ART AND BREAD:

MIKE GOLD, PROLETARIAN ART, AND THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN

COMMUNISM, 1921-1941

by

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Vita

Abstract

Chapter 1

Introduction

Art is not a plaything, it is an organic part of the Revolution. . . . It is necessary as bread.

- *Mike Gold, "America Needs a Critic,"* <u>*New Masses*</u>*, 1926*

Philip Rahv famously said of proletarian literature: "[it is] the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class" ("Proletarian" 623). Rahv spearheaded, along with William Philips, James Farrell, and others, a critique of proletarian literature of the thirties, and this critique, which Barbara Foley terms the "anti-Stalinist aesthetic," and the later stigma of Communism, colored the view of proletarian literature, its authors, and advocates for decades. After the Cold War began and during and after the McCarthy communist witch hunts of the 1950s, proletarian literature was irrevocably stained by its association with Communism, and the result was that this literature was largely ignored by scholars. When it was studied, it was devalued or dismissed as "cheap" and "tendentious" (Kazin 378). Foley quotes Dixon Wecter from a study he published in 1948, *The Age of the Great Depression 1929-1941*: "Today the novels of Albert Halper, Meyer Levin, Michael Gold, Grace Lumpkin and Albert Maltz are almost unreadable. Doctrinaire communism, in particular, seemed curiously at odds with good writing, as if Marx's own ineptitude was inherited by his cult" (qtd. in Foley 21). Foley surveys a number of other anti-Stalinist aesthetic critiques published during the Cold War that she demonstrates "effectively [drove] the nail into proletarian literature's coffin" (21).

Anti-Stalinist Aesthetic

The development of the anti-Stalinist aesthetic is attributed primarily to the *Partisan Review* editors, Philip Rahv and William Philips, and also to James T. Farrell and his influential work, *A Note on Literary Criticism*. Rahv published a scathing critique of both proletarian literature and the Communist party in his 1939 *Southern Review* article, "Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy." In it, he claims the Communists have constructed a "strategic mystification" (617). The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), according to Rahv, "co-opted Marxism in the name of the party and used the party's version of Marxism as the theoretical basis of proletarian literature and its source of values" (617). Rahv goes on to explain:

> The principle mystification involved in this transaction consisted of the fact that while the writer thought he was allying himself with the working class, in reality he was surrendering his independence to the Communist Party, which for its own convenience had fused the concepts of party and class. (619)

This demand for proletarian literature to serve periodically changing party interests, Rahv argues, resulted in proletarian literature's "peculiar artificiality, the devious and volatile nature of its critical principles, [and] its artistic chaos plus its political homogeneity and discipline" ("Proletarian" 623). With the Popular Front initiative, the Communist Party courted "name" artists rather than unknown, working-class artists, and Rahv declared proletarian literature dead – killed by the party's own hand. This, the deserting of its working-class base, demonstrated to its critics finally that the CPUSA was never committed to an actual flowering of proletarian arts, but instead to furthering its own political goals.

According to Rahv, when working-class art no longer served the party's interest, the party abandoned its art – and its artists. This struck Rahv and Philips particularly hard, as the *Partisan Review* was originally an arm of the John Reed Clubs, clubs specifically designed to encourage true working-class citizens to take up the arts. With the Popular Front initiative, the John Reed Clubs were dissolved, and the League of American Writers was formed, a group consisting of primarily "name" writers associated with the leftist cause.

Where Philips and Rahv delivered their censorious reviews of proletarian literature primarily in the pages of their magazine, beginning with the revival of the *Partisan Review* in 1937, James T. Farrell published his more cohesive aesthetic critique in 1936. Farrell asserts that "revolutionary criticism" contains two noticeable manifestations which "starting from opposite poles, usually meet in the same rut":

> One of these may be called the school of revolutionary sentimentalism. Anti-rational to the core, it usually fights criticism with epithets, and struggles against ideas as "petty bourgeois abstractions." It demands a literature of simplicity to the point of obviousness, and even of downright banality. Crying for songs of "stench and sweat," it tends to idealize the "worker" and the "worker-writer," producing overdrawn pictures of both.
>
> The second tendency is that of mechanically deterministic "Marxism." It usually assumes implicitly, if not explicitly, that literature follows economics obediently and directly. It approaches literature from the outside with a narrow set of absolutes and abstractions. (*Note* 29-31)

Farrell goes on to assert that literature is – necessarily – many things: subjective and aesthetic as well as objective and functional. Literary criticism, likewise, will contain all of these elements and must approach a work of literature for what it is and evaluate it by standards that have "applicability to the literary work that is being judged" (216). This is where Marxist critics, according to Farrell, are mistaken. They apply the "absolutized and fixed" standards of either revolutionary sentimentalism or mechanically deterministic Marxism to judge all literature, thereby dismissing as bourgeois anything that does not fit the mold – and, perhaps more importantly – encouraging writers to make what should be living and real literature into something sterile and artificial.

Contemporary recovery efforts that trace the trajectory of proletarian literature, such as studies by James Murphy, Barbara Foley, Michael Denning, and others, demonstrate how Philips, Rahv, and Farrell's anti-Stalinist aesthetic has become, often unquestioningly, the lens through which later scholars view proletarian literature. This stigma of Communism is evident in works produced during World War II and the Cold War periods that look back at proletarian literature of the 1920s and 1930s. In *On Native Grounds* (1942), Alfred Kazin characterizes proletarian literature as "frankly a method of indoctrination rather than a literary movement" and the proletarian writer as a "party pamphleteer" (374). Citing Rahv's critique of "the literature of the party disguised as the literature of a class," Kazin concludes, "the influence of Communism [resulted in] cheaply tendentious political novels" (378). In Wecter's 1948 chapter on Depression-era literature, he blithely reports that the "thirties proved to be thin years for poetry, drama, philosophy and religion; irregular ones for the novel" (251). In only a few pages, he surveys works he characterizes as proletarian and dismisses most out of hand; the few he does allow as "better examples of proletarian fare,"

he often qualifies the writer's association with the movement. For instance, about Richard Wright he observes that he is "understandably a left-winger like so many other able young Negroes" (253). Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950) asserts that the Communist-influenced literary movement produced "not a single work of distinction or even of high respectability" (100). This blanket dismissal of proletarian literature as worthless propaganda endured until a recovery effort was begun in the 1960s.

Contemporary Criticism

After a period of neglect by scholars, increasing attention to rhetorical studies, and a decreasing stigma of things communist, interest in the thirties and the proletarian literary movement was revived; in fact, in recent decades, scholarly interest in the 1930s has exploded. Perhaps the most ubiquitous work is Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left*, published in 1961. Aaron's work focuses on the writers of the 1920s and 1930s, those associated with what Aaron calls "literary communism." Many of the primary players in depression-era leftist literature advised Aaron during his writing, and *Writers on the Left* was considered the quintessential text on the subject until recently. Alan M. Wald in the introduction of his work, *Exiles From a Future Time*, published in 2002, surveys the criticisms of Aaron's study through the years; Aaron has been charged with writing only of the "entrepreneurs of writing," concentrating on those in New York City; of subordinating creative work to polemics; and of relying on a few "embittered renegades," such as Joseph Freeman (4).

Wald's own study, which he terms "revisionist," is meant to compensate for some of the deficiencies of Aaron's text by examining a broader spectrum of the 1930s critics and

writers – those who did fit the mold of revolutionary writer, as well as those who did not (6). In another recent study, *Radical Representations*, published in 1993, Foley explicitly counters the embedded anti-Stalinist aesthetic and reclaims leftist texts of the thirties as legitimate artistic works. James Murphy's work, *The Proletarian Moment*, published in 1991, concentrates on how the critical debates that took place in the depression decade affected developments in aesthetic criticism and political/artistic theory.

Defining the Genre

I have been using the term "proletarian literature" as if all parties – writers, critics, and later scholars – agreed on its definition; in fact, this is not the case. The definition of proletarian literature, or more broadly, proletarian art, has been in dispute for as long as people have been using the term. Michael Gold himself, the focus of this study and the primary advocate for proletarian literature, could not settle on a final definition. His earliest attempt at defining the term in 1921 was broad and vague, really just a reference to a culture created by the working class ("Towards"). In 1930, Gold laid down nine principles of proletarian art, which included principles of technique, subject matter, and proposed effects ("Proletarian"). Granville Hicks, another ardent supporter of the proletarian art movement, attempted also to define proletarian art in his 1933 *New Masses* article, "The Crisis in American Criticism." Hicks's definition dealt primarily with attitudes, the attitude of the writer and the attitude created in the reader through the work. That is, for a work to be considered "proletarian," the writer's "identification with the proletariat should be as complete as possible"; should create an attitude in the reader that would "rouse a sense of solidarity with the class-conscious workers and a loyalty to their cause"; and would

ultimately “galvanize him [the worker] into action” (12). By the First American Writers’ Congress in 1935, defining proletarian art had become a key issue, as indicated by the many speakers who either directly or indirectly attempted to articulate the parameters of proletarian art or identify the element that made a work of art “proletarian,” including Joseph Freeman, Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, and Edwin Seaver. Malcolm Cowley provided, perhaps, the most concise definition: “a novel written from the revolutionary point of view about working-class characters” (Cowley, “What” 59). Seaver’s entire speech attempts to define the proletarian novel; he writes that critics should “find the unique quality or group of qualities which distinguish it from that novel that, up to recently, we were accustomed to call *the* novel, and which we now call the bourgeois novel” (original emphasis; 99). This unique quality is “not style, not form, not plot, not even characters, not even the class portrayed” but, instead, “the present class loyalties” of the writer (100-01). To Seaver, the determining factor had not to do with aesthetics, or the work of art itself; it had to do with politics – the political orientation of the writer. Critics of proletarian literature did not have such a difficult time defining the term; proletarian literature was uniformly described as an attempt to dogmatically apply Communist party principles to literature.

Later scholars also used various definitions to encapsulate the leftist literary movement of the 1930s,[1] but for my purposes, I find Foley’s definition to be most useful. Foley defines proletarian literature as “novels [and short stories and poetry] written in the ambience of the Communist-led cultural movement that arose and developed in the United States in the context of the Great Depression,” adding that “proletarian writers constitute a distinct school in American literary and cultural history” (vii). One of the salient points for my study is that the writers and critics concerned with proletarian art were consciously

members of such a movement. That is, although there were certainly precursors, which I will address in Chapter Two, previous writers of working-class texts would not have called themselves "proletarian." In addition, since I will be looking at a vast number of works, critics, and writers through the depression-era, I am not interested in constricting definitions of proletarian literature, which changed with changing circumstances; instead, I require a definition that includes the movement as a whole and allows me to rhetorically analyze the changing definitions, which Foley's definition allows me to do. In other words, at issue in my analysis of Gold and proletarian literature is the fact that the definition and requirements of such literature changed with changing contexts; therefore, Foley's definition is broad enough to include all works written in this time period in which the author intentionally meant to produce proletarian art, even if those works would have been considered more or less proletarian as the criteria of the genre changed.

Russia and the CPUSA

The beacon of communist possibility was Soviet Russia, which a number of leftist radicals visited in the 1920s and 1930s, including Gold.[2] The victory of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 marked the first successful seizure of power by the proletarian forces in the world. Marx had predicted it, and Russia had demonstrated it. It was in Russia that Gold saw the possibility of a true proletarian art:

> [A]rt has always flourished secretly in the hearts of the masses, and the *Prolet-Kult*[3] is Russia's organized attempt to remove the economic barriers and social degradation that repressed the proletarian instinct during the centuries. In factories, mines, fields, and workshops, the word has spread in

> Russia that the nation expects more of its workers than production. They are not machines, but men and women. ("Towards" 69)

Russia was more than just an inspiration to the left writers and critics of the thirties; the Soviet Union, its philosophies, leaders, and policies exerted tremendous influence on the development of American proletarian literature, and this foreign influence was a central point of contention in the 1930s' literary debates.

The CPUSA[4] was a spin-off by the left wing of the American Socialist Party and, created in 1919, was underground until 1921. The American Communist Party received direction, as did all national communist parties, from Moscow, and the organization which provided this direction was Communist International (Comintern).[5] In 1928, the Comintern was guided by "third period" principles;[6] primary among them for the purposes of this study, was the Comintern's stand on democracy and capitalism. During this third period, which lasted until 1934, the Comintern, and therefore the CPUSA, saw "no substantial difference between democratic and fascistic forms of government" (Ottanelli 55). In this period, the "red" arm of the radical intellectuals, including Mike Gold, followed Soviet policy in not recognizing this difference; therefore, anything bourgeois was equated to fascism, and this included literature, so literary works that were not for, by, or about the working class were often dismissed. Beginning in 1934, with the enduring economic crisis and the increasing threat of fascism, the Party realized that "fascism, rather than proletarian revolution, was itself the possible outcome of the economic crisis" (Ottanelli 57); therefore, to combat this threat, the party instituted its popular front policy, which enlisted the support of all sympathetic parties to the anti-fascist cause.

Introducing Mike Gold

Proletarian literature as a genre gained ground in the 1920s and 1930s, due undoubtedly to the historical context in which it arose. With the collapse of the stock market and the ensuing Depression, capitalism appeared to be failing. To many leftist intellectuals, communism appeared to be the answer. Mike Gold[7] was one such intellectual. Born to an immigrant family, having lived early life in the tenements, and working in industry from a young age, Gold became a radical after being clubbed by a police officer at a worker's demonstration at the age of 21. Initially, Gold considered himself an anarchist, but through the associations with others and in reading Lenin, he came to designate himself a Communist ("Why" 211). Gold wrote, "The one political problem of our time . . . is how the working class can be organized and led to the conquest of the state and to socialism. There is no other problem" ("Why" 212). Gold believed the problem could be addressed through the development of a worker's art, led by the Communist Party.

Although the idea of a working-class literature was already in the air, Gold produced the first official call for such an art form in the U.S. with his article "Towards Proletarian Art," published in the radical magazine, the *Liberator*, in 1921. Michael Folsom writes, "The American currency of the term 'proletarian literature' can be dated from the publication of this article" ("Introduction" 62). Later, Mike Gold published two more articles that proved pivotal in the proletarian art movement: "Go Left, Young Writers!" (1929) and "Proletarian Realism" (1930), both published in the leftist magazine with which Gold was most closely associated, the *New Masses*. Apart from these, his better known essays, Gold wrote many other essays and opinion pieces for the *New Masses*, as well as for

other literary magazines of the day, including importantly a weekly column, "Change the World," for the official American Communist Party newspaper, *The Daily Worker.*[8]

Gold also wrote proletarian fiction in the form of poetry, short story, and novel. Perhaps most importantly, however, as editor of the *New Masses*, Gold solicited and published unknown working-class writers and initiated and participated in debates regarding working class art and culture.

Gold's close association with proletarian literature was enough to warrant dismissal by later critics, but additionally, Gold was one of the few 1930s leftist artists who actually joined the Communist Party.[9] By 1936, with the Russian "purges," a definite split developed within the left – those who defended Stalin and the Communist Party ("Stalinists") and those who opposed Stalin (Trotskyists and others). Gold was firmly in the Stalinist camp, an increasingly unpopular camp to be in. When the movement was largely abandoned with the United States' entrance in World War II, Gold still defended his art and his association with a communist ideal. At the Fourth Congress of American Writers in 1941, Gold, aware of the passing of what Murphy calls "the proletarian moment,"[10] was still unwilling to concede failure:

> Let me . . . repeat that the proletarian decade of the Thirties was no misunderstanding or accident, no foreign plot, no feeble esthetic cult that a few critics had artificially created and now can as easily destroy. It was a great movement out of the heart of the American people. It can no more be erased from our national history than can the public school system or trade union movement. It is fascistic to try to destroy this people's culture and literature of the Thirties.

> The Thirties compares favorably with the Civil War decade, the greatest single chapter in the history of American culture. . . . [N]o single Emerson or Walt Whitman stands out, though thousands of potential Emersons and Whitmans were formed. . . . The present war interrupts the democratic renaissance of the Thirties. But that renaissance and its literature will in turn end the system of war and profit.[11]

Where even the most ardent supporters of proletarian art abandoned the movement, including Joseph Freeman who, with Gold, was considered one of the "leading literary lights of the party" (Aaron 84), Gold persisted. Thus, Gold came to be seen as the quintessential dupe who subordinated all else to a now untenable political philosophy.

Gold has been resurrected – to an extent – in recent scholarship. In fact, it would be nearly impossible to write on proletarian literature of the 1930s without mentioning Gold. In such studies, Gold has been cited variously as "the outstanding 'proletarian' of the group" (Aaron 84); as the individual who "contributed more to forging the tradition of proletarian literature as a genre in the United States," the "'star' of the movement" (Wald 39); and as the one man who "stood at the center of the proletarian literary movement and the cultural front," who "[attempted] to build a new culture out of the stories and confessions of ordinary workers" (Denning 204).

There also exist two anthologies that survey Gold's work: *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, edited by Michael Folsom, and *The Mike Gold Reader*, edited by Samuel Sillen. Both anthologies include an introduction, written by the respective editors, which outline Gold's contribution to American literature. Sillen's introductory comments, published in 1954, consist of a brief biography of Gold and his literary activities. Clearly, Sillen's

introduction is largely a reaction to the McCarthy Communist witch hunts of the day, as he mentions McCarthy repeatedly and praises Gold for maintaining his dedication to the "democratic literary movement" (13), for not taking the "zigzag course of most American writers during the past few decades," those writers who now were "desperately apologizing to McCarthy" (7). Folsom, generally regarded as the foremost scholar of Gold,[12] wrote more extensive and insightful prefatory comments. Like Sillen, Folsom recounts the major events of Gold's life and works, but he makes a more compelling argument for Gold's relevance in American literary and political history as the "initiator of the so-called 'proletarian' movement in American literature" (7).

Gold's work, both fiction and non-fiction, is included in numerous other anthologies that excerpt work from the time period; Gold himself published an anthology of his work in 1929, *120 Million*. At least one dissertation has been written specifically on Gold's biography and how his experiences resulted in his literary productions and philosophical ideas, with a concentration on interpreting events from Gold's fiction novel, *Jews Without Money* (Azar Naficy, 1979), and an examination of Gold is often allotted a chapter in larger works that address the proletarian movement in America.[13]

However, the scholarship on Gold has been – in relation to his impact on the proletarian art movement – insufficient. Although there were a number of artists and critics responsible for developing, critiquing, and revising proletarian literature through the 1920s and 1930s, including Joseph Freeman, Granville Hicks, Edwin Seaver, James Farrell, Kenneth Burke, and so on, none is more pivotal than Gold; yet, there is no systematic, book-length study focused exclusively on Gold and his contributions. Gold continues to suffer

from his reputation as a radical who followed party line without regard for standards of literary aesthetics.

Redeeming Mike Gold

When Gold is included in studies of the period, he is, therefore, most often viewed as a one-dimensional representative of this leftism who uncritically defended a formula of which he was largely a creator. The scholarship on Gold and proletarian literature has focused largely on the weaknesses and failures of both the literary movement and the efforts and actions of Gold, the movement's greatest advocate. What is lost in this portrayal – and what I hope to make clear with this study – is the complexity of Gold and his views – and the *successes* of both Gold as initiator of a literary movement and the proletarian literary movement itself which Gold initiated. Additionally, Gold's views have been oversimplified by a focus on parts of texts that are not, ultimately, representative of Gold's ideas. Additionally, much of the context that bore directly on Gold's strategies is forgotten or overlooked.

This study will show that Gold was not the inflexible, dogmatic representative of the Communist line, as he has been so often portrayed. Gold valued art; in fact, while coeditor of the *Liberator*[14], Gold strongly objected to its increasing emphasis on politics which resulted in, Gold thought, neglect of its art. That Gold did believe art should be used in the service of the inevitable class war and that he did often change his requirements of proletarian literature based on changing contexts, does not indicate that Gold subordinated art wholly to politics or that he followed Soviet policy blindly. For instance, Ottanelli, in his history of the CPUSA, demonstrates how Gold and other CPUSA members called for a

unity against fascism before the official Comintern policy changed: “They [young socialists and communists] gave one of the few effective examples of united front collaboration in the pre-1935 period, all the more important as its inception predated the Comintern’s shift away from social-fascism” (58). Gold adapted his views as needed to meet the requirements of a changing historical situation, and he altered his position through conversations and debates with other leftist intellectuals. Gold never maintained that literature produced by the masses in the United States would be the same literature produced by the masses in Soviet Russia. Gold understood that the context was dramatically different and that aesthetic and political philosophies would need to be adapted to fit the specific needs of the country.

To understand Mike Gold, then, one must clearly understand the cultural scene in which he acted. Gold was, in fact, responding to a host of exigencies: 1) the social and economic situation in America, which included class conflicts, but also race, gender, and religious conflicts, as well as an economic depression which left millions unemployed; 2) constantly changing international situations, most importantly, developments in the Soviet Union, but also the Spanish Civil War and the rising fascism in Europe; and 3) feedback and criticisms from public intellectuals who represented all segments along the political spectrum – most importantly, the critics from the left. During the primary period under investigation, 1921 to 1941, Gold produced speeches, non-fiction, and fiction works; engaged in debates, both oral and written; and advocated for and often published unknown writers’ works with the explicit intent of making changes in his society; that is, these artifacts were meant to function rhetorically.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

I will attempt to reconstruct the cultural conversations in which Gold was engaged with the goal of understanding how and why Gold and proletarian art were persuasive in their particular historical setting; this will also allow the reader to better understand how, with changing historical situations and cultural conversations, Gold's arguments became less persuasive through time. Stephen Mailloux's concept of rhetorical histories, outlined in his work, *Rhetorical Power*, provides the perfect lens because it does not set up ultimate interpretive standards, but allows changing contexts to effect interpretations. Mailloux maintains that all meaning is made inside the setting of rhetorical exchanges, and he envisions these exchanges, like Kenneth Burke, as a struggle or, more specifically, "voices engaged in continual . . . conflict" (58). Burke's famous "rhetorical parlor" metaphor helps illustrate this concept:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for awhile, until you decide you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you. . . . However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress. ("Philosophy" 110-11)

To use Burke's metaphor is to consider not only the exchanges in which Gold actively participated, but the conversations in place prior to Gold entering the scene, conversations which inevitably influenced and shaped him. Burke's metaphor of an unending conversation also, then, posits that the conversations are still taking place, conversations of which this study will be a part.

Mailloux proposes an "anti-Theory theory," called "rhetorical hermeneutics" which allows for interpretation of any text without appealing to absolute interpretive standards. Interpretive standards are never permanent; they change with changing contexts, as in the case of proletarian literature viewed through an anti-Communist 1950s lens. There is no ultimate meaning or rhetorical significance of an act apart from the context in which it is produced and consumed. Mailloux's concept of rhetorical histories allows scholars to consider the changing meaning of Gold's texts through time. Gold's texts, then, did not mean the same thing in the Cold-war era as they did in the 1930s, or as they do today. The mistake of the Cold-war critics was to apply absolutized standards to rhetorical acts that were persuasive *because* of their specific historical context. Mailloux asserts, "meaning has one determinate shape in one situation and another in a different situation" (12); further**,** he states that "arguments are always embedded in historical circumstances, rhetorical traditions, episodes of cultural conversations – all of which make certain arguments appropriate and others inappropriate at particular moments" (146). An argument for establishing a communal society in America – one that held some currency in the 1920s and 1930s – would obviously be received differently in the 1950s. Abandoning idealist or realist theories and substituting them with rhetorical histories, as Mailloux proposes, does not, as

one might fear, lead us to hopeless relativism; it is, Mailloux claims, the only legitimate ground upon which to interpret:

> [T]extual interpretation and rhetorical politics can never be separated. Indeed the failure of hermeneutic foundationalism is just another instance of the fact that interpretations can have no grounding outside of rhetorical exchanges taking place within institutional and cultural politics. (180)

It is, of course, impossible to get outside one's own historical context, and, therefore, my own study will be affected by rhetorical exchanges in which it participates, yet Mailloux concludes that:

> to recognize the rhetorical politics of every interpretation, is not to avoid taking a position. Taking a position, making an interpretation, cannot be avoided. Moreover, such historical contingency does not disable interpretive argument, because it is truly the only ground it can have. We are always arguing at particular moments in specific places to certain audiences. Our beliefs and commitments are no less real because they are historical, and the same holds true for our interpretations. If no foundationalist theory will resolve disagreements over poems or treaties, we must always argue our cases. In fact, that is all we can ever do. (180-81)

Parameters of Study

I will seek to reconstruct the concerns of Mike Gold and his colleagues by examining the relevant historical events and dominant social concerns which produced the discussions and debates among the literary left. I will concentrate on the formation of Mike Gold's ideas

through historical and biographical events, including his early experiences in the tenements, his associations with early radicals, and his occupations as writer and editor; and examine, in depth, his developing ideas by looking at his fiction and non-fiction works. I will compile and analyze Gold's published writing from 1921 to 1941, focusing on those which developed his views on proletarian literature. His critical essays about art and politics are particularly important for this study, so I will examine in depth the following: "Towards Proletarian Art," "Go Left, Young Writers!", "Proletarian Realism," and "America Needs a Critic," among others. Gold's fiction also helped define the genre of proletarian literature; I am interested particularly in his autobiographical "fiction" account, *Jews Without Money*, but also fiction works that modeled Gold's vision of proletarian art, such as "A Damned Agitator" and "Love on a Garbage Dump." Similarly, I will analyze the major works of other leftist literary and social critics whose criticism helped shape Gold's ideas and the genre of proletarian literature. Among others, I will look at works by Philip Rahv, William Philips, and James Farrell, the three most responsible for developing the anti-Stalinist aesthetic and who waged war with Gold primarily through the pages of the revived *Partisan Review*. I will examine the work by the earlier radicals who both influenced Gold and challenged him including Max Eastman and John Reed. And, lastly, to place these conversations in their historical/theoretical context, I will present pertinent secondary source material on Mike Gold, Communist rhetoric, and proletarian literature.

To accomplish my goal of redeeming Mike Gold, I have to limit my focus. In doing so, I will address important attendant issues, such as the debates about race and sex that were raging in the same left circles during the period under study. Gold explicitly advocated equality for all, but, specifically, when he addressed questions of oppressed groups within

the proletariat, he usually did so through the lens of the Jew. The Communists, such as Gold, believed that equality of the sexes, races, and religions would be achieved automatically by a successful worker's revolution.

Undoubtedly, extraordinarily important movements were simultaneously taking place within black culture, notably, of course, the Harlem Renaissance. Many of the primary writers of the Harlem Renaissance also moved in Communist-led literary circles, including Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. McKay served as editor of the *Liberator* with Gold, and Hughes and Wright both contributed to the *New Masses* during Gold's reign as editor.

Women's issues were also hotly debated during the 1920s and 1930s. Margaret Sanger advocated for the legalization of birth control throughout the period, a cause many in the original *Masses* and later *New Masse*s took up enthusiastically. Gold's first encounter with a radical was reportedly in a Times Square demonstration led by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, an IWW member who was also fiercely committed to women's rights in general. While Gold wrote his "Change the World" column for the *Daily Worker*, Flynn wrote a feminist column for the same publication. The *New Masses* solicited and published articles written by women writers on women's issues throughout its tenure and included contributions by such noted female writers as Genevieve Taggard, Josephine Herbst, Katherine Anne Porter, and Grace Lumpkin, among others.

Although Gold was definitely involved with black and women writers and concerned about issues specific to blacks and women, Gold and the other literary communists were often criticized for downplaying race and sex issues in favor of class issues. Gold has also, specifically, been charged with sexism in his portrayals of women in fiction works.[15]

Additionally, Gold's "typical" proletarian writer is obviously male, and masculine characteristics are celebrated throughout Gold's fiction and nonfiction. Although analyzing Gold and proletarian literature as they relate to issues of race and sex is important work, it is not the focus of this study. Foley's *Radical Representations* contains two chapters, "Race, Class, and the 'Negro Question'" and "Women and the Left in the 1930s" that not only provide an excellent overview of the issues, but also provide an extensive literature review of works focused specifically on the literary left and issues of race and sex respectively.

Apart from the focus on class, I have also had to limit the time period under review, and I have had to limit the writings studied within that time period. I am interested in revealing Gold's contributions to the proletarian art movement during the time the *movement was viable*. Gold, unlike the vast majority of left critics and writers, remained dedicated to Communism long after the rest abandoned the movement. My focus on the 1920s and 1930s is not an effort to obscure admittedly problematic aspects of Gold. Although Gold may rightly be charged with defending Communism after it became, to most Americans, indefensible, this fact and later activities and writings of Gold do not negate his work, or his importance, during the period under study. Additionally, I have limited the presentation of Gold's writings to his better-known fiction works and essays, due primarily to issues of relevance and interest. Folsom's anthology of Gold's writings, besides obvious issues of accessibility, do offer the best of the material Gold produced as well as a useful cross-section of his views. I have examined works not included in Folsom's or Sillen's anthologies and, where relevant, included those works in this study as well.

Chapter Outlines

In this introduction, I have described the overall project; traced the development of the anti-Stalinist aesthetic, the Cold War dismissal of proletarian art, the recovery efforts from the 1960s to today; defined the key term, proletarian literature; introduced Mike Gold and the historical situation in which he functioned; surveyed scholarship on Gold, as well as pointed out the relative scarcity of such scholarship; and outlined the critical framework used for this study. In Chapter Two, "Mike Gold Becomes a Radical," I will examine the influences on Gold from his early childhood to the publication of his pivotal article, "Towards Proletarian Art," in 1921. There I will examine the precursors to proletarian art; I will look at earlier radicals and their influence on Gold, specifically Max Eastman and John Reed and the other associated with *The Masses* and the *Liberator*; and I will examine the developing situation in Russia that would, throughout the 1920s and 1930s exert a continuing influence on Gold, his contemporaries, and the genre of proletarian literature. In Chapter Three, "Jew Without Money: Mike Gold's Fiction," I will look at Gold's contribution as a fiction writer, and I will investigate how he exemplified through this fiction the genre of proletarian literature. My emphasis in this chapter will be on his best-selling autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* and on his short fiction published primarily in the pages of the *New Masses*. In Chapter Four, "Rebel with a Cause: Gold's Advocacy for Proletarian Art," I will examine the larger context in which Gold was working and demonstrate how these factors influenced Gold's thoughts and actions. Also, I will survey criticism of Gold and proletarian literature in general and defend Gold by reviewing the development of his philosophy in his many nonfiction essays. I will, additionally, examine the rhetoric of proletarian fiction by outlining Kenneth Burke's objections. Finally, in the

conclusion, I will consider the successes of Gold and proletarian literature. I will offer suggestions for reexamining Gold and proletarian literature, and hopefully, I will convince readers to see Mike Gold not as the political dupe he has been drawn to be, but as a dynamic and successful writer and thinker who was pivotal in the creation and development of one of the most successful radical literary movements in American history.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] For example, Murphy defines this movement as "worker-writers [engaged] in creating a school of fiction, poetry, and drama, which, in different ways and with varying degrees of explicitness, called for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a new socialist order under the revolutionary leadership of the Communist Party" (1).

[2] Max Eastman, Floyd Dell, John Reed, Joseph Freeman, and others visited Russia as well.

[3] Foley explains that *Proletkult* was a "movement that sprang up in the Soviet Union in the wake of the Boshevik Revolution"(63), and this movement intended to create a culture of the working class. Different critics spell this word in different ways. Where I quote directly from a source, I maintain the original spelling. When I use the word, I will use the spelling, *proletkult*.

[4] For a detailed history of the CPUSA and its association with the Soviet Union, see Fraser M. Ottanelli's *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser's *The American Communist Party: A Critical History (1919-1957)*.

[5] Ottanelli's work is an attempt to revise traditional assumptions of the CPUSA's relationship to the Soviet Union. Traditionally, the CPUSA was shown to implement policy intact from Party leadership in Moscow. Ottanelli counters this traditional view and asserts that "the course of the CPUSA was shaped by a homespun search for policies which would make it an integral part of the country's society as well as by directives from the Communist International" (4).

[6] Ottanelli explains that James Cannon, a founding member of the CPUSA, divided the early years of the CPUSA into three distinct periods. In the first period, 1917-1919, the Communist Party battled with the Socialist Party along "clearly defined lines of political principle" (9). In the second period, 1920 to 1923, the "Communist movement split into factions that agreed on principles but not on tactics in the matter of specific 'American' circumstances" (9). The third period, begun in 1924, was consumed with "political gang warfare," or gaining political ground (9).

[7] Gold was named Itzok Isaac Granich upon birth in 1893. He first Christianized this name to Irwin Granich, the name by which he signed his works until 1919. At that time, he adopted the name Mike Gold (Folsom 10).

[8] Although the *New Masses* was often cited as the revolutionary journal most closely associated with the CPUSA, it was not officially an arm of the Party. The *New Masses* probably earned its reputation as a primary Communist organ due to its association with and influence of Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, and Granville Hicks, among others, the official "red" members of the movement.

[9] Many leftist artists and critics were "fellow travelers" of the Communist Party. Aaron describes this group as "those who were in the 'movement,' who sympathized with the objectives of the party, wrote for the party press, or knowingly affiliated with associations sponsored by the party" (*Writers* ix).

[10] Taken from the title of Murphy's study, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy Over Leftism in Literature*.

[11] Edited version of original speech reproduced in *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, edited by Michael Folsom (253-54). Folsom added the title "The Second American Renaissance," which he claims "Gold liked" (243).

[12] Folsom's papers are housed with Gold's at University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

[13] For instance, David Madden's work *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties* includes one chapter on Mike Gold, "The Education of Mike Gold," written by Michael Folsom.

[14] The *Liberator* was a descendent of the original *The Masses*. *The Masses* began publication in 1911 and ceased publication in 1917, after which many of its editors were prosecuted (unsuccessfully) under the Espionage and Sedition Acts. The *Liberator* was subsumed under Soviet publications in 1924, and the *New Masses*, the *Liberator*'s replacement, was begun, with Gold on its editorial board, in 1926.

[15] As discussed in Foley's chapter, "Women and the Left in the 1930s," 213-46.

Chapter 2:

Mike Gold Becomes a Radical

In this chapter, I will place the development of Gold's social consciousness in the context of his early childhood experiences and interactions with early radicals and radical magazines; in addition**,** I will look at earlier examples of working-class literature and interpret their significance to Gold. I will explain how the developing situation in Russia via the Bolshevik Revolution and the corresponding developing communist movements in the United States affected and influenced Gold and other American radicals. Lastly, I will analyze the significance of Gold's first call for proletarian art in 1921 with the article, "Towards Proletarian Art."

Early Influences

"Your place . . . is with the working people in their fight for more life than it benefits capital to give them; your place is in the working-class struggle; your word is Revolution" (qtd. in Aaron 23). These words of Max Eastman in the radical magazine, *The Masses*, had such an impact on young Michael Gold that he memorized and later used them to convert others to his radical cause (Aaron 23). Gold, however, had no political leanings, radical or otherwise, until 1914, when he was 21 years old. The transformation story of Gold accidentally stumbling into an unemployment demonstration in Union Square; listening to the rebel speaker, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn[1]; being clubbed by a police officer; and buying a copy of the *The Masses* is well-known among scholars of Gold and proletarian literature.

Prior to this awakening, however, Gold had lived and worked in the East Side New York tenements, a place populated by primarily Jewish immigrants.

The East side tenements of Gold's youth remain a constant presence in his writings throughout the 1920s and 30s and serve alternately as a symbol of the injustices of capitalist society and as a symbol of the hope and humanity present in the working-class slums. In *Jews Without Money*, ostensibly a work of fiction but generally accepted by scholars as an autobiography of Gold's first 21 years of life[2], Gold describes the tenement in which he lived:

> It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces. Always those faces at the tenement windows. . . . People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried. A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang. . . . Pimps, gamblers, and red-nosed bums. . . . An endless pageant of East side life. . . . (14)

He tells the stories of the "hundreds of prostitutes on my street" (14). He wrote of the "tragedies and cockroaches" of one's neighbors (30), the sweatshops, the pimps. For fun, the young tenement children would swim in the East River, a "sun-spangled open sewer running with oily scum and garbage" while pushing "dead swollen dogs and vegetables" out of their way (39). Amid this filth and crime and dreariness, however, was always an underlying hope and humanity; Gold also saw "courage in the sick worker who went to the factory every

morning. . . . beauty in the little children playing in the dim hallways" ("Towards" 65). It was these memories that fired Gold's dedication to fighting for a just society, his commitment to a Communist Party that he thought would free the working class, and his devotion to building a literature that would simultaneously give voice to these lives and miseries and help to change them.

Although Mike Gold claimed to have no political yearnings prior to the unemployment demonstration and his discovery of *The Masses*, the day's preeminent radical magazine, he did have some *literary* ambitions. He had published a few poems and stories in a neighborhood newsletter prior to 1914[3], and soon after buying his first copy of *The Masses*, he submitted a poem to the editors. To Gold's astonishment, they published it. Folsom explains that this poem, "Three Whose Hatred Killed Them," the first publication for Gold in the radical press, was a eulogy for anarchist terrorists who had been killed by their own bomb (Folsom 12); they had planned to use the bomb against unknown targets in response to the "Ludlow Massacre," a massacre by the Colorado State Militia of families of striking coal miners[4] (Aaron 33). The event was heavily covered in *The Masses*, so Gold would have read extensively about it, and, like other young radicals, been outraged by it. Although at this point Gold had not yet become a Communist (he considered himself an Anarchist), much of the later language of Gold's proletarian literature can be found even in this early work:

> Think of them, dear comrades, as fellow soldiers too impatient
> to await the signal.
> Undisciplined warriors, aflame for battle and loath to bide the
> issue

Until came reinforcements, fresh troops by love and reason

recruited,

Singing as they came to join us, the Army of Brotherhood of

Man. (ll. 7-10)

Gold would continue to use the word "comrades" throughout his later writings, and images of citizens as soldiers would become a staple in both Gold's works and proletarian works in general.

Discovery of *The Masses* and the publication of Gold's protest poem were pivotal events in Gold's life; most importantly, they convinced Gold that he could survive doing something other than manual labor, the trap of the working class, and, through these events, Gold was introduced to a community of people who would influence and guide him to radicalism. It is not hyperbole to state that these two events forever changed the course of Mike Gold's life, and, by doing so, changed the history of protest literature in the United States.

Gold as a child had always been interested in books, and one of the greatest tragedies in his life was being forced to drop out of school at the age of 12 to work in industry. Gold tried to pretend as though he didn't care. He wrote: "I was trying to be hard. For years, my ego had been fed by every one's praise of my precocity. I had always loved books; I was mad about books; I wanted passionately to go to high school and college. Since I couldn't, I meant to despise all that nonsense" (*Jews* 304). With the publication of his poem and his growing acquaintance with literary radicals, this love of books was rekindled, and Gold set about changing his life. He moved out of the tenements into Greenwich Village, made a living at newspaper work[5], and even spent a year at Harvard. Gold, however, never dropped

his identity as a member of the working class; Folsom writes how Gold would even affect certain habits and dress, such as wearing dirty, unwashed clothes and spitting tobacco on floors, regardless of where he was. From 1917 to 1919, Gold lived in Mexico to avoid the draft. He wrote a number of plays, some of which were produced, and he was associated with the Provincetown Players.[6] Until he joined the editorial staff at the *Liberator* in 1921, Gold was a cross between a Bohemian and an Anarchist (Folsom 12-14; Aaron 84-87). But, whatever his political designation at the time, Gold was now firmly a member of the radical left literary circle in New York City, and *The Masses* and those associated with it, primarily Max Eastman and John Reed, became models to Gold and helped him better formulate his ideas about art and revolution.

Eastman and Reed were radicals who came of age prior to World War I and influenced the newer generation of radicals, a group Aaron calls the "New Patricians," which included Kenneth Burke, Malcolm Cowley, and others. Gold and Joseph Freeman, Gold's partner in editing the *New Masses* for many years, were not properly members of either group, but were heavily influenced by both. Max Eastman became editor of *The Masses* in 1912, one year after its founding by Piet Vlag, a radical who found himself unable to financially support the magazine. Vlag's magazine was left-leaning, but Eastman's magazine was "unabashedly red" (Aaron 20); however, Eastman and Reed were not "Party" people and, as long as submissions didn't "transgress the principles of socialism," the political affiliation of the contributors was not considered important (Aaron 22). The magazine was a hodgepodge of topics, ranging from birth control to the single tax, but always with an eye on world socialism; in fact, Eastman wrote a monthly column called "Knowledge and Revolution" which dealt with socialist developments across the world. It

was primarily in *The Masses*, under the editorship of Eastman, that the debates between art and revolution, particularly in the context of Marxism or Communism, began.[7]

The Masses was Gold's first encounter with truly radical ideas; in addition, importantly for Gold, a lover of literature, *The Masses* blended literature with radicalism, essentially what Gold was trying to more systematically do later with proletarian art. The fact that the magazine solicited art from truly working-class people and even printed this work, as evidenced by the publication of Gold's own poem in 1914, was proof to Gold that the magazine was truly radical and aligned with the long-suffering proletariat. In addition to the unknown proletarian literary and artistic contributions, *The Masses* had an impressive array of established literary contributors, including Sherwood Anderson, Mary Heaton Vorse, Helen Keller[8], Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair, and Amy Lowell. Under Vlag, the magazine was primarily concerned with the cooperative movement, an apparently early conception of communism that would work with the established Socialist Party in the U.S. Vlag in his editorial in the magazine's inaugural issue in February 1911 attempted to explain its mission:

> *The Masses* is an outgrowth of the co-operative side of Socialist activity. . . . *The Masses* will watch closely the developments of the American co-operative organization, and will keep its readers informed of its work and progress. But while the co-operative feature constitutes its distinctive feature – distinctive merely because other Socialist publications have so far almost entirely neglected this field – its aim is a broad one. It will be a general ILLUSTRATED magazine of art,

> literature, politics and science. (Selzer 3)

Vlag's *The Masses* dealt with an array of Socialist issues, including working conditions, women's rights, etc. Marx was often discussed and cited in Vlag's magazine; in fact, the cover of the September 1911 edition reproduces -- in all capital letters -- Marx's famous words: "WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR CHAINS AND A WORLD TO GAIN." After the August 1912 issue, the next *The Masses* issue did not appear until December 1912, with this accompanying editorial notice: "We ask our subscribers' pardon for a three months' delay. It was due to the resignation of our managing editor." Vlag was out, and Eastman was the new editor of *The Masses*.

Max Eastman, in his first issue of *The Masses* as managing editor, clearly spelled out the new mission statement of the magazine:

> We are going to make *The Masses* a popular Socialist magazine – a magazine of pictures and lively writing. . . . [In addition we] shall print every month a page of illustrated editorials reflecting life as a whole from a Socialist standpoint . . . but we shall be hospitable to free and spirited expressions of every kind – in fiction, satire, poetry, and essay. . . . [We] are opposed to the dogmatic spirit. (3)

Eastman characterized the magazine as a broadly Socialist magazine, losing Vlag's co-operative focus. Eastman also solicited donations and subscriptions in his inaugural issue, claiming to have a subscription base of 5,000, a distribution of 10,000, and absolutely no income from advertisements. In the following issue, January, 1913, Eastman offers a new

description of the magazine, a bold description that differentiates this *The Masses* from Vlag's earlier *The Masses*, and it is this description that is often reproduced in scholarship on the magazine:

> [*The Masses* is] a revolutionary and not a reform magazine; a magazine with no dividends to pay; a free magazine; frank, arrogant, impertinent, searching for the true causes; a magazine
> directed against rigidity and dogma wherever it is found;
> printing what is too naked or true for a money-making
> press; a magazine whose final policy is to do as it pleases
> and conciliate nobody – not even its readers. (3)

If Mike Gold's conversion story is accurate and if, as he claims, he had never read *The Masses* until the spring demonstration he attended, then Gold's introduction to *The Masses* would have begun with the April 1914 issue. This issue had editorials about religion, women's suffrage, and capitalism by Max Eastman; a field report set in Mexico during the revolution by John Reed; cartoons by Art Young; and poetry scattered throughout the magazine by various authors. This initial issue of *The Masses* provides insight into the impact the words of radicals, such as John Reed and Max Eastman, had on Gold.

Reed's report set during the Mexican Revolution, "Mac – American" contains language and ideas that are quite similar to material Gold would produce later. "Mac," an American that Reed encounters in Mexico, is described as "over six feet tall, a brute of a man, in the magnificent insolence of youth. He was only twenty-five, but he had been many places and done many things" (5). Mac's language is simple and crude: "'I've got the cussedest damn disposition', laughed Mac" (5). Mac explains to Reed over drinks that at 16,

he was working in the lumber mill. Reed glamorizes the roughness of Mac and ultimately shows the integrity and strength Mac possesses despite hardships. This rough-edged "Mac" figure appears in Gold's later works. In "Go Left, Young Writers!", an important essay on proletarian literature, published in *New Masses*, May 1928, Gold describes the "new writer" arising in America, the writer who will produce the new proletarian literature:

> a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps. . . . He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. ("Go" 188)

Gold romanticized the figure of John Reed by describing him much as Reed described his character Mac: "John Reed was a cowboy out of the west, six feet high, steady eyes, boyish face; a brave, gay, open-handed young giant; you meet thousands of him on the road, in lumber camps, on the ranges, . . . in the mines" ("John" 152). This figure of the rough, American working-class man became the stereotype of the ideal proletarian for Gold; not only did this figure appear in his writings, but Gold tried to be this figure himself.

Where Reed was the rough, wild, adventurer, Eastman was the more polished intellectual, yet both men influenced Gold immensely. Eastman was not just managing editor of *The Masses*; he was also a regular and prolific contributor. Where Reed's writing was more informal, Eastman's writing was refined and infused with intelligence, yet he always kept the ultimate goal, a socialist revolution, at the forefront. In the April 1914 issue, Gold would have read in Eastman's monthly column, "Knowledge and Revolution," an analysis of the relation of the church to Jesus Christ, with the Church being a Judas figure (2). In the following issue, May 1914, Eastman writes of "The Woman Rebel": "In

Margaret Sanger's new magazine, with its motto in the old ideal that Lucretius preserved from Epicurus, 'No Gods, No Masters,' I look for a strong and poised and affirmative expression of the final goal of feminism" (1). Although Gold would ultimately reject such complex language and classical allusions, favoring language that was easily accessible to the working man and woman, Eastman's example as a dedicated radical would continue to influence Gold. In addition to publishing Gold's original poem, "Three Whose Hatred Killed Them," Eastman also published another Gold poem in the pages of *The Masses*, "Macdougal Street" (May, 1916); one book review by Gold and three short stories, "Treacherous Greaser" (August, 1916), "God is Love" (August, 1917) and "Birth – a Prologue to a Tentative East Side Novel" (Nov/Dec, 1917).[9] Eastman's and Reed's roles as sponsors, role models, and friends for Gold would help pave the way for Gold's transformation to becoming a radical. Folsom writes, "No lost rebel poet ever found more congenial mentors or a better time to bloom than did Mike Gold in Greenwich Village on the eve of the first world holocaust, at the dawn of Soviet power" (12).

Although Gold put out the first official "call" for the creation of proletarian literature, the concept was certainly in the air prior to 1921. In 1901, the Socialist *Call* published Edward Markham's poem, "The Man with the Hoe," a poem repeatedly cited by later advocates of proletarian literature as a harbinger of working-class literature of the 1920s and 30s:

> Bowed by the weight of centuries he leans
>
> Upon his hoe and gazes on the ground,
>
> The emptiness of ages in his face,
>
> And on his back, the burden of the world.

> Who made him dead to rapture and despair,
>
> A thing that grieves not and never hopes,
>
> Stolid and stunned, a brother to the ox?
>
> Who loosened and let down his brutal jaw?
>
> Whose was the hand that slanted back this brow?
>
> Whose breath blew out the light within this brain? (ll. 1-10)

Markham's poem contains some of the major themes found in later proletarian literature: man as animal or machine, man without hope or joy because of back-breaking labor, man without art or expression. A primary difference between Markham's poem and Gold's proletarian literature was that Gold was concerned with workers in industry who worked in groups, not agricultural workers who worked independently. The proletariat was primarily an urban, industrial class to Gold. One of the tenets of proletarian literature that Gold would later establish would be the necessity to write of working-class industry experiences realistically: "if one is a tanner and writer, let one dare to write the drama of the tannery" ("Proletarian" 207). There are certainly instances of earlier writers applying this realistic, or naturalistic, description of work in industry. A notable example is Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills*, published in 1861:

> Masses of men, with dull, besotted faces bent to the ground, sharpened here and there by pain or cunning; skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes; stooping all night over boiling caldrons of metal, laired by days in dens of drunkenness and infamy; breathing from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body. (2534)

Walt Whitman, although he certainly would have violated many of Gold's tenets of proletarian literature, was considered by Gold and others as the forefather of working-class literature. Whitman was the ultimate democrat; in his poetry, no person was superior to another; Whitman even tended to exalt the "lower" members of society: slaves, prostitutes, and laborers. To Gold and others, this was the spirit of proletarian literature: all people are equal, and the downtrodden are forced to be so by economic necessity. Gold, too, exalted the downtrodden, including women forced into prostitution. In "Love on a Garbage Dump," a short story Gold published in *New Masses*, December 1928, the main male character who works at a garbage dump is smitten with a young woman, Concha, who works on the same dump. She invites him over to her house in the slum and, with her family in the same room, only a curtain separating them, she initiates a sexual encounter with the protagonist. After kissing, the young woman, Concha, says, "Maybe you gimme a dollar. . . . Me poor. Me make $8 a week" (184). At first, the protagonist is horrified, but he gives her the dollar out of pity. On the way home, he takes a detour to the aristocratic side of town. There, he witnesses a rich, young woman listening to Mozart while leaning on the balcony of her gallant home. The protagonist has a realization:

> Mozart and candlelight and the spiritual values, to hell with you all! . . . You are parasites, Concha is the one who pays for you! It is more honorable to work on a garbage dump than to be a soulful parasite on Beacon Hill. If Concha needed a dollar, she had a right to ask for it! It is that lazy, useless, parasite who plays Mozart who forces Concha so low! (185)

Gold's "Towards Proletarian Art" includes a section entitled "Walt Whitman's spawn." In it, he praises Whitman for being the "heroic spiritual grandfather of our generation" (67); however, Gold maintains that Whitman made one fundamental error in that he "dreamed the grand dream of political democracy, and thought it could express in completion all the aspirations of proletarian man" (68). Gold goes on to explain that the generation following Whitman also held to this impossible hope of political equality, but it was Gold's generation that had finally "awakened" (69). Regardless of "error," however, Whitman was revered, and many poets tried to imitate his style. In the May 1914 issue of *The Masses*, again, one of the first issues Gold would have read, the following poem, "Leaves of Burdock," by Henry Kemp appears:

> Three cheers for God and six more for Infinity . . .
>
> By God I shall sing the entire universe, and no one shall
>
> stop me!
>
> Rocks, stones, stars, wash-tubs, axe-handles, red-wood trees,
>
> the Mississippi – everything!
>
> Hurrah for me! Superbos, optimos, ... I seeing eidolons,
>
> proclaim myself, and, through myself, all men!
>
> By God, I say I shall sing! (ll. 1-5)

Kemp's poem was clearly an intentional – and obvious – ode to Whitman, particularly Whitman's *Song of Myself*. Yet, this was not the only case in which a Whitmanesque poem appeared in the 1920s and 30s leftist press. Wald demonstrates how poet, Edwin Rolfe, "reworks themes from Whitman":

> . . . I am the pilgrim of every race,

of every age, landing on the shore:

he of the slant eyes, blond hair black face. . . . (qtd. in Wald, *Exiles* 21)

Although as demonstrated there were obvious precursors to the 1920s and 1930s proletarian literary movement, the movement was distinctive in a number of ways. First and foremost, the members self-consciously identified themselves as proletarian writers and critics. Foley points out that "proletarian literature was to a significant extent the brainchild of the American left and was from its beginnings involved in a discourse about itself" (44); it "was to a considerable degree born out of an *a priori* conception of itself" (45). Although modeled after the proletkult in Russia, American proletarian literature required its own theories and would take its own form. Proletarian advocates wanted their art to be original and independent of previous art forms, and they spent considerable effort theorizing this art. Mike Gold's articles, "Towards Proletarian Art," "Go Left, Young Writers!" and particularly "Proletarian Realism" were all efforts to establish these critical principles and criteria. Foley relates a story of Walt Carmon, then literary editor of *New Masses*, writing to Stanley Kunitz in 1930 "urgently requesting an essay on Marxist criticism" (50-51); Carmon asserts that "if anything is necessary that type of thing is" (qtd. in Foley 51). The First American Writer's Congress in 1935 saw many speakers directly address the definitions, parameters, and defining characteristics of proletarian art.[10] Malcolm Cowley in his book review "The Poet and the World" attempts to define the movement by examining one of its primary artists: John Dos Passos. Cowley writes that "the difference between the late-Romantic and the radical Dos Passos is important not only in his own career: it helps to explain the recent course of American fiction" (303). The proletarian writers and critics

were not a monolith by any means, as the fierce debates of the thirties will illustrate, yet they did at times "[exhibit] impressive coherency" (Wald, *Exiles* 13), and it is possible to look at the general principles and beliefs of the movement as a whole.

Russian Connection

Although the American Left gained coherence through domestic concerns and although they were intentional in creating a unique proletarian art form, the movement was also heavily influenced by international events, particularly the situation in Russia. After 1917, with the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Communist Party was the dominant force in Russia and was imagined as an international party. Gold was one of the few members of the literary left to actually join the Communist Party and remain a member throughout the 1930s. The Communist Party's influence, however, was pervasive throughout the activities of the literary left – its publications, its debates, its conferences, and importantly, the formation, transformation, and eventual demise of proletarian literature.

The Communist Party was not an independent American party, as were the Republican and Democratic parties; it was very much a part of an international effort to establish communal societies around the globe. All Communist parties, whether in Europe, America, or elsewhere, were directed by the Communist Party in Russia. It is vital one understand the Russian connection to American politics and how this foreign nation held such sway over the hearts and minds of not only official members of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), such as Mike Gold, but also those who sympathized with the leftist movement but did not join the party. In order to provide necessary context on both

Russia and the American Communist parties, we will have to step back from Gold and the proletarian movement for a moment.

Out of a tradition of socialism and based on Karl Marx's historical-economic philosophy, the Marxist Party in Russia was formed in 1889 and was immediately racked with internal disputes. Some advocated for improving workers' immediate conditions, such as raising wages, while others, particularly Lenin, advocated revolution. This dispute between those who advocated gradual reforms and those who wanted immediate revolution would replay later in the American Socialist Party and would, in fact, be one primary reason that the far-left segment of the Socialist Party (SP) split off to form the Communist Party of the United States. Lenin wanted personal control of the Marxist Party in Russia and even set up his own rival newspaper, *Iskra* (*The Spark*), to bypass the official Marxist publication.[11] As Robert Harvey explains in *A Short History of Communism*, the Party was split into pro-Lenin and anti-Lenin segments; the pro-Lenin group became known as Bolsheviks.[12] Lenin used – and often elaborated on or even altered - Marx's writings to help secure his leadership; for instance, Lenin developed Marx's vague notion of a communist party that would help bring about the dictatorship of the proletariat; Lenin defined it as "an elite helping to guide the working class into a central theory of revolution: a professional, small, centralized, disciplined and highly qualified Communist party that alone would lead the masses to salvation" (43). Klehr in *The Heyday of American Communism* defined Lenin's concept as "corps of professional revolutionaries," or "cadre," that was "one of Lenin's most important organizational principles" (7).

This description of the Communist Party allowed Lenin to act, and act as leader, prior to the development of a revolutionary sensibility in the proletariat; that is, Lenin and

his party members would *be* the revolutionaries without the direct help of the proletariat at all. Lenin justified this method by arguing that a revolutionary dictatorship was a necessary precondition to the emancipation of the working class. Lenin developed a number of Marxist ideas into solid, guiding concepts for the Russian Marxist Party and future Communist parties. In fact, the version of Marxism that the American Communists would later profess was a creation largely of Lenin, not Marx. Lenin's version of Marxism would become known as Leninism and would be the official version of Marxism in both Russia and abroad. Harvey writes: "Lenin revealed himself to be not a high-calibre Marxist theoretician but, unlike most of his intellectual peers, a man with a shrewd grasp of reality and the concrete steps needed to attain power" (43). Marx was the man of theory; Lenin was the man of action. Harvey continues:

> [Lenin's] ruthlessness and single-mindedness lifted the Bolsheviks to power in Russia. Without his actions, the supposedly inevitable socialist revolution would have remained forever a footnote on the second page of an entirely different chapter of Russian history. (42)

Although Lenin's ideas for revolution would become the road map for later revolutionaries, in 1914 they were considered radical, and the Bolsheviks had no real hope of overthrowing the Russian leadership – that is, until the outbreak of World War I.

Russia suffered a huge loss of life and a faltering economy in the first months of WWI, and this hardship for Russia proved a boon to Lenin and his followers, who had opposed the war from the start. As conditions worsened for Russian citizens, spontaneous strikes and demonstrations broke out, and soviets (elected governmental councils) were set up in cities across Russia. After the abdication of the throne on March 15, 1917 by Tsar

Nicholas II,[13] a provisional government was set up which advocated continuing the war. Lenin, now in exile,[14] was the lone voice of dissent; he "insisted that the imperialist war be converted into a civil war" (46). The abdication of Nicholas and the increasing dissatisfaction with the war created a power vacuum in the Russian government. When Lenin arrived at Finland Station on April 3, 1917, he made a speech to the gathered crowd advocating the end of the war. Against the advice of his comrades who believed revolution, according to Marx, had to happen gradually and had to begin with a revolution of the bourgeoisie, Lenin saw his opportunity for a full-scale proletarian revolution. Lenin, with a military committee he set up under Leon Trotsky, a gifted Russian leader who initially aligned himself against Lenin but eventually became a top Bolshevik under Lenin, seized power in Petrograd on October 23, 1917, and by October 27, the Bolsheviks had secured power in Moscow. The Russian Revolution was seemingly a success[15], and sympathetic people in countries across the globe, including Mike Gold and the American leftists, reveled in the victory of the proletariat.

The fact is, however, that the proletariat was not responsible for the Russian Revolution and had little idea who the Bolsheviks were or what they stood for; the Bolshevik slogan of "Peace, Bread, and Land" did provide some hope to a desperate populace, however, and through these promises, Lenin and his comrades secured some passive acceptance by the people of Russia. Yet the Russian Revolution, Harvey maintains, "was no more than the seizure of power by one armed faction from another in a political void; the great majority of the Russian people had no say in this at all" (64). Lenin's version of Marxism and of "dictatorship of the proletariat," however, did not necessitate that the workers be involved in the actual revolution; the revolution, or overthrowing of oppressive

government, was a preliminary step to what would ultimately be the liberation of the masses. Once in power, Lenin instituted his communist program, including designating land public property, abolishing inequality in the army, and passing legislation which made men and women equal in the eyes of the law (52). It is these cultural changes that Marxists around the world hailed as the beginning of a truly, non-exploitative, communist society.

Beginning in 1922, Lenin suffered the first of a series of strokes that would eventually kill him. He made efforts to secure Trotsky's place as successor, but upon his death in January 1924, a power struggle ensued between Trotsky and Lenin's General Secretary, Joseph Stalin (Harvey 56). This struggle for control, and the eventual victory of Stalin in 1927, divided both the Russian Party and the Communist parties abroad, including the CPUSA.

In 1919, prior to the formation of the American Communist Party, the Bolshevik leaders, headed by Lenin, created a governing organization called Communist International, more commonly known as Comintern. The Bolsheviks reasoned that since the only successful worker's revolution had occurred in Russia, Russia would therefore be the only nation fit to lead such an international movement. The Comintern stated its purpose: "It is the aim of the Communist International to fight by all available means, including armed struggle, for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and for the creation of an independent Soviet republic as a transitional stage to the complete abolition of the State" (Klehr 4). This body set the terms for communist organization; policies were "binding upon the Russian Party as well as all other members of the Comintern"[16]. The Comintern established policy at periodic conferences attended by the Russian leadership as well as delegates from other countries with active Communist parties. The guiding policies in place

at a given time established what became known as “periods” in Communist history, or different stages in the “general crisis of the capitalist system” (Worley 1). Klehr explains that “the particular definition of a ‘period’ was much more than an exercise in linguistics or Talmudic hair-splitting. The nature of capitalism in a given era was related to a particular inventory of Communist tactics”; for example, “if capitalism was decaying, then militancy was the order of the day” (11). The First Period, 1917-1919, was described as a period of “revolutionary upsurge.” The Second Period from 1920 to 1923 was an “era of capitalist stabilization,” and the Third Period, announced at the Comintern’s Sixth World Congress in 1924, marked an increasing crisis in capitalism (Klehr 11). With an increasing threat of fascism, the Comintern finally instituted a “popular front” policy, or joining of all anti-fascist forces, in 1935. Third Period and popular front politics would dominate the most active years of communist activity in America, part of the 1920s and 1930s, and would shape the messages communicated by both official channels of the CPUSA, leaders like Browder and Party publications, such as *The Daily Worker*; and unofficial channels, such as Mike Gold and the *New Masses*.

The Comintern issued various statements about the state of capitalism during the third period: “a period of increasing growth of the general crisis of capitalism”; “[a time when workers are faced with] decisive alternatives; either dictatorship of the bourgeoisie or – the dictatorship of the proletariat; either economic and political slavery or . . . an end to capitalist exploitation and oppression”; and “[a time] of revolutionary crisis” (qtd. in Klehr 11-12). In addition to revolutionary rhetoric, the Comintern instituted policies which greatly affected the message and the actions of American communists. One important Comintern formulation was that of social-fascism, under which the socialists were considered the

primary enemies of communism, not the evident fascists. The reasoning behind this formulation was that the socialists were a "masked" form of fascism, and were, therefore, more dangerous. Comintern spokesmen went so far as to direct international Communist Party members to focus their energies fighting the socialists. Another similar formulation, called "class against class," argued that the Communists were the only true working-class party and any other party claiming to fight for the working class was, in fact, the enemy. Lastly, the Comintern instituted the "united front from below" policy. This policy dictated that the rank and file Communists band with rank and file members of other parties, not to advance the agendas of both parties, but to convert the non-Communists into Communists. The practical implications for the American Communists were that the Communists and Socialists – quite similar in many goals – did not work together, at least not openly or officially, and, in fact, spent much of their time fighting one another, rather than fighting fascistic capitalism. Klehr explains:

> All of this followed logically from the premises of the Third Period. Capitalism was in collapse. Those groups which stood between the Communists and the working class were actually serving the interests of the enemy by deceiving the workers. They had to be fought and smashed. Once their rivals on the left were vanquished, the Communists would be able to deal with the fascists, by then stripped of their most valuable allies and unable any longer to hide the true nature of their policies. (12)

The Comintern retained its policy of social-fascism right up to the consolidation of power by Hitler in 1933. Even after Hitler's ascendancy, official policy didn't change until the Popular Front policies were instituted in 1935.

Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA)

The political situation in Russia directly impacted the leftist political situation in America, which ultimately resulted in the formation of the CPUSA. The CPUSA was an offshoot of the Socialist Party (SP) which formed in America in 1901. By 1912, the SP was fractured and contained a nebulous right wing and left, which were both also riddled with internal disputes. In fact, not until 1915 did the left wing of the SP manage to attain a "certain coherence of expression" (Howe 17). The strengthening of the left position, and a turn leftward by the SP in general, were due to a number of events: World War I, the passing of the Espionage Act in 1917 and the accompanying prosecution of a number of left-wing activists, and, most importantly, the Russian Revolution of 1917. Howe and Coser claim that "there was hardly a radical in America who did not support the Bolshevik Revolution" (25), and the apparent victory of the proletariat in Russia provided evidence to all radicals that such a thing, a just and communal society, could be reality. The left had always maintained that such a society was possible, and the Russian Revolution provided political currency to the leftist position. Although the SP as a whole turned left, there was increased agitation within the far left, both internally and externally, to break free from the constraints of the party.

Many leftist members of the SP were immigrants with "Russian fever" who held to an international perspective; they felt constricted by the SP and wanted to join a party that would unite with other countries to spread revolution across the world. Although the victory of the Bolsheviks, with Lenin as leader, alone proved to many that Marx's earlier predictions of class war and the resulting dictatorship of the proletariat had become a reality, more evidence was building that revolutions would sweep the globe. In 1918 and 1919, a

series of revolts broke out across Europe, in Hungary, Austria, Belgium, Germany, Finland, France, Italy, and England (Howe 26; Klehr 4). The American radicals of the left felt confident that revolutionary fever would spread to America (in fact, four million workers had gone on strikes in the year 1919 alone), and they wanted to be prepared for it. The SP, according to the leftists within the party, was not fit to lead such a revolution; it was concerned with reform, not revolution; it wanted to elect leaders to work inside the system, not overthrow it. The Communists in Russia also advocated an independent Communist Party in America, not associated with the Socialist Party -- that is, the Russians desired an American Communist Party independent from the Socialist Party, *not* independent from Russian control. Marx's vision was international; the proletariat of the world would not be members of any State, and the Socialist Party in America was an explicitly national party.

The CPUSA, formed in 1919[17], went almost immediately underground due to a concerted government effort to quell radical activity in the U.S., including the arrests of suspected radicals and deportations of aliens associated with radical activity (and many members of the early CP were immigrants).[18] Klehr explains that the Worker's Party was formed as a "legal party front" in 1921, but not until 1923 did the "Communist party abolish the underground and become a completely legal organization" (4). The collapse of Wall Street in 1929 coincided with a major leadership crisis within the CPUSA, and the leadership crisis initially received more attention from the Party. This crisis of leadership also proved an important illustration of Third Period policies, their influence on American party members, and the dangers to American Communist party leaders who strayed from the International line. As Stalin had declared at the Sixth World Congress in 1928 that capitalism was in its final decline and the proletariat had to be immediately organized to

form the coming socialist society, this became the only officially acceptable view within all international communist parties. Because Jay Lovestone, Party Secretary, the top position in the CPUSA, had hinted at "American exceptionalism," "the doctrine that Marxist principles of history do not apply to the United States," he was immediately vilified by Stalin, and measures were taken to remove Lovestone from leadership (Ryan 206). Although the front runner for Party Secretary was Bill Foster, a man named Earl Russell Browder would ultimately be named Party Secretary, a position he would hold for decades. Foster became the leader of trade union business for the CPUSA.[19] With leadership issues settled, the CPUSA began to recognize the impact of the stock market crash.

The 1929 stock market crash and resulting depression seemed only to verify the truth of Third Period policies. From 1928 to 1934, the CPUSA organized its activities and messages around these policies. Ryan explains that the "American party's Third Period policies appeared in the wake of the worldwide process known as Bolshevisation" (204). Using Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew's definition, Ryan writes, "the term [pertains] to the Soviet domination of the Communist International (Comintern) and its member sections, to the 'Russification' of its ideological and organizational structures, and to the 'canonization of the Leninist principles of party unity, discipline and democratic centralism'" (204). He continues:

> Bolshevisation met acceptance (eager or reluctant) because of: the Soviet's successful revolution; the tendency toward bureaucratization in modern organizations; the expanding role of the state that seemed to confirm the central propensities of Marxism-Leninism; and anti-communist assaults on the working class and its institutions. (205)

Acting within the confines of the Third Period principles, the CPUSA reorganized into shop branches or factory cells rather than neighborhood associations; formed communist factions within existing non-communist organizations, including trade unions; publicized the plight of the jobless, even staging a widely-publicized "Unemployment Day," which led to high-profile protests at various city halls; created the National Council for the Unemployed and formulated a plan to fight the depression; created dual unions in industries to fight the influence of the social-fascist A.F. of L.; directed a series of strikes; and attacked segregation and racial injustice by running an African-American vice-presidential candidate, James W. Ford, in the 1932 elections and by making a national issue of a rape case in Scottsboro[20] (Ryan 209-17). Although the CPUSA ostensibly followed strictly Comintern policy, in reality, even with effort, American communists, including Gold, couldn't always fit within the policy confines. The policy of social-fascism proved problematic for American communists, as they were forced by other policies, such as dual unionism and united front from below, to work with Socialists at the local level. Although the call from Moscow was for revolution, the American Communists were forced to support workers in their pursuit of non-revolutionary gains, such as increased wages, to attract the workers to Communist-led strikes and unions. This created a strange contradiction for American communists, as they tried to stay on message in Party publications even as they constantly violated their own rules. The CPUSA was, fortunately, released from Third Period strictures after the consolidation of Hitler's power in 1933 and the growing threat of fascism forced communists to align with all sympathetic parties. Hence, by 1935 the Popular Front era had begun.

Towards Proletarian Art

Long before this alliance of sympathetic parties, however, there was great division in the American left. In the year 1917, the United States had only a divided socialist party, and the vague concept of proletarian art had yet to be formulized or recognized as its own art form. After the U.S. declared war on the Central Powers in the same year, and after the passing of the Sedition and Espionage Acts of 1917, radical organizations and members of organizations were scrutinized, harassed, and often punished – either through prosecutions and imprisonment or through deportations, as evidenced by the prosecution of those associated with *The Masses*. After losing their mailing privileges, the August 1917 issue never made it to its distributors or subscribers, as it was intercepted and seized by the government.[21] Eastman did manage to publish a September issue and a final November/December issue, which, notably, contained one of Gold's most well-known short stories, "Birth: A Prologue to a Tentative East Side Novel"; however, the magazine ceased publication after this final issue and five members of the editorial staff were charged with violating the Espionage Act, including Eastman. The jury could not reach a conclusion, so the five men, with the addition of Reed, were again tried in September, 1918. This time, they were all acquitted. *The Masses*, however, was dead.

The Masses' successor, the *Liberator*, would be the site of Gold's first call advocating a conscious creation of proletarian art. The *Liberator* was begun by Eastman and his sister, Crystal Eastman, even as Eastman's trial was unconcluded. The *Liberator* was more political in its orientation, and the first issue, March 1918, was consumed primarily with John Reed's reports from Russia regarding the on-going revolution. Editorial changes took place in 1921; Claude McKay became an associate editor and, "two opposite poles of a

magnet," William Gropper and Mike Gold joined the editorial staff (Eastman, "Liberator" 6). Gropper was described by Eastman as "instinctively comic an artist as ever touched pen to paper," while Gold was described as "almost equally gifted with pathos and tears" (Eastman**,** "Liberator" 6).

Gold's "pathos and tears" was evident in all the works he had published up to February 1921; he had published two poems in *The Masses*, decrying the position of the working-class and the fates of the radicals who attempted to change things: "Those Whose Hatred Killed Them" and "Macdougal Street." Also in *The Masses* he published two of his most famous short stories, "God is Love" and "Birth – A Prologue to a Tentative East Side Novel," the former being a meditation on the imprisonment of poverty, even for the elderly**,** the latter being an autobiographical sketch, a precursor to the longer fiction work, *Jews Without Money*. Additionally, he published a short sketch on the U.S. military, "Treacherous Greaser." In the *Liberator*, prior to February 1921, he published a number of letters and reviews and two short stories about Mexico. Yet, it wasn't until "Towards Proletarian Art" that Gold really "put in [his] oar," to quote Burke, regarding the arguments surrounding the nature and function of art and the artist.

"Towards Proletarian Art" was published in the February 1921 volume of the *Liberator*, a magazine of which Gold was now co-editor. Although with Gold, "politics [had always been there] behind the fiction," with this article and subsequent journalistic and critical pieces, Gold's politics were now "up front, strong and clear" (Folsom 10). Scholars agree that Gold was not a great political or theoretical thinker; Gold, himself, would not have wanted to be thought as such, as he idealized the working man driven by instinct, not intellect. Paul Berman describes Gold as "never a learned Marxist, he didn't have

sophisticated theories. He knew his Whitman better than Marx . . ." (45). Gold's politics were, apparently, quite simple, driven by a few basic precepts: capitalism is exploitative; capitalism exploits the poor and working class; the working class must identify and organize as members of the working class; this organized class must overthrow the capitalist, bourgeois society and institute a communist society. One element of Gold's position that was not negotiable or alterable was that art was vital to the accomplishment of this final communist goal. That is, Gold's conception of proletarian literature was that it was literature with an explicitly revolutionary agenda. This yoking of aesthetics and politics would constitute the primary battleground within the left throughout the 1920s and 30s, and Gold began the argument in earnest with this publication.

Gold's essay is often referred to as a manifesto; Folsom describes it as "mystical," (10); Aaron calls it a sort of "prose poem" (87). In it, Gold imagines a complete separation of the "old ideals" (bourgeois) and the new (proletariat) (62). He does not detail what, specifically, proletarian art is; this he will do later in his 1930 essay "Proletarian Realism." In this essay, Gold accepts without question the Marxist premise that a proletarian world revolution will, in fact, occur; his essay is meant to prepare the way, to make the transition easier, to provide not a systematic basis for the production of proletarian art, but a philosophical view– or prophetic vision – of what type of society produces such art. Gold wanted to create a vivid contrast between the exploitative capitalistic society's ideas, people, and art and the nurturing communistic society's people and art is a major focus.

One such binary that Gold establishes is the difference in the artists that the different societies will produce. Man in bourgeois society, particularly in its art, is drawn as "groveling or sinful or romantic or falsely god-like," while man in the coming communistic

society will be “humble . . . responsible, instinctive . . . sad and beaten yet reaching out beautifully and irresistibly like a natural force for mystic food and freedom” (“Towards” 64). Individualism is the old bourgeois ideal, and, to Gold, is fundamental to the current sufferings of humankind; he writes, “even its priests of art must be lonely beasts of prey – competitive and unsocial” (“Towards” 65). The proletarian ideal – the people – are painted in dramatic contrast: “The people live, love, work, fight, pray, laugh; they accept all, they accept themselves, and the immortal urgings of Life within them” (“Towards” 66). This broad condemnation of the bourgeoisie and broad praise of the proletariat will be a constant in works by Gold and other adherents to Gold’s proletarian principles. In fact, it is this characteristic, among others, that critics will later attack.

In this early essay, Gold establishes what will become another staple dichotomy in his theory of proletarian literature: the difference in substance of bourgeois art and proletarian art. Bourgeois art is high ideas, disconnected from common human concerns; it causes the artist “to brood and suffer silently and go mad” (66). For proletarians, common experience is the stuff of art. Specifically, Gold advocates that art should come out of the factories, the tenements; he asks, “Why should we artists born in tenements go beyond them for our expression?” Further he states that the “boy in the tenement must not learn of their art. He must stay in the tenement and create a new and truer one there” (65**,** 66). The subject matter of proletarian art, according to Gold, would be the subject matter that constituted the lives of the proletariat. Again, Gold will refine this concept, but for now, Gold has merely laid the groundwork – for his own burgeoning philosophy and for the creation, rife with controversy which molds it, of an actual flowering of proletarian art in America.

Foley notes that Gold termed his early call "purely prophetic" (90), but in it we see not only a beginning – the first call for proletarian art – but also an end, a culmination of Gold's early experiences which have transformed him to a radical with a voice and a cause. The tenets of the philosophy he bends, he alters, he clarifies, but he never abandons. Gold's childhood experiences living in poverty in the East side tenements, his despair at being removed from school, the back-breaking labor he endured from the age of 12 to 21; the publication of his own amateur work; his association with various radical groups and publications; and the fact that he was accepted as a writer and editor all allowed Mike Gold to make the foray into not just contributing fiction to reveal the working-class American experience, but to actually attempting to create and mold an entirely new literary movement that will work to improve working-class life. Gold has been dismissed repeatedly as a hack, as a propagandist, yet Gold, in fact, accomplished, at least temporarily, what few people in history have done: he originated, helped define, and advocated for a new type of American literature

Notes to Chapter Two

[1] Gold alternately cited the speaker as Flynn and Emma Goldman. Folsom points out that both Flynn and Goldman addressed separate rallies in Union Square in the spring of 1914, so it could have been either speaker that Gold encountered.
[2] This interpretation has been posited by multiple scholars including Michael Folsom, Paul Berman, and others. Azar Nacify's entire dissertation (1979) argues this point.

[3] Now lost.

[4] Aaron explains that the militia first fired on the families then set fire to their tent housing community. In total, a strike leader was killed, along with twelve women and children (33).

[5] Worked for the Socialist daily, the *Call*, submitted work to *The Masses*; and was part of the editorial staff at *The Masses*' successor, the *Liberator*. He also, according to Wald, worked at the *New York Globe*.

[6] An important theater group, which produced one of Gold's plays, *Fiesta*, in 1929**.**

[7] These debates continue – and become more heated – throughout the 1920s and 30s, and Mike Gold would be a major participant in the debates. Chapter Four of this work will trace and analyze these later debates.

[8] Helen Keller would later serve as a contributing editor for *the Liberator* and also contributed to *The Call*.

[9] "Birth" eventually became Gold's most famous "fiction" work, *Jews Without Money*.

[10] Including Joseph Freeman, Waldo Frank, John Dos Passos, Edwin Seaver, Malcolm Cowley, and others.

[11] The *Iskra* board became the model for the Politburo – "the tiny committee which dispensed real power in Soviet Russia" (Harvey)

[12] Harvey explains that at a 1903 conference of the Marxist Party, Lenin's challenger, Martov, won the initial vote on Party leadership. Lenin, however, "astutely manipulated the Party votes to secure a majority of his supporters on the Party's Central Committee. . . . From then on, Lenin's supporters became known as Bolsheviks (Majorityites)" (Harvey).

[13] Nicholas and the entire Romanov family were executed in July 1918, after the Bolsheviks had achieved power.

[14] Lenin was initially exiled to Siberia in 1897 for trying to spread Marxism in St. Petersburg; he was released from exile in 1900. In 1914, Lenin was forced to leave Russia, and he settled in Switzerland in 1914 (Harvey).

[15] Uprisings and revolts continued throughout Russia, many aiming to unseat the Bolshevik dictatorship. Lenin put down these attempts with any means possible, including, at times, mass executions.

[16] At this time, there were Communist parties in America, Germany, France, England, China, etc.

[17] Actually, the left spun off into two separate parties: Communist Party and Communist Labor Party. They were both forced underground and eventually united as one, due primarily to pressure from the controlling body in Russia, the Comintern.

[18] The Deportation Act was passed in 1918. This along with the Sedition Act of 1917 was used as a weapon to fight against all forms of radicalism in America. As radicals were often immigrants, particularly in the early years of the CPUSA, the Deportation Act was an effective tool to dissuade immigrants from participating in organized radical, political activity.

[19] For an in-depth discussion of leadership in the CPUSA, see James Ryan's chapter "A Final Stab at Insurrection: The American Communist Party, 1928-1934" in Matthew Worley's *In Search of Revolution*, or Harvey Klehr's *The Heyday of American Communism*.

[20] Nine black youths were accused in Alabama of attacking two white female passengers aboard a freight train. Although evidence should have disproved the prosecution's case, all nine boys were convicted and sentenced to death. The CPUSA's publicizing and legal support for the Scottsboro boys prevented any from being executed and led to the release of four.

[21] This is explained in the September 1917 issue under the heading, "What happened to the August *Masses*?"

Chapter Three

Jew Without Money: Mike Gold's Fiction

In this chapter, I will argue that proletarian literature is necessarily of a hybrid nature. I will consider Mike Gold's vision for proletarian art, and I will look at the challenges and successes of Gold's primary contribution, *Jews Without Money*. Additionally, I will briefly review some of Gold's other fiction works, and, lastly, I will answer the charges against and detail the successes of Gold's fiction and the positive impact these works had on the movement as a whole.

Mike Gold ends his most successful fiction work and his primary contribution to proletarian literature, *Jews Without Money*, with the following:

> A man on an East Side soap-box, one night, proclaimed that out of the despair, melancholy and helpless rage of millions, a world movement had been born to abolish poverty.
>
> I listened to him.
>
> 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! (309)

This ending Foley terms the "*locus classicus* of troublesome closure" (311). Gold's protagonist, Mikey Gold, at the age of 12, forced to leave school, finds his first factory

employment. Then, in less than four pages, Gold outlines Mikey's series of oppressive jobs, spanning almost a decade, to his encounter with the man on the soapbox. The recognition and adoption of a radical, revolutionary point of view spans less than half a page.[1]

This character conversion to revolutionary politics, often referred to deridingly as the "conversion narrative" by critics, is considered a representative weakness of the genre of proletarian fiction. Denning calls Gold's ending, "the scandalous final page" and the "epitome of this 'problem' [with endings]" that "haunts all these books" (248). If *Jews Without Money* serves as the *locus classicus* or epitome of problem endings, the novel also serves as a representative of the genre, both its weaknesses and its strengths. Additionally, the text illustrates in concrete terms Gold's somewhat abstract theory of proletarian literature.

The creation of proletarian fiction presented a number of challenges: what form would best encompass the stories of working-class life? How would one take into account the very important issues of difference within the working-class community – race, religion, language, etc. – and still present the class as cohesive? What does a narrative of proletarian stagnancy look like? How does one glorify the collective, when traditional literature celebrates the individual? In what way can an author usefully combine the detailed realism of working-class life with the necessary idealism of a yet-to-occur class revolution? These challenges, among others, Gold faced, and his fiction can be read as a negotiation of these tensions. Proletarian literature cannot be judged by purely aesthetic standards, because a defining characteristic of the literature was its role as rhetoric. By reading closely *Jews Without Money* and other short, representative fiction pieces by Gold, one can see how Gold addressed the inherent challenges present in the art form he helped to create.

The Proletarian Gargoyle

Proletarian works were decidedly rhetorical; they were meant to change people's ways of thinking and, ultimately, acting. To the proletarian advocates this was necessary because society no longer served the interest of the vast majority of its citizens, and by 1930, the year of publication of *Jews Without Money*, it was becoming clear that American society itself might crumble and take down with it not only the working poor, but also the middle class, particularly the lower middle class who were in constant danger of descending into the working class. The traditional allegiances were to country and capitalism. The American Dream, though realized by few poor immigrants, provided the narrative needed to sustain these traditional allegiances, even by those least likely to attain it, perhaps *especially* by those least likely to attain it. Michael Folsom writes in his introduction to *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*: "America even had a self-exonerating legend which it taught its victims. Abe Lincoln educated himself by firelight, and, if young Isaac Granich [Mike Gold] couldn't do the same by gaslight after twelve hours of work in a sweatshop, well, it was his own fault" (11). Proletarian literature, to be successful as a rhetorical tool, needed to provide a different narrative and break the hold of the American Dream, a very difficult task to accomplish. Kenneth Burke, considered by many contemporary scholars to be the foremost rhetorician of this time period, writes:

> In highly transitional eras, requiring shifts in allegiance to the symbols of authority (the rejection of an authoritative structure still largely accepted, even by its victims, who are educated in wrong meanings and values by the "priesthood" of pulpit, schools, press, radio and popular art) the problems of identity become crucial. ("Twelve Propositions" 244)

Burke's "problems of identity" are the ways in which people identify themselves, ways which no longer serve them: as Americans, as potential members of the middle class, etc. As Burke indicates in the quote above, the messages communicated by the "priesthood" of society encourage classes to identify with the class above them; proletarian rhetoric's goal is to encourage downward or lateral identification.

This fundamental shift in allegiance or identification, then, requires, Gold would argue, a new literature. Denning writes, "Not surprisingly, theirs [proletarian writers and critics] was an experimental and iconoclastic aesthetic" (66). Although the contemporaneous modernism of Eliot, Joyce, and others would definitely qualify as experimental and iconoclastic, it was useless as a rhetorical tool to sway the masses due to its complexity. Denning goes on to explain that proletarian literature was closer to realism than modernism, but it was not traditional realism; "compared to the canons of realism . . . theirs was more a 'proletarian grotesque'" (66), a merging of realism with something not realistic at all. Instead of glossing over the degradations and hardships experienced by the working class, it would demonstrate the reality of that experience, but it would also illustrate an ideal, a cohesive working class, bound together with the middle class, fighting for equality and freedom.

Denning borrows the term "grotesque" from Burke who, in his 1935 text *Permanence and Change*, discusses what he calls, "a stage of planned incongruity"[2]: the grotesque (112). The grotesque occurs when "perception of discordancies is cultivated without smile or laughter" (112); Burke defines the grotesque in opposition to humor, a device that also cultivates discordancies but does so with the intent to produce laughter and which, ultimately, serves to reinforce our sense of the old order. The grotesque, Burke

compares to the gargoyles of the Middle Ages; Burke writes, "The maker of gargoyles who put man's-head on bird-body was offering combinations which were completely rational as judged by his logic of essence. In violating one order of classification, he was stressing another" (112). Burke applies the "gargoyle element" to Marxism and this application is relevant to my study of proletarian literature (112):

> Class-consciousness is a social therapeutic because it is *reclassification-consciousness*. It is a new perspective that realigns something so profoundly ethical as our categories of allegiance. By this reinterpretative schema, members of the same race or nation who had formerly thought of themselves as *allies* become *enemies*, and members of different races or nations who had formerly thought of themselves as *enemies* become *allies*. (113)

Although Burke was highly critical of Gold and those who advocated proletarian art[3], this gargoyle analogy works as an analogy for proletarian literature, as Denning points out. Proletarian literature is a gargoyle, but instead of having a head of a bird and a body of a man, the proletarian gargoyle has the form of traditional literature, for instance in *Jews Without Money*, the novel, but instead of having the traditional elements of a novel – cohesive narrative, protagonist who grows and changes, protagonist defined as individual by contrast to other characters – the proletarian novel violates these customs. There is no cohesive narrative because the proletarian life itself is stagnant, repetitive; the protagonist does not grow or change because he or she is "stuck" in this static environment; and the protagonist is not defined against other characters to illustrate his or her individuality; the protagonist is almost interchangeable with the other characters because there is nothing that marks his or her life as different – they are all part of the proletarian mass. Therefore, reader

expectations of a novel are frustrated or, to use Burke's language, the classification of the genre is violated in order to establish new connections. The proletarian novel, though often very realistic in its description of working-class life, is not realistic in the general sense because of the explicit rhetorical goal of the genre, something imagined but never before realized, a goal that requires radically new ways of thinking, of identifying. Edwin Seaver, writing in 1935, asserts that what "must be considered . . . [is] the revolutionary purpose of [the] work, [the] aim not merely to understand the world and not merely to explain it, but to change it" (8). To Seaver, "[w]ithout the presence of [this revolutionary element] in a given work . . . we cannot have a genuine proletarian novel" (8). The radical element of proletarian literature prohibits the works from being wholly realistic because it is demonstrating something that is not currently the case, but it also prohibits them from fitting neatly into any other hitherto established artistic category.

Therefore, critics and scholars have used a variety of terms to describe this "proletarian gargoyle": Wald describes it as "romantic idealism"; Foley identifies the proletarian novel variously as "proletarian fictional autobiography," "proletarian bildungsroman," "proletarian social novel," or "[proletarian] collective novel"; Denning calls Gold's work a common proletarian form, "the ghetto pastoral" or "proletarian tale of terror." Disparagingly, Kazin refers to these texts as examples of "violent naturalism," that were "riddled with determinism" (370**,** 385). Lawrence Hanley points out that similar to the image of the grotesque, "monstrosity" is a familiar metaphor for proletarian literature (134). The genre defies easy classification, and though this is often cited as a weakness, to accomplish the rhetorical work for which it was intended, this defiance of classification is an *absolute necessity*. It had to be a gargoyle of sorts; it had to be recognizable and it had to be

unrecognizable at the same time. It had to mirror the real world, but it had to also demonstrate how that world could be changed beyond recognition.

Proletarian literature is meant to serve an intermediary stage; it has work to do in persuading people. Once that work is accomplished, proletarian literature will cease to be proletarian, and will just be literature; in Gold's vision, literature produced by the new, communal society of equals. Seaver, in attempting to define the proletarian novel, acknowledges its temporary condition. He compares our current use of the term "proletarian literature" to the use of the term "bourgeois literature" and "feudal literature" during the French Revolution. Once the "gains of the French Revolution were already long established," the distinction of bourgeois literature from its predecessor was no longer necessary, as "[n]ovelists and critics alike moved freely in a generally accepted body of ideas" (7). Likewise, Seaver maintains that

> such terms as Bourgeois Literature or Proletarian Literature are what might be called *beginning* and *end* terms. They are used when the ideological superstructure and the economic base have not become either entirely *united* or entirely *dis-united*. They represent the same struggle being conducted on the cultural front, and at the same time, as the struggle on the economic front.[4] (7)

In this view, the term "proletarian literature" represents struggle; it does not necessarily elucidate the characteristics of a certain kind of literature. Hanley argues that "[i]f proletarian literature names anything . . . it signifies not so much a stable body of texts, motifs, or writers, but this awkward cultural space" (133). Denning posits a similar argument:

> Too often critics and historians have begun with the question: Does one define proletarian literature by author, audience, subject matter, or political perspective? Is it literature by workers, for workers, or about workers? Or is it simply revolutionary literature? But these critical attempts to define "proletarian literature" as a genre all fail because they treat genres as abstract and ahistorical ideal types; they forget that genres are literary institutions that have grown out of particular social formations and must be understood not as a class of objects but as the products of those formations. . .Thus, rather than ask "What is proletarian literature?" or "What is a proletarian writer?" one would better ask "What was the proletarian literary formation?" (201-02)

Gold's Vision

Gold envisioned proletarian art, to at least a degree, as a response to what he viewed as the predominant literary style. Gold called this style "bourgeois literature." Aaron in *Writers on the Left* provides an outline of a recurring pattern he sees in the series of revolts that took place in American literature: the repudiation of the literature that came before and an attempt to define the new literature against the old. The proletarian literary movement of the 1920s and 1930s was no different. Gold, in particular, was pivotal in defining proletarian literature and denouncing non-proletarian literature as bourgeois; bourgeois literature to Gold was complicit in maintaining the old, exploitative order.

Probably the clearest of Gold's efforts to distinguish proletarian literature from bourgeois literature is found in a review of Thornton Wilder's works, published in the *New*

Republic in 1930, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ."[5] In this scorching review, Wilder represents to Gold all that is wrong with contemporary, bourgeois literature. Gold criticizes Wilder's characters, his settings, his themes, but, mostly, Gold criticizes Wilder for the claims he makes about his work. Wilder claims to "discover the spirit that is not unequal to the elevation of the great religious themes" (qtd. in Gold, "Wilder" 199), but Gold asks, "[W]ho could reveal any real agonies and exaltations of spirit in this neat, tailor-made rhetoric?" (200). Gold attacks Wilder for writing of warped, aristocratic characters such as "the sixteen-year-old son" who is "burned out with sex and idleness, and sexualizes with his sister, and then commits suicide" (197). Gold discusses the seriousness with which Wilder addresses their "lavender tragedies" (198), tragedies which have no bearing on the "child slaves of the beet fields," the "stockbroker suicides," or the "passion and death of the coal miners" (201). Wilder's settings are as remote from industrialized America as imaginable; in the three books Gold discusses, one is set in aristocratic Rome, another in Peru during the 1700s, and the last in the Greek Isle, "the hour somewhere in B.C." (198). Gold does not begrudge writers use of the past, but he envisions proletarian literature as "heroic archeology," use of the "past as a weapon to affect the present and future" (199). To Gold, then, bourgeois literature was literature of escape; it was meant to lull and/or titillate the reader with perverse concerns of aristocratic individuals who lived in remote times and exotic places; it is a "historic junkshop" (199).[6] The intent of proletarian literature, thought Gold, was not to lull its readers, but to awaken them.

Although I will discuss Gold's essays subsequent to "Towards Proletarian Art" in detail in Chapter Four, I will briefly outline his developing theory here in order to help the reader understand how Gold's fiction fits into this framework.

Gold published a series of essays and columns about proletarian art, but he is generally considered to have published three main calls, or manifestos: "Towards Proletarian Art" (1921), "Go Left, Young Writers!" (1928), and "Proletarian Realism" (1930). By examining the essays chronologically, one can trace Gold's developing notions of what constitutes proletarian art. Gold's initial vision for proletarian literature was vague; in "Towards Proletarian Art" (1921), Gold imagined a proletariat, as Aaron puts it, "groping for culture" (208). His model was the emerging Proletkult in Russia of which, at this time, he had only heard reports. In a later essay[7] he explains that Russia should be the new model for American literature. He compares what he hopes to be the new influence of Russia to the old influence of France for that "foreign cross-fertilization that has always been biologically necessary for a healthy national culture" ("America" 129). He calls Russia "a huge fascinating art laboratory" ("America" 129).

His next major call, "Go Left, Young Writers!" was published in May 1928 in the *New Masses*, and in this essay, Gold was concerned with differentiating proletarian literature from bourgeois literature, similar to what he does later in the Wilder critique. Dominant culture, Gold argues, is the culture of the *nouveau riches*, and fiction is written for them to "fill in the idle moments between cocktail parties" (186). However, Gold points out, the vast majority of Americans are not rich or idle, and the masses are not being represented in literature. With a great economic crisis at hand, Gold urges the young writer to "go leftward" (188):

> When I say "go leftward," I don't mean the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing, the professional poetizing, etc. No, the real thing; a knowledge of working-class life in America gained from first-hand contacts,

> and a hard precise philosophy of 1929 based on economics, not verbalisms. (188)

It is in this essay that Gold imagines the proletarian writer as "a wild youth of about twenty-two," a son of working-class parents who is himself working class and who "writes because he must" (188). The concern for Gold in this essay is that the "real" life of Americans – the working life, the slums, the everyday ordeals – has not been represented in literature. In this essay, Gold concerns himself with this, the subject matter, and although he imagines a true, working-class writer, he does not seem to believe that the writer of this new literature *must* be of the working class. He calls for all writers to go left and if not already acquainted with working-class life, to become so. This is a call for a more conscious effort to produce proletarian art than was his earlier essay, which functioned more as a prophecy of an art form yet to come.

Gold's last cohesive call for proletarian art appeared in the 1930 volume of the *New Masses* and at the time of original publication was untitled; it was part of an editorial "Notes of the Month." Folsom describes this piece, later titled "Proletarian Realism"[8] as "a rationalization and codification of the views . . . published a decade earlier in the manifesto, 'Towards Proletarian Art'" (note 203). Here, Gold most systematically attempts to define proletarian art; however, Gold claims to be *describing* the elements of this art form, not *prescribing*. He delineates nine elements, which I, in brief, outline below.

> 1. [The] proletarian writer must describe . . . work with technical precision.
> 2. Proletarian realism deals with the *real conflicts* of men and women who work for a living.

3. Proletarian realism is never pointless. It . . . [always] has a social function.
4. [Proletarian literature is written in] as few words as possible.
5. [P]roletarians . . . write with the courage of [their] own experiences.
6. [Proletarian realism is] swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words.
7. [Proletarian literature does] away with drabness.
8. [Proletarian literature does] away with all lies about human nature.
9. [There is] no straining or melodrama or other effects. (207-8)

Proletarian literature, then, to Gold, was simple, honest, and useful. The last of Gold's three "proletarian essays" was published six months after Gold's primary contribution to the genre, *Jews Without Money*. Hence, Gold was able, at the same time, to act as both an intellectual theorist of the genre and a proletarian contributor to the genre, a position few other people in this cultural formation were able to occupy.

The Jew in *Jews Without Money*

Samuel Sillen, a great fan of Gold's who later published an anthology of Gold's writings, describes his fiction thus:

> The style, like the man, is direct, warm, earthy. It is the speech of the plain people, lit up with tenderness, anger, humor. The images are drawn from life, not from books about other men's lives. There is a salty impatience with the roundabout, the merely discreet. Mike is able to slash out in a sentence the

> truths which other writers often smother in pages of more reserved prose. (12)

Literary critic, Alfred Kazin, who was very critical of Gold and proletarian literature as a whole, describes Gold in the "Introduction" to the 1996 printing of *Jews Without Money* as

> a man without the slightest literary finesse, without second thoughts on anything he believes, without any knowledge of Jewish life apart from the Lower East Side. . . .Gold – dare one say it? – was a monumentally injured soul but clearly not very bright. But he had a remarkable gift for putting wholly visceral experiences into rhythmic series composed of short stabbing sentences. (3-4)

These two critics, though obviously varying widely in their estimation of Gold, use similar imagery to describe Gold's style in *Jews Without Money*; there is slashing and stabbing; there is something violent and abrupt about *Jews Without Money*. In fact, everything about the novel is violent and abrupt: its sentences, the experiences of its characters. It's an apt metaphor to see Gold as slashing and stabbing his way through a society oppressive to the working class and to see Gold trying desperately to change it. Because of the novel's importance in exposing the effects of economic deprivation on people, it was as Folsom states, "the first popular success of the movement" (7); however, it was also a lightning rod – for praise and attack.

Jews Without Money was first published in February 1930, as the gravity of the economic situation after the stock market crash was becoming more clear, and it was immediately a bestseller. It went through eleven printings by October of that year, and in combination with the publication of the Wilder essay, Gold was suddenly famous (Denning

233). He had already been well known in radical circles, particularly those left circles associated with the *New Masses*, advocating for a proletarian art, but this successful example of such art provided more credence to Gold and to the idea that a proletarian art form was possible.

Gold's telling of his childhood story had been long in the making. He published a first, much shorter draft of his story in 1917 in the final issue of *The Masses*. The novel begins just before the protagonist's, Mikey Gold's, fifth birthday; it ends when Mikey, presumably at the age of 21, encounters the soap-box orator preaching revolution.[9] The entire novel, excluding the last chapter, deals with Mikey Gold's childhood, from the age of four to eleven.[10] *Jews Without Money* is generally accepted by critics to be a "thinly-veiled autobiography" (Folsom 10); Foley reports that "Gold once stated that his text was about 85% autobiography" (293). *Jews Without Money* was both representing and forming the genre, and in it, we can see many of the genre's successes and failures. Denning writes, "*Jews Without Money* was an exhaustive catalog of the genre's motifs, incidents, and characters, as well as the embodiment of the formal contradictions that came to haunt subsequent [proletarian] novels" (233).

Questions of categorizing characters based on nationalities, races, and religions with the ultimate intent to erase such categories produced a serious challenge to Gold and other proletarian writers. Mikey experiences life in the ghetto as a Jew. Mikey's Jewishness is fundamental in both the way he defines himself and the way which other people define him. Lacking any individual power or true assimilation into American culture, these poor immigrants and their families united with those they could best relate to, those who spoke the same language or practiced the same religion. This uniting within the ghetto provided

community, support, power, and a feeling of belonging. However, these unions inevitably formed divisions, and these divisions served to obscure the commonality of experience and suffering. This uniting and dividing within the Lower East Side, then, presented unique challenges for Gold and other proletarian writers; to appeal to a working-class audience, they would have to portray life as it really was in these neighborhoods, but to achieve the goal of raising a working-class consciousness, they would have to demonstrate that the people's similarities were greater than their differences, and the only true power they could obtain would be to unite together *as a class*.

At the age of 12, Mikey lands his first job as an errand boy; however, he didn't make it through the first day. Gold writes:

> The very first morning the shipping clerk, a refined Nordic, suddenly realized I was a Jew. He politely fired me. They wanted no Jews. In this city of a million Jews, there was much anti-Semitism among business firms. . . . How often did I slink out of a factory or office where a foreman said Jews were not wanted? How often was I made to remember I belonged to the accursed race, the race whose chief misfortune it is to have produced a Christ. (306)

Mikey's "Jewishness" is never far from the center of the text; in fact, it is significant that Gold titled the work <u>*Jews*</u> *Without Money*. Categorizing characters by their religion, race, or occupation may seem to run counter to Gold's explicit goal of representing a cohesive working class, but in actuality, as Denning explains, "[e]thnicity and race had become the modality through which working-class peoples experienced their lives and mapped their communities" (239). Only by coming to America, were these immigrants "ethnicized and racialized" (Denning 239). Within the Lower East Side, Gold explains, "was

a world plunged in eternal war. It was suicide to walk into the next block" (*Jews* 42); further he writes:

> This [walking into another neighborhood] was the signal for a mass assault on the unlucky foreigner, with sticks, stones, fists, and feet. . . .We did it to others, they did it to us. It was patriotism, though what difference there was between one East Side block and another is now hard to see. (*Jews* 43)

Gold asserts that the lower East Side is a "geology" (qtd. in Denning 247); that is, the manifestation of neighborhoods divided by ethnicities and race reveal a history of immigration to America by varied people who came for a common goal, a better life, but who found only poverty and oppression.

The emphasis on race and ethnicity in *Jews Without Money* provided a problem for Gold and proletarian critics. To many, Gold's work was significant not because it was one of the first American novels to accurately portray the experiences of the working class, but because it was one of the first to portray the experiences of poor Jews, and this emphasis was not Gold's goal. Denning explains that Gold's work and others like it, such as Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, were often seen as Jewish tales or "minor regional forms[s]" (Denning 237). Although Gold attempts to show the commonality of the working class, many argue he only successfully shows the impossibility of such a thing as a cohesive working class, as this "class" is clearly divided by factors such as race and religion. Burke takes this division further:

> A proletarian is defined, by abstraction, as a worker of a certain sort. But he is obviously many other things as well: a particular endoctrine combination,

> for instance, an “introvert” or “extravert,” a man who did or did not have a bad attack of measles in his childhood. (*Permanence* 123)

However, Gold does not gloss over the differences of the working class; in fact, he fully acknowledges in *Jews Without Money* that these individual and group differences separate the working class. Where he diverges from his critics is his belief that these differences can be overcome, that there is something more important than differences in race, class, religion, or even Burke’s “endoctrine combination.” If Gold is guilty of anything in portraying the different “types” of people in *Jews Without Money*, he is guilty of optimism that the barriers to class consciousness can be overcome and the inhabitants of the Lower East Side, and by extension all other American slums, can realize that due to these divisions, they deny themselves the power that can be generated through a common purpose: to create a better life for all.

Although Gold’s primary purpose was to heighten class consciousness, Gold understood that to do this, he would have to redeem the groups marginalized even within this class. Gold fought discrimination based on race or sex, but Gold was most vehement in his defense of the Jews. Famously, he attacked Theodore Dreiser who expressed anti-Semitic views in the September 1933 *American Spectator*. Of special concern to Gold was the possibility that Dreiser’s divisive comments could harm the left movement. On the other hand, Dreiser was an important “name” writer, and by 1935 with the Popular Front movement, Dreiser was considered an important asset. Dreiser refused to retract his comments, and although the left in general was largely silent on the matter, in 1935, Gold published his response, “The Gun is Loaded, Dreiser!” In it, he accuses Dreiser of uncritically accepting the stereotype that all Jews are rich and exploit the poor. Gold rails

that this view runs absolutely counter to the Communist view and that, in fact, Dreiser himself, after a tour of the Lower East Side by Gold, had seen the Jewish tenements. It is, perhaps, primarily this standardized conception of the *Jew as rich*, furthered by Dreiser, that Gold wanted to counter with *Jews Without Money*. It was these stereotypes that interfered with the necessary precondition to the worker's revolution: the development of a class consciousness– one based on economic reality, not popular myth.

Additionally, the Jews were, by 1935 certainly, upon the second printing of *Jews Without Money*, in real danger from rising fascism in Europe, particularly Germany[11], and the left movement simply could not fight fascism with communism when its own members recognized a fundamental difference between Jews and Christians. When this happened, as in the case of Dreiser, the matter became one of religious/ethnic difference and, according to the communist model, these differences were immaterial and were subsumed under the far more important class similarities. Gold was fighting a tradition of the stereotyped Jew. Sillen, in his introduction to Gold's anthology, writes of Henry James's visit to the Lower East Side: "James's nostrils were offended, and his anti-Semitism aroused as he found himself 'at the bottom of some vast sallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of over-developed proboscis, were to bump together, for ever, amid heaped spoils of the sea'" (8). Sillen goes on to say that the "classic counter-image" is *Jews Without Money*, where "Henry James's innumerable fish prove to be warm human beings with their throbbing hurt and yearning, their tragedies and meager joys; and the aquarium turns out to be a prison-house of exploitation from which patricians draw the wherewithal to cultivate their sensibilities" (8). Jack Conroy, another writer of a successful proletarian novel, *The Disinherited*, wrote a review of *Jews Without Money* and argued that the old stereotype of the Jew was well-

known, but "it was left to Mike Gold to portray the Jews without money, the tragic proletarian Jews of New York's East Side, the sweat-shop slave, the Yiddish gangster" (qtd. in Denning 216). Gold's autobiographical character was, naturally, Jewish, but Gold's intent was to show not a character different from other working-class characters, but a character very much the same; Gold attempted to, according to Foley, "establish a specifically proletarian typicality" (298). That typicality could be Jewish, Christian, black, white, male, or female; what was important was the class affiliation, the person's position in the American hierarchical class structure. Gold writes in his "Author's Note" to *Jews Without Money*: "Jewish bankers are fascists; Jewish workers are radicals; the historic class division is true among the Jews as with any other race" (10).

Narrative Resistance in *Jews Without Money*

Questions of categorizing characters based on nationalities, races, and religions with the ultimate intent to erase such categories produced a serious challenge to Gold and other proletarian writers, but this was only one challenge among many. Gold, writing what Foley calls a "proletarian fictional autobiography," had to decide how to narrate a story that defied traditional conventions of narration. That is, nothing happened in Gold's childhood world. Of course, this isn't entirely accurate; things happened, sometimes quite shocking things, but these events did not build upon one another in a conventional narrative manner. The narrative didn't progress; the protagonist didn't grow; the setting never changed; the conflicts were never resolved. Each day was another day in the tenements where families and individuals starved and fought and tried to survive. Gold, to produce a novel-length account of such fixedness, had to violate many traditions of narration. Denning writes,

"Stories . . . come from travels, adventures, romances, holidays, events: interruptions of the daily grind" (244). Because there were no interruptions of the daily grind in Gold's East Side neighborhood, Denning asks, "Were there *stories* in the monotonous routines of work, in the childhoods without futures, in the bleak sweatshops and tenements?"(244).

Jews Without Money is less a cohesive story of a childhood and more a series of brief stories – largely unconnected except for the fact that they take place in the same East Side tenement. Both Foley and Denning refer to these brief stories as "sketches"; Foley explains that a sketch was "produced within the ranks of proletarianism itself. . . .[a] product of the 1920s Proletkult radicalism"; she characterizes the sketch as "brief and unbellished, depict[ing] one or several stages in the worker-author's growth toward revolutionary class consciousness (286). Gold, as mentioned earlier, had produced "sketches" of his childhood as early as November 1917, and *Jews Without Money* seems to be almost an anthology of these sketches arranged in roughly chronological order and fused together by a narrator who comments on the significance of the events – this narrator, unlike the young protagonist, Mikey Gold, has the advantage of understanding tenement experience though the lens of revolutionary politics; the older, wiser narrator is unmistakably the real Mike Gold.

The chapters in *Jews Without Money* address either particular events or certain themes. Every chapter also contains commentary by the narrator, commentary designed to affect the reader's interpretation. For instance, in Chapter One, "Fifty Cents a Night," the young Mikey Gold, not yet five, decides, with his "gang of Yids," to harass the prostitutes on his street for fun. After yelling, "Fifty cents a night! That's what you charge; fifty cents a night!" Mikey receives a beating from his father (17). At the end of the episode, the narrator comments: "Vain beating; the East Side street could not be banished with a leather strap. It

was my world. . . .We had to live in it, and learn what it chose to teach us" (19). In Chapter Five, "Did God Make Bedbugs?" Mikey tells of his days at a Jewish religious school. Here, Mikey is told that God made everything in the world, and Mikey wonders if God even made such evil things as bedbugs. Mikey describes sleeping in a bed crawling with bedbugs and the continuous battles his mother would wage – unsuccessfully – with these creatures. The older narrator, in parenthesis upon first mention of bedbugs, comments that "([b]edbugs are what people mean when they say: Poverty. There are enough pleasant superficial liars writing in America. I will write a truthful book of Poverty; I will mention bedbugs)" (71).

Gold's work, then, with its disconnected "episodes," its intrusive narrator, its lack of narrative progress, and as always, its problematic ending, have caused many critics to assert that *Jews Without Money* is representative of all that is wrong with proletarian literature. This work and other proletarian works, critics such as Philip Rahv, James Farrell, Alfred Kazin, etc. argue violate established canons of literary aesthetics. Gold is seen to have disregarded literary concerns in favor of communicating what life is really like in the tenements, and, importantly, of neatly resolving the complex issue of poverty with a miraculous conversion ending. Gold, however, was trying to establish a new literature, and with this literature accomplish a number of rhetorical goals.

To Gold, the old criterion was not only unsuitable for this new literature, but in fact it restricted its authors' abilities to tell the truths of the working class. Foley explains that "Gold's often-quoted remark that '[t]echnique makes cowards of us all' did not mean that craft was unimportant, but that . . . [proletarian] writers should not feel obligated to emulate bourgeois stylistic models" (91). Denning goes on to assert that many left-wing critics and writers thought that even established literary genres were not appropriate for this new art

form. Kyle Crichton, a *New Masses* critic, asserted that proletarian writers should "show their independence of old forms"; they should attempt "reportage, autobiography, comment, philosophy and even nonsensicality" (qtd. in Denning 241). Gold chose a conglomeration of different modes – novel, autobiography, the "sketch," etc. – and through this mishmash of forms and styles, Gold created his contribution to proletarian literature.

Gold faced a number of challenges in writing *Jews Without Money*: he had to appeal to a widely diverse audience, as the success of a worker's revolution had always been predicated on help to the proletariat from those sympathetic with the cause, the middle class and intellectuals. Additionally, he had to portray realistically working-class experience; he had to attempt to develop certain realizations in his audience, including the facts that working-class miseries are due to the economic system and that cohesion with the working class is the answer; and, lastly, he had to provide if not resolution, hope. Given these difficulties, Gold may very well have been guilty of many of the charges brought against him in this work; however, he also managed to achieve a number of important objectives and, by doing so, *Jews Without Money* was in many ways a success. Janet Galligani Casey acknowledges the difficulty of finding an appropriate narrative style to communicate the "static reality of workers"; and Foley argues that Gold's loosely connected sketches work to communicate this static reality (Casey xi; Foley 296). Foley asserts the "accumulated episodes function not so much to explain the protagonist's development as to provide as wide-ranging a portrait of oppression as possible"; further, Foley writes the repetition of "happenings" serves to "underscore the oppressiveness of ghetto life" (296). Renny Christopher and Carolyn Whitson, who attempt to theorize working-class literature in general, write that

> [working-class writers] attempt to reproduce the boredom of sameness, of mindless repetition, of humans acting as machinery. . . .They spin narratives of starvation, of job search, of standing in welfare lines. These narratives of waiting for change – because you're paralyzed or without options – often have a style that dilates time and mimics the state of consciousness that an inoperative machine produces. (73-74)

In the very fact that nothing happens, that each chapter simply tells another story of a day in a young boy's life in the tenements, Gold's novel succeeds in communicating the general repetition, the sameness, the lack of hope and progress found in the American slums. Gold's working-class readers would recognize their own plights and their neighbors'; Gold's middle-class and intellectual readers would, Gold hoped, understand better the miseries inflicted upon millions by an unjust economic system and the cultural superstructure it supports.

The Collective Component in *Jews Without Money*

Since the ultimate goal of any proletarian work, according to Gold, would be to demonstrate – or at least suggest – class cohesion, Gold in *Jews Without Money* had to universalize, at least among the working poor, the experiences of a young, Jewish boy growing up in the Lower East side of New York. However, to do this, Gold had to fight against an entire American literary tradition that, as Jon-Christian Suggs puts it, had always set up an "oppositional structure" between the individual and society and "which generally records an American flight from rather than toward collective experience" (159). Foley claims that *Jews Without Money* is a hybrid form she calls the Proletarian Fictional

Autobiography that "draws to a significant degree upon the model of the bildungsroman, or novel of education" (284); however, the emphasis changes in a proletarian bildungsroman. Instead of the traditional education of the protagonist in his or her individuality, the protagonist of the proletarian form is educated in his or her commonality with others. Foley explains:

> Proletarian fictional autobiographies, like bildungsromans, posit the synecdochic relation of their protagonists to their social groups. But they speak for a collective, not an individual self. As Mike Gold put it [in "Towards Proletarian Art"] . . . "The tenement is in my blood. When I think it is tenement thinking. When I hope it is tenement hoping. I am not an individual; I am all the tenement group poured into me during those early years of my spiritual travail." (284)

The reader, then, is meant to undergo a similar "education"; in *Jews Without Money*, the reader is meant to identify with Mikey as part of an oppressed class. Mikey Gold is merely the vehicle that allows the readers to understand their condition, their position as part of a class system, either being oppressed or oppressing others.

Although Gold's novel does have an individual protagonist, Mikey Gold's experiences and observations are generalized by the narrator. After Mikey describes his neighbors, the prostitutes and pimps, and comments that his "parents hated all this filth," the narrator states, "[i]t's impossible to live in a tenement without being mixed up with the tragedies and cockroaches of one's neighbors" (30). After the young Mikey's sister, Esther, dies, the narrator observes, "Joy and grief were social in a tenement" (283). The reader is

never able to forget that Mikey's experiences are only a microcosm of the larger experiences of the poor and that life in the working class is necessarily social.

Gold and other proletarian authors, however, face a contradiction in the rhetorical work they need the protagonist to accomplish. On one hand, the protagonist has to serve as a representative member of the working class, but on the other hand, the protagonist has to usher the way to a revolutionary consciousness. This deviation from the masses would, by default, mark these protagonists as exceptional and their exceptionality highlights individuality, not sameness. That is, the protagonists had to be remarkable but not so remarkable as to appear fundamentally different from other characters of the same class. Foley notes that the protagonist had to illustrate that "revolutionary class consciousness is the product of choice" (296), and "subjectivity . . . emerges as distinctive to the degree that it perceives its own agency in the revolutionary process" (298).

It is the protagonists' dawning awareness that there is an alternative to the tenements and potential for change that complicates so much of this literature. It is this revolutionary element that results in deviations from experienced reality and the often awkward endings of these stories. In *Jews Without Money*, Mikey's revolutionary consciousness is immediate upon encountering the radical speaker. Mikey, hitherto no different from his family or neighbors, suddenly understands that a revolution is at hand and that a new society will replace the old. This "conversion" seems disconnected, out of joint with the rest of the novel. Upon consideration, however, of Gold's tasks – to represent working-class life realistically but also to ultimately provide a solution to the miseries of poverty – one better understands this deviation from realism. For instance, after an unfortunate accident with fireworks, Mikey was plagued by nightmares. His mother sought help from a traditional

“medicine woman” from the old country who used chants and symbolic rituals for medicine. Eventually, young Mikey was cured of his nightmares, and the older, narrator Gold tells the reader:

> The nightmare did not return. I woke no longer screaming in the night. Yet I was skeptical, and could not believe in magic. . . .But I was cured. . . .I never told my friends, I was too ashamed. But I marveled that summer, and not even my parents could explain it all. They had not heard of the greater magic: *Suggestion*. (emphasis added; (146-47)

Gold, like the medicine woman in his novel, uses the magic of suggestion to appeal to his audience. Gold does not explain how the protagonist develops a revolutionary consciousness; he does not explain how the revolution will take place or when; he merely suggests that there is an alternative to a life of poverty and misery, an option to accepting as inevitable one’s lot in life.

If one considers Gold’s text in this light, that the ending of *Jews Without Money* implies a beginning of another sort, a beginning perhaps not yet well defined, the ending becomes less problematic. Gold’s novel is intentionally experimental; Gold was creating something new. The ending is, in many ways, consistent with the rest of the novel, and Gold, in fact, deftly negotiates a number of competing tensions. The novel as a whole resists traditional narrative technique, and the ending resists traditional narrative closure. Gold manages to avoid an ending altogether and, instead, suggests another beginning. The novel also must reconcile competing ideas of individuality and community, and when Mikey separates himself from his tenement community by developing a revolutionary

consciousness, he joins the community of radicals, a community Gold hopes will be the new community of all working-class peoples. From a tale of poverty and suffering, Gold manages to end *Jews Without Money* with an emphasis on beginnings, communities, and hope for the future.

Gold's Other Fiction

Jews Without Money is retrospectively recognized as a typical proletarian novel. It is, much like other successful proletarian novels, such as Conroy's *The Disinherited*, a largely autobiographical tale told by a young protagonist whose childhood is infused with poverty and suffering and who ultimately finds redemption in the revolutionary model. This novel type details the miseries of the poor, demonstrates the similarities of the class, and suggests a solution to poverty and oppression. Although the ultimate rhetorical goals were always the same -- develop class consciousness and hasten the revolution -- often the goals of the different proletarian types of fiction differed in emphasis.

Another widely recognized – and criticized – proletarian fiction form is deemed the "strike narrative." Where Gold's "ghetto" novel emphasizes the misery and hopelessness of the poor, the strike narratives emphasize the strength of an organized working class; where *Jews Without Money* showed characters who were passive victims of a cruel system, Gold's strike narratives showed active characters fighting for change. Strike novels avoided some of the difficulties found in a narrative like Gold's *Jews Without Money*, but they magnified others.

"A Damned Agitator" was one of Gold's earliest publications, published well before any of his proletarian essays, yet it illustrates characteristics and complications of the strike

narrative. Gold published “A Damned Agitator” in the Socialist magazine, the *New York Call*, in 1917. Folsom notes that it became one of Gold’s “most popular stories” and, in fact, it was revised and republished multiple times throughout Gold’s career (n24). The story opens in the middle of a strike that has been ongoing for seven weeks; the narrator establishes immediately that things are not going well for the strikers as “company officials were growing more and more militant” and “the strikers themselves were drifting into a settled state of depression and dangerous self-distrust” (24). The focus shifts to the story’s main character, Kurelovitch, a worker who had become a leader and an inspiration to the strikers. Gold describes him as “a tall, tragic, rough-hewn Pole, who had been suddenly hammered into leadership by the crisis of the strike, by reason of his unquenchable integrity and social fire” (25). The plot is simple. Kurelovitch awakens early, as he has every other day for seven weeks, and leaves his wife and four children with little to eat; he goes to the strike site where he faces gunmen hired by the company, whose “mission in life” was to “break strikes and to murder,” and he also faces disillusioned strikers (27). Kurelovitch steps onto a platform and delivers a rousing speech which ends with Marx’s famous lines: “Workingmen of the world, unite; we have nothing to lose but our chains; we have a world to gain!” (29). The strikers are reinvigorated by the speech, and Kurelovitch continues to work at the strike site until late that evening, when he returns home to an infuriated wife who claims that Kurelovitch is starving her and her children. Kurelovitch is torn with guilt for the condition of his family, but, ultimately, he is infused with resolve in the rightness of his cause. He sleeps to awaken the next day and continue in the fight.

The proletarian strike story, represented here by Gold’s short story, manages to avoid some of the complications of the longer, ghetto novel. Although not much happens in this

story, the narrative is more traditional in that there is a plot – a beginning and an end – and a resolution of sorts of the narrative conflict. The main character is also better defined as a dynamic individual defined against both the enemy (the company men) and the ally (fellow strikers). The primary narrative conflict in this tale is not Kurelovitch's conflict with the company men, or capitalism itself– that remains unresolved – but Kurelovitch's conflict with himself. He must choose between sacrificing his fight for the good of his family or recognizing that the fight is worth temporary hardship, even severe hardships, for both himself and those he loves. He chooses the latter. As stated earlier, Denning questions whether stories exist in the monotony of ghetto life; it is this lack of movement that poses a problem for the proletarian ghetto novel. Denning notes, however, "the strike novel [uses] the interruption of work, a festival of the oppressed, as a solution" (244).

The strike narrative also avoids the complications implicit in the "conversion endings" of the proletarian ghetto novels. In "A Damned Agitator," Kurelovitch is a radical from the first paragraph; the ending follows logically from the rest of the story. Additionally, given its conventional narrative structure, the strike novel exhibits a cohesiveness that is often missing in the "sketches" of life in proletarian novels.

Although the strike narrative manages to avoid certain complications found in other proletarian types, it invites others. One common charge against Gold and other proletarian writers and critics was that they engaged in what Foley calls "ouvrierism" or "workerism," which is, as Foley explains, "promotion of an essentialist and romantic conception of the working class" (96**,** 95). Hand in hand with this romanticizing of the working class was the demonizing of those not in – or not sympathetic to – the working class. Although Gold is guilty of this oversimplification, given his rhetorical tasks, one can understand the effort

Gold made to, as Burke would say, establish new ways of identifying. The emphasis in the strike novel was to establish connections between the working class and radical action. In *Jews Without Money*, Gold wanted his working and middle-class readers to identify with Mikey and the other working-class characters; in "A Damned Agitator," Gold had, perhaps, a more complicated task. He wanted working-class readers to identify with Kurelovitch and the other strikers.

This effort to encourage working-class readers to identify with radicals presents a problem similar to that Gold faced in *Jews Without Money* – how to emphasize collective identification rather than individualism. As was often the case in the strike story, as illustrated by Gold's "A Damned Agitator," the reader was urged to recognize the class struggle as the fundamental consideration of life. Although fighting for the future of the entire working class, Kurelovitch must, in the immediate sense, choose the needs of the strikers over the needs of his own family. Suggs addresses this dilemma:

> [H]ow can the worker define and maintain his own class interests when the clearest medium available to him, the labor strike, may cause even greater hardship to his family? . . . .[H]is loyalty must be transferred from family to class. (158)

Gold, however, is presenting Kurelovitch as the ideal worker. The other workers in the tale followed Kurelovitch ; they participated in the strike; they recognized their common goal, but the reader does not see these workers having to choose so directly between options. Burke in discussing the analysis of historical documents observes that any piece of literature can be treated as "*a strategy for encompassing a situation*. . . .as the *answer* or *rejoinder* to assertions current in the situation" ("Philosophy" 109). The proletarian strike narratives

provide a basic strategy for dealing with widespread poverty and misery of the working class: join together and fight for a better life.

Gold produced other short fiction, much designed as a vehicle primarily for social commentary, as is the case with "Love On a Garbage Dump," published in *New Masses* in 1928. Folsom notes that this story also illustrates a common problem found in proletarian fiction, that there is often "no clear sense of the distinction between fiction and autobiographical fact" (note 177 – fix citation), and, one might add, between journalistic reporting and storytelling. Gold describes the Boston dump in such detail, similar to a report "a plain 200 acres square, containing no trees. . . .Hills of rotten fish dot this plain; there are also mountains of rusty tomato cans" (178). He comments on the people he finds there: "I am always sorry for these mental freaks one meets among the workers. . . .with this dangerous combination of Napoleonic ambition and kindergarten learning, they are shot into factories, mills, and mines, to be hopeless wage slaves for life" (180). And he tells the story of the protagonist meeting Concha on the dump, only to find later that she is a prostitute. This proletarian hybrid short story, like others of Gold's, such as "God is Love," functions in ways similar to both the ghetto novel, *Jews Without Money*, and the strike narrative, "A Damned Agitator." Like *Jews Without Money*, Gold is able to describe poverty not in abstractions, but in concrete images; he is able to show the distortion of people subjected to constant deprivation. Additionally, he is able to show resistance, as he does in "A Damned Agitator." The protagonist in "Love on a Garbage Dump" eschews bourgeois values and recognizes his kinship with Concha, who is forced into prostitution, and with all other members of the working-class oppressed.

Legacy of Gold's Fiction

Gold, given his central role in the movement, understood that his proletarian fiction contributions would be viewed by many as representatives of proletarian fiction in general. He also, no doubt, knew that there were weaknesses and unresolved dilemmas in his fiction. However, as Seaver explained at the First American Writers' Congress in 1935, "The proletarian novelist in the U.S. is, at least in part, destructive in his work" (7); he goes on to say that "[p]roletarian literature in the U.S. . . . has its roots in the future" (8). Gold's job, then, was two-fold: to symbolically destroy an established but no longer viable economic and cultural system and to suggest or create an alternative.

Does Gold's fiction succeed in its destructive *and* creative work? In some ways, yes, and in some ways, no. Denning writes that fellow proletarian writer, Martin Levy, wrote a review of *Jews Without Money*, published in the *New Republic*, in which he claims the novel "was a failure when judged by the standards of proletarian literature"; Denning explains that Levy objected to Gold's omissions of political demonstrations that did occur during Gold's childhood in the East Side (qtd. in Denning 236). Gold responded, "I could do nothing else honestly and emotionally at the time. I could only describe what I had seen with my own eyes . . . I do not believe any good writing can come out of this mechanical application of the spirit of proletarian literature" (qtd. in Denning 236). Gold was evidently aware that his work could not encompass all the needs of a proletarian literary movement. Gold realized that to include political demonstrations, for instance, in *Jews Without Money* would have disrupted the, admittedly fractured, narrative of childhood in the slums of Lower East Side New York. Gold contributed to the movement; he did not intend his fiction to constitute the movement.

Gold rejected flatly the criticism that proletarian art was a failure because it did not meet the standards of traditional art. He had nothing but disdain for critics who "sneer at the idea of proletarian literature," who characterize it as something simple, romantic, and naïve (Gold, "Proletarian" 203). Folsom echoes Gold's position on those who would judge proletarian literature untenable as a serious art form; Folsom writes, "(It is perfectly reputable to devote academic passions to the study of aristocratic poems about shepherd poets, but the very suggestion of farmers writing sonnets elicits snickers)" (8). Gold addresses this elitism in *Jews Without Money*. After the young Mikey discovers his aunt sick in bed from overwork in a sweatshop, he runs to the music store to buy her some sheet music at her request. She sings the songs, and both she and Mikey's mother cry at the lyrics of love and death. The older narrator responds:

> I look back at the moment. I know a cynic or a Broadway clown must have written these songs, with tongue in cheek, maybe for money. It is sophisticated to laugh at such songs. But I remember my Aunt Lena, sickened by piece-work slavery in the shop, singing them in her deep voice, I remember my mother's tears. (135)

Gold was not attempting to produce great literature; he was attempting to produce genuine literature. He was not, like the "cynic or Broadway clown," doing it for money; he was attempting to improve the lives of millions of suffering people, and he believed that to do this, he and others would have to appeal to the workers through art – to show them that their lives, their miseries, their redemption were matters for art.

The weaknesses in Gold's proletarian fiction do not obscure the strengths. Sillen who lived through the proletarian art movement wrote of the 1920s that "[i]n those days of

eternal prosperity the literary scene was dominated by various cults of escapism and cynicism. . . .[Gold] anatomized the wastelanders; he showed us an alternative" (10). Foley asserts that Gold's *Jews Without Money* and other proletarian novels were "making a statement against elitism" (91) and demonstrating "visions of human possibility" (445). Folsom credits Gold with bringing Folsom and many other radicals into the movement with "hot words and simple stories about the daily fight – words and stories which lived in a way that deadly political harangues and hair-splitting argument never did, and never will" (15). Gold knew that many of the sophisticates would laugh at his work, but he always had in mind the persuasive power of art to affect people like his Aunt Lena and his mother, and to accurately judge Gold's fiction, one must bear in mind the politics – and the hope – that was always behind it.

Notes for Chapter Three

[1] The text used is the Third Carroll & Graf edition, published in 2004; the novel, minus the introduction and author's note, has 296 total pages.

[2] Burke's "planned incongruity" denotes a conscious attempt to establish new verbal linkages in order to shatter, or break through, traditional associations. To Burke, this was necessary because often old associations or orientations proved no longer useful.

[3] I will discuss Burke's criticism of proletarian literature and its advocates in Chapter Four.

[4] Leon Trotsky in *Literature and Revolution* makes a similar argument. Trotsky argues that because there will be no class distinction after a successful revolution, there will be no class-distinct art, such as proletarian art.

[5] I will discuss the ensuing debates begun by this essay in Chapter Four.

[6] Wilder was not the only target of Gold's accusations; Gold also attacked Ernest Hemingway as a writer of bourgeois literature. I will examine Gold's attacks on these and other authors in depth in Chapter Four.

[7] "America Needs a Critic," *New Masses*, 1926**.**

[8] Gold, himself, calls this art "proletarian realism" within the essay.

[9] Although the age of the protagonist at the end of the story is never made clear, Gold himself was 21 years of age when he encountered radicalism, and the book is believed to be largely autobiographical.

[10] Denning states the novel dealt with the "adventures of young Mikey between the ages of five and seven"; however, the age of the protagonist is not entirely clear through most of the novel, and Mikey does identify himself as eleven years old prior to the final chapter (233).

[11] Lee Bernstein in "The Avengers of Christie Street: Racism and Jewish Working-Class Rebellion in Mike Gold's *Jews Without Money*" argues that the first printing of *Jews* in 1930 was primarily as an example of proletarian realism, while the second printing in 1935 served primarily as a "powerful counterargument to anti-Semitic beliefs that Jews controlled banks and international finance" (129). This difference of emphasis, Bernstein argues, is due exclusively to the changing international

political context. By 1935, Hitler was securely in power in Germany. Gold, himself, acknowledges this extraordinarily important contextual shift in his "Author's Note" included in the 1935 printing. The importance of countering the prevailing stereotype of the Jew had become tremendously important. Gold writes:

> A German friend told me recently in New York about her arrest by the Nazis. It was a week or so after Hitler had taken power and had begun his great lynching party against liberals, radicals and Jews.
>
> The dark ages had returned; modern thought was again burning in the flames of the new inquisition, the Jews again afflicted with the yellow badge of shame.
>
> My friend, a radical, expected a visit from the Brown Shirts, but as calmly as possible continued literary work. It happened that she was translating a chapter from my book, "Jews Without Money," when armed Nazis finally broke in. The officer picked up some sheets of her manuscript, and read, "Jews Without Money."
>
> "Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "So there are Jews without money!" And all the Brown Shirts laughed with him at the marvelous joke. How could there be Jews without money, when as every good Nazi knew with Hitler, Jews were all international bankers? (9)

Chapter 4

Rebel With a Cause: Gold's Advocacy for Proletarian Art

In this chapter, I will illustrate the complexity of the left literary debates of the 1920s and 1930s. I will explore how important events and conditions, including the Sacco-Vanzetti Case and the mainstream media, influenced the development of proletarian art. I will present the primary criticisms of Gold and proletarian literature, then counter this criticism by presenting a fuller picture of Gold and his developing ideas.

Mike Gold and other leftist writers and critics struggled throughout the 1920s and 1930s with one fundamental question: What is the role of art in social change? The discussions and debates revolved around seeming dichotomies: politics versus aesthetics, content versus craft, collective versus individual, "man of action" versus "contemplative man," and revolutionary art versus "pure" art. In reality, the arguments forged by the different leftist camps were often far more complex than these binaries; most of the arguments were arguments of degree, best understood in relation to the others.

In 1930, the Southern Agrarians, a group of cultural and literary critics most associated with Vanderbilt University, published a manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, decrying industrial capitalism and arguing for a return to traditional southern values. Although the Agrarians were not part of the left, I include this group because they were very actively participated in the literary debates of the time period. Additionally, the Agrarians best represent the "art for art's sake" position: many members (including John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Allen Tate) would later form the core of the New Critics, a school

of thought arguing for the inherent value of literature unconnected to anything outside itself. Tate, in his 1933 "Poetry and Politics," published in the *New Republic*, argues that poetry is "neither science nor politics" but is "positively . . . a fine art" (308); further he asserts that when a writer tries to combine science or politics with art, "[w]e get neither art nor politics; we get heresy" (310). Ransom, in his 1937 essay, "Criticism, Inc.," agrees with Tate, arguing that the idea that art be measured by audience response is "odious . . . because it denies the autonomy of the artist as one who interests himself in the artistic object in his own right, and likewise the autonomy of the work itself existing for its own sake" (324).

Max Eastman occupied a far more crowded middle ground[1]; he condemns extremists of any stripe. Eastman asserts that "[b]oth shouts of art as propaganda and 'art for art's sake' are symptoms of a troubled condition," the condition being the attempt to limit or narrowly define the function of art (*Art* 6). Further, Eastman maintains that "all art is impractical to an extent" (*Art* 7) and "[a]rt has always had a purposive element" (*Art* 19). Kenneth Burke opens his 1931 essay "Program" with the following lines: "Art -- 'eternal' in so far as it deals with the constants of humanity. . . . But art is also historical -- a particular mode of adjustment to a particular cluster of conditions" (107). Burke's concern was how best to create art to produce attitudes in readers most beneficial to society. Similarly, Edmund Wilson argues that art needs to grow out of the present to meet immediate needs, but also that art may take many different forms, including traditional forms.

Mike Gold and the proletarians, including Joseph Freeman, Granville Hicks, Jack Conroy, Edwin Seaver, Isidor Schneider, and others,[2] believed that, given the dire situation of American society throughout the 1930s,[3] to concern oneself with "pure art" was irresponsible; art needed to be employed in the service of the oppressed. The proletarians

best represent the “art as politics” position. Hicks admits in his review of *New Letters in America*[4] that contemporary worker’s art violates many standards of traditional art, but he argues that *at this time*, truth is more important than technique, and Gold writes, “[Art] is not a child of eternity, but of time. . . . It is not any more mystic in its origin than a ham sandwich” (“Go” 186). To Gold, in order for a successful economic revolution to take place, there would have to be an accompanying, or even a preceding, cultural revolution – a revolution that would be encouraged through proletarian art.

Even with the sometimes vast differences in opinions, generally all the left critics and writers agreed on certain things: 1) society is sick and many people are suffering; 2) a change is needed to restore society to health; and 3) art is important, regardless of its role as rhetoric or not. The debates were usually not about *what* needed to be done – for a time, almost everyone[5] agreed the establishment of a communal society was the answer – but *how* to do it. An illustration published in *The Masses* in a February 1912 editorial[6] predicts the stalemate situation of the 1920s and 1930s literary debates:

> Suppose a group of people are going from New York to Chicago. They all know it is to their advantage to travel together, but at the same time each one separately has made up his own mind, definitely and positively, what road he wants to travel by. Some want to go by the Erie, some by the New York Central, and others by the Pennsylvania. They come together, not for the purpose of selecting a road which would be acceptable to all, but for the sole object of inducing the other fellows to travel by their chosen road. They spend many days fighting about the road, but finally they break, and each travels his own way. (3)

Proletarian Parlor

The literary debates of the 1920s and 1930s were not academic debates engaged in by "ivory tower" intellectuals; the debates were a direct result of specific events and conditions in the years immediately prior to and during the period of study. Although radical politics and literature were being combined and discussed throughout the period of *The Masses*, 1911-1917, the primary stimuli for the 20s and 30s debates can be dated from the year that *The Masses* ceased publication.

1917 was a watershed year in American radical politics. The U.S. declared war on the Axis powers, and with this war, suspicion of immigrants and radicals increased. The government passed two highly controversial laws, designed to quell radical activity—the Espionage and Sedition Acts; these laws were then used to deport suspected radicals, often without trials, shut down radical presses, and threaten and intimidate those engaged in other radical activities. *The Masses* and its editors were prosecuted under the Sedition Act (unsuccessfully) and forced to cease publication. In addition to the unrest in the United States, in October of 1917, Lenin and his Bolsheviks successfully gained leadership of Russia and set to work creating a communist society. Although hailed as a grand achievement by American radicals, the success of the Bolshevik revolution only added to American paranoia. With the "Red Scare" of 1917-1920, the government increased its efforts to deport undesirable aliens and silence troublesome natives (*Sacco*).

This government overreaction to radical activity is perhaps best exemplified by the Sacco and Vanzetti case. In 1920, two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were accused of murdering two factory pay clerks. The prosecutor had no real evidence to link Sacco or Vanzetti to the crime, but he did establish in court that the two

men were immigrant anarchists who had fled to Mexico to avoid being drafted into WWI (*Sacco*). To many, it was Sacco and Vanzetti's immigrant status and radical affiliation that resulted in their conviction and execution, not their participation in the crime. Gold had met Vanzetti during a strike from 1914-1915 and was, therefore, committed to the fight from the start (Folsom 148). Most of the later leftist critics and writers, however, did not get interested in the case until immediately before the two men were executed in 1927. Aaron explains that their execution ignited the passions of many important leftist writers and critics: John Dos Passos, Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and others. Aaron quotes Cowley from a 1935 *New Republic* article:

> The intelligentsia was "going left"; it was becoming friendly with the Communists; it was discussing the need for a new American revolution. All sorts of people tried to explain this development in all sorts of contradictory fashions, some of which were partly true. Almost nobody mentioned the obvious fact that, whatever else it might be, it was also a sequel to the Sacco-Vanzetti case. (173)

Gold published an "eleventh hour report of the battle" in the September 1927 *New Masses* (Folsom n148). The report appeared in print right after the two men were executed. Gold describes a city in turmoil: "The entire State militia has been brought to Boston and is quartered on the alert in the armories. The police are on 24-hour watch, equipped with machine guns, tear-gas bombs, and armored cars" (149). Gold draws a sharp distinction between the lynchers, those "well-spoken Harvard graduates in frockcoats," and the rest, those without power to stop the murder: "Jewish needle-trade workers and Communists from New York. . . . young Finnish working girls. . . . iron workers, sailors, jewelry workers,

barbers, bakers, educators, agitators and waiters" ("Lynchers" 150). After the execution, the case served as a rallying point for radicals and a clear illustration of the powerlessness of the poor when faced with the authority of the State. Gold writes in the October 1927 issue of the *New Masses*, under the title, "Sacco-Vanzetti – A Symposium": "There is no white virgin daughter of Platonic perfection living in this bad world and named: "Justice." There is a bloody battle between classes, and one side wins or the other, and the victory is Class Justice. . . . In America, rebel workingmen are burned in an electric chair" (7).

The big presses maintained that America was, however, a country of fairness, equality, and justice. An unnamed editorialist for the *Boston Globe*, after a second trial of Sacco-Vanzetti but before their execution, wrote, "Upon the conclusion now reached, we can afford to stand and tell the rest of the world that we are executing these two men because we believe them guilty of an atrocious murder and not because of their political or other views or of their attitude toward the war" (qtd. in Watson 323). The left, to make their counter points clear, had to offset these pervasive messages. The interpretation of national events, such as the Sacco-Vanzetti case, was one concern; however, the spin of international events was also a primary concern. Where the American radicals were exuberant about the Russian Revolution and inspired by the attempted revolutions in Mexico and Spain, they were almost uniformly opposed to the war that dominated America's attention from 1917 to 1919, and the world's attention even earlier—World War I. Upom America's entrance into the war in 1917, feelings of patriotism spread through the country. Men enlisted en masse and American flags seemed omnipresent. The mainstream American press fanned the fires of patriotic feeling, and the radical presses attempted to counter the messages produced by a press that dwarfed them in size and reach. Although radical positions were often generated

internally in the left, many messages were formed directly in reaction to the positions represented by the capitalist newspapers and magazines – the newspapers and magazines consumed by the vast majority of Americans.

By the thirties, *The Saturday Evening Post*,, as Kathryne V. Lingberg asserts, "seemed [to be] America itself" (55). By 1929, the *Post* approximated weekly direct subscriptions of almost 3 million (Lindberg 57). By contrast, at its peak, the *New Masses* reached a circulation number of 25,000.[7] With this level of dedicated readership, the *Post* was able to mold public opinion in a way that the radical presses could not, and, of course, the *Post* was just one among many mainstream presses with readerships in the millions. Lindberg comments, "It is most important to recognize the successful manipulation of all writing within the agencies of official culture by news agencies and mass-circulation magazines, which were rather transparently Big Business" (58). Upton Sinclair attempted to make visible the political and cultural agendas present in mainstream presses with his 1919 work, *Brass Check*:

> From the point of view of the literary business man, these Curtis publications [the press empire that owned the *Post* along with many other mainstream publications] are perfection. They read your manuscripts promptly, and pay the very highest price upon acceptance. So they are the goal of every young writer's ambition, and the most corrupting force in American letters. Their stuff is as standardized as soda crackers; originality is taboo, new ideas are treason, social sympathy a crime. (qtd. in Lindberg 59)

Not only, then, were the big presses able to reach millions of people every day; they were also able to court the best writers. Gold, when he encourages young writers to "go left,"

addresses the lure of the big presses: “If [the writer] gets tangled up in the other thing he will make some money, maybe, but he will lose everything else. Neither the *Saturday Evening Post* or the *Nation* can any longer nourish the free heroic soul” (“Go” 188).

The radical presses, such as *The Masses*, the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker*, were at war with giants, and one fundamental goal of these subversive presses and their writers and editors was to expose the big presses’ “various masks of disinterest” (Lindberg 62). The *Post*, for example, was so pervasive and made such sustained claims of objectivity in reporting, that the biases were often invisible to the general reading public. But, as Sinclair pointed out, the mass publications were guided by politics and class interests, though hidden, every bit as much as the radical publications whose politics were highly visible. In March 1913, Eastman’s “Knowledge and Revolution” column in *The Masses* includes a brief paragraph under the title “Advertisement.” He writes only the following three sentences: “*The New York Times* is printing arguments in favor of child labor. Read them. They are good for your class consciousness” (1). Eastman again attempts to expose the biases of the major presses in an editorial published in April 1914, the issue Gold first encountered:

> The papers made a great point of the fact that a Baltimore society girl was married to a physician who is a Socialist. Since the views of the participants are important, why not tell the rest: The bride’s mother is a Catholic, her father a Jeffersonian Democrat and a bridge player. The minister is a conservative Progressive Republican, and the best man a bookkeeper and Mason. The six bridesmaids are, respectively, a suffragist, an anti, a Daughter of the Revolution, a Sunday-school teacher, the treasurer of a literary club,

> and a beautiful and accomplished daughter fond of outdoor sports. The sexton is in favor of large families and the organist thinks that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. The flower girl believes in Santa Claus. (9)

Even after the *Partisan Review* became an anti-Stalinis press and, therefore, broke with the *New Masses* and its advocates, the *Partisan Review* editors also fought to expose the biases of the mainstream presses. In an editorial in the April 1938 issue, Dwight McDonald writes, "*Time* has a ticklish editorial task: to give the news an upper-class angle without appearing to violate the creed of 'objectivity'" (60); further he writes that "[t]he well-fed, well-heeled members of the *Time* Community insist that their spokesmen fight for their class interests by denying the existence of class struggle" (60).

Given the difference in resources and reach, it would seem as though small publications like *The Masses* or the *New Masses* would be dismissed -- or even entirely ignored -- by the publication giants. However, this is not the case. Not only did the U. S. government find *The Masses* to be such a threat that it prosecuted the editors for violating the Sedition Act, twice, the *Associated Press* and its allies also pursued charges, for libel, against editor Max Eastman and cartoonist Art Young. The 1913 libel charges came in response to one paragraph in an Eastman editorial that claimed the AP was affiliated with owners of the mines who were responsible for "the bloody suppression of miners' strikes in Colorado and West Virginia" (Lindberg 62). The accompanying cartoon showed "an AP officer pouring inky poison into a pool of 'News' with cartouches reading 'suppressed facts,' 'lies,' 'hatred of labor organizations'" (Lindberg 62). The libel case itself was used by the AP as anti-radical rhetoric; Sinclair, for his expose, *Brass Check*, consulted "no less than 4 million words" published about the case in the AP and its affiliated publications (Lindberg

64). The mainstream press was threatened by these much smaller presses, and this fact itself is indicative of the political and cultural investment the mainstream presses had in a particular version of society. Lindberg asserts that the ongoing evaluations of the impact of the radical presses "confirm . . . [their] historical importance as . . . touchstone[s] for legitimizing or delegitimizing narratives" (67).

Although the libel case remained unresolved and became largely moot after Eastman was forced to cease publication in 1917, the mainstream press was always a factor in the debates of the 1920s and 1930s. When scholars look solely at the conversations among those on the left and analyze how those conversations molded the leftist art and criticism of the day, they are often missing the larger context. Before the left intellectuals could persuade the workers of anything, they had to reach them. And once – or if – they reached the workers, they had to invalidate or override the messages they received by all popular media. Gold, in his 1922 *Liberator* essay "Thoughts of a Great Thinker," addresses the influence of the *Saturday Evening Post* directly: "This magazine takes hundreds of the young creative artists of America and bribes them, in their poverty, to write stories of 'Success'" (113); he goes on, "They corrupt the writers, they corrupt the readers" (114). Gold was concerned not only with countering what he called "bourgeois literature"; he also had to counter the popular media – the *Post*; the *New York Times*; the movies; the cheap, mass-produced novels; the advertisements – the culture as a whole. The task was monumental, and this fact helps explain the controversial strategies employed by those most eager to affect change through literature.

Gold's Critics

Although the Agrarians argued that art "perfectly exists" on its own (Tate 303), those on the left generally agreed that art should function rhetorically. The focus of the debates was how the art should be constructed – by whom, for whom, about what, and according to what standards. The 1930s debate about the nature and function of art was not new; *The Masses* published articles on the topics throughout its tenure, and critics have debated the points throughout history. What was new was the context in which this debate took place and the fact that an entire literary generation self-consciously attempted to create, *a priori*, a literature that would fundamentally move its readers *to action*. Mike Gold was primary in articulating a theory of this unique art form, in contributing examples, and in spawning debates that would serve to both publicize and shape the form of this new art. However, to summarize Gold's views is complicated. Murphy explains that the complications exist because "Gold's views . . . were not presented methodically in theoretical essays . . . but were rather scattered throughout various articles, many of which were addressed to events of the moment" (64).

Murphy opens his study of the 1930s literary debates with a summary of the primary criticisms of the leftist position[8], of which Gold is often thought a representative:

> Among these was sectarianism in relations with non-Communist writers, and the view that the proletarian writers had nothing to learn from bourgeois writers of the past or present. In addition, leftism referred to the disregard for aesthetic values, the limitation of literary criticism to sociological analysis, and the demand that proletarian literature be narrowly agitational in character, addressing events of the moment. In criticism of individual works

> the term was directed against tendentiousness, which included the stereotyped portrayals of workers and capitalists as heroes and villains, the insertion of abstract propaganda into fiction, poetry, and drama, and the general distortion or coloring of reality for political ends. (1)

Farrell considered Gold *the* representative of "revolutionary sentimentalism," which he defines as "[a]nti-rational to the core. . . .Crying for songs of 'stench and sweat,' it tends to idealize the 'worker'" (*Note* 29). Further, Farrell asserts that "our [Marxist] critics reveal a crass determinism. . . . [T]hey seem to treat this complex network of relationships as if it were a simple algebraic equation with a proper and easily mastered formula for its solution" (14). Cowley and others felt that "modernism was the central issue in the controversy over leftism," and Gold and the proletarians were believed to have eschewed modernism in favor of blatant realism (Murphy 8). Sillen recounts that Gold was often "criticized as over-simple, naïve, emotional, idealistic" (13); Alfred Kazin characterizes proletarian literature as "literature of literal realism, mechanical prophecy, and disgust" (371). Ann George and Jack Selzer reveal that Burke called the *New Masses*, in a letter to Farrell, "a highschool graduating-class sheet," due to its perceived low artistic standards (117).

Gold was – and still is – often characterized as the ultimate dogmatist. As late as 2002, Theodore F. Watts, who published *The New Masses Index* said of Gold, "Michael Gold . . . the proletarian Stalinist of the founding group, [applied] a Marxist litmus test to every contribution" (5). In 1938, Philips and Rahv refer to Gold as the "pillar of orthodoxy," who at all cost attempted to maintain adherence to the Communist Party line. Kazin argues that, for Gold, "considerations of orthodoxy outweighed all literary considerations" (375). Murphy explains that in "most of the literature on leftism [Gold] has been identified with

extreme *Proletcult* views and positions" (64). The proponents of *Prolecult* in Russia posited "a simple, direct connection between production conditions and ideology," and "[t]heir goal [was] to make proletarian culture dominant, thus bringing the ideological superstructure in line with the economic base" (Murphy 22). What this meant in practice, particularly in America, was up for debate, but the term, *proletkult*, eventually represented the strict sociological view of literature.

Gold, in total, published hundreds of essays, editorials, book reviews, short stories, and poetry in the primary radical publications of the period; he did not, however, publish a definitive, cohesive account of his theory on art and politics, which complicates attempts to understand Gold's theories as a whole. Murphy asserts that "the explanation [for the intense criticism] . . . is to be found in contradictions in Gold's own writing, as well as the fact that generalizations about his views have been based on a relatively small number of articles and statements, while others have been ignored" (64). Gold also published his texts over a considerable period of time – from his first call for proletarian art in 1921 up to and through the debates of the 1930s into the 1940s. If one looks at the entire career of Gold, a very different portrait emerges. Gold, in fact, was not dogmatic; did not reject bourgeois writers outright; did not oppose modernism; and did not require that proletarian literature be about workers or by workers. Gold valued form and artistic standards; he urged diversity in worker's art. Although at times he was guilty of developing false binaries himself, Gold ultimately conceded that the binary of "worker as good"/ "capitalist as bad" was simplistic and often false. In short, Gold was far more complex and effective than he has hitherto been given credit for.

Although Gold was certainly guilty of making sweeping statements on occasion, the majority of his comments would indicate anything but a strict political protocol for proletarian literature. Even the essays most cited as evidence of his orthodoxy reveal the opposite. Gold had traveled to Russia in 1925 and had first-hand witnessed the seriousness with which the Russians regarded art and the government's support for artistic programs. In his 1926 article "America Needs a Critic," Gold sets up Soviet Russia as the model for young artists in America. He compares what he hopes to be the influence of the Russian Revolution on American writers to the influence of the French Revolution on English writers. In this essay, he praises Trotsky and his work, *Literature and Revolution*, praise he will later recant after the Trotsky/Stalin split in 1927. But in this essay, Gold presents Trotsky as the great Russian literary critic, who after analyzing hundreds of Russian writers, develops a Marxian literary criticism unafraid of the "economic roots of the shining rose bush of art" (133) only in order to argue for the need to *Americanize* Marxist criticism. He ends the essay with a call for an American critic to analyze and develop a similar criticism of American art: "O Life, send America a great literary critic" (138). Gold suggests the artist turning to Russia rather than France for *inspiration*, not *domination*, and he does so because there "we find a new dynamism akin to our own American spirit" (129).

In the 1932 essay largely considered his most important on proletarian art, "Proletarian Realism," Gold writes, "proletarian literature is a living thing" and "is not based on a set of fixed dogmas" (205). Additionally, Gold explains that "[w]ithin this new world of proletarian literature, there are many living forms. It is dogmatic folly to seize upon any single literature form and erect it into a pattern for all proletarian literature. . . . My belief is that a new form is evolving, which one might name 'Proletarian Realism' " (206). Gold then

goes on to describe some of its elements “as [he] see[s] them” (206) and follows with a list of nine characteristics. Although Gold clearly asserts he is describing an already existing phenomenon, one that is growing and in flux, many critics have taken this list of characteristics to be Gold’s requirements for proletarian literature, which is simply not the case. Hanley writes that “Proletarian Realism” was “hardly concerned with ideology or doctrinal politics”; rather, Gold “sought to define an ‘authentic’ proletarian literature against the slumming, sensationalist representations” (150). By the 1935 First American Writers’ Congress, it was widely accepted by those advocating proletarian art that the American situation differed dramatically from Russia’s and that art produced in the U.S. would be distinctive. Seaver, an advocate of proletarian literature, writes, “These critics who conceive the problems of proletarian literature in the U.S. and USSR as essentially the same err seriously” (7). Similarly, Gold in his 1941 speech to the Fourth American Writers’ Congress, after having some distance on the debates about proletarian art, concluded the following:

> If [Marxism] was able to influence American writers so widely during the depression, this can only mean that Marxism was really able to help them in such a situation. And the fact that there was present a living core of Marxist thought in America ready to shape the thought of intellectuals, is due to the presence of a mature and firm Communist movement – itself no Moscow plot, but the legitimate child of American parents and grandparents such as Horace Greeley, Albert Brisbane, Eugene V. Debs, Bill Haywood, Jack London and Walt Whitman. (249)

In *The Proletarian Moment*, Murphy's primary goal is to survey the 1930s literary debates and counter the prevailing anti-Stalinist aesthetic that had been dominant since the late 1930s. Rahv, Philips, and Farrell, among others, accused Gold of attempting to supplant American literary tradition with Russia's *Proletcult*, but working class literature advocating socialism was present in America before the widespread development of *Proletcult* and many principles similar to those of *Proletcult* were, in fact, developed *within* the American Communist left. Additionally, the *New Masses* and its editors were criticized repeatedly by Russian representatives for its *lack* of political content. After commenting on one such Russian article, critical of the *New Masses*, Murphy writes that "[it] demonstrates . . . that in the midst of the Third Period, with all its revolutionary rhetoric, the demand for establishing aesthetic criteria and defining the relation between literature and propaganda continued to proceed from within the movement" (73).

Additionally, debates about proletarian art and literature were constantly taking place within the *New Masses*. Philips, Rahv, and Farrell provided, perhaps, a more cohesive literary aesthetic – based primarily on criticism of proletarian art – but what they argued, beginning in 1936 with Farrell's *Note on Literary Criticism*, and continuing in the revamped *Partisan Review* in 1937, was not new. Additionally, much of their criticism was based on outdated positions – positions already discarded by Gold and the other proletarian advocates. The attack on Gold was often based on earlier essays, and, interestingly, Rahv was every bit as guilty as Gold of excesses in earlier debates.

Rahv, in a *New Masses* article, "The Literary Class War," published in 1932, condemns contemporary bourgeois writers: "the novels of a writer like William Faulkner leave the reader with nothing" (qtd. in Murphy 78). Murphy also demonstrates that in 1932,

Rahv was opposed to recruiting middle-class writers into the movement, a position no longer advocated by the editors of the *New Masses*. Murphy continues by showing that prior to the relaunch of the *Partisan Review*, Rahv often occupied a position more dogmatic than Gold, but, somehow, these earlier excesses in Rahv were forgiven, whereas in Gold they were not.

Farrell's attack on proletarian literature, Murphy maintains, confused Gold and others because much of what he wrote was already a "truism" within the ranks of the Communist critics themselves (Murphy 172). Hicks responds to Farrell's work by writing in the *New Masses*, "In the course of his book, he misrepresents the opinions of half a dozen revolutionary critics. . . .Not only does he wrench his quotations from the surroundings that explain them; he performs obvious feats of distortion" (qtd. in Murphy 172). Prior to the publication of *A Note on Literary Criticism*, Farrell often occupied, with Rahv, a position less conducive to aesthetic standards than Gold himself. Murphy observes that "[w]here opinions differed, the roles that literary historians have established – with *New Masses* critics applauding inept, politically "correct" works, while the *Partisan Review* staff insisted on aesthetic values – as often as not were reversed" (173).

Another common complaint against Gold and other leftist critics was that they rejected middle-class writers outright. Gold is said to have believed that proletarian artists could learn nothing from the bourgeois artists and that, in fact, proletarian writers should renounce the conventions of traditional literature entirely. Gold's review essays[9] are most often cited to support this objection. In "More News from Nowhere," for example, Gold writes of George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells:

> The people are lost in the wilderness, and must be led forth to hope again. The world is coming to an end, and these bourgeois prophets talk to us grandiosely of the Life-Force and God and Bibles and noble aspirations. They are fiddling Neros in the midst of a conflagration; they are fussy suburbanites at sea who cannot understand that the ship is sinking. (84)

It is Shaw's and Wells's concern with philosophical theories that concerns Gold; for him, the emergency is real and immediate, and Shaw and Wells are wasting their time and talents addressing the abstract and eternal. Gold writes of the proletarian writers, "[w]e of the new generation are not too proud to tackle the belly problem first" (84). Gold has a similar complaint against Hemingway who produces, according to Gold, "literature of escape" designed for the "harried white-collar class" (159; 158). In Wilder, Gold criticizes the "gentility and derivativeness" (Murphy 65). In all of Gold's references to bourgeois writers, Gold objects to the emphasis on individuality, disconnect from social reality, and emphasis on form to the disregard of content.

However, although Gold certainly did object to certain characteristics of middle-class writers, Gold's critics, again, pick and choose which sections of Gold's essays to focus on, and by doing so, they oversimplify Gold's positions. Gold praises Shaw for all the revolutionary work he has accomplished in the past and asserts that both Shaw and Wells are victims of their times: "Shaw and Wells are the irretrievable products of the age of romantic individualism and we are the products of the age of conscription, scientific revolution and mass action, and there is a dark and impassable gulf between us" ("More" 84). Although Gold chides Hemingway for focus on "[l]iquor, sex, and sport," he celebrates Hemingway's talent ("Hemingway" 158). He also clearly acknowledges that Hemingway is a writer from

whom proletarian writers can learn:" Hemingway is a power; he has led American writing back to the divine simplicities of the prosaic; he has made a great technical contribution. The revolutionary writers of the future will be grateful to him; they will imitate his style. But they will have different things to say" ("Hemingway" 160). And although Wilder represents to Gold all that is wrong with contemporary art, he praises even Wilder for "[setting] himself a goal higher than the usual racketeering" ("Wilder" 200).

Gold is also accused of excluding the middle class from the ranks of proletarian authorship; however, in his early 1921 essay, "The American Famine," Gold makes it clear that he criticizes those in the middle class who would claim to speak on behalf of the proletariat without understanding the hardships of the proletariat. Gold uses this essay as a vehicle for communicating two important points directed at the activities of middle-class leftist writers, critics, and advocates: 1) direct action is necessary; and 2) one cannot, through intellect or reading, understand the plight of the proletariat; one must experience it by seeing it first hand. Here, Gold is directly responsing to a typical police intervention at a very atypical workers' demonstration. A man named Urbain Ledoux found a way, as Gold put it, "of flinging . . . [the worker's] misery into the teeth of polite society" (87): Ledoux had set up "slave auctions" at which the unemployed workers would auction themselves off to the highest bidder (Folsom n86). Gold maintains that Ledoux "had done more in two weeks than the rest had done in ten years" because he had actually *done something*.

Gold describes how he and artist Hugo Gellart walked around New York for a few days to witness the lives of the unemployed and homeless around the Bowery Park area, where the slave auctions were held, and he encourages his fellow critics to do the same – to first go where the workers are and experience what they experience. Only then will middle-

class leftist critics be equipped to do something about the poverty and suffering. The visit to New York was, by no means, intended to position Gold as something other than working-class; he always included himself as part of their ranks; rather, it was meant to model a course of action for those concerned writers who were not part of this class but were fighting on its behalf. Gold disparages the liberal who claims to care for members of the working class but does not ever actually encounter them, and he questions the ability of a person to improve a situation about which he has no first-hand knowledge. Gold wonders, "Have any of these gentleman ever really stood about in the freezing rain in thin rags, hungry, jobless, friendless, half-dead with worry?" (86). He answers, "I have. Millions of men in this country are doing this today, and for them it's an emergency, not the academic problem it is for liberals" (86). Gold participated directly in the action: he went on strike with workers, wrote exposes about their living conditions and the government's impotence in dealing with the crisis, but, to Gold, another form of direct action was advocating a worker's art, soliciting contributions, and providing publication opportunities.

Rahv was primarily responsible for disseminating this view of Gold as strictly separating bourgeois from proletarian writers and denying any legitimacy to the former. But, again, Rahv was, if anything, more guilty than Gold in perpetuating this view in the early 30s. Murphy quotes an extended excerpt from an article by Rahv published in the magazine, *Rebel Poet*, in 1932:

> Under the remorseless impact of economic reality, the autistic thinking of bourgeois ideology has been exposed in all its uselessness and debility. The antithesis of proletarian literary class-consciousness has succeeded in undermining the original condition of equilibrium, with the

> result that the conflict is growing ever sharper and sharper, gathering momentum for a complete irreconcilable separation between the two camps. . . .Too long has literature been standing on its head, doped by mephitic fumes of idealist opium. Dialectic materialism demands that we put it back on its feet. . . .We must sever all ideological ties with this lunatic civilization known as capitalism. (qtd. in Murphy 78)

Gold, in 1932, occupied a far more moderate role than Rahv, yet the "Gold myth," largely created and furthered by Rahv, asserts that Gold was the extremist. Gold turns the tables on the anti-Stalinist critics in his address 1941 address to the American Writers' Congress when he declares Rahv, Phillips, and Farrell's position as one of "dogmatic prejudice" (248).

Along with the myth that Gold rejected middle-class writers outright, Gold is said to have denied proletarian literature the heritage of any bourgeois writers, that he attempted to completely sever the cords between literature of the past and literature of the present. Murphy reveals that Gold "frequently pointed to writers of the past," including Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake, Shakespeare, and Goethe, "as standards by which to measure current literature" (66-7). Farrell is guilty of stereotyping Gold in this manner, although what Farrell asserts about non-proletarian writers of the past in 1936 had already been asserted by Gold and Hicks in the 1920s. Murphy explains that Farrell held up Shakespeare and Dickens as fundamental to contemporary literature and framed this argument as a rebuttal to the proletarians. However, Gold, in 1926, had already included both authors "in the heritage of proletarian writers" (Murphy 167). Farrell also praises Proust in the same work, which the Communist critic Hicks had already also done (Murphy 167).

Many critics and writers were concerned with more fundamental questions: what constitutes proletarian literature? What is proletarian literature *not*? By what standards do we judge proletarian literature? Critics of proletarian art often had readied answers: it is stark realism about workers and by workers; it is "art" with no artistic standards; it is politics disguised as art; it is propaganda; it is antithetical to modernism; it is not really art at all. Denning explains that "[n]othing is more firmly established than the perception that the Thirties was a time of social realism. . . .[which] has come to mean three things: the documentary aesthetic, a rearguard opposition to modernism, and a relatively straightforward representationalism in the arts" (118). Wald characterized the situation as "internecine warfare on the issues of style and technique" (qtd. in Murphy 9). Gold and the proletarians were primarily accused of sacrificing quality for political ends.

Gold definitely did believe that proletarian art should be accessible to the masses, and he rejected art that proved intentionally abstrus; however, the contention that Gold rejected all experimental art or any art associated with modernism, is incorrect. The modernist movement encompassed such a range of writers and texts – from the complexity of Eliot to the simplicity of Hemingway – and Gold often applauded modernist writers and modernist techniques, as indicated by his praise of Hemingway's style. Gold did often express the need for simplicity and truth in art, and it is most likely from this emphasis that Gold has been characterized as anti-modernist and aesthetically uncritical.

However, Gold was concerned with the aesthetics of proletarian art as early as his original 1921 call, "Towards Proletarian Art." This article was a response to a number of already documented events: recession of the post-WWI period, early literary debates, the Russian Revolution and *Proletcult*; however, it was also a direct reply to Eastman's

aesthetic theories as stated in the preface to his 1919 book of poetry, *Colors of Life* (Folsom n62). George Hutchison argues that "Eastman rejected high modernism but felt traditional verse had the advantage over free verse" (256); Eastman outlines his theory by way of two outstanding American writers, Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe. Although Eastman celebrates Whitman for his ability to present a "mood that is truly primitive, and social, and intelligible to the minds of simple people," Eastman argues that Poe was the better of the two because he "had a greater understanding of the imperative of form" (Hutchison 256). Gold's essay is a direct reply to Eastman's theory of art[10]; Gold rejected Eastman's emphasis on form outright, and this first essay is a declaration of new standards of art.

To Gold, form and technique served a gate-keeping function, which allowed the middle- and upper-class writers in and kept the lower middle- and working-class writers out. Gold does not condemn traditional artists in this essay; in fact, he empathizes with what will undoubtedly be their confusion when the new art arises. Gold acknowledges the coming transition as one that will be painful and messy but asserts that artists must endure the pain and mess to arrive at the goal of a communist society[11]. Potential working-class artists must first write *something* before they can perfect their art, and these initial attempts will not be perfect – or, perhaps, even good. But Gold asserts that to "censor the poor brute-murmurings would be sacrilege" and to "stifle the meanest of Life's moods taking form in the artist would be death" (64). If the value of literature is in its form, as Eastman suggests, then only the select few who have mastery of the form (i.e., those with education and time) can produce art. Unlike Eastman, then, Gold holds Whitman up as the inspiration for proletarian art.[12] He calls Whitman "the heroic spiritual grandfather of our generation" and asserts that Whitman "knew all that we are stumbling after" (67), which is, as Whitman wrote in

Democratic Vistas, "that democracy can never prove itself beyond cavil, until it founds and luxuriantly grows its own forms of art, poems, schools, theology, displacing all that exists, or that has been produced anywhere in the past under opposite influences" (qtd. in Gold "Towards" 68).

In "A Little Bit of Millennium" (1921), Gold argues that the impulse for art exists naturally in the worker. He does this by taking a close look at the Ferrer colony in New Jersey, one attempt among many historical attempts at communal living. Gold recognizes the futility of such an enterprise, as he maintains the adults have been hopelessly corrupted by the capitalist system. Gold even reveals that he, for a time, lived at a commune until he gave up, but he also recognizes the human need and hope that drives such enterprises: "Those dreamy-eyed, dear people . . . [are] sick of the slime in their souls. . . .They wish to become free workers – gentle, creative, loving, truthful men and women" (72). Although the attempts are doomed to failure, they provide proof that the urge exists within the workers to live differently. It is with the working-class children that Gold finds the true seeds of the proletarian culture. Gold describes how the children produce art spontaneously and are an example of the natural human urge to express. Here, Gold reiterates the need to produce art without constraints or standards; he writes, "Let all who love art practice it; begin as the cave man began, without technique, without precedents and masters" (78). He ends with his famous line: "Technique has made cowards of us all" (78). This idea – that form and technique make potential writers afraid to write -- represents a theoretical advancement for Gold. With this pronouncement, Gold acknowledges that it is not lack of time and energy alone that may prevent a potential working-class writer from developing; it is also the lack of knowledge, in this case, knowledge of traditional forms of literature.

In “Letters from a Clam Digger,” published in 1929, Gold refers to the developing proletarian art in Europe and Asia: “They do not adorn, stylize or pose; they put down the facts. And it is literature; it is art; it is the new and creative thing in the world” (191). The year before, in 1928, Gold had assumed sole editorship of the *New Masses*, and he was making a concerted effort to recruit working-class writers. In 1929, the *New Masses* founded the first worker-writer club, the John Reed Club of New York, and Gold wanted to remove the barriers that would prevent what he hoped would be the flowering of proletarian art. Technique and form presented potential barriers. Later in the essay, Gold writes, “I am through, I guess, with the form-searchers. . . .New forms without a new content seem as worthless to me as walnut shells whose meat the little bugs have gnawed away” (192). Although Gold criticized intentional complexity in literature and those who thought form of utmost importance, he did not abandon aesthetic standards.

Murphy reminds his readers that Gold was absolutely committed to developing a proletarian literature and, to do so, he had to encourage workers to write:

> The urgent tone of [Gold’s] calls for workers to write for the *New Masses* suggests that it was not easy to obtain material from this source. One factor was no doubt the intimidation that many felt before the word *culture* and the task of writing. In this case the advice to “forget the past” (“Let it Be” 26) and to simply relate the facts of one’s own experience was, at the same time, an invitation to begin writing. The advice not to worry about style and to stick to facts was also possibly directed [toward this end]. (68)

If worker-writers felt intimidated by demands about history, form, and content, they would simply not attempt to write. Gold, who had lived a worker’s life and who submitted poetry

for publication while still a worker, understood the odds already stacked against a worker attempting to write. In "Letters from a Clam Digger," Gold explains that "[n]o one who hasn't put his sweat, gall, blood and fury into a piece of unpopular writing, while wondering at the same time how the room rent would be paid, can understand the drama of the proletarian writer's role" (193). In theory, proletarian art should have standards, as does all art, but Gold understood that first it was necessary to get the workers to write – anything. The proletariat had to believe that they could write and that their experiences were worth writing about. This urgency for raw material is reflected in Gold's call for workers' writing in the July 1928 issue of the *New Masses*:

> WE WANT TO PRINT
>
> --Confessions – diaries – documents
>
> --The concrete –
>
> --Letters from hoboes, peddlers, small town atheists, unfrocked clergymen and schoolteachers –
>
> --Revelations by chambermaids and night club waiters –
>
> --The sobs of driven stenographers –
>
> --The poetry of steel workers –
>
> --The wrath of miners – the laughter of sailors –
>
> --Strike stories, prison stories, work stories –
>
> --Stories by Communist, I.W.W. and other revolutionary Workers. (page number unreadable)

Gold understands the initial writings will not be perfect and may not even look like literature, but he looks at them as a foundation for a future art that will form naturally and

will improve and will, ultimately, set its own standards. Gold writes, "The soil must be prepared; we know our tree is sound" ("Proletarian" 204).

As proletarian literature became a more viable phenomenon after the successful reception of proletarian novels, such as *Jews Without Money* in 1930, Gold began to focus more urgently on standards he had previously dismissed. Gold asserts that one function of the *New Masses* is to discuss technique for proletarian literature. Murphy points out that Gold stressed the need to master technique throughout 1933 and 1934 in his regular *Daily Worker* column (122). For instance, in the September 1933 column, Gold decries the lack of development in proletarian criticism:

> I haven't the critical temperament, and I don't ever expect to be a really good Marxian critic of literature. But it sometimes grieves me to see how our critics lag behind the actual movements in the literary field. . . .
>
> No proletarian critic that I know has paid much attention to the difficult problem of style, of creative writing. They are historians and polemicists, a vital and necessary job at present. The young proletarian writer has little creative guidance. (qtd. in Murphy 122)

The other primary proletarians were, by the thirties, arguing along similar lines, contrary to the assertions of the Anti-Stalinists. Freeman also argued that technique was being neglected. Hicks criticized the "conversion ending" in *The Disinherited* and *Jews Without Money* in a 1934 article (Murphy 125). Far from demanding art be crudely political, Gold and the others repeatedly expressed concern for aesthetics. Also, as indicated by Hicks's reviews, they were also not afraid to criticize one another's works or positions; they were not a monolithic group, as is so often asserted.

Gold reiterated his commitment to recruiting middle-class writers and intellectuals into the fight at the First American Writers' Congress in 1935. Responding to a comment by Russack made in response to Jack Conroy's paper, Gold said, "If anything has been cleared up in the last few years, it has been this point: that the revolution is a revolution led by the working class, and the lower middle class are its allies. *There is therefore room in the revolution for literature from all these groups*" (qtd. in Mons 275). In the same response, he asserts that although literature about working class characters is important, it is not necessary to fit into the category of revolutionary literature. Additionally, although Gold himself was often guilty in his fiction of furthering the binary of "worker as good/capitalist as bad," in a 1928 *New Masses* article, "In Foggy California," Gold praises Upton Sinclair in general, but criticizes him on one point:

> There in nobility in the revolutionary camp; there is also gloom, dirt and disorder. The worker is not a bright radiant legend. . . .The worker is a man. We don't need to edit him. Let us not shirk our problems. Let us not rob the worker of his humanity in fiction. Not every worker is Jesus; there are Hamlets, Othellos, Tom Joneses and Macbeths among them, too. And I prefer this variety of life to abstractions. (169)

Kenneth Burke and the Rhetoric of Proletarian Literature

In discussing proletarian literature, one cannot neglect its rhetorical aspect, as it was specifically conceived as a rhetorical art. Therefore, along with considerations of style, authorship, audience, content, and history, one must consider the effectiveness of the rhetorical strategies. Kenneth Burke will serve as a representative critic because most

questions about the rhetorical effectiveness of proletarian literature are contained in Burke's writings. Burke considered the rhetoric of proletarian literature, as it was developing under the leadership of Gold and the others, largely ineffective.[13]

Burke was active in the literary discussions of the left during the 1920s and 1930s; he published in the radical presses, such as the *New Masses*, but he also published in the more moderate left presses, including the *New Republic*, Additionally, Burke wrote for art journals, such as *Dial*, and mainstream presses, including the *Nation* and in aesthetically conservative magazines such as the *Southern Review* (edited by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks). Burke was in conversation with a variety of groups: the Communists, the Southern Agrarians, the fellow-travelers, the Stalinists, the Trotskyists, etc. Burke moved in many circles and today is certainly considered the primary rhetorical theorist of the period. In addition to his magazine and newspaper publications and other activities, Burke published four books during the 1930s: *Counter-Statement* (1931), *Permanence and Change* (1935), *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), and *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (published in 1941 but comprised almost entirely of works written in the thirties); additionally he wrote another book, *Auscultation, Creation, and Revision* in 1932, which remained unpublished until 1993.

Although Burke's work is extremely hard to summarize in a condensed space, I will attempt to illustrate components of his primary theories that have some bearing on his objection to proletarian literature. Burke, first of all, asserts that humans were symbol-using animals and that "symbolic forms affect conduct because of the ways in which they affect communication, and thus all action" (Duncan, "Introduction" xx-xxi). Burke maintains that human societies, at any given time, exist with certain orientations, "the vast network of

mutually sustained values and judgments"; further Burke asserts that the orientation "is largely a self-perpetuating system, in which each part tends to corroborate the other parts" (*Permanence* 23; 169). These orientations develop because they are useful to society, but they also persist after they cease to be useful and, in fact, have become harmful. Burke attributes this to humans' "trained incapacity," a term he borrowed from Thorstein Veblen, which Burke defines as a condition where one's "past training has caused them to misjudge their present situation" (*Permanence* 10). Burke borrows another important term from John Dewey, "occupational psychosis," explaining that "a tribe's ways of gaining sustenance promote certain specific patterns of thought which, since thought is an aspect of action, assist the tribe in its productive and distributive operations." Burke continues, "Once this psychosis is established by the authority of the food-getting patterns . . . it is carried over into other aspects of the tribal culture," including its art (*Permanence* 38).

Burke asserts that to change an orientation, one must break established associations, the breaking of which Burke calls "perspectives by incongruity." In language, this entails "the use of a term by taking it from the context in which it was habitually used and applying it to another"[14] (*Permanence* 89). Burke asserts the foundation of persuasion is identification; that is, persuasion is accomplished by getting an audience to identify with the persuader and by getting that same audience to identify against something else. Before identification can be accomplished, however, the rhetor must first reach the audience. This is one ground on which Burke objects to the rhetoric of proletarian art.

Burke writes, "We interest a man by dealing with his interests. . . .[but] [t]he mere fact that something is to a man's interest is no guaranty that he will be interested in it" (*Permanence* 37-8). Burke maintains that proletarian literature will not interest the

proletariat because it is dreary and does not “embody an ideal” (“Revolutionary” 269). Burke posits that members of the working class want to read about something other than the miseries of their lives; they want what Gold calls deridingly, “literature of escape” – they want to forget their miseries. More importantly, Burke argues that the rhetoric of proletarian literature will not be effective in recruiting the middle class, which he sees as a necessary step toward a successful revolution. In Burke’s address to the First American Writers’ Congress in 1935, he asserts that a symbol must “suggest traits which we should like to share” (269); for this reason, he maintains the proletarian symbol of “the worker” is unlikely to inspire the middle class. Since much of proletarian literature recounts the miseries of poverty, Burke would argue that, as rhetoric, it is ineffective; it would “enlist our *sympathies*, but not our *ambitions*” (“Revolutionary” 269). Burke defends literature which offers ideals: “[P]eople have gone too long with the glib psychoanalytic assumption that an art of ‘escape’ promotes acquiescence. It may, as easily, assist a reader to clarify his dislike of the environment in which he is placed” (“Program” 119). He further explains that ”[the artist] may sing of pastoral moments on the shores of the Mississippi, nothing more; but if the things he extols there are found to be endangered by the growth of chain stores, his purely pastoral concerns involve by implication the backing of an anti-chain store candidate for President” (“Program” 113).

Burke also objects to proletarian rhetoric’s strategy of explicitly calling for revolutionary change. First of all, by using class symbols, the revolution the proletarians describe threatens non working-class people, rather than enlists their aid. Gold and others insist that the middle class will be vital in a successful revolution and by alienating the middle class, as Burke suggests they are doing, the proletarians are defeating their own

rhetorical efforts. Burke maintains that "[a]s a propagandizer, it is not his work to convince the convinced, but to plead with the unconvinced" ("Revolutionary" 271). Also, to Burke, effective revolutionary rhetoric should appeal to existing values using existing (American) language; language built on antithesis, us versus them, would not be the best way to recruit "them," those outside the working class. Burke responded to Wilson's plea for an overthrow of the Communist Party leadership with his article, "Boring from Within," where Burke maintains that "[t]o be immediately effective, we must promote change which can be put into effect by utilizing the mentality already at hand" (327). Since the capitalist orientation is so ingrained, Burke asks:

> [I]s it expedient to ask Americans that they adopt a new flag? Is it expedient that we should deliberately go out of our way to ally an economic program with names which many people fear more strongly than they fear sinister and gloomy vices? Is it expedient to advocate nationalism of industry in a country less given to such notions than any other spot on earth? (327)

Instead of using such revolutionary rhetoric, Burke suggests the best way is to "bore from within." He writes, "If you want to attack the Republican party, become a Republican" (327).

Hence, in contrast to Gold, Burke argues that art is most effective, rhetorically, when its appeals are implicit rather than explicit. Gold and other proletarian writers highlighted the miseries of the poor in the capitalistic system, and by doing so, they hoped to move the poor – and those sympathetic to the poor – to action. But to Burke:

> a poet does not sufficiently glorify his political cause by pictures of suffering and revolt. Rather, a poet makes his soundest contribution in this wise: He

> shows himself alive to all the aspects of contemporary effort and thought. . . . The complete propagandist, it seems to me, would take an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields as he can handle—and into this breadth of his concerns he would interweave a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions. In this way he would ally his attitudes with everything that is broadest and fullest in the world today. And he would argue for his political sympathies, not literally and directly, but by the intellectual company he keeps. (”Revolutionary” 270)

This implicit identification with broad cultural values—“boring from within”—is, he claims, the most effective way to motivate people to accept the need for and then work toward social change.

I am not interested in proving Burke wrong or categorizing Gold as a theorist in the same league with Burke; he was not. I am interested, however, in illustrating the strengths of Gold’s rhetoric and answering some of Burke’s objections. To the first objection, that proletarian readers would not be interested in proletarian literature in part due to its dreariness, I would answer that Gold also always fought against dreariness in proletarian literature and understood the need for the component of hope. Much of Burke’s complaint would also be Gold’s complaint. However, when one looks at the practical enterprise of producing an actual proletarian art, one sees the pragmatic need for focus. Eastman said it best in responding to similar complaints of dreariness in *The Masses*: “Well – we would be glad to publish happy stories and woodland scenery in *The Masses* if we had plenty of room

and money to pay for them. As it is, we do not pretend to reflect the whole of life. . . .our function is supplementary" (December 1915).

Also, given the best-selling status of a number of proletarian works, including Gold's *Jews Without Money*, Conroy's *The Disinherited*, and Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, lack of interest did not seem to be a problem, although it is unclear how many consumers of these novels were working class versus middle class. Additionally, if workers were not interested in reading literature about workers, were they interested in reading literature about middle-class individuals? Gold writes, "[the poor] have no time to think or lead full-orbed lives. The trouble with the poor is their poverty" ("Thoughts" 113). Did the poor, then, have the money, the time, or the interest to read Faulkner or Hemingway? Admittedly, if the answer is "no," the answer would most likely also be "no" to Gold, Conroy, or Steinbeck, but then all of these authors would be equally ineffective in influencing the working class.

However, Gold's rhetoric may very well have been more effective in influencing the vital allies of the working class, the middle class. By exposing the degradation of the poor and portraying the humanity in this population, the middle class would be more apt to sympathize, perhaps even align themselves, with the oppressed. A middle-class reader reading a middle-class novel would not experience the same revelation, *specifically* about the poor. Gold makes a good point in his Hemingway review: "[the intellectuals] can understand dead revolutions, and dead revolutionary writers. They can "place" the revolutionary writings of Walt Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, they can overlook the lack of style and "behavioristic" psychology in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*"(170). Gold purposely draws the parallel between proletarian literature and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because both were susceptible to the same critiques, but the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on the issue of

slavery in the United States is indisputable. The slaves weren't reading it; those apathetic about the issue of slavery were. The apathetic middle class is one very important audience for Gold and his proletarian literature, and Gold had a solid historical example of success in Stowe's novel.

Moreover, in a practical sense, how would escapist literature – or literature that would emphasize the ideal – literature which has already existed for hundreds of years – address the specific contemporary crisis in America, as Gold was trying to do? The need to effect change was, to Gold, immediate. By advocating writing about the working class, Gold attempted to show the working-class that their experiences were significant, were unfair, and were due to an exploitative economic system. Gold never resolved the problem for the readers; he pointed towards a solution; he provided some alternative – one could certainly say an "ideal" – to aspire to or to work towards. Proletarian literature helped legitimized the experiences of the poor in America.

Burke was concerned with the explicitness of Gold's revolutionary rhetoric. He feared that calls for a revolution would scare people rather than move them to positive action, and this was a very possible outcome of proletarian rhetoric; however, Gold was confronting an immediate situation that required immediate action, and direct confrontation seemed to be the only choice. Additionally, perhaps scaring the middle class with the threat of a proletarian uprising was not such a negative strategy. Gold writes, "No one will do anything for the unemployed until they organize themselves and force some sort of recognition from the society that tries to forget them" ("American" 87). Burnshaw, a later editor of the *New Masses*, when looking back at the time period said, "When the house is on fire, you don't stand aside and play the violin, and we thought the house was on fire"

(Harrison 2). The strategies of the proletarians may have been somewhat crude and transparent, but they believed they were facing disaster. They had to force a break with the old ways, and the way to do such a thing was to make people uncomfortable, to jar them out of apathy, not provide pleasant tales of escape that may, in an indeterminable amount of time, effect change. In fact, this technique could be justified by Burke's own theory of perspective by incongruity. Burke also acknowledges the need, at times, for direct confrontation:

> In subscribing to a philosophy of being . . . one may hold that certain historically conditioned institutions interfere with the establishment of decent social or communicative relationships, and thereby affront the permanent biologic norms. He may further hold that certain groups or classes of persons are mainly responsible for the retention of these socially dangerous institutions. And since we insist that a point of view requires, as its material counterpart, adequate embodiment in the architecture of the State, a philosophy of being may commit one to open conflict with any persons or class of persons who would use their power to uphold institutions serving an anti-social function. (*Permanence* 271-2)

Gold was attempting to change a people's entire orientation, to use Burke's term, in a short period of time against tremendous obstacles: the U.S. government, the popular press, and intense criticism from others within the left. The literature of the proletarians was not ideal – it contained weaknesses and unresolved conflicts. Likewise, Gold was not the master rhetor; he would never have claimed to be such a thing. But given the emergency of the situation and the short time in which the intellectuals had to respond to it, Gold

accomplished much through his efforts. As Folsom writes, “At least . . . Gold was instrumental in sustaining the impulse of radical literature” (14). Gold, looking back at the 1930s and proletarian literature, argues that it was a renaissance, albeit a short-lived one: “A sign of the renaissance was the furious literary controversies that set in. Literature was alive and dangerous, a social factor in the national life.” (“Second” 246).

Notes for Chapter Four

[1] This middle ground would include many of Eastman's contemporaries, such as Floyd Dell and John Reed, but it also included many of the slightly later critics and writers, such as Kenneth Burke, Malcolm Cowley, etc.

[2] Other notable writers and critics in this camp include Josephine Herbst, Genevieve Taggard, Tilly Olsen, Leon Trotsky, Langston Hughes, and John Dos Passos.

[3] And, certainly to Gold and Freeman, throughout the 1920s as well. Although the 1920s is generally considered a "boom" period economically in American history, the early 1920s was, in fact, a period of recession. Additionally, the radicals understood that even in periods of economic prosperity, the vast majority of Americans were not prosperous, but were, instead, living in poverty or near-poverty.

[4] Collection of essays on proletarian literature, edited by Horace Gregory and Eleanor Clark.

[5] Everyone except the Southern Agrarians. Although they were very involved in the literary debates of the time, the Agrarians politics differed from the critics and writers on the left. The Agrarians wanted to return to a previous, agricultural model of society; the others envisioned a communal, industrial society. I include the Agrarians here only because their views on art influenced the views of the leftists. Burke, for example, is identified by name in Tate's "Poetry and Politics."

[6] Probably written by Max Eastman.

[7] According to Walter B. Rideout in *The Radical Novel in the United States.*

[8] Murphy defines the term leftism as "an epithet characterizing certain attitudes and practices that were considered unacceptable" (1). The *Partisan Review* editors considered Gold and the others associated with the *New Masses* as representatives of this leftism.

[9] Which functioned more accurately as expository essays regarding the function and form of art.

[10] A footnote on the essay in Folsom's anthology, which he edited with Gold until the latter's death, explains that it is "specifically a reply to the aesthetic theories of Gold's mentor, Max Eastman" (62). In Folsom's "Introduction," Folsom explains that "[t]he few footnotes are Gold's own" (19).

[11] Gold uses the metaphor of childbirth to communicate this sentiment in his *New Masses* 1926 article, "America Needs a Critic":

> The bloody events of the Revolution are only as important as the blood and pain in which a child is born. After that hour of primitive violence passes, the mother begins rearing the child. It is for this child that the pain was suffered – he is the Revolution, not the pain and blood" (135).

[12] As discussed in Chapter 2, Whitman was the model for many leftist writers and critics.

[13] Burke did not, however, disparage all proletarian works; he wrote favorable reviews, for instance, of works by Henry Roth and Muriel Rukeyser as well as the anthology, co-edited by Gold, *Proletarian Literature in the United States*.

[14] One of Burke's examples of perspective by incongruity: "Can one be terroristic in his industriousness and conscientious in his slaughter?" (*Permanence* 108)

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this chapter, I will argue for the relevance of proletarian art for today's writers and critics, and I detail the successes of Gold and the proletarian art form. Additionally, I look at the politics of proletarian art and offer some closing comments on this study.

I have attempted to demonstrate the context in which Gold's radical ideas developed and in which he advocated for and produced proletarian art. I have also argued for the strengths in Gold's fiction works and nonfiction essays. My goal is to explain and redeem Gold – to give him credit for developing and sustaining a unique rhetorical art form in America during a period of crisis. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will examine the lasting implications of Mike Gold and the proletarian art movement in America.

Significance of Gold and Proletarian Art

The proletarian art movement, as conceived by Gold and others, ultimately failed in the sense that it did not result in a permanent proletarian culture *replacing* the dominant middle-class culture, and it did not lead to a worker's revolution. With the Moscow purges in 1936; the Stalin/Hitler pact of 1939 and the outbreak of war in Europe in the same year; and with America's entrance into the war in 1941 with its accompanying economic recovery, the moment had passed. Fascism was the new enemy and, after 1945, communism became, instead of an inspiring economic and cultural theory, the perceived primary threat to America. "Revolutions" and classes defined as "bourgeois" or "proletarian" smacked

distinctly of communism and were now fundamentally at odds with American values. Most writers and critics active in the literary movements during the 1930s tried to distance themselves as far as possible from their previous communist activities. Kenneth Burke, for instance, edited specific references to communism out of one of his 1930s works, *Permanence and Change*. Others in the 1940s and 1950s were brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee and questioned about their involvement in radical causes in the 1930s. Others were threatened with being blacklisted; for example, Archibald MacLeish, who had written an article for the *New Masses* in the 1930s, was almost prevented from obtaining an appointment as Librarian of Congress due to his earlier leftist activities (*Spartacus*). J. Edgar Hoover, likewise, tried to prevent MacLeish from employing Malcolm Cowley due to Cowley's earlier radical activities (*Spartacus*).

Indeed, proletarian literature as a viable literary movement was well on its way out after the Popular Front movement began in 1934. The imminent threat of fascism changed the focus from fighting capitalism to fighting fascism and well-known writers from all points along the spectrum were welcomed into the fight. This meant increased competition for publication space, and the unknown working-class writers were often pushed out in favor of more established writers. Although critics assert the movement failed because of its dogmatism and explicit politics, the fact is it failed to develop because, as Hanley explains, "the priorities of the left wing movement . . . altered dramatically with the Popular Front" (127). After the moment had passed, the proletarian literary movement was seen largely as a historical oddity which arose from a particular historical situation and which no longer had much, if any, value. It is this perception of the movement that the revisionist works, such as works by Foley, Denning, and Murphy, hope to change. As these authors and this study

demonstrate, the proletarian literary movement has tremendous value for contemporary critics because it repositioned the role of the writer in relation to his or her cultural context, and it left an indelible mark on American culture. Additionally, the proletarian literary movement serves as an interesting example of an attempt to consciously form a new art with specifically rhetorical goals.

Repositioning the American Writer

The writer in American culture has historically been seen as detached from the working life of the common man or woman; the writer's occupation was *that of writer*; however, the proletarian art movement broadened the conception of writer. In 1928, the *New Masses* had failed as a monthly magazine when financial support from a liberal trust fund had evaporated, and Gold with others recreated and reconceived the magazine as a weekly, a magazine set to publish truly working-class writing. Folsom writes, "For four years . . . [the magazine attempted] to rely upon the contributions of working men and women rather than on those of professional writers with radical sympathies" (14). Prior to 1928, proletarian literature was a literature theorized but not really realized, apart from a few examples, including works produced by Gold. Gold's call in July 1928, with the title "Write for Us!" read in part:

> Yes, every other magazine is written by professional writers. Every other magazine is always courting the "big names." But we want the working men, women and children of America to do most of the writing in the *New Masses*. The product may be crude, but it will be the truth. And truth, though she slay us, is the most beautiful of gods in the pantheon.

> There has been much theorizing about a worker's art in America. The only way it can be built, we believe, is by starting at the foundations.We want the raw materials of the workers' art in the *New Masses*. (3)

By soliciting writing from the ranks of the working class, Gold was asking both middle and working class readers to rethink what it meant to be a writer. With the swing leftward in 1929, many middle-class writers and intellectuals encouraged the proletariat to join them in artistic endeavors, to portray an aspect of American culture rarely seen in art. The *New Masses* also established in 1929 the New York arm of the John Reed Club, and new clubs sprung up in various U.S. cities throughout the Depression years; these clubs were specifically designed to mentor young working-class writers. Hanley writes, "Indeed, for a brief historical moment, a shared commitment to radical politics joined working-class and established writers together in a 'great alliance'" (133).

Gold's editorship of a radical literary journal provided a most necessary practical function for the development of proletarian art – it gave the working-class writer a legitimate opportunity to publish his or her work. Others followed suit; Conroy edited the *Anvil*, another outlet for inspiring proletarian writers. Additionally, as Suggs details, the following publications provided publication possibilities: *Contempo*, *Left*, *Dynamo*, *Partisan Review*,[1] *Left Front*, *New Force*, and *Partisan* (156). Hanley comments on the significance of these publications: "Proletarian writers in the early 30s, with limited or low-status schooling . . . and zero social capital, could gain access to the dominant literary system on the basis of authentic working-class experience and its representation" (132-3). Prior to this movement in America, workers had very little, if any, hope of publishing literary work. The proletarian literary movement, although attempting to counter American capitalist ideals,

such as the "American Dream," served to make the dream a reality to aspiring working-class authors. The proletarian movement helped democratize the production of literature.

The "Laboring" of American Culture

Although proletarian art failed to replace traditional art, it did alter traditional art by expanding its purview to include working-class characters and working-class experiences. Moreover, it explored regions of America previously neglected – the deep South, the Midwest, and so on. Denning cites Gold's promise that "[a] Jack London or a Walt Whitman will come out of this new crop of young workers" (qtd. in Denning 229); and he validates Gold's prediction by observing that "there was indeed a Richard Wright, a Tillie Olsen" (229). In Gold's "The Second American Renaissance," a speech before the participants of the Fourth American Writers' Congress in 1941, Gold analyzes the impact of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*; he calls it "a sensation," a work that "has passed into American folklore" (244). In this speech, Gold looks back at the thirties and sees the proletarian movement as the seed that produced "the hundreds of theaters, books, dance recitals, concerts, moving pictures," all possessing the "shape of proletarian literature" (251).

Denning calls this lasting proletarian imprint on American literature the "laboring" of American culture, a "lasting indelible working-class imprint" (201). America still cherishes its middle-class archetypes, its intrepid entrepreneurs, its lonely artists, but proletarian literature has made way for new American types: the "drifters and hobos . . . gangsters and prostitutes, even [the] occasional union organizer," characters which have become "part of the mythology of the United States, part of the national-popular

imagination" (Denning 229). Gold considered the thirties and the proletarian movement as a renaissance, one which he compares to the America's move westward, its break from foreign control; he terms it the "Second American Renaissance" because new American territory was again discovered, but this time in art. Gold in looking back at the thirties claims "whole new areas of American life were opened up – the deep South, the daily life in factories, mills, and mines, the struggle of the farmer, the souls of black folks, the problems of the recent immigrant and his children" (245).

Politics of Proletarian Art

Gold was criticized for politicizing art; the proletarian art movement was often dismissed as pure propaganda, or politics disguised as art. There is no doubt that politics was fundamental to the movement – was, in many ways, the entire justification for the movement. As I have repeatedly stressed, proletarian art was meant to *do something*, to change society. To many, this explicit *use* of art cheapened it. But, Gold did not deny the politics behind the art; if anything, he constantly reminded the writers and critics of the politics of such an art form. Terry Eagleton, one of the primary modern literary critics, asserts all literature is political, whether it be labeled traditional or subversive, and he says of radical critics, such as Mike Gold: "[T]hey have a set of social priorities with which most people . . . tend to disagree. That is why they are commonly dismissed as 'ideological' because 'ideology' is always a way of describing other people's interests rather than one's own" (211).

Eagleton suggests that not only should we stop ignoring the political ramifications of literary work, but we should embrace a rhetorical theory of literature and evaluate literature

by, among other things, its actual impact on daily life. Eagleton looks back at rhetoric's classical role:

> [Rhetoric] saw speaking and writing not merely as textual objects, to be aesthetically contemplated or endlessly deconstructed, but as forms of activity inseparable from the wider social relations between writers and readers, orators and audiences, and as largely unintelligible outside the social purposes and conditions in which they were embedded. (206)

If we do what Eagleton suggests, proletarian literature ceases to be "bad art" according to certain absolute aesthetic standards and becomes rhetoric or a rhetorical strategy. Traditional art, far from being apolitical, serves to reinforce the dominant politics of the day, and proletarian art was meant to undermine that power structure. And, proletarian art did manage to undermine the power structure by exposing the inherent politics in what most termed generally "American" culture. Proletarian art managed to demonstrate that American culture was, in fact, middle-class and upper-class culture, not working-class, and it reinforced the power structure which resulted in oppression of the working class. Hanley maintains that the most significant contribution of Gold and the proletarian literary movement is "its success at exposing . . . the 'social conditions' that naturalize the class organization, definition, and imposition of 'culture'" (136).

Closing Comments

Kenneth Burke and Stephen Mailloux provide a lens through which to look at Mike Gold and the proletarian art movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Though a self-conscious and distinct literary movement, it, like all movements, is intimately connected to what came

before and what came after. Using Mailloux's concept of rhetorical history – analyzing the meaning of a work by recreating the conditions in which the work was produced – hopefully provides the reader a new way of seeing Gold and proletarian art. By understanding components of Gold's childhood, the influence of his mentors on his developing ideas, the historical exigencies to which Gold was responding, and the social conditions under which people lived in America during the Depression era, one can better understand Gold's rhetorical strategies and aesthetic standards he used in his fiction works, his positions and the emotionality of his nonfiction works, and his undying commitment to the cause of social justice. Burke reminds us that the conversation – in this instance the conversation about economics, art, classes, and how they relate to each other – was taking place before we entered and will be taking place long after we leave. The concerns of Gold and the literary left movement of the 1920s and 1930s is relevant today because we face the same issues. In America, the gap continues to grow between the very rich and the very poor. The poor often do not have adequate housing, adequate health care, or adequate representation in the legal system. The dominant culture continues to reinforce the American Dream, and thereby, blames the poor for their poverty. We dislike talk of class in America, the country of equality where no classes are supposed to exist, but much like denying the inherent politics in literature, denying class in America is simply a way to maintain the privilege of the classes that benefit from the denial. Gold made a stab at changing this condition.

Folsom notes that many critics "ignore [Gold] wholly, or reduce him to a grudging footnote – as befits what they consider a wart on the buttocks of American literature" (7). But, for all the vehemence with which people attack Gold, it is important to remember that he may not have been the brightest theoretician or the best writer or the most savvy political

agent, but he worked tirelessly for the poor. Gold was not perfect; proletarian literature was not perfect. But, Gold attempted to do something against impossible odds, and in that attempt we have lessons to learn.

Notes for Chapter Five

[1] Prior to its relaunch in 1937, *Partisan Review* was part of the worker-writers' groups, the John Reed Clubs.

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VITA

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In August, 2001, Erin enrolled in full-time graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her doctorate in English, she held the position of Graduate Instructor from 2001-2004. She also served as Senior Assistant Editor of *Composition Studies* from 2004-2005. Erin was then awarded the Jim Corder Memorial Fellowship in August 2005 and continued to teach composition classes at TCU until August, 2007. Since August, 2007, Erin has held the position of Professor of English at Weatherford College, Decatur, Texas. She is a member of National Council for Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

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ABSTRACT

ART AND BREAD: MIKE GOLD, PROLETARIAN ART, AND THE RHETORIC OF AMERICAN COMMUNISM, 1921-1941

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An important literary movement took place in 1920s and 1930s America, initiated by author, editor, and critic, Mike Gold; however, both the movement and the man have been marginalized or even dismissed due to their entanglements with political communism.

This study is an effort to recover Mike Gold and demonstrate his successes and the successes of proletarian art. Due to changing historical and political contexts, proletarian literature, an art form closely associated with Communism, became the target of attacks by a group of anti-Stalinist literary critics in the mid to late 1930s. This anti-Stalinist aesthetic became the lens through which both Mike Gold and proletarian literature was viewed for decades.

Criticism of Gold and proletarian literature intensified after World War II and the onset of the Cold War, particularly after the beginning of the McCarthy Communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Gold's proletarian art was seen by mainstream critics as communist propaganda with no inherent literary or social value.

Recovery efforts have been underway since the 1960s for proletarian literature; Gold, however, has not received the attention and credit he deserves for initiating and sustaining a unique, largely-successful literary movement meant, quite consciously, to function rhetorically.

This project attempts to fill in the gap in Gold scholarship, to contextualize Gold's writings by considering the very specific exigencies to which Gold was responding and by considering Gold's ultimate rhetorical goals. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that Gold quite deftly navigated the obstacles he encountered and succeeded in "sustaining the impulse of radical literature" in the United States throughout the 1930s (Folsom 14).