

The Gold-Wilder Controversy Of 1930

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with a celebrated episode in the history of modern American letters - Michael Gold's famous essay on Thornton Wilder, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", printed in the liberal **New Republic** magazine of October 22, 1930. The essay stirred up the first major literary argument of the 1930's and announced some of the central preoccupations of the literary life of the Depression decade.

It is the purpose of this paper to establish the importance of Gold's essay in its historical contexts, with particular attention to its place in the development of radical letters in America. The critical point of view presented in the review came as the result of a growing body of radical criticism in America, largely under the influence of the earlier Soviet theorists; the review is an example of Gold's own socio-economic, or "Marxian" criticism worked out during the preceding few years. In its main arguments, the review reflects the antagonism felt in left-liberal circles toward the Humanist school of philosophers and their literary associates. In its ancillary arguments concerning the formal technical qualities of literature, the essay is shown to be linked to an important ideological rift within the staff of the **New Masses** magazine (the only organ of radical literary expression of the time). This split had seen Gold challenged by the critic and literary historian, Joshua Kunitz, on the questions of proletarian literature, literary craft and technique, and on Gold's

reorientation of the magazine along specifically proletarian lines in the style of the Soviet Proletkult experiment. The review is seen as a defiant statement of confidence in the future of a proletarian movement in American literature and in the sterility of the bourgeois tradition as a concomitant to the decline of American capitalism, as Gold saw it.

The main strands of the review are defined. In its themes, settings, and philosophical concerns, Wilder's work is seen as the product of the particular socio-economic conditions of post-World War I American society and of the dominant class within that society - the bourgeoisie. Wilder's work is escapist, since in it he refuses to deal with contemporary America, and reactionary, since instead of stimulating an awareness of modern social conditions Wilder returns his reader to the stasis of the past. Wilder's technical expertise is dismissed as "rhetoric", designed to disguise an emptiness of content and lack of constructive social outlook.

The main significances of the essay are set out. Gold brought social criticism and the idea of socially-concerned literature to the attention of the literary establishment and demanded that the writer confront his times. The review had an influence on the liberal intelligentsia, attracting many to the radical point of view. For the left, the review 1) demonstrated the central priorities of the "Marxian" critical method 2) dissociated the radical writer from the bourgeois literary tradition 3) announced the presence of a new literary movement evolving in America, and 4) pointed to the existence of a tradition in social writing in America and in world literature. The review's impact on later left-wing critical technique is then assessed.

The review is located, finally, within the context of American-Soviet literary relations, and is seen as a memorial to a significant experiment in American revolutionary letters - Michael Gold's struggle for a proletarian literature by and about the working-class.

On October 22, 1930, the liberal **New Republic** magazine printed Michael Gold's "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", the review-article which, in Edmund Wilson's opinion, marked "the eruption of the Marxist issues out of the literary circles of the radicals into the field of general criticism" and which made it plain that "the economic crisis is to be accompanied by a literary one."⁽¹⁾ Editor of the radical literary magazine, the **New Masses**, and leading exponent of the budding proletarian movement in American letters, Gold had savaged Thornton Wilder as "the poet of the genteel bourgeoisie", whose books ignored contemporary America in favour of a "historic junkshop", eighteenth century Peru and ancient Greece. At the same time, Gold blasted Wilder's Anglo-Catholicism as "that newly fashionable literary religion... that last refuge of the American literary snob."⁽²⁾ Obscured in the ensuing uproar, and neglected by most later commentators, was the full significance of Gold's review in the development of the radical literary movement in America - firstly, as the outcome of the campaign for an independent left-wing criticism which Gold had been advocating since the early 1920's, and, secondly, as the by-product of an ideological rift within the **New Masses** group over the new direction the magazine (and, therefore, American revolutionary writing) was taking following its proletarianization by Gold in June 1928⁽³⁾.

II

The beginning of Michael Gold's career in left-wing letters had coincided with the appearance of a more single-minded intellectual style in American radicalism in the years after the first decade. The 'economic' or 'sociological' interpretation of literature was beginning to gain currency among radical critics. Gold's own early reviews for the radical press had eschewed the formalism of close textual and stylistic analysis in favour of broader speculations about the social context of literature or about trends in contemporary American writing. In his work for the **Liberator** magazine in 1921-22, Gold's tendency to view literature in these terms hardened, as he began to formulate an approach which rested on some basic assumptions about the relation between art and society and the specific literary situation in the United States. These assumptions may be summarised as follows: the intellectuals had "turned to the

life of the moods, to the worship of beauty and sensation", and had turned art into an escape from the complex realities of life in capitalist America ("Towards Proletarian Art", February 1921); the artist had a moral responsibility to concern himself with events in the society in which he lived, and to ignore those events in favour of "pure art, arty art" was an abdication of that responsibility ("Two Critics in a Bar-room", September 1921); in condemning the radical writers as "propagandists" and in evaluating literature from a class-biased (i.e. middle-class) point of view, the "bourgeois critics" demonstrated the close link between the values of the dominant social class and the prevailing literary taste and opinion (Gold's review of Arthur Morrison's **Tales of Mean Streets**, March 1922). Hand in hand with these ideas went Gold's belief in the need for writers to turn to the life of the proletariat for fresh inspiration, and his faith in the imminence of a new, vital proletarian art along the lines of the Soviet Proletkult experiment, which would rescue American literature from the decadence and despair of the intellectuals ("Towards Proletarian Art").

In his notions of the literary escapism of art-for-art's sake and the social responsibility of the writer, Gold displayed a knack for putting his finger on themes which, as one critic has acknowledged, would "dominate the thinking of proletarian critics of the 1930's". (4) And Gold did so during a period when there existed in radical thought in America what Joseph Freeman later described as "a gap between revolutionary politics and revolutionary literature", with the result that, in the pages of the **Masses** and the **Liberator**, literature and revolution, art and politics had usually stayed well apart, and literary criticism was usually conservative and genteel. Gold's tentative efforts at bridging that gap in his emphasis on the social context of art must be seen against an absence in the United States of any substantial tradition of radical critical theory.

By the time Gold joined the **New Masses** magazine in the spring of 1926, the radical intelligentsia in America had had time to absorb some of the lessons in the Russian Marxist criticism of Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, and Lunacharsky, which was beginning to filter through from the Soviet Union in English translation. The Russians' position hinged on the view of literature as part of the cultural superstructure built onto the economic foundations of society, and held that literature is a partial reflection of the forces at work within

the socio-economic base of society. This theory bolstered the sketchy principles of the 'sociological' criticism which existed on the left in America, and in the years 1926-30 it was partially applied to the American scene by Gold, Joseph Freeman, and other critics in the pages of the **New Masses**.

Reviewing Trotsky's **Literature and Revolution** in the **New Masses** of October 1926, Gold stated his approval of Trotsky's "Marxian method" of literary analysis. Gold contrasted Trotsky's approach to trends in American literary criticism:

In America subjective criticism prevails almost entirely. It is worthless to the writer; it cannot help him understand himself, or his relationship to his age. At best, it is a pat on the shoulder, a prettily strung bouquet of appreciation; at worst, a kick in the rear.... Trotsky comes to literature... with the scientific tools of the Marxian methodology. He gives us, what no American critic has yet fully given us, a sense of the social changes which precede each new school of art, and which determine the individual psychology of the artist, however "free" he thinks he is. (5)

Marx had discovered "the mutability and class roots of all cultures", and Trotsky applied this discovery to an examination of the relation between literature and the society in which it is produced. He and other Marxist critics, Gold says, have unearthed "the economic roots of the shining rose bush of art, and have found that healthy real roots do exist there".

Noting that Trotsky's history of Russian literary movements contains parallels to the development of literature in the United States, Gold attempted to apply the "Marxian methodology" to the American situation. The writer in America, Gold argued, had become a "specialist" who "thinks of himself merely as a craftsman, and is proud to confess that he is ignorant of history, economics, and science". The result of this, Gold went on, was the formalist attitude toward literature evident in most American writing. "Wherever the boudoir bards and the minor Oscar Wildes congregate", Gold declared, "one can hear those awful cliches of the esthetic bores: Art is never useful. Art has nothing to do with propaganda. Art is above the battle. Art is Free, etc., etc." For Gold, this art-for-art's sake escapism had now become explicable within a more coherent set of critical principles, reinforced by the theory laid down in **Literature and Revolution**. Gold's review set out some of

these principles: that both literary movements and the individual psychology of the author can be interpreted by socio-economic analysis.

It was not until March 1928, in a review of Ernest Hemingway's **Men Without Women**, that Gold made his first extensive application of the "Marxian method" and set a pattern of criticism which would lead to "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" in 1930. Hemingway deserved recognition, Gold wrote, because "he is powerful, original... has a technical control of his material as sure as a locomotive engineer's". Gold praised Hemingway as a great stylist, who had "led American writing back to the divine simplicities of the prosaic". Gold predicted that the revolutionary writers of the future would imitate Hemingway's "bare, hard style". Gold's remarks on literary style are of significance in the context of the events leading up to his review of Wilder in October 1930; they show, clearly, that at this time Gold recognised and was prepared to discuss style as a special aspect of literary craftsmanship which could be analysed separately and which did not necessarily stand in any fixed relationship to content or philosophy.

But the young Hemingway, Gold believed, was merely a "fashion", with his themes of "liquor, sex and sport" satisfying the fantasies of "the American white-collar slave", harried and demoralised by "the fiercest scramble for a living the world has ever known":

This is literature of escape, it is a new form of the ivory tower in America. The Young American "liberal" writes advertising copy meekly all day, then at night dreams of Hemingway's irresponsible Europe, where everyone talks literature, drinks fine liqueurs, swaggers with a cane, sleeps with beautiful and witty British aristocrats, is well informed in the mysteries of bullfighting, has a mysterious income from home.

That is why Hemingway is suddenly popular. He has become the sentimental storyteller to a whole group of tired, sad, impotent young Americans, most of whom must work in offices every day - "white collar slaves". (6)

Gold locates the roots of the modern temper in the betrayal of the "great wave of social revolt" which came to a head with the election

of Woodrow Wilson. Hemingway's writing reflects the "enormous self-pity" of the betrayed idealist, who "romanticizes his bewilderment in a world where social problems have become the only real problems of the so-called individual". "Incapable of social thought", Hemingway is "too bourgeois to accept the labor world" and will probably go on to imitate "those young French writers near to his mood, who have sought nirvana in the Catholic Church".

Although brief, "Hemingway - White Collar Poet" incorporates some of the cornerstones of Gold's developing critical technique: that literature is a reflection of socio-economic trends within society; that the individual writer is constrained by his own class affiliation and serves as the articulator of the values, attitudes and tastes of that class. Over the next eighteen months, Gold would recapitulate these central principles of his critical position in various **New Masses** articles, but "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" of October 1930 would be their most dramatic - and most public - expression to date.

III

It is unlikely that many of the **New Republic's** readers could have been aware that "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" was the outcome of a dispute which had erupted six months earlier in the pages of the **New Masses** over the status of revolutionary writing in America and, in particular, over the proletarianization of the magazine (then the left's only literary organ) which Gold had instituted in June 1928 with his call for contributions from 'worker correspondents'. As Eric Homberger has pointed out (7) Gold's transformation of the **New Masses** into a Proletkult magazine came a full eight years after Lenin had moved to crush the Soviet workers' cultural movement, Proletkult, in 1920. Within the Proletkult, whose leading theoretician had been A. A. Bogdanov, it had been felt that a complete break with the culture of the past was necessary, with the All-Russian Proletkult Congress of 1918 urging that they should "throw away bourgeois culture entirely as old rubbish"⁽⁸⁾ The idea of creating a new proletarian culture *ex nihilo*, with no borrowings from the bourgeois tradition, was one which had strong appeals for Gold, whose influential essay of 1921, "Towards Proletarian Art", had really been an iconoclastic call for a total break with the bourgeois past - "the old moods, the old poetry, fiction, painting, philosophies" - and the erection of a

new proletarian culture.

To some inside the **New Masses**, certain aspects of Gold's new emphasis appeared an unhealthy departure for American revolutionary writing. One of his over-riding concerns at this time was to try to simplify and demystify the process of writing, mainly in the interests of the new school of proletarian writers (coal-miners, steel-workers, seamen and farm-hands) whose rough-hewn efforts were beginning to appear in the magazine. But in his eagerness to have his proletarians "tell it simply and sincerely", Gold also counselled them not to "worry about style, grammar or syntax".⁽⁹⁾ To some of the **New Masses** staff, like the critics Joseph Freeman and Joshua Kunitz, the new tone of unlettered aggression threatened an undesirable lowering of standards and, in Kunitz's case, confirmed his worst suspicions about Gold's handling of the whole question of proletarian literature. Himself of Russian origin and a leading authority on the Soviet cultural scene, Kunitz felt that Gold knew little of Soviet esthetic theory and that he was ignorant of the details of the Proletkult movement. In Kunitz's view, Gold was vulgarizing Soviet practice in the field of literature and was leading American revolutionary writing along an increasingly narrow path.

It was the question of style and craft and their relevance to the revolutionary writer which dominated the **New Masses** debate on Thornton Wilder. In April 1930, in his editorial "Notes of the Month". Gold joined in an already well-advanced radical attack on the Humanist group of philosophers and artists when he accused the school of representing "the startling and sly introduction of Fascism into this country". The Humanists, led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, stood for a philosophy of conservatism, individualism, religion, and moral restraint; they stressed the moral foundation of all art, and emphasised its formal esthetic qualities at the expense of intent and content - a position, in fact, diametrically opposite to Gold's own. Opponents of the Humanists criticised them as aristocratic and anti-democratic, with the critic V. F. Calverton in the **New Masses** labelling them as "reactionary to the core"⁽¹⁰⁾

Gold also attacked the Humanists on political grounds, but he added some remarks on their literary achievements. As the editor of a workers' magazine which exalted the bluntness of proletarian

prose, Gold was understandably keen to point to the way in which an elaborate prose style served as camouflage for Fascist ideology. In so doing, he singled out Thornton Wilder for special attention:

That fairy-like little Anglo-American curate, Thornton Wilder, is about their best specimen writer so far. His novels have the suavity, discretion and flawless rhetoric the "humanists" so prize. Yes, Wilder writes perfect English. But he has nothing to say in that perfect English. He is a beautiful, rouged, combed, well-dressed corpse, lying among the sacred candles and lilies of the past, and sure to stink if exposed to sunlight.⁽¹¹⁾

Taken in the larger context of the editorial, these comments came much in the nature of an aside, but by making them, and by selecting Wilder as his target, Gold let loose a storm inside the **New Masses** revolving around the question of proletarian literature and literary technique.

It was Gold's disdain for Wilder's "perfect English" which drew fire in the May issue of the magazine from Kunitz, who, under the pseudonym of J. Q. Neets⁽¹²⁾ reviewed Upton Sinclair's **Mountain City** and Wilder's **The Woman of Andros** - a deliberate coupling designed to provoke comparisons between the formal qualities of radical and bourgeois literature. Kunitz had been looking for an opportunity to demonstrate the dangers in Gold's outlook, as he recalled much later⁽¹³⁾ and in Upton Sinclair he had chosen a leading radical novelist whom he knew Gold respected, but whom Kunitz considered too much of a propagandist, giver to "poor writing" and speechifying. "I stood for quality", Kunitz explained later, and for the idea that revolutionary writing had "to be literature, and you cannot achieve literature simply by being proletarian". Needless to say, Kunitz had little time for Gold's proletarian protégés then writing in the **New Masses**.

In his review, Kunitz readily agreed that Wilder's outlook was "utterly reactionary", but he went on to extol the formal qualities of Wilder's work:

There is a seductiveness in his pallid beauty. The novel has perfect structure, impeccable delineation of plot and character, subtle nuances of meanings, and rhythms, and colors. The story is pervaded with a feeling of nostalgia, a mystic yearning, a clairvoyant probing into the under-

ground labyrinths of the human soul. **The Woman** is genuine art. It is a perfect expression of a well-defined social trend. It is humanism **par excellence**.⁽¹⁴⁾

In other words, literary technique and form need not stand in any rigid relation to the moral or political position of the writer. Style was an independent quality of literature, and could be perfected by the “utterly reactionary” Humanists as well as by any other literary school.

With admiring glances at Wilder’s “literary craftsmanship” and “technique”, Kunitz made a plea for quality in proletarian writing and criticised some other writers who, he suggested, might learn from the Humanists:

We too need literary craftsmanship, technique... That is why I cannot agree with Mike Gold’s sneering remarks about Wilder’s ‘flawless rhetoric’ and ‘perfect English’. Perfect English is not such a bad thing. Some day we too will learn to prize it. Why object to a subtle use of words, to a splendidly organized prose? Are we forever doomed to relish the flat, grey soporific stuff dished out to us by so many of our writers? Pushkin and Tolstoy were aristocrats who used ‘flawless rhetoric’ and ‘perfect Russian’, yet never have they been read with such avidity and studied by the proletarian writers in Soviet Russia. We must learn from the bourgeoisie just as the bourgeoisie had once learned from the aristocracy... A wise proletarian does not pooh-pooh the very real technical achievement of the bourgeois writer. He attempts to master it, and then to transcend it.

The “flat, grey soporific stuff” was an obvious reference to Gold’s young proletarians.

Kunitz went on to show that he numbered Upton Sinclair among those radical writers who wrote so dully. Using Sinclair’s as an example of the type of writing the proletarian ought to shun, Kunitz dismissed Sinclair’s contribution in the bluntest of terms:

Neither in content nor in form is it calculated, I feel, to meet the needs of the vanguard of the proletarian movement. His technique is obsolete. His somewhat obvious satire would make excellent pabulum for the more naive members of the Socialist Party and the American Federation of Labor. The classconscious, revolutionary workers hardly need to be

told about the dastardly methods in which capitalistic fortunes are made... What we need is real revolutionary content... Instead of Sinclair's drab prose and two-dimensional characters, we need glowing words, and penetrating psychological illumination.

Kunitz's attack on Sinclair was also an attack on Gold, his literary standards, and his stewardship of the radical literary movement, for Gold had always held Sinclair up as a model for aspiring proletarian writers as the only writer who had presented "the workers' side of the class struggle" and had inspired them with "solidarity and revolt"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Kunitz's review was a protest against Gold's recent antiliterary tone and his consistent failure to consider seriously the formal aspects of literature - a failure which sprang partly from Gold's conviction that it was the socio-economic roots of art which held the key to its understanding, and partly also from his attempts to minimize the difficulties of creative writing in order to encourage his budding proletarian writers. At the same time, the review hinted at the ideological differences which had surfaced inside the **New Masses** as a result of Gold's militant new policy, with his uncompromising proletarianism opposed by those who, like Kunitz, were more open-minded in their approach to the issue of proletarian writing and more cautious about rejecting out of hand the whole bourgeois tradition.

Gold's retort in the June 1930 issue of the magazine was to dismiss Kunitz's advice that the proletarian writers observe Wilder for technique as "the old academic banalism" (an obvious jibe at Kunitz, who was then working as a teacher of literature, as Gold knew). The very idea of style study was "classroom nonsense", said Gold, because "there is no 'style' - there is only clarity, force, truth in writing". "Style and content are one", Gold continued, and in the case of the proletarian writer, his "material and his proletarian character will create a new style in the world, which will be different and better than all the dead splendors of all the Wilders and Paters in the world"⁽¹⁶⁾ In his insistence that the style of proletarian Literature would evolve directly from its new content, and in his rejection of the bourgeois esthetic heritage, Gold was taking up a position reminiscent of that adopted by the Lef (Left Front) faction of Soviet revolutionary writers in 1923. The Lef platform had rested on the beliefs that the proletariat "cannot and will

not restore esthetic forms that have served historically outlived social systems"; that the proletariat must produce "new forms to correspond to its new content"; that "any ideological intercourse with the past is harmful, dangerous".⁽¹⁷⁾ The crucial difference, of course, was that the Lef group had been operating in a real post-revolutionary situation, whereas Gold was attempting to apply a similar theory in vigorously capitalist America.

For several more months, the feud dragged on acrimoniously in the **New Masses**, exposing deep divisions over policy. Kunitz went so far as to denounce Gold in person, attacking his "childish nihilism, a blind impetuous revolt against anything that savors of the past, of "old culture", and accusing him of flying in the face of Lenin and of a recent Politburo resolution which had rebuked "frivolous and contemptuous" attitudes towards the past and towards specialists in style.⁽¹⁸⁾ Eventually, the quarrel lost its momentum, and the whole question of literary style and revolutionary writing was shelved. The attack on the Humanists petered out, too, and by July 1930 Gold was confidently burying the group as defunct. In his view, the Crash of 1929 had undercut the appeal of Humanism, and the movement would remain "a dead herring until the stock market comes back (if it ever does)".⁽¹⁹⁾ Gold made it plain that one of his main objections to the Humanists was that they sought shelter "in the comfortable mausoleums of the past" instead of attempting "to write about the living world".

IV

The **New Masses** argument had settled on the question, "Can We Learn Anything from the Bourgeois Writers?"⁽²⁰⁾ by the time "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" appeared in the **New Republic** in October 1930. The review was solicited by Malcolm Cowley, an outspoken liberal adversary of the Humanists, in an attempt to "liven things up" in the **New Republic's** book-review section, but when Cowley saw the finished piece he decided against publication on account of its "violent tone".⁽²¹⁾ Edmund Wilson, the magazine's editor, had no such qualms. He had been away at the time, but on his return he saw the review and immediately inserted it in the magazine's Fall Literary Section. Gold's review no doubt seemed timely to Wilson, who, in his move leftward, had already decried literary Humanism as "an attempt to write literary history in

a vacuum, with the social and economic background left out" and had specifically criticised Thornton Wilder for his remoteness from the modern American scene.⁽²²⁾

Gold's review of Wilder's novels and plays re-iterated many of the points raised earlier in the **New Masses** debate. The critical position behind it, too, had also been worked out in the **New Masses**. Consistent with the "Marxian method" Gold had employed in his 1928 review of Hemingway, the focus is on the social basis of Wilder's work, which Gold relates to the socio-economic conditions of American society and to the particular class within that society whose general outlook Wilder reflects. This is the hub of Gold's argument:

Mr. Wilder remains the poet of a small sophisticated class that has recently arisen in America - our genteel bourgeoisie. His style is their style; it is the new fashion.... America won the war. The world's wealth flowed into it like a red Mississippi. The newest and greatest of all leisure classes was created. Luxury hotels, golf, old furniture and Vanity Fair sophistication were some of their expressions. Thorstein Veblen foretold all this in 1899, in an epoch-making book that every American critic ought to study like a Bible. In "The Theory of the Leisure Class" he painted the hopeless course of most American culture for the next three decades. The grim, ironic prophet has been justified. Thornton Wilder is the perfect flower of the new prosperity. He has all the virtues Veblen said this leisure class would demand: the air of good breeding, the decorum, priestliness, glossy high finish as against intrinsic qualities, conspicuous inutility, caste feeling, love of the archaic, etc...⁽²³⁾

The class Wilder writes for, Gold maintains, is essentially a "parvenu class" which needs to forget "its lowly origins in American industrialism" and to disguise "the barbaric sources of their income, the millions wrung from American workers and foreign peasants and coolies". Therefore, Wilder leads the bourgeoisie "into castles, palaces and far-off Greek islands... This Emily Post of culture will never reproach them; or remind them of Pittsburgh or the breadlines".

As for the content of Wilder's work, Gold centres his attack on

Wilder's use of historical themes and his failure to exploit those themes "to affect the present and future". Singling out Wilder's short plays as an example, Gold catalogues their "erudite and esoteric themes". They are, he says,

all about Angels, and Mozart, and King Louis, and Fairies, and a Girl of the Renaissance, and a whimsical old Actress (1780) and her old Lover; Childe Harold to the Dark Tower Came; Prosperina and the Devil; The Flight into Egypt; a Venetian Prince and a Mermaid; Shelley, Judgment Day, Centaurs, God, The Woman in the Chlamys, Christ; Brigomeide, Leviathan, Ibsen; every waxwork in Wells's Outline, in fact, except Buffalo Bill.

Gold probably had Kunitz's recent charges of his frivolity towards the past in mind when he went on to contrast Wilder's "museum" with the "heroic archaeology" of Walter Scott and Eugene Sue, both of whom had "used the past as a weapon to affect the present and future". The past, Gold declared, should be used "as a deepening, clarifying and sublimation of the struggles in the too-immediate present". The trouble with Wilder was that his "historic junkshop" was totally irrelevant to contemporary America. "Where are the modern streets of New York, Chicago and New Orleans in these little novels?" Gold asked; "where are the cotton mills, and the... child slaves of the beet fields? Where are the stockbroker suicides, the labor racketeers or passion and death of the coal miners?... Is Mr. Wilder a Swede or a Greek, or is he an American? No stranger would know from these books he has written".

It was the suggestion that Wilder write "a book about modern America" (a recommendation Edmund Wilson had made two years earlier) that quickly became identified as the crux of Gold's argument, but his indictment carried other implications as well. One was that, far from being merely irresponsible (as it had seemed to him in 1921) the form of esthetic escapism Wilder's work represented was reactionary in a political sense, since it was the attempt of the intellectual to retreat from the social upheaval of the present into the stasis of the past. In Gold's view, the literary philosophy Wilder's writing embodied - what Gold called "that newly fashionable literary religion... Anglo-Catholicism" - bore a real relationship to the socio-economic trends within society, and his attack on the literary products of that movement was at the same time an assault on the reactionary philosophy those products represented.

Thus far, in his socio-economic analysis of Wilder's work and its themes, Gold had quite forcefully demonstrated some of the basic elements of the developing radical criticism in America. When Gold took on the question of Wilder's style, it was clear that the **New Masses** exchanges with Kunitz had prompted him to modify his stance and also to clarify his attitude toward the cultural achievements of the past. On the latter, Gold denounced Wilder's "tailor-made rhetoric" as "false to the great stormy music of Anglo-Saxon speech". Shakespeare, Gold went on, "is crude and disorderly beside Mr. Wilder. Neither Milton, Fielding, Burns, Blake, Byron, Chaucer nor Hardy could ever receive a passing mark in Mr Wilder's classroom of style". Gold's list of literary giants at least refuted Kunitz's allegations in the **New Masses** that Gold stood for "indiscriminate negation and wholesale rejection" and "a reversion to barbarism". What Gold really objected to, it now appeared, was the deliberate cultivation of style for its own sake (another form of art-for-art's sake, that is), for conscious concern for style may actually be used to conceal an emptiness of content, and the ornateness of style may relate to the reactionary nature of that content. All that should be aimed for, Gold implied, was the directness and unpretentiousness of the vernacular (again, he must have had his proletarians and their writing problems largely in mind). Gold was obviously not prepared to abandon his rather mechanical theory that style and content were inextricably linked, a theory which might work well enough in the context of proletarian writing and its immediate needs, but which Gold had more trouble applying to the contemporary bourgeois scene (witness his comments in praise of Hemingway's style in 1928). Nor was Gold prepared to concede that there might be any value whatsoever in Wilder's stylistic expertise. As for learning from the bourgeois, Gold's sneering dismissal of Henry James and Anatole France made it plain that he was as convinced as ever of the bankruptcy of the whole tradition.

V

With all its shortcomings - its insulting tone, its cavalier dismissal of literary technique and bourgeois tradition, and its rather mechanical application of Marxist theory - Gold's review, in Edmund Wilson's words, had succeeded in provoking "one of the most violent controversies which the literary world [had] lately known".⁽²⁴⁾ For the next two months the cor-

response columns of the **New Republic** were inundated with letters in reaction to Gold's review, the majority of them echoing the indignant reader who thought it "vulgar, tainted, poisonous".⁽²⁵⁾ Most of these readers seemed to take it for granted, as the left-wing critic Bernard Smith noted in a letter to the magazine, "that the critic should concern himself exclusively with 'style and pattern' or 'style as art' and that an author's ideas and feelings about the way people live is none of the critic's damned business... [that] literature must be regarded as 'above the [social] battle' and criticism must be an act of disinterestedness".⁽²⁶⁾ Thanks to Gold's review and the uproar it caused, these assumptions would now be openly questioned, with the result that few would thereafter be prepared to challenge the relevance of literature to society or to deny the social involvement of the writer. Gold had brought the radical point of view to public notice, and had undermined the idea of literature as isolated from social realities.

That Gold's message had got across to the liberal intelligentsia emerged from Edmund Wilson's comments following the controversy. In an editorial titled "The Economic Interpretation of Wilder" (November 26, 1930), Wilson acknowledged that Gold had raised "a fundamental issue" and that there was "a good deal to be said on his side". Pointing out that Wilder obviously owed a lot to Proust, Wilson conceded the socio-economic basis of Wilder's work when he agreed that "in Wilder the pathos and the beauty derived from exotic lands of the imagination are, as Michael Gold suggests, a sedative for sick Americans". That Gold had, indeed, helped in persuading many middle-class intellectuals of the radical point of view would be attested later by the left in the anthology, **Proletarian Literature in the United States** (1935), where Gold's review was credited with having played "a conspicuous part in the development of a goodly number of intellectuals who had just begun to be conscious of the unhappy state of American literature and the instability of American capitalism".⁽²⁷⁾

For the left, Gold had demonstrated at least some of the main tasks of the growing Marxist criticism. He had examined both the content and form of Wilder's work, identified their social roots, and demanded that Wilder confront the society in which he lived - which Wilder promptly did in a collection of short plays, **The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act** (1931) and in his next novel, **Heaven's My Destination** (1934)⁽²⁸⁾. Yet, "Wilder: Prophet of the

Genteel Christ" was by no means an example of the subtlest application of the Marxist technique then available. Gold's tendency toward lengthy analyses of the socio-economic conditions which give rise to literary movements gave Edmund Wilson the impression - as it must to many others new to left-wing criticism - that "the Marxist point of view" undervalued literary craft in favour of "economic and social factors".⁽²⁹⁾ There were more sophisticated radical critics, such as Joseph Freeman and Robert Wolf, who had also devised a more flexible approach to the question of style and technique than Gold's hard and fast attitude.

"Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" is usually thought of as an 'attack', but seen in the context of the **New Masses** argument over Humanism, technique, and revolutionary literature, the review appears also as a form of defence - against charges from within the left that Gold's was a frivolous attitude toward literary craft and that he condoned low standards in proletarian writing. It was not the last time that Gold would have to defend himself against accusations that he was an apologist for mediocrity in radical writing and narrowness in critical thought; in 1936, similar charges were made by Josephine Herbst, the novelist, during an altercation over the critical writings of James T. Farrell. This was of minor significance, however, compared to the more fundamental objections raised ten years later by Isidor Schneider, the novelist and critic, who, during a period of post-war reappraisal on the literary left, surveyed the history of radical criticism of the previous fifteen years and came to the conclusion that some of the critical concepts Gold had popularized through "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" had been responsible for impeding the progress of left-wing criticism.

Assessing the left-wing inheritance from the 1930's in literature and criticism, Schneider found it disappointingly meagre. He numbered "terms like 'escapism', 'the ivory tower', and 'decadence' " among concepts which had "for some time... merely served as epithets and no longer as critical instruments". All of these were terms which Gold had used repeatedly during the latter 1920's and after, and for which, indeed, he was partly responsible, as Schneider went on to point out:

In October 1930, when Mike Gold first made use of the idea of literary "escape" in reviewing the books of Thornton Wilder, it was succinct, apt and electrifying. It challenged the assumptions of the "esthetic" criticism of the time,

exposing its evasions of reality. It was a well-timed battle cry, and it directed the militant, social consciousness of the period. But it was hardly a measure of literary values.⁽³⁰⁾

Schneider claimed that the concept of "escapism" was turned by others after Gold into "a club against imagination and relaxation, against the satisfaction of human needs, properly among the functions of culture". Because "moral pressures" had been used instead of "critical values", Schneider continued, "important functions in the creative process were misunderstood and often denied. There was a tendency to use them to restrict the area of experiment in form and exploration into states of consciousness". Writers like Henry James and James Joyce, said Schneider, had been wrongly assigned to the "'dung heap of decadence' ". It is probable that Schneider had Gold himself in mind in connection with left-wing misunderstanding of James, whom Gold had deprecated as "a Harvard snob" who wrote "tiresome and empty books".⁽³¹⁾

By 1946, therefore, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" was still acknowledged on the left as an important landmark in the history of radical letters in America, but, to Schneider and others like him, its strengths appeared one-sided and its weaknesses actually harmful to subsequent left-wing criticism. Indisputably, Gold had helped win a major intellectual victory through the review by gaining recognition for social criticism. But, equally undeniable, most of the issues Gold raised had been primarily **moral** ones; there was practically no evaluation of the intrinsically literary qualities of Wilder's work and, therefore, nothing in the way of an esthetic theory to serve the later generation of radical critics. Through this bias, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" probably did much to set the tone for some of the narrowest left-wing criticism of the 1930's.

VI

"Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" appeared at a moment when Michael Gold's long fight for an American proletarian literature by and about the proletariat, in the image of the Soviet Proletkult, had just begun to bear its first rough fruit in the **New Masses** worker-correspondents. The abrasive self-confidence of the review reflects Gold's certainty in the future of his nascent

proletarian literature, and in damning Thornton Wilder so comprehensively, Gold was re-affirming his belief that his proletarians should go it alone, free from the dominant bourgeois tradition. On this issue, Gold echoed the defiant proletarianism and class antagonism of the sectarian left within the newly-formed John Reed Clubs.⁽³²⁾ It was a gloriously extreme position which Gold would soon have to modify as the shifting political currents emanating from Moscow began to overtake him. Gold was present as a member of the American delegation to the second congress of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers, held in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov in November 1930, to hear the new IURW line stress the need to recruit progressive elements of the bourgeoisie and to guard against "the straitjacket of sectarianism" implicit in a too narrow, classbased interpretation of proletarian literature. With this shift, Gold's militant brand of proletarianism, with its anti-bourgeois overtones, soon began to lose ground, to be eclipsed almost entirely by the policy of rapprochement with middle-class intellectuals during the United Front period from 1935. As a result of Kharkov, Gold's influence on the running of the **New Masses** began to wane, and by July 1931 he would relinquish his sole editorship. The **New Masses** gradually changed course, diluting its proletarian flavour as more contributions began to appear from middle-class writers and intellectuals. Gold's Proletkult-style of proletarian literature would never occupy so central a place in American revolutionary letters again. In this context, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" stands as a memorial to a watershed in American radical literature, appearing, as it did, at a moment when Gold's populist dream must have seemed to him almost within reach - the day "when there is singing and music rising in every American street, when in every American factory there is a drama group of the workers, when mechanics paint in their leisure, and farmers write sonnets".⁽³³⁾ As it turned out, thanks to Kharkov, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ" was part of the swan-song of the American proletarian movement as Gold had cherished it.

Footnotes

1. Edmund Wilson, "The Literary Class War: I", **New Republic** (May 4, 1932), p. 30.
2. Michael Gold, "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", **New Republic** (October 22, 1930), p. 267.

3. Gold became editor of the **New Masses** in June 1928, and immediately began to reshape it into a working-class organ of revolutionary labour, promising poems and tales by "the great submerged unpublished voices of America".
4. James B. Gilbert, **Writers and Partisans** (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), p. 86.
5. Gold, "America Needs a Critic", **New Masses** (October 1926), pp. 7-9.
6. Gold, "Hemingway — White Collar Poet", **New Masses** (March 1928), p. 21.
7. Eric Homberger, "Proletarian Literature and the John Reed Clubs", **Journal of American Studies**, Vol. 13, No. 2 (August 1979), pp. 221-224.
8. Quoted by Sheila Fitzpatrick, **The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization and the Arts under Lunacharsky** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 95.
9. Gold, "Write for Us!", **New Masses** (July 1928), p.2.
10. Calverton, "Humanism: Literary Fascism", **New Masses** (April 1930), pp. 9-10.
11. Gold, "Notes of the Month", **New Masses** (April 1930), p. 4.
12. Kunitz was a teacher in the public school system at the time, and assumed the pseudonym to protect his job.
13. As reported in an interview with the present writer, September 30, 1971.
14. Kunitz, untitled review of Sinclair's **Mountain City** and Wilder's **The Woman of Andros**, **New Masses** (May 1930), p. 18.
15. Gold, note in response to a reader's letter, **New Masses** (November 1929), p. 22.
16. Gold, note to a reader's letter, **New Masses** (June 1930), p.21.
17. As outlined by Joshua Kunitz in "Literary Wars in the U.S.S.R. : II : Alignment of Literary Forces under the NEP", **New Masses** (June 19, 1934), p.23.
18. Kunitz, letter in the **New Masses** (July 1930), p.23.
19. Gold, note of the Month, **New Masses** (July 1930), p.3.
20. The title of a public debate between Kunitz and Gold, advertised in the **New Masses**, July 1930.
21. As reported by Cowley in an interview with the present writer, November 3, 1971.
22. Wilson's comments on Humanism appear in a letter to Upton Sinclair (March 25, 1930), reprinted in **Letters on Literature and Politics, 1912-1972** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), p. 195. His criticism of Wilder came in "Thornton Wilder", **New Republic** (August 8, 1928), p. 384.
23. "Wilder: Prophet of the Genteel Christ", **New Republic** (October 22, 1930), p. 267.
24. Wilson, "The Literary Class War : I", **New Republic** (May 4, 1932), p.319.
25. Reader's letter, **New Republic** (November 12, 1930), p. 353.
26. Smith, letter in the **New Republic** (December 10, 1930), p. 104.
27. From the Preface to the "Literary Criticism" section in **Proletarian Literature in the United States** (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 325. The Preface is unsigned, but was probably written by Joseph Freeman.
28. How much direct influence Gold's review may have had on Wilder is hard to say. The modern American settings of Wilder's collection of plays, **The Long Christmas Dinner and Other Plays in One Act** (1931) seemed to Edmund Wilson a sign that Wilder had been "not unmoved" by Gold's reproach ("The Literary Class War : I", **New Republic**, May 4, 1932, p. 320). Wilder's novel, **Heaven's My Destination** (1934), set in the Depression, also seemed to Wilson an indication that Gold's attack had "stimulated Mr Wilder to attack this American subject" ("Mr. Wilder in the Middle West", **New Republic**, January 6, 1934, p.30). The modern view is divided. Malcolm Goldstein in **The Art of Thornton Wilder** (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1965, pp. 71, 82-83), argues that Gold had no

influence on Wilder. But in **Thornton Wilder: an Intimate Portrait** (New York: Dutton, 1975, p. 83), Richard Goldstone writes that Gold's review "had materially changed Wilder's life" and "had a most salutary and liberating effect upon its victim."

29. Wilson, "The Economic Interpretation of Wilder", **New Republic** (November 26, 1930), p. 31.
30. Schneider, "Probing Writers' Problems", **New Masses** (October 23, 1945), p.22.
31. Gold, "Change the World" column, **Daily Worker** (October 29, 1934), p. 5.
32. The first John Reed Club, for younger radical writers, was founded in New York in November 1929. See Homberger, **op. cit.**, for a discussion of the Clubs.
33. Gold, "Towards Proletarian Art", **Liberator** (February 1921), pp. 20-24.