

# READERS' FORUM

Owen Burke and Michael Gold on Isadora Duncan—Another view of army life

TO THE NEW MASSES:

Mike Gold may have known Isadora Duncan, found in her a "complete vision of life and revolution," but his knowledge of the young revolutionary dancers seems a bit meager and confused. There isn't even the evidence in his story on Duncan that he has seen Anna Sokolow's *Strange American Funeral* danced to his own poem.

Isadora "belongs to us forever," says Mike. And she does. Not because he says so, but, and contrary to his rhetorical question, because there isn't a young dancer in the whole country that doesn't know the great pioneer's work.

No, the young dancers are not "dancing democracy" particularly, but it isn't likely that an Anna Sokolow dancing *anti-fascist* satire or a Sophie Maslow dancing *Two Songs for Lenin* will ever dance an imperialist ballet. Nor will they ever say, as Isadora did, that Nietzsche gave dance its "spirit."

Isadora was as great a pioneer as Mike Gold indicates, for all the broad romantic sentimentality of her work and life. But there's no reason to deprecate the metal of the younger dancers. Isadora's record speaks for her. The young dancers are still fashioning theirs, and doing a good job of it.

True enough, for some time the dance "substituted geometry and technique for emotion and the spirit," but it was a passing phase in the development of a new language, and it wasn't long in passing. Isadora was never the "old devotee surrounded by the young philistines of a new sophistication." Isadora was dead long before this short period set in.

These "philistines," incidentally, now stir audiences—as Isadora never could—with Negro songs of protest, with passionate protest against fascist invasion, with unequivocal damnation of imperialist wars. Nor did these "philistines" run away from their America, as Isadora did. You'll find the Virginia reel, the round and square dances of our American ancestry in the dances of our young revolutionaries. The "young philistines" turned to the "American folk-life" as Isadora never could. The Irish jig she learned from her grandmother she developed in terms of Greek vases, no more the "natural expression" of the "human body" than the present day "geometrical contortions." Geometrical distortions is the more advisable phrase, distortions that aren't any more related to the "post-war German Dadaists" than is José Limon's satiric *Hoch* to the cultural dictates of the Führer. And since when are "geometrical contortions" a vice of themselves? Look at Picasso's anti-fascist *Guernica* canvases. And George Grosz.

No, Mike, you haven't seen "our young revolutionary dancers" if you speak of them in terms of "ugliness," "despair," and "no hope." No, they do not "create such images of a new human beauty toward which the race may strive in socialism." They leave that to the utopian romantics. It may have been all right for Isadora in her muddled utopian way to do beautiful Greek bodies. The young revolutionary dancer is more of a realist. And it was a bit of a gratuitous slap that you, Mike, delivered in suggesting that the young dancers do a festival "in honor of Isadora to testify that struggle is not enough, there must also be a vision and goal."

The young revolutionary dancer walks the picket line, stages a sit-down, goes on a hunger strike; the young revolutionary dancer does active party work; the young revolutionary dancer knows of no struggle in a vacuum—he has a real vision and a real goal. Isadora was never involved in party struggles; she was alive while John Reed wrote for the proletariat of the world. Isadora never walked a picket line, never got a pink slip; she had her

Lohengrin, her private yacht, champagne and oysters along with her "prattling" of Marx. Sure, give Isadora all the credit she deserves, and she deserves plenty; give her a festival; but it's time a good many besides yourself, Mike, paid a little comradely respect to our own young and militant revolutionary dancers.

New York.

OWEN BURKE.

## Mike Replies

TO THE NEW MASSES:

Isadora Duncan never walked a picket line and neither did Walt Whitman and Henry Thoreau. Isadora never got a pink slip, but neither did John Reed. Isadora was not involved in party struggles; but did not I say in my original article that she was a utopian socialist in the transcendentalist American tradition?

I thought I was careful enough to say that Isadora was not to be judged as a modern Communist. Comrade Burke wants to debate me on that issue, but it's not an issue at all, unless we are to apply the same foolish retroactive test to every American revolutionist from Tom Paine down. This isn't the way to learn from our historical forerunners, or have they nothing of their own to teach us?

But I believe Isadora Duncan had something to teach the younger generation of revolutionary dancers, and I have tried to indicate what it was. I believe, similarly, that Walt Whitman has more to teach our younger poets than has T. S. Eliot, by whom so many of them have been affected, with what I believe are sad results.

I am not denying the great revival of interest in the American dance, and the freshness, enthusiasm, and vast talent shown by the young revolutionary dancers who have created this interest. We owe them a great debt.

I have been present at some of their festivals, and watched the audiences, too. I still believe that much of their work is as deliberately unintelligible and overtechnicalized as the "modern" poetry. I think it hasn't the simple, humanist approach of Isadora, or her feeling for beauty. I know "beauty" is an outmoded, old-fashioned word, but I have come back to it in my own thinking, and am firmly convinced we will never develop a fully-rounded, humane, revolutionary art unless this old word is restored to its rightful place in our scale of human values. You think Isadora was a "romantic"—well, Lenin must have been the same sort, because he once said after a futurist concert in Moscow, when the futurists were ruling the Soviet art world, "It may be called modern and revolutionary, but it gives me no joy."

Well, again, to repeat: I wasn't "deprecating" the younger dancers in order "to raise monuments to Isadora." In a brief article I tried to make a single point: that in our revolutionary poetry and dance I would like to see more beauty and romanticism—the sort one finds in all folk-ballads, for instance. I just don't like cerebral art, and don't believe I ever will. Aren't we of the minority to be allowed to say this any more? They bite your head off—these poets and dancers.

New York.

MICHAEL GOLD.

## What's Wrong with the Army?—

TO THE NEW MASSES:

In your September 14 issue you featured an article by Joseph W. Mitchell dealing with life in the army. It is encouraging to see the NEW MASSES publishing material relating to the soldier and his life in the army, as there is much to be said about it. However, articles of the Mitchell type will only serve to arouse antagonism in army circles, rather than gain popularity for the MASSES and its radical friends.

Because he simply grouches all over the place in stead of trying to deal with the soldier and his problems in an intelligent fashion, Mr. Mitchell's article should have been entitled "My Gripe About the Army." This is the kind of stuff that every post commander will use to show his boys what gold-bricking good-for-nothings these radicals are.

To begin with, Mr. Mitchell isn't the so-called soldier he presents himself to be. He is a sergeant and a clerk. These two facts place him in a much better spot than the average doughboy. Just imagine if our author had been No. 2 of the rear rank in an infantry squad, and drilled several hours a day, stood guard duty, kitchen duty, parades, polished brass, and dog-robbed for some officer. Or if he were a private in a field-artillery unit and had to scrub the horses' backs every day, sweep the stables, etc. And to top it off received only half of his monthly pay of \$45 on which to get drunk.

The point that I wish to make is that Mr. Mitchell's tendency to exaggerate, dramatize, and look at things purely subjectively has negated the truth of his facts and will not result in a clear understanding of the soldier's life by the average citizen of our country. The natural question aroused after reading the article is how the devil does anyone stand the army for any length of time? In order to answer this, it is necessary to know the average soldier.

The majority of young men in the army are from small towns (mill towns, coal towns, steel towns, etc.). Almost all of them turn to the army as a sort of last resort, a means of escape from drudgery and unhappiness at home. Therefore they do not find the food so objectionable, the work so menial or so difficult. They form friendships, and rather enjoy sitting around chinning at the table with the same old faces. Most of them go in for some sport, and enjoy the ball games. Yes, although they are a definite minority, I know men who actually like the army because it seems better than spending your life in a factory or a coal mine. Getting up at 5:45 a.m. is not only the soldier's lot; many workmen do it. And believe it or not, there are plenty of men who shave every day even though they are not forced to do so.

There are three main reasons why a soldier's life is a tough one: (1) his economic conditions are very poor; extremely low pay, inferior food, etc.; (2) the extreme red tape and discipline which he must always put up with; (3) the isolation of the soldier from all normal links with life (especially true of foreign duty). It is this latter point that leads the soldier so often to drink and debauchery.

These conditions are characteristic of any army under a capitalist system. Therefore, the solution is not a simple one, such as an individual "buy out."

It is an accepted rule that soldiers must not talk about anything going on in the world. They are simply supposed to take and carry out orders. They are even deprived of the basic right of every citizen—to vote. This must be changed!

I think the hope of the soldier lies in the direction of making this country as progressive as possible; such as would exist under a farmer-labor leadership. The soldier's problem, just as that of the workingman and farmer, is a big one and requires a major change in the social system. This is the message that should reach every doughboy so as to lift some of the gloom and show him his future is not just one hopeless routine job after another.

A living example of what the army could be is offered by that of the Soviet Union. I would like to see an article dealing with the everyday life of the soldier in the Red Army. That should prove interesting and enlightening by comparison.

New York City.

A FIRST LIEUTENANT.

# REVIEW AND COMMENT

*The "science" of race-thinking—Two Negro novels—Quest for the absolute and the Pacific puzzle*

JACQUES BARZUN'S study of "race-thinking"\* is a tremendously valuable survey that assembles in one place a most astounding record of flimsy theorizing. One will certainly do well to avoid it if he would make his own baleful contributions to the "science" of racial discrimination. Here is a house of horrors if there ever was one—and I think that its evidence should be included in the exhibit of lynch ropes, Klan robes, and kindred devices assembled at Commonwealth College. The ropes themselves are "neutral." They might have been used for tethering cattle, and the robes would probably do quite well as night shirts. Here, however, is the record of the "ideas" that guide their use for malign purposes.

The book, for me at least, contained surprises. It was surprising to be reminded that "race-thinking" was not always reactionary. Tacitus, for instance, played an important part in "starting the powerful race dogma of Nordic superiority," yet he was actuated by the exact opposite of chauvinistic purposes. His "essay on the Germans, which contains so many of the facts and so much of the feeling that animates modern racialism" was motivated by emancipatory intentions:

Tacitus wrote as traveler, historian, and moralist, but especially as an embittered foe of the imperial tyranny. Hence his eulogy of the Germanic race is systematic and politically pointed. According to him the Germans are an indigenous race; they are virtuous, individualistic, freedom-loving, and jealous of their racial purity; physically they are tall and blond, brave and tough, they live frugally and are adventurous rather than toilsome.

In other words, he was building up the picture of an "ideal" race as a political weapon against tyrannical trends at home. It was apparently a roundabout way of saying, "Let us be virtuous, brave, tough, frugal, adventurous, individualistic, and freedom-loving." Later we see the uses of such thinking begin to shift.

Leaning on the *Germania* for a description of the special gifts and institutions of the Frankish or Germanic race, the Count Henri de Boulainvilliers (658-1722) evolved the still lively notion that all freedom and independence come from the Germanic strain. Hence Louis XIV's absolute monarchy, based on the Roman idea of the imperium, was a government fit only for slaves. Boulainvilliers wanted the nobles of his day to revolt against slavish institutions and restore the aristocratic freedom of the German forest.

We also find that race-thinking serves, a little later, to enunciate a muddled doctrine of class-consciousness in an emancipatory direction:

Just before the French revolution the Abbé Sieyès, the author of *What Is the Third Estate?*, had tried

\* RACE: A STUDY IN MODERN SUPERSTITION, by Jacques Barzun. Harcourt, Brace & Co. \$2.50.

to settle the race issue for all time. The nobility, said Sieyès, claims that its political rights are based on the inheritance by blood of the privileges won in the Frankish conquest. "Very well. We, the Gallo-Roman plebs, will now conquer the nobility by expelling and abolishing them. Our rights will supersede theirs on exactly the principle they invoke."

Hence, after the revolution, when "the bourgeoisie had overthrown both the monarchy and the aristocracy and had lumped the two," we find that "'Freedom' had thereby changed camps, from the Franks to the Gallo-Romans. This is the initial alteration of the Nordic myth of freedom found in Tacitus."

The general pattern was now secure, though its variants would be endless, with all sorts of new strains introduced each time some new scientist found another way of classifying differences. Those who tend to feel that race-thinking is "peculiarly German" (an attitude that is itself an example of race-thinking) will discover ample evidence that it is ubiquitous, with far more important systematic contributions coming from writers in France than from writers in Germany prior to the rise of Hitlerism (the "Franks" enjoyed a special tactical advantage as vessels of liberty, because of the pun lurking behind the name).

Much of such thinking, as Barzun points out, was not cast in the "superiority-inferiority" mold at all. It was liberal, neutral. Particularly in æsthetic theories as to different "racial" or regional characteristics, the distinctions were frequently made along "parliamentary" lines, with the notion that each "race" had its own special contribution to make toward the common cultural pool of mankind. Herder's romantic historicism was of this sort. However, such theories incidentally reinforced the belief in racial distinctions by *taking it for granted that they existed*. Hence, such a mode of thought indirectly served reactionary ends, since it maintained the belief in distinct "racial" traits (with a trait like "humor," or "musicality," for instance, being allocated to some particular "blood"). Political rivalries arising from economic pressure could always provide the groundwork for resentments that converted such *neutral appreciation* of differences back into an *invidious comparison* of differences.



Charles Martin

And always, as the author shows, in the heat of such impassioned controversies the crassest inconsistencies could be charitably overlooked. For you worked the system two ways: first you discovered "Aryan," or "Semitic," or "Celtic" traits—and whenever you found an "Aryan" that didn't fit the "Aryan" pattern, you thereby "discovered" that he was *really* "Semitic," etc. Or you extolled a certain "blood stream" as all-powerful, capable of winning out over any other (along the "nobility will out" line of thought), and coupled this heroic disclosure with admonitions lest this all-powerful "blood" be contaminated by other "bloods."

Each advance in physiology, geography, philology, anthropology, history, laboratory technique, psychology, and medicology was in turn drawn upon for service in the cause of racial quackery. Any innovation in scientific measurement provided a fresh opportunity for "us vs. them" racial patterns of one sort or another, with each suppositious faction slightly revising the terms for the opposing traits. "We" had "boldness" on "our" side, for instance—but a thinker on "their" side would name this same trait "brutality." "Merimée was right when he said that racial historiography was the democratic form of dynastic history."

The book concludes with a summarized critique of such thought, and with suggestions as to the great number of ways in which it must be modified if it is to be anything but damned nonsense (*nonsense serviceable for the uncritical scapegoat devices of political demagogues*). The book should also be read by Marxists because it indicates how both "class" and "regional" divisions can, in naïve hands, lead to a schematization of psychological traits that is hardly other than a concealed variant of the same oversimplified patterns as prevail in "race-thinking." On Marx's own testimony, a theory of purely economic classifications must be subtilized when one is analyzing the expressions of any specific individual.

KENNETH BURKE.

## *Between Laughter and Tears*

THESE LOW GROUNDS, by Waters Edward Turpin. Harper & Bros. \$2.50.

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD, by Zora Neale Hurston. J. B. Lippincott Co. \$2.00.

IT IS difficult to evaluate Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied in either of the two novels; but rather because neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation. Miss