the interest in the arts — indeed, in a richly detailed way the whole experience of Jews in New York from the mid-1880's to the early 1910's.

The excellence of Cahan's book results not only from its being a re-creation of a type and a time, but also from its author's control of a narrative technique; for Levinsky is allowed to tell his story, in the first person, in a lucid, direct, even-tempered way that is itself part of an enormous irony. What the author has him reveal, now consciously, now unconsciously, is a financial success bought at the expense of moral conduct; Levinsky's inner life, as opposed to his outer, is thus a descent toward failure, toward emotional and spiritual emptiness. It is a fine touch at the end when the wealthy Levinsky recognizes that he is basically unhappy, but still remains scornful of the Socialists whom he has met along his way and who have offered him, without his realizing it, an alternative path. Since we pity and dislike its hero, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is a triumph for the radical novel. By keeping within his very human hero's point of view, Cahan writes a book that is simultaneously all propoganda and not propoganda at all.

At a lower level of accomplishment, though still distinguished despite its neglect, is the almost forgotten *Worshippers* (1906), by Henry Berman, a novel which explores the relationship between Katherine Bronski, the dissatisfied wife of a well-to-do druggist in the Philadelphia Jewish colony, and Alexander Raman, an idealistic and popular young Socialist poet. Mistakenly convinced that she is a great actress, Katherine deserts her husband and goes to New York to live with Raman, who has fallen in love with her out of ignorance

⁵ Cf. Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1917), p. 156, for an illuminating comment on the tremendous interest of immigrant Jews in learning: "The East Side was full of poor Jews . . . who would beggar themselves to give their children a liberal education. Then, too, thousands of our working-men attended public evening school, while many others took lessons at home. The Ghetto rang with a clamor for knowledge."

of women. Katherine fails to obtain dramatic parts, and in her self-centered hate of Raman's popularity turns against him, destroying his poetic gifts and then deserting him in turn to go back self-pityingly to her husband. Although *Worshippers* conveys a sense of life among well-to-do Jews and of the interests of Jewish artists and intellectuals, its main strength lies in cutting deep into universal human nature. Where Cahan's talent has an affinity with that of the much greater Turgenev, Berman's seems related, if again in a minor way, to that of Ibsen. Berman, too, tunnels into the dark areas of consciousness and unconsciousness, the tangle of motivations behind intimate human relationships, and his Katherine Bronski is at times as searchingly revealed as Ibsen's Hedda Gabler.

THE CONFLICT OF GENERATIONS

When we consider that only six of some thirty-five Socialist novelists appear to have been Jewish and that a very large number of all the Socialist novels are decidedly inferior as fiction, it would seem from the discussion up to this point that the average level of ability of the Jewish writers was quite respectably high, even if they were unequally informative about Jewish life. Subsequently there were to be other Jewish achievements in the radical novel, but not by writers associated with the American Socialist Party; for this segment of the Second International was destroyed, to almost all practical intents, by the conflict of loyalties called forth by the First World War and by the ensuing intraparty struggle with the groups that later formed the Communist Party in the early 1920's.

The 20's have become recognized as a period of experiment and revolt, but only rarely of a distinctly political sort. The cataclysm of World War I persuaded many of the young writers, both Jewish and Gentile, of the uselessness of political action, particularly when, as they saw it, most parties of whatever ideological shade were dominated by the same Older Generation that had been responsible for the War and its slaughter. For this and other reasons, the 20's, and to some extent the 30's, became peculiarly marked by the conflict of generations, a society-wide father-son antagonism that

was strongly felt by young Jews who were the American-born offspring of immigrant parents. Their problem was complicated by memories of their upbringing in the Jewish faith and by the traditional closeness of Jewish family life, but social and economic forces in their urban environment were driving them away from both. More adjusted, superficially, to American society than their parents — they had learned English in American schools and were embarrassed by their parents' speech — they preferred assimilation to the extent that it was not denied them by crude and subtle devices of discrimination; or they rebelled both against their parents and against an acquisitive American society in the name of Art or Life, rarely of the Workers' Revolution.

Understandably, few radical novels appeared in the 20's, only one of any importance by a Jewish writer.⁶ Samuel Ornitz' anonymously-published *Haunch Paunch and Jowl* (1923) may very well have derived its basic narrative device, that of the ironically self-revealing autobiography, from *The Rise of David Levinsky*; and Meyer Hirsch's rise from the brains of a boys' gang on the East Side to shyster lawyer, crooked politician, and eventually "Judge of the Superior Criminal Court" is as ruthless as that of Cahan's protagonist. The books are alike also in their sense for the detail of life on the East Side, though *Haunch Paunch and Jowl* is the more impressionistically sketchy. Both, too, use contrasting characters that allow the reader to see the idealistic ferment of the ghetto and the Socialist alternative to the capitalist system. What particularizes Ornitz' book, however, is a sense of humor as grotesque and earthy as certain Yiddish jokes. Where Levinsky's corruption is suggested by his poignant admissions of emotional aridity, Meyer's is declared, with the concrete obviousness of caricature, by his tremendous belly. Cahan's novel is the superior work; yet one remembers Ornitz' for its verbal bounce, its stinging good spirits, its raucous hilarity.

⁶ After publishing *House of Conrad* (1918), a nonradical account of three generations in a German immigrant family, Elias Tobenkin wrote *The Road* (1922), which is radical in outlook, but is not concerned with Jews. The value of both books is historical rather than literary.

O GREAT BEGINNING!

Humor is unfortunately a rare enough quality in any radical fiction; and the monstrous events of the 30's — a decade of world depression, of totalitarianism, of hunger and concentration camps and war — did tend to make humor seem as out of place as a wise-crack in a torture room. Outraged anger seemed the more human reaction, and this is, indeed, the over-all emotional quality which one senses in the left-wing novels of the time. Although it would be unhistorical to make the depression the sole efficient cause for the rise of the so-called “proletarian” novel in the early 1930's, the pervasive effect of the great economic collapse is obvious. Like other young would-be writers of this decade, the Jewish novelists were influenced by the depression to question and even reject as inadequate a capitalist system that produced hunger and want in the midst of potential plenty. They noted, on the other hand, that the Soviet Union was in the midst of its first Five-Year Plan, and the human suffering entailed could be excused on the basis of increasing industrial achievement and the hopefulness of the stated goals. The Russian experiment took on for them the overtones of a gigantic and successful effort by youth to throw off the shackles imposed by the old men; and many young intellectuals in America — though only a minority of them — became attracted to Marxism and the Communist Party, which, for whatever ends, was trying to shape and utter the inarticulate sense of frustration and protest felt by the unemployed, the declassed, and the dispossessed.

What the radicalized novelists attempted to create became known as the “proletarian” novel, a term borrowed from Soviet literary critics at a time when the Russians themselves were rejecting it in favor of their still-current phrase, “Socialist realism.” To most left-wing American writers and critics, a “proletarian” novel meant a novel characterized either explicitly or implicitly by a Marxist point of view on the part of the author. So they wrote novels depicting strikes as battles in a sharpening class war or describing the conversion of a worker or middle-class hero from a mindless acceptance of capitalism to a militant faith in Communism. Unlike their Socialist predecessors, they were inclined to deal graphically

and at length with violence and cruelty, a tendency that probably reflects both the literary conventions established by the antiwar novelists of the 20's and the disruption of their own lives by the depression. So they wrote also of the decay of the middle class or of the sordid, terrifying lives of those at the bottom of the social pit — the “bottom dogs,” as they were called from the title of Edward Dahlberg's striking first novel.

Among the “proletarian” novelists, considerably more were Jews than among the Socialist novelists, a fact that illustrates how Jewish writers as a whole were becoming of progressively greater importance on the American literary scene. Where just over one-sixth of the Socialist novelists (six out of thirty-five) had been of Jewish origin, between one-fourth and one-third of the proletarian writers (fourteen out of fifty) were Jews. These fourteen⁷ were less interested in recording specifically Jewish life than life as they observed it or, occasionally, had lived it among the working class in general. Their Jewish upbringing, if they dealt with it at all, was typically something to be rejected on the grounds either that it had been middle-class and therefore ideologically unenlightened or that it had been dominated by Judaism, which the young Communist-oriented writer considered just another religion, another form of the opiate of the people.⁸

The sense of their origin, even in those Jewish novelists who deliberately wrote of non-Jewish experience, was not entirely

⁷ These, together with such of their novels as may be considered “proletarian,” are as follows: Maxwell Bodenheim (*Run, Sheep, Run* and *Slow Vision*), Edward Dahlberg (*Bottom Dogs*, *From Flushing to Calvary*, and *Those Who Perish*), Guy Endore (*Babouk*), Waldo Frank (*The Death and Birth of David Markand*), Michael Gold (*Jews Without Money*), Albert Halper (*The Foundry* and *The Chute*), Meyer Levin (*The New Bridge*), Melvin Levy (*The Last Pioneers*), Albert Maltz (“Season of Celebration” [novelette in *The Way Things Are and Other Stories*] and *The Underground Stream* [1940]), Henry Roth (*Call It Sleep*), Isidor Schneider (*From the Kingdom of Necessity*), Edwin Seaver (*The Company* and *Between the Hammer and the Anvil*), John L. Spivak (*Georgia Nigger*), and Leane Zugsmith (*A Time to Remember* and *The Summer Soldier*). Of these, Waldo Frank and Meyer Levin, two of the best novelists to be associated with the “proletarian” movement, accepted Communist ideology with marked reservations at the time they wrote the novels here listed and soon rejected it. Cf. Levin's criticism of the Communist Party in *Citizens* (1940), his ponderous but impressive novel about the Memorial Day Massacre of 1937.

⁸ It should be noted that, almost without exception, the non-Jewish writers, most of them brought up within some Protestant denomination, reacted against their own home environments and religion in essentially the same way.

eradicated, however. Although only one book, Edward Dahlberg’s *Those Who Perish* (1934), deals at length with reactions of American Jews to the killing of their European brethren, Nazi atrocities are very often mentioned with horrified loathing, while at some point in nearly every proletarian novel the author, Jew or not, attacks social or economic discrimination against Jews in America. The fictional device usually employed is the creation of a minor character who is victimized because of his Jewishness.⁹ In many instances, the author further emphasizes his position by having a Communist in the novel defend the victim. Granted that the point is often made crudely, granted also that the author writes from ideological rather than religious motives, still the proletarian novelist did take a firm, open stand against any kind of mistreatment of Jews as Jews.

It may also have been a strong sense of origin, even if expressed negatively, that impelled a very large majority of the radical Jewish novelists to write novels describing a conversion to Communism. That they probably found in this political ideology a surrogate for their rejected Judaism is nowhere clearer than in Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930), a work combining autobiography with imaginative sketches of East Side people in the first decade and a half of the century. In a style now sharp with a striking phrase, now blurred with sentimental rhetoric, Gold describes the filth, terror, cruelty, hunger, and vice of tenement life, and as well its sudden brief joys, the kindnesses of the very poor toward the very poor, and the unkillable human decencies. An intense emotionalist, Gold presents the “blind drift” of his own and other workers’ lives, until abruptly, on the last page of the book, a revolutionary on a soapbox transfixes him with illumination:

O workers’ Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy.
You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come,
and build there a garden for the human spirit.

O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live.

O great Beginning!¹⁰

⁹ For only one example, cf. James T. Farrell, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1934), pp. 123–32, for the brutal gang-up in a football game against “Jewboy Schwartz” and his subsequent death from the injuries.

¹⁰ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1930), p. 309.

THE PEOPLE OF THE ABYSS

Many of these radical novels written in the 30's by Jews — and by non-Jews likewise — are as crude as, or cruder than, Gold's book, and their authors often lack his real, if fuzzy, love for human beings; but it is unwise to reject all these books, especially if one has not read them, as mechanical exercises in propaganda. Edward Dahlberg's bitter novels, *Bottom Dogs* (1930) and *From Flushing to Calvary* (1932), are semiautobiographical accounts of the displaced, dispossessed people in the lower reaches of society, presented in a style which is deliberately as raw, flat, and arid as the life it describes, but often charged with such startling, wry images that it becomes a kind of poetry of the ugly. Not centrally concerned with Jewish life, both novels are rather revelations of the sordidly futile lives of what H. G. Wells once called "The People of the Abyss" and are by implication attacks on certain shortcomings in American society as a whole. Waldo Frank's *The Death and Birth of David Markand* (1934) is likewise an attack on the failure of America as the author sees it and likewise has little to say about Jews as such. Overwritten and self-consciously portentous as this book may be, it is, nevertheless, a large-scale attempt to dramatize American problems both through the concrete experience of its characters and through an intricate pattern of historical, social, cultural, and spiritual symbolizations, whereby Frank apparently hoped to combine Marx and Spinoza into an organic unity.

The best proletarian novel of all, however, is not only by a Jew, but also deals entirely with Jewish experience. Henry Roth's one book, *Call It Sleep* (dated 1934, but published in 1935), is a truly brilliant performance, one of the best first novels which I have ever read. Like Gold's volume, but in vastly superior fashion, this lengthy novel details the life of poor Jews in Brownsville and the East Side of New York from 1911 to 1913, here chiefly as seen through the sensitive eyes of David Schearl, who is not quite six at the beginning of the story. The son of a warmhearted mother and a neurotically truculent father, the timid and imaginative David experiences the terrors of tenement cellar and street, the precarious emotional security of the Schearl apartment on the top floor of the

tenement, and the psychic release of the rooftop. Each level of physical existence corresponds to part of a complex and powerful symbolic structure of which both David and the reader slowly become aware until all the discordant elements in the child's consciousness are suddenly brought into clear and acceptable relationship by an emotional crisis.

What makes the novel so extraordinary is its seamless web of concrete and abstract, of reality and symbol, of earth and spirit. Many of the events are grossly physical and are described in revolting detail; yet even these become incandescent with the intensity of a mystic's vision as symbol, in the Transcendentalist phrase, flowers out of fact. The language, too, represents the same unity of opposites; it moves back and forth effortlessly from a precisely heard and rendered everyday speech, complete with oath and obscenity, to the apocalyptic imagery of David's own thoughts. The result is to give the reader the sense of himself experiencing all the levels of a child's inner and outer world and of himself coming to accept the repulsive, the ugly, the horrifying along with the clean, the beautiful, the loving as necessary parts of life's self-contradictory wholeness.

THE INDEPENDENT LEFT

It is not surprising that, on its publication, *Call It Sleep* was attacked by some left-wing critics, though strongly defended by the more intelligent ones, for it can be read illuminatingly in many ways besides as a revolutionary novel. The besetting sin of many proletarian novelists and critics was that they considered ideology more important than art in the creation of fiction. It was, in fact, shifts in the Communist Party line that ended the excitement roused by the proletarian novel in the first half of the 30's. From 1936 on, the novel of revolutionary intent was in eclipse among leftists, at first because of the Popular Front policy of Communist cooperation with liberal "bourgeois" political parties. Meanwhile, the Moscow Trials of 1936-1938 and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 disillusioned many Party members and sympathizers, and the new converts during the early 1940's were more impressed by the Russian resistance to the

German armies than by Marx's analysis of capitalism. Radical novels continued to be written, but the most interesting ones were produced by the "independent leftists," those who had learned much from their study of Marx but who refused to commit themselves to Communism as an organized political force. Two of the best novels of the 40's were by such independents, both of them also Jews.

Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) has been criticized for viewing the Second World War through the eyes of Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos. Echoes of both writers are clear in the language and structure of this book, but it is informed throughout by a politico-philosophic assumption not derived from either writer, one that is, incidentally, productive of qualified optimism rather than of stoic or anguished despair at man's fate. The basic optimism or pessimism of a work of fiction has, of course, no necessary relation whatsoever to its literary value. What is important is that Mailer's assumption — that groups of men, not their leaders, shape history — acts as a thematic device to unify the entire book. The actions of General Cummings and of Sergeant Croft are not separate; both are attempts to dominate the men under them by means of a ruthless power morality, and in each case chance and the mass of men combine to defeat the leader's purpose. Thus Mailer makes his ideology and his art powerfully reciprocative.

The men who make up the mass in *The Naked and the Dead* are not at all portrayed as good, self-integrated persons. This is nowhere clearer than in Mailer's demonstration of the psychological damage that anti-Semitism may inflict. Of the two Jews in the book's reconnaissance platoon, Goldstein feels that his whole personality has been rubbed raw inside by discrimination; yet the injury to the "well-adjusted" Roth is even more disastrous: by refusing to consider himself a Jew any more, he has deprived himself completely of his past. But the persecutor is hurt as well as the persecuted. Jew-baiting is only one of the unsatisfying outlets for Gallagher, the Christian-Fronter, who hates Jews because he hates his own terrible insecurity. Anti-Semitism is, in fact, implicit in the protofascistic "fear-ladder" structure of the Army as described by General Cummings and assumed by Croft.

The psychic dislocations of the individual within a power-

structured society are also examined, at length and with insight, by Ira Wolfert in *Tucker's People* (1943). In this radically-oriented novel, ostensibly about men and women caught up in the numbers racket in New York, Wolfert makes a constant equation between the racket and "legitimate business" so that the book becomes a condemnation both of the unscrupulous methods employed by the big corporation and the overwhelming sense of insecurity which their impersonality develops in individual men. To some extent, for example, Leo and Joe Minch and their parents suffer from discrimination for their Jewishness, but what embitters the parents' lives and forces Leo and Joe into crime is, the author tries to demonstrate, this same sense of insecurity in an emotionally atomized society. Wolfert's underlying conception, that capitalism inevitably develops from the paternalistic company to the impersonal corporation to the completely hierarchical and completely demoralizing structure of totalitarianism, may not be intellectually convincing to the reader; but, like Mailer's conception in his book, this one also forges the material into an artistic unity, enabling the novel to exist simultaneously on a variety of levels — tough gangster story, account of a racket, record of the depression, analysis of the neurotic personality of our time, and dramatized theory of history. Less brilliant stylistically than *Call It Sleep*, *Tucker's People* is notable for both breadth and depth. Like Roth's book, it will eventually recover itself from neglect.

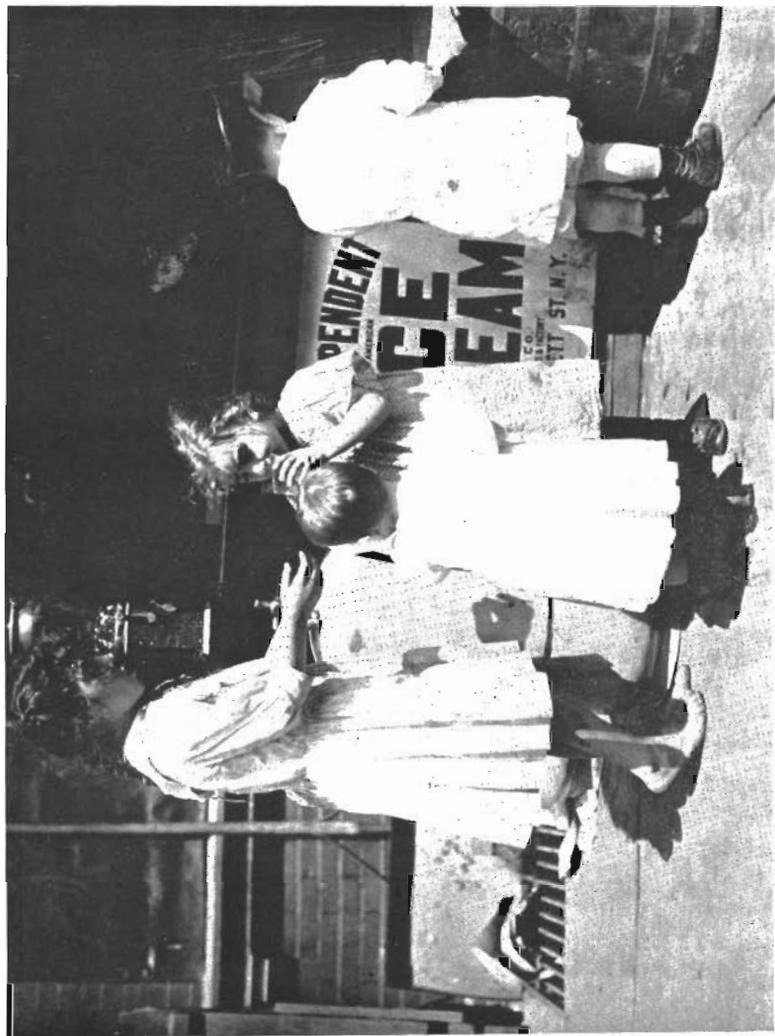
THE NAKED GOD

One other Jewish writer in the radical tradition remains to be considered. Mailer and Wolfert had drawn from this tradition what they wished and discarded the rest; Howard Fast, on the other hand, was, from the early 1940's until 1957, the chief literary spokesman for the American Communist Party and supported every new turn of its policy. A prolific writer, he dedicated himself to the historical novel as a means of celebrating in human society the age-old spirit of revolt toward freedom, finding that spirit in the American past and present and also in the history of ancient times. He is the only radical Jewish novelist to concern himself with events in the earlier

life of the Jewish people. Displaying its author's usual talent for the stripped narrative of violence, *My Glorious Brothers* (1948) describes the revolt led in Judaea against the country's Syrian-Greek rulers by Mattathias and his five sons, the Maccabees, and the restoration of the defiled Temple.

Fast often deals in some way with the relation of Jews to the Gentile world. In *My Glorious Brothers*, he examines the Jewish character in a long, ironically-conceived "Report of the Legate Lentulus Silanus to the Roman Senate," which argues that the Jewish passion for freedom and equalitarian democracy is antipathetic to the majesty of Rome and that this troublesome people must therefore be stamped out. More commonly he attacks anti-Semitism by positive counterstatement, one device being to present a triad of heroic figures, one Negro, one white Gentile, one Jew. Actually this triadic device appeared so regularly in those of Fast's novels published after the end of the Second World War that it came to sound like a cliché, a mere sterile assertion of one element of the Communist Party line. The publication of his nonfictional *The Naked God* in 1957, however, recorded a break with organized Communism on the basis of the Soviet repression of the Hungarian revolt, of Russian anti-Semitism, and of the Party's ideological domination of the writer; and it made clear that Fast's concern for his people was a deeply motivated one. It may very well be significant that the first novel which he has brought out since his break with the Party, *Moses, Prince of Egypt* (1958), is an interpretation of the early life of that leader and seems to be the initial volume in a trilogy describing the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt.

The Naked God comes as a belated postscript to the history of the effect of Socialism and Communism on American writing; it records yet one more in a long series of bitter disenchantments with an illusion. But the peculiar nature of literature is such that it can spring fruitfully even from illusioned views of reality, and the artistic accomplishments of the radical novel need not be rejected with its politics. Jewish writers and readers should keep this fact in mind particularly, for it helps to modify the current notion that only in the last decade and a half has the American-Jewish novel suddenly "come of age" after years characterized almost solely by silence or



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A HOT DAY ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE IN NEW YORK
(about 1910)



ABRAHAM CAHAN

triviality. On the contrary, the tradition of the radical novel proves that, from the beginning of the century, a number of Jewish writers of fiction were seriously concerned with interpreting their world as they saw it; and in the work produced by Friedman, Cahan, and Berman up to the First World War, by Ornitz in the 20's, by Dahlberg, Frank, and Roth in the 30's, by Mailer, Wolfert, and, at his best, Fast, in the 40's — in all this work, the portrayal of the writer's world is sensitive, complex, and memorable. Whatever its divergence from the tenets of Judaism or from customary political ideology, the work of these men is a body of literary achievement for which Jews need not apologize.

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