Engaging Elegance: The Politicization of the *New Yorker*, 1934-1946

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E.B. White once wrote that “the world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly….It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be something less than great, because if it were truly great it would be wholly serious.” Therefore, he claimed, all writers come to a point at which they must decide to either trudge toward the fame and riches of serious writing, or give in to their nagging sense of humor and make up as best they can. To some degree, the tension within that choice frames the content of the next fifty pages: it faced all of the writers discussed therein—indeed, it defined the ethical bounds of their work—and faces me as I reconstruct their story. To best integrate the lighthearted material, and to make everything else more palatable, I have occasionally chosen the second path in writing this thesis, and admit that it is not wholly serious. Nonetheless, to all my readers, I hope that you find it worthwhile.

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Introduction

The New Yorker was not a magazine designed to stem tides, join crusades, or take political stands.

--James Thurber, 1957

Ask people if they read the New Yorker magazine and you will usually get variations off of a single response. The more sophisticated—or the more pretentious—will begin by murmuring about its fiction and art commentary. Others will cock their head and say something vague about movie reviews or jazz clubs. Eventually, however, they arrive at the answer that most people will admit from the start: “I just read the cartoons…” Over the last seventy-five years the New Yorker’s cartoons and satire have become comic icons, one of the many ways in which the magazine has shaped the landscape of modern American literature and humor during that time. Before the appearance of the New Yorker, cartoons got laughs by reproducing stale race-, gender-, or class-based stereotypes, and included several lines of written dialogue. Two New Yorker contributions streamlined and sophisticated this style of joking, and have thereby modernized the American comic perspective.

The first breakthrough challenged the reliance on comic stereotypes by combining archetypal scenes and characters with unexpectedly brash captions. Adolescent, rural, and primitive characters, all expected to be naïve and unsophisticated, instead spoke with surprisingly advanced vocabulary or culture, sardonically twisting the formerly prejudiced foundations of comedy. A classic example of this was a 1927 cartoon by Carl Rose, which featured a mother leaning over the dinner table to reassure her four-year-old about the meal. She cooed, “It’s broccoli, dear,” to which the child calmly responded, “I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.” A second step was to limit dialogue in favor of one-line captions, whose succinctness hastened the punch-line and focused the reader’s attention on the drawing itself, rather than on the writing. Together, these two factors created a uniquely New Yorker brand of humor, which was clearly identifiable as early as 1930. Today, the style’s success is well-known—evident by the number of readers it
attracts to the magazine—and has sparked widespread imitation, as both strategies have become common conceits for modern cartoonists.\(^1\)

In addition to its style of humor, the *New Yorker* magazine has always been renowned for its opinions on literature, fashion, and entertainment. From the earliest years, its haughty composure commanded overwhelming authority over cosmopolitan taste and trends. One 1930’s critic sneered that its writers believed “when the *New Yorker* had spoken the last word had been said” and that “few [of them] could mention the magazine without crossing themselves.”\(^2\) The magazine was so sure that it directed—rather than reacted to—public opinion that when reporters questioned its second editor about falling revenues and a changing readership in the 1960’s, he reddened with indignation and replied,

> Who the readers are I really don’t want to know. I don’t want to know because we edit the magazine for ourselves and hope there will be people like ourselves and people like our writers who will find it interesting and worthwhile.

Although many magazines put forth this ideal of editorial independence—most of them farcically—the *New Yorker* maintained separate business and editorial offices to ensure it, insulating its editors’ decisions from social or financial pressure.\(^3\) Today, it remains a pillar of editorial freedom, as well as an insider’s guidebook to the culture and nightlife of New York City. Although some departments and practices have changed, its current style, format, and even editorial personnel have altered only gradually since its conception, thanks to the inviolable system of pride and tradition that its creators established.\(^4\)

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4. As a testament to its editorial continuity, for the first sixty-two years of its existence the *New Yorker* had only two managing editors, Harold Ross and William Shawn, his protégé. Many of the writers and editors of my study, the Whites for example, played a part into the 1980’s. Although murmurs of dissent and disgust arose when new owner S.I. Newhouse demanded Shawn’s dismissal in 1987, in recent years the staff has tried to balance major structural changes by reaffirming the role of tradition and accentuating old relationships, such as that with Katharine White’s son, Roger Angell, who remains a regular contributor.
Because of the insistence on tradition and the disdain for popular fads, processes of comedic and editorial change at the *New Yorker* have become meaningful in themselves, symptoms of fundamental changes in culture rather than passing media gimmicks. Using these themes as a historical optic, the first and most compelling example of change at the *New Yorker* began during the heart of the Great Depression. In 1934, the magazine was coasting on its success as a sophisticated, humorous weekly, booming with advertising income and a rising circulation, and it refused to publish any serious pieces about politics. In 1946, it would release an issue comprised of a single article, John Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” which explored the horrors of the atomic bomb, called America’s foreign policy into question, and has been recognized as one of the century’s definitive pieces of journalism. The intervening decade obviously brought a stark transformation in editorial policy.

Although *New Yorker* scholars have not directly addressed the period, two recent histories straddle it: Lee’s *Defining New Yorker Humor* (2000), which approaches the magazine’s current structure and tone by analyzing the development of various themes in its art, cartoons, and writing from 1925 to 1930; and Corey’s *The World Through a Monocle* (1999), which juxtaposes the *New Yorker’s* increasingly liberal politics upon its equally prosperous consumerism during the early Cold War period. Both of these authors introduce their work with cumulative histories of the *New Yorker*, in which they advance a simple—if somewhat misconceived—rationale for its sudden politicization. They suggest that the liberal politicism which began in the late 1940’s was “a correction to the *New Yorker’s* much criticized silence on suffering during the Depression.”

The term “criticized” obviously requires qualification here, for as the previous quote—“we edit the magazine for ourselves”—illustrates, the staff did not respond to common means of criticism, such as letters to the editor or falling advertising revenues. Therefore, we are left with three questions: Who voiced this criticism, why, and by what

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5 Lee, 16.

6 In addition to the separation of business and editing offices, letters to the editor were not printed until 1983.
means? Through an examination of the New Yorker’s editorial staff and its response to two political influences, the rise of American literary radicalism and the outbreak of World War II, this thesis will locate the process of its politicization from 1934 to 1946 within a historical system of cultural criticism, centering on the Communist/capitalist debate over artistic engagement. By mapping the drastic shift in the New Yorker’s social posture, it will work to correct a current historiographical distortion regarding the magazine, and more broadly will outline the amorphous relationship between art, humor, politics, and ethics in twentieth-century American culture.

However, before analyzing the New Yorker’s evolution, it is important to understand the origins of the magazine, as well as its defining personalities. Harold Ross, who founded the New Yorker in 1925, was perhaps an unlikely candidate for such an enterprise. Those familiar with the New Yorker know it as the pinnacle of poise, a polished, cultural magazine with an urban perspective and highbrow humor. Ross was a native of Aspen, Colorado when that still connoted ruggedness. The son of an immigrant miner, for the first decade of the century he was a tramp reporter all over the West, working his way from San Francisco to New Orleans while still a teenager. He wrote for Stars and Stripes in Europe during World War I, moved to New York after the Armistice, and founded the New Yorker on a shoestring, relying entirely on the financial backing of his friend, Raoul Fleischmann. Because condescending New York literati disregarded these credentials as provincial, the image of Ross that long circulated, one which recent biographer Thomas Kunkel has taken pains to refute, was that of the bumbling success, whose fortune was made by his disarming idiosyncrasies and the lucky acquisition of superior talent.


8 Among Ross’s idiosyncrasies were an editorial prudishness—he constantly worried that writers were trying to sneak sexual innuendoes into their copy and refused advertisements that mentioned the ‘unpleasantries’ of the human anatomy—and personal primness, both of which were strangely interspersed with his trademark outbursts of paranoia and profanity. Once he chastised Frank Sullivan for using bad language in memos, where it might corrupt office secretaries; then, returning to a submission, he said, “Don’t hesitate to complain if I’ve fucked up this piece.” Kunkel, Genius, 247.
In fact, Ross was an incredibly talented and literate man. Kunkel points out that in his practical training he was much more of a nineteenth-century editor than twentieth. He returned every draft with pages of notes, questioning facts, punctuation, and grammar. His skill and precision as a proofreader combined with incredible management abilities, as he nurtured, corralled, and stimulated unwieldy egos toward great writing. A typical memo from Ross to a friend, important for its lack of importance, read as follows:

I was going to wire you, but I couldn’t think of anything to say that would sound tactful; I’m hypersensitive because I hear Harper’s said I wasn’t tactful, which is the grossest misstatement ever made about me. I am the God damnedest mass of tact known to the human race. That’s about all I am. Fortune said I never read a book and Harper’s says I’m tactless. American reporting is at a low ebb.

Despite the rough-around-the-edges image that he cultivated—to be sure, he was not the “God damnedest mass of tact known to the human race”—this letter illustrates several personal traits that would manifest themselves in the New Yorker, among them a trivial humor and an almost neurotic introspection, self-importance, and guarded sensitivity to public opinion.

The literary world never quite understood the blustering Ross, but it immediately took to his magazine, a blithely satirical weekly aimed at sophisticated in and around New York City—not, as Ross specified in his now-famous prospectus, “edited for the old lady in Dubuque.”9 The New Yorker enjoyed great success because it capitalized on an emerging advertising niche for luxury goods, which earned it hefty profits despite a relatively narrow readership. Its first cover, since reproduced for every anniversary issue, featured a top-hatted, Victorian dandy examining a butterfly through his monocle. The character soon became the magazine’s rhetorical symbol, receiving the nickname Eustace Tilley for its embodiment of the New Yorker’s bemused, consumerist, and nostalgically cultured style. Everything that the magazine printed, from book reviews to sports stories, seemed filtered through the softening lens of Mr. Tilley’s monocle.10

The literary milieu of the New Yorker’s early years centered around the Algonquin Roundtable, a group of writers, thinkers, and drinkers so named for meeting weekly at the Algonquin Hotel for luncheons. The club, which formed in 1919, thrived

9 Thomas Kunkel, Genius, 1, 440.

10 See Appendix.
on the speakeasy atmosphere of the day, mixing casual discussions of art and literature with gossip about the New York nightlife. Satirical humorists such as Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woolcott, Robert Benchley, Ring Lardner, and the Marx brothers were all friends with Ross, and several of them helped lift his magazine off the ground with their early contributions.

From this environment, Ross also found and retained a core group of editors to put his prospectus into action. Needing to “carry each week several pages of prose and verse,” the first long-term member that Ross hired was Katharine Angell, a Bryn Mawr College alumna, who joined the staff in 1925. Angell is generally credited with establishing the magazine’s refined taste, as well as soliciting superior literature from little-known aspirants. Under her tenure, its pages nursed the talents of writers like J.D. Salinger, Vladimir Nabokov, and John Updike.

Ross hired a young man named E.B. White in 1926 to edit newsbreaks and rewrite Talk pieces. White, known as Andy to his friends, was a shy, introspective hypochondriac who enjoyed strolling Central Park and the Bronx Zoo during lunch breaks. By 1927, he had assumed primary responsibility for Notes and Comment, the magazine’s editorial page, “commenting on the week’s events in a manner none too serious.” Whatever Comment deigned to observe, from local cemeteries to celebrity gaffes, it did so with disinterested elegance and spoke with the plural “we” of old-fashioned editorials. He would marry Katharine Angell in 1929, and would later become author of such beloved children’s titles as Stuart Little (1945) and Charlotte’s Web (1952), editor of the grammatical handbook The Elements of Style (1959), as well as one of the premier essayists of the twentieth century.

11 Kunkel, Genius, 440.

12 Kunkel, Genius, 440.

13 White thought this part of his job “harebrained,” because it was an “effort to express a corporate or institutional opinion [but] the individual charged with formulating this opinion forgot all about his basic responsibility and got talking about himself and peddling his personal prejudices, retaining the ‘we’ and thus giving the impression that the stuff was written by a set of identical twins or the members of a tumbling act.” E.B. White, The Second Tree From the Corner (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), xii.
Ross also noted, “The New Yorker expects to be distinguished for its illustrations,” and built the careers of such artists and cartoonists as Rea Irvin, Peter Arno, and Charles Addams. The last major addition to the staff in the Twenties was James Thurber, who was hired as a writer in 1929 but also contributed with his unique line drawings. To those outside the staff, Thurber was brash and nonchalant, known for his pugnacious drinking and failure with women. Those who knew him well recognized this as a screen for the same neurotic self-consciousness that seems to have beset all New Yorker writers. Most scholars cite Thurber’s portrayal of the sexes as a trademark of New Yorker humor, and “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” (1939) and Fables of Our Time (1956) have become classics in American storytelling.

Thurber and White were best friends, shared an office, and were commonly coupled as the “heart and soul” of the early New Yorker, but, as with their differing personalities, on the points of criticism and ethics they embodied an almost literary duality. While White quietly brooded over charges made by the New Yorker’s detractors, Thurber aggressively combated them, going out of his way to confront critics in writing or personally. When pressed about the magazine’s aloof editorial policy during the Depression, the pair’s respective styles created a superbly introspective dialogue within its core. We will use these arguments to frame the debate with its critics, and thus contextualize this period of New Yorker history.
Part I: The Critics

In the class war the New Yorker is ostentatiously neutral. It makes fun of subway guards and of men-about-town, of dowagers and laundresses, of shop-girls and debutantes. It refuses, officially, to recognize the existence of wars, strikes, and revolution, just as it doesn’t mention the more unpleasant diseases…

--Partisan Review, 1937

The Communists not only deny that art is something apart from the social structure; they further deny that artists are ‘above the battle.’

--Joseph Freeman, 1930

In order to understand the development of political consciousness at the New Yorker, one must appreciate the shift of political and literary forces surrounding it, the historical upheaval that pushed Ross and his staff to redefine their conception of journalistic responsibility. The decadent, carefree atmosphere of the mid-Twenties that had spawned the New Yorker ended abruptly with the 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing Depression. The wealthy escaped the crisis relatively unscathed, safeguarding the New Yorker’s economic niche and leaving its subscription and advertising rolls intact, while Life, Judge, and several other competitors closed their doors for lack of revenue. The lower classes, however, bore the brunt of the Depression, with workers in the textile, mining, and agricultural sectors hit the hardest. As an example, by 1932 the hourly wages of bituminous coal miners fell from $0.68 to $0.50, weekly hours fell from 38.4 to 27.2, and the annual number of days worked from 219 to 146. Even those unskilled workers that kept their jobs were unable to support their families, and either remained at the mercy of charity, set out in search of migrant labor, or turned to petty crime. Thousands of children suffered from malnutrition. With its economy in flux and the potential for class conflict rising with lower-class consciousness and desperation, America appeared ripe for revolution; for the five years from 1929 until 1934 it seemed that democracy and capitalism were on their last legs.14

The Communist Party endorsed this perspective and, being in the business of revolution, positioned itself for the impending break with the old capitalist order. Rather

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than allying with the A.F.L. or other labor interests that tried to negotiate with the establishment, the Communists decided to form their own unions, organized strictly around revolutionary programs. This exclusive approach had both positive and negative effects on the Party’s political position. By recruiting unskilled workers—again, many of them in the textile, mining, and agricultural industries—minorities, and the unemployed, Communists enlisted a mass of people that mainstream labor unions, trying to survive amidst dropping membership and weakening political support, could not afford to include. Thus, to its credit, the Party’s membership grew substantially in the first years of the Depression. However, the Communists were so intent on using strikes as a tool to foment revolution that they often began them prematurely, without adequate leadership or resources. The results were several bloody—and unsuccessful—confrontations with management, typified by the strikes of textile workers in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929, by California lettuce pickers in 1930, and in 1931 by coal miners in “Bloody” Harlan County, Kentucky.\textsuperscript{15}

While these clashes were all Communist failures, the media coverage that they generated convinced many intellectuals that the capitalist system was in fact irreparable. For two years, the Hoover administration did almost nothing to help the working class. Rather, as economic turmoil and violent strikes mounted, its inaction seemed to further provoke the proletarian/bourgeois conflict. In its first few years the New Deal also achieved no measurable results, and was decried by both Right and Left as demagogical, growing dangerously close to fascism, which Communists saw as the last and most dangerous form of capitalism. The brutal insensitivity of Hoover’s term and the shortcomings of Roosevelt’s grew even more pronounced when compared to the apparent economic progress of the Soviet Union, which projected Stalinism as the future of politics. This dichotomy—in hindsight, obviously mistaken with its glorification of Stalin—prompted a mass leftward migration of intellectuals, with which came a flood of Communist writing, both political analysis and previously marginal Communist literature, so much so that by 1932, “literary radicalism had become ‘a mainstream affair.’”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Ottonelli, 19-22.

The Communist literary tradition began in America around 1912, when Max Eastman took over the editorship of a protest magazine called the *Masses*. Joined in 1914 by John Reed, he espoused a typical revolutionary agenda, “to everlastingly attack old systems, old morals, old prejudices,” but more importantly “a social one,” in which one could express individual opinions and artistry, rather than merely resound Party prescriptions. The *Masses* strove toward this goal until 1918, when the government suspended distribution because of its pacifist stance during World War I. The first magazine of its kind, the *Masses* would prove influential for the next wave of Communist writers, who came of age during the Depression.

With the *Masses’* closing, Eastman moved on to edit the *Liberator*, where he espoused the same position of leftist art and writing. The *Liberator* was taken over by the Communist Party in 1922, the first cultural journal ever annexed, and as a result lost most of its writers, who did not want to publish in a suddenly ‘political’ magazine. The writers’ abstention illustrates a distinct tension between art and politics, perhaps unavoidable between an ultra-scientific, authoritarian movement like Communism and the creative artists trying to operate within it. If artists were not “above the battle,” as Communist theory argued, if their work had to strive toward utilitarian political objectives, did this curtail their right to skillful artistry? Many Communists thought so, dismissed art as unimportant save for use as propaganda, and considered serious attempts at fiction and poetry inherently bourgeois.\(^\text{17}\) Not yet confident that the fusion of the two was ideologically tenable, early Communist writers yielded to the belief that art and politics could not coexist, that a magazine could be cultural or political, but not both. They were also unwilling to sacrifice their artistic independence for political conformity. Therefore, while continuing to read the *Liberator*, they published elsewhere, outside the Party’s control.

Despite the successive losses of the *Masses* and *Liberator*, a second wave of radical periodicals and pamphlets appeared in the mid-Twenties, and these remained in circulation during the Depression. The two that made the most impact were the *New Masses* and the *Partisan Review*. The *New Masses* was founded in 1926 as a journal of

\(^{17}\) Aaron, 20-23, 95.
radical art and letters, nominally Communist but at the outset more ecumenically radical, incorporating the work of enough bohemian liberals that it embodied a tone as roundly irreverent as that of the *New Yorker* during the same time. When orthodox Communist writers from the *Daily Worker* derided the *New Masses*’ discussion of sex and art in 1927, its editors replied:

> We are as much against the Socialist puritan as we are against the capitalist puritan. We are as much against the labor-union bureaucrat as we are against Mussolini. Smug formulas and complacent institutions we will attack lustily wherever they seem to stand in the way of human freedom. That kind of crusade is lots of fun. The writers and artists and readers of the *New Masses* will not have a dull time of it.\(^{18}\)

In this respect, the *New Masses* was not unlike the *Masses* and *Liberator* before it, and indeed attracted the same core group of Communist, feminist, and other protest artists that had sustained its predecessors. However, in 1930 it came under the sole editorship of Michael Gold, who weeded out many nonconformist liberal elements in favor of solely Marxist contributors. This move was consistent with the Party’s growing popularity in the late Twenties, and more so with its political exclusivity and increasingly violent rhetoric against rival leftist groups, but should not imply that Gold had reconciled the ambiguous position of Communist literature.

Gold was born as Itzok Granich in the Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side in 1894. He converted to Communism around 1914, dodged the draft during World War I, flew to Mexico and, in order to avoid investigation and arrest, changed his name before returning to the United States and working for *The Liberator* in 1921. He would become an outspoken advocate for the American Communist movement throughout the period. Alternately a radical author and literary critic when not editing the influential *New Masses* or writing his “Change the World!” column for the *Daily Worker*, his semi-autobiographical *Jews Without Money* remains a canonical text for those interested in American Communism. He was also instrumental in forming *John Reed Clubs* across the country, which were meant to foster discussion and association between writers and their

\(^{18}\) Aaron, 202.
proletarian subjects—a Chicago chapter brought young Richard Wright into the radical fold.19

Like his predecessors, Eastman and Reed, Gold hoped to use the *New Masses* as an independent medium through which Communist art could mature. An idealist, he defended “the independence of a literary avant-garde...particularly in its right and its duty to its own experience,” and felt that the writer should be unfettered to express the ‘true’ beauty and correctness of proletarian life. Yet, this freedom was often incongruous with practical politics, and as Stalinism consolidated, the liberty of independent thought or expression within the Party became chimerical; the Communist International (Comintern) expected writers to reiterate the Party line.20

However, the peripheral status to which Communism relegated its artists, as well as American journals’ economic independence from Party authority—both visible at the *Liberator* before its closing—allowed deviations and stylistic contradictions impossible elsewhere in the Communist Party. For example, Gold’s position at the *New Masses* allowed him to perpetually publicize his penchant for “sentimental proletarianism,” a belief, perhaps naïve, in the natural artistic capabilities of the lower classes, which sometimes estranged him from his colleagues and political support.21 Thus, despite his personal loyalty to the Party, through his editorial freedom Gold skirted the fundamental issue of whether one could be fully artist and fully Communist.

Another key figure of the era, often paired with Gold and his colleague on the editorial staff of the *New Masses*, was Joseph Freeman. The two met at the *Liberator* in 1922, the year in which Freeman became a staff writer and Gold shared a brief and rocky


21 Klein, 81.
editorship with Claude McKay. As emphatic as Gold, and perhaps even less doctrinally grounded in his political and artistic tastes, Freeman immediately embraced the *New Masses*’ unique crusade for proletarian art, which the two undertook through literary criticism. He and Gold wrote most persuasively not over the particulars of Communist theory, nor over any narrowly political issue, but rather when “a self-proclaiming high culture seemed to be imposing itself” in the arts, whereupon they would retaliate with a passionate, though only tenuously Marxist, case for the lower classes. Thus, rather than wage internal debates over the validity of their critical position, they directed it outside the Party, where it was unsusceptible to partisan squabbles.

Gold and Freeman vocalized the importance of proletarian writing because in their interpretation Marxist doctrine required a fiercely proactive approach to literature. Their literary criticism sought to raise class awareness through “an adaptive appropriation of a culture’s myths and icons.” By using professional and personal criticism to engage popular media organs—or, like all successful political publicity, at least to force responses in Marxist language and thus set the terms of debate—they worked vigorously to expose and denounce the political bent of popular American culture. In doing so, they set upon the literary establishment with an unpretentious, lower class urgency befitting their cause, purposefully shocking formerly prim circles with their arguments’ direct incivility. James Bloom, in his analysis of the two writers, uses the term *kulturkampf*, or “culture struggle” to describe this aggressive program of cultural engagement. For Gold and Freeman it was literally a war of words, and with personalities bent toward confrontation, each set upon the bourgeois establishment with gusto.

A typical exchange began in 1930, when Gold published a review of Thornton Wilder’s writings in the *New Republic*, challenging the lack of class-consciousness in

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22 A key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, McKay was author of African-American classics such as “If We Must Die” (1919) and *Banjo* (1929).

23 Klein, 243.

24 The term *kulturkampf* originated with Bismarck’s consolidation and modernization of Germany against Catholicism in the 1870’s, and Bloom notes its ironic resonance when applied to Gold and Freeman’s hopes of progressive democratic change, for their proletarian beliefs prompted an ideological embrace of Stalin, “who exploited progressive hopes far more monstrously than Bismarck before him.” James Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1992), 8-9.
Wilder’s work. Glancing over *The Cabala* (1926), *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1928), and *The Woman of Andros* (1930), Gold summarized Wilder as silly and superficial, a “poet of the genteel bourgeoisie,” who focused on the past not as a “sublimation of the struggles in the too-immediate present,” but as a romantic diversion to help the leisure class “disguise the barbaric source of their income, the billions wrung from American workers.” To Gold, this “banal evasion” was not only insubstantial and un-American, with its parlor-talk, courtly characters, and outdated international settings, but was inferior to the artistic and ethical authenticity of working class themes.  

The article, unremarkable except for some notable lapses of etiquette, nonetheless demonstrated an increasing polarization within the literary community. Responses poured into the *New Republic*’s “Correspondence” column for two months, vehemently supporting both Gold and Wilder, before the editors grew weary, refused to print any more letters, and the debate, like a ballgame, was “called on account of darkness.”

Gold’s review was the latter half of a carrot-and-stick approach to cultural politics, in which Party writers would successively criticize, court, and convert colleagues opposed to their political agenda. This method of negative engagement was an imperfect tactic, for overzealous incendiaries like Gold sometimes alienated potential allies with unforgivably brutal remarks. Viewing his work as a wartime struggle, it was common for him to criticize writing taken out of context and engage in personal attacks against capitalist sympathizers like Wilder.

Although such fault-lines regularly appeared within 1930’s literary criticism, revealing the red heat of smoldering political differences, they gradually improved as a result of the United Front. The Comintern proposed the Front, a political union between previously hostile Communists, Socialists, and Liberals, in response to the threat of German fascism, specifically Hitler’s solidification of power in 1935. It was an ideological paradox for Communists, who had to turn a blushing about-face—hard to do  

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26 Should vaguely historical terms like “polarization” prove insufficient description for the literary-minded reader, Edmund Wilson’s account of the incident reads, “Those who applauded Gold seemed moved by a savage animus; those who defended Wilder pleaded or protested in the tone of persons who had seen a dearly beloved thing desecrated. Strange cries from the depths arose, illiterate and hardly articulate.” The tones of savageness and sanctity would repeat themselves throughout the period, especially in the case of the *New Yorker*. Klein, 244.
when your movement claims historical infallibility—after years of exclusivity, during which they had undermined and attacked their newfound allies. Yet there seemed no other recourse. Revolution was not materializing in America or Europe, and it was the divisions within the Left from 1929 to 1934 that had ensured Hitler’s success in Germany. So the Comintern shifted to more conservative tactics, overlooking doctrinal divisions for the collective defense against a militant Right. Because the ends of popular support and fascist resistance justified the United Front’s means, the Party promoted the apparently blasphemous alliance.

The compromises of coalition politics facilitated political cooperation between Party members and other progressives sympathetic with the spirit, if not the letter, of Communism, making it more approachable and swelling Communist support to levels hitherto unknown. The relaxation of political boundaries also boded well for the cultural development of American Communism. It legitimated the work of radical artists and writers, whose formerly marginalizing “inconsistencies” paled in the more tolerant atmosphere. Furthermore, collaboration with “fellow-travelers” increased the number of talented writers petitioning for economic equity and political progress under the banner of Communism. Without the weight of political commitment, there was no shortage of idealists willing to oppose fascism and support the worker. In this era of goodwill, Gold and Wilder, whose *New Republic* debate had marked the center of a political struggle at the beginning of the Depression, would in 1937 go on to serve “with fellowship and co-operation” on the United Front’s League of American Writers. They joined such notables as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Malcolm Cowley, editor of the *New Republic*.  

The United Front pushed the *kulturkampf* battle lines rightward, but one target that remained was the apolitical bourgeois writer, eschewing politics in favor of high culture’s acceptance, doing his best to sell his copy and stay uninvolved. It was during

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27 Ottanelli, 166. Despite an increase in artistic freedom, the Front was not devoid of political manipulation and bad faith by the Party. At the First Writers’ Conference, John Chamberlain remarked on the absence of many notable anti-fascists, such as Max Eastman, Charles Beard, and the *New Yorker’s* Clifton Fadiman, all presumably allies, as well as many oppositional Trotskyites who had been excluded on questionable political pretenses, thereby raising doubts about the Party’s sincerity with the ‘inclusive’ policy. Aaron, 293-297. For more on the League of American Writers and the cultural mission of the United Front, see
the first years of the Depression that “the stereotype of [this] writer began to take shape in the radical imagination.” The image became

a man who cried ‘pooh at every sentiment and every generalization,’ who distrusted all convictions and ideals, whose chief foe was dullness, who insulated himself from the currents of life (“Greenwich Village is worse than Wall Street”), who despised yokels and morons but was much farther from reality than they.

Thus, the New Yorker, by virtue of its ivory tower reporting, smart set humor, and pointed exclusion of the “Old Lady from Dubuque” represented the quintessential target of Communist agitation and by 1933 was routinely denounced by the bloodthirsty literati of the left, Gold and Freeman at the fore. It was the object of such attacks for the remainder of the decade.

One of the most pointed critiques of the New Yorker came from the Partisan Review. The Review began publication in 1934 as the organ of the John Reed Club in New York City. It closed as an orthodox publication in 1936—partly because its editorial position was too close to that of the New Masses, partly because of a long-running quarrel with the Party over artistic freedom—but would reappear on the side of the Neo-Trotskyist opposition later in the decade. When it reopened in 1937, its inaugural issue featured Dwight Macdonald expounding on the basic Communist critique of the New Yorker with a nuanced analysis of its comic formula and rhetorical voice, as well as the economic considerations underlying both. According to Diana Trilling, it was this article that won him his lifelong position at the magazine.

Macdonald opened the piece by historically situating the style and method of New Yorker humor. To him, the predecessors of the New Yorker’s cosmopolitan humor were

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28 Aaron, 162. Because of their vested political interest, Gold and Freeman were among the first literary critics to analyze movies and magazines as serious cultural texts. Bloom, 11.

29 There is scholarly debate over whether the Review was founded in collaboration or competition with the New Masses. However, it was one of many spin-off magazines protesting the New Masses’ monopolization of leftist art. Conversely, Granville Hicks and other prominent writers opposed what they saw as the dilution and commercialization of proletarian writing. The divide again underscores the issue of authority and centralism in Communist literature. Aaron, 297-303.

Midwestern humorists like Artemus Ward and Bill Nye, whose success in the early 1900’s derived from the swelling tide of populism, which they joined in attacking urban corruption and Wall Street. However, the First World War “destroyed the populist position in humor as in politics,” and with the resurgence of big business the social and political locus shifted back to eastern urban centers, triggering the “Roaring Twenties” epoch that produced the early *New Yorker*.

The article claimed that with the stock market crash the tone of the magazine’s humor changed, a telltale sign of its dependence on the existing economic order. “The brash Menckenians and the aggressively sophisticated Algonquins” that had submitted the bulk of the copy in the Twenties had “been superceded by the timorous and bewildered Thurber.” The Thurber Man, a beset, day-dreaming character petrified by women, machines, and theories, became a metaphor for the weakened ruling class.\(^3^1\) In Macdonald’s theory, the Thurber Man’s growing success as a comic device during the Depression stemmed from its resonance with economically impotent bourgeois readers. Hence, to Macdonald, “the *New Yorker* formula for pathos and humor [was] an expression of a deep-rooted uncertainty…which this class has come to feel in the late economic crisis,” and its humor was “superior [merely] because it [was] an accurate expression of a decaying social order.”\(^3^2\) The theory is compelling, but overly dour in its presentation of the *New Yorker*’s economic and comedic status. In the mid-Thirties, advertising revenues and circulation were at all-time highs, netting annual profits over $600,000 and reaching 125,000 readers; a wealth of literary talent was debuting in the *New Yorker*’s pages; the lighthearted weekly was cultivating a sophisticated metropolitan audience, precisely as Ross had intended.\(^3^3\) If the social order was in such decline, the *New Yorker* must have been quite therapeutic indeed.

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\(^3^1\) See James Thurber, “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” *New Yorker*, March 18, 1939.

\(^3^2\) Although Macdonald bases much of his thesis on the confluence of economic vulnerability and the rise of the Thurber Man, and he may very well be correct in his assessment of the latter’s growing popularity during the Depression, it is important to note that Thurber did not create this character-type at the magazine. Lee documents the progression of the “Little Man” from the very first issue, and traces its roots to Mark Twain. Lee, 5-6.

\(^3^3\) The profit margin is taken from a contemporary magazine article, Dale Kramer and George R. Clark, “Harold Ross and The New Yorker: A Landscape with Figures,” *Harper’s* vol. 186, April 1943: 519. For a more detailed financial history of the magazine, see Section V: Legal & Financial Files of the *New Yorker* records, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.
Macdonald’s third point examined the danger inherent in Ross’s belief that artists, by avoiding political commentary altogether, could rise “above the [class] battle.” He warned that the *New Yorker’s* apparently incorruptible neutrality was not as simple as the editors would have one believe. Whatever the slant of the writing, whatever came out of the magazine, it was what went in—the advertising revenue, for example—that determined its class affiliation. As with the rise of Thurber, from the Communist position it was the *New Yorker’s* economic dependence on the elite that not only allowed but *required* it to maintain an aloof, escapist editorial policy. Thus, neutrality itself became inherently political, a privilege and defense mechanism of the upper classes. Macdonald conceded that the magazine’s readers were not all wealthy, and that the majority of them probably could not afford the Tiffany’s jewelry and European drapes advertised therein, but said that the advertising remained detrimental by creating a “keeping up with the Joneses” mentality that reinforced the rewards of capitalism and distracted readers from the class struggle.34

Thus, the *New Yorker’s* earliest and loudest critics came from the radical literary movement, which cast the magazine as the defender of an outdated economic order. It was in response to these claims the *New Yorker* would first throw its top hat into the political ring.

Part II: A Light Response

One of the duties of the radical press is, of course, to keep the masses in a high state of dissatisfaction with the world. Apparently this even includes keeping them displeased with the weather. On Thursday, April 5th, we picked up our Daily Worker to get into a proper inflammatory mood for literary composition and noticed with some surprise that the forecast said: “WEATHER: Probably rain.” This dire prediction failed to check with the eight capitalist dailies… predicting fair and warmer. It must be fun to run a Communist organ and give even the weather a sly twist to the left.

--Notes and Comment, April 14, 1934

To correctly frame the debate over journalistic and literary engagement, one must not distort the opponents’ respective positions. Despite the rise of leftist writers with the United Front, much of American society remained hostile to Communism during the Depression, and the “culture wars” so gallantly undertaken suffered frequent counter-attacks. These included tirades against the ‘Reds’ by reactionary mainstream reporters, most notably in the Hearst newspapers, who could dish out as much political abuse as they received.35 In this environment, rife with the unpleasantness of rioting, strikes, and slanderous journalism, it is important to stress that the New Yorker was not editorially anti-Communist in any serious sense. Its initial reaction to the Left was stoically quiet; over a year after the first barbs of disapproval, the magazine was on record only as saying that “Communists have bad manners.”36 Unfortunately, we shall see that this turn-the-other-cheek policy was impossible to maintain among a staff that made its living on quick wits: it devolved to tongue-in-cheek by 1934, and from there to downright cheeky.

In several anniversary editions of the New Yorker from the Depression and war years, the Notes and Comment sections began with a reckoning of the magazine’s maturity—often coupling changes in editorial policy with the metaphor of a growing boy—and took the opportunity to address other issues of editorial importance. Appropriately, in 1934 the first response to the New Yorker’s political antagonists came in February, when E.B. White wrote in the anniversary column:

35 Aaron, 158.

These are more vigorous times than we bargained for when 1925 was young…What the changing times will do to Comrade Tilley’s rather formal hat, for which he still feels a sentimental though embarrassed attachment, is a matter of conjecture. Already it shows dents of rioting.37

Taking the Tilley top hat as a symbol of privilege and whimsical formality, it is evident that the magazine was already self-conscious about its editorial position. While the “dents of rioting” alluded to several Communist and fascist altercations that had just taken place in New York, the only actual damage the New Yorker suffered was verbal criticism. Yet even with the admission of embarrassment, the editorial’s distaste for violence and its non-committal reliance on “conjecture” illustrated a hesitance to change. Thus, in typical New Yorker fashion, White acknowledged, but politely forestalled the issue of Communism and engaged writing until a later date.

The first New Yorker cover that addressed Communism, from April 28, 1934, appeared in anticipation of the great May Day demonstrations that would take place in Union Square that week. It depicts a multitude milling around the park, several red banners among them, and fiery orators speaking from soapboxes. Ostensibly, it is a model scene of successful radicalism. However, upon closer examination, one notices that very few of the congregants are actually listening to the speakers or marching with the banners. A great many of them seem merely to be walking about, viewing the greenery and enjoying a warm day in the park. In fact, the entire design is consistent with a park-going motif common to the New Yorker during this period. The cover’s painter, Ilonka Karasz, had released a similar piece depicting the crowds at Coney Island in the September 3, 1932 issue, and indeed was the creator of this panoramic cover style at the magazine.38 Fellow artist Arthur Kronengold also designed two similar covers during the early Thirties, featuring a colorful glimpse of Battery Park on June 25, 1932 and a picture of families at the Central Park Zoo on May 13, 1933. Since each of these three covers predate that of the Union Square demonstrations, and all four use the same sense of color and perspective, the latter seems merely part of a series, an annual glimpse of the Manhattan promenade. Understood in this light, the cover of April 28, 1934

37 “Notes and Comment,” New Yorker, February 17, 1934: 11.

38 Karasz remains the most prolific cover designer as well, with 186 submissions accepted.
communicates a detached disinterest typical of the magazine in the early and mid-Thirties, the quaint belief that spring’s blossoms draw the masses more readily than political rallies.39

As it turned out, politics attracted hundreds of thousands to the streets of Manhattan for the May Day marches, which that year were the largest held ever in New York. But, in turn, the frenzy of the demonstrations provided Ross with several weeks of humorous material. His May 12th edition featured a two-page cartoon with the mock-headline “The Rightist Opposition Forms a United Front and Takes Over Union Square for a Counter-Demonstration.” In it hundreds of top-hatted men and bejeweled women carry signs reading “DOWN WITH PROLETARIAN ENCROACHMENT,” “LET ‘EM EAT CAKE,” and “MAKE THE WORLD SAFE FOR PLUTOCRACY,” and march in a parade of tuxedoes and foxhounds. On the next page, E.B. White published “Down With Cake,” a light poem based on the protests of midtown stores that the Communist parades were suffocating business.

How could tulle and chiffon be the things we spend our dime on
While Scottsboro defenders blocked the doors of Franklin Simon!
Our chances of recovery, the Trib explained, were dead,
If our potential purchasers were jostled by the Red;
And social revolution was a rather trying dee-tail
To add to all the Troubles of the Man who sells at Retail.40

Despite the fact that these pieces were aimed at Communism, it should be noted that both equally patronize the wealthy, for New Yorker humor thrived on class tensions from several perspectives and followed the belief that one should “make fun of Everything, in a nicely polished way.”41

James Thurber responded to the growing popularity of Communist literary beliefs with a June 9th article entitled “Notes for a Proletarian Novel.” In it he sarcastically traced the progression of novel writing from the days of sentimental romance to melancholy searches for Something Worth While to his contemporary atmosphere, when


41 Kinney, 623.
one was required to write about the workingman in drab terms, to the exclusion of Love and Individuality. Despite his own attachment to these ‘bourgeois affects,’ Thurber acknowledged the need to adjust to the leftward shift. He even admitted his own service on an advocacy committee during a waiters’ strike, but wryly stated that he could never write a novel about it because he had no idea what waiters did when they went home, and an author could not omit the home life of his characters.42

Moreover, for all of their zeal, Thurber doubted whether his leftist opponents had any idea what waiters did when they went home either. A chief criticism of those who adopted Communism as an intellectual fad was their lack of cultural connection with the working class and the sometimes hypocritical maintenance of their social circles and lifestyles—for example, Thurber’s friend Heywood Broun supporting a taxi strike while being chauffeured in limousines.43 White likewise lamented the plight of the

politically anemic…[who] go to work in the morning, work hard to make a profit, and return in the evening to serve a gentle round of sherry to a roomful of leftists who insist that no more profits be made and ask for more sherry.44

The class tension was unavoidable, for proletarian art, as with so many aspects of Communism, was sustained by those with the education and time necessary to cultivate it, an idealistic but primarily bourgeois vanguard. Scholars note that the proletarian movement drew inspiration from its class contradictions, synthesizing lower-class ideals into an evolving bourgeois discourse. As discussed in the previous chapter, it was this class tension, these inconsistencies, which marginalized artists within Communist circles, but gave them independence and moral fuel for their work.

Yet, to many contemporaries outside the Party, these same contradictions weakened the movement’s credibility. For example, in his book The Red Decade (1941), Eugene Lyons ascribed the leftward migration of intellectuals to fashion—as Communist


43 Kinney, 624.

art and criticism trumped dadaism, surrealism, etc. with its shock value—combined with economics, for many of the intelligentsia could no longer afford the lifestyle they had embraced before the Depression. He acerbically summarized the interest in proletarian literature as an exchange of “prosperity bohemianism for proletarian bohemianism.”

Although many writers and thinkers obviously turned to Communism with nobler intentions than faddishness or ‘intellectual slumming,’ the frequency—and piquancy—of such counter-attacks suggests the political volatility within social groups that made the New York literary scene increasingly uncomfortable throughout the Thirties. The Algonquin Roundtable, the focus of New York intellectual life and source of many New Yorker writers, had broken up by 1934, largely over the question of Communism. In addition to Thurber’s friend Broun, several New Yorker contributors, some as prominent as Ring Lardner and John O’Hara, temporarily joined the literary Left.

Perhaps it was this social overlap, the conversion of so many acquaintances and writers, rather than its mere apoliticism that incensed Communist criticism against Ross and the New Yorker. With such a prominent cultural authority obstinately resisting the literary environment in which it was immersed, struggling in tantalizing proximity to its opponents, the Communists saw both symbolic value and a practical possibility in their mission “to turn [the] magazine into a voice of protest and rebellion.” Anecdotes about Thurber’s social life at the time support this argument. He could rarely attend a cocktail party during the period without being cornered and forced to defend the New Yorker’s editorial stance. With an erratic temper but steady drinking habits, his responses frequently led to shouting matches, and occasionally to physical retaliation—he threw drinks at Lillian Hellman and got into tussles with Michael Gold and Hart Crane.

Yet Thurber’s counter-attacks were not limited to jabs, written or thrown: in 1936 he seriously reviewed Granville Hicks’ collection Proletarian Literature in the United States (1935) for Malcolm Cowley and the New Republic. The review reiterated

45 The Communist echo came in 1935 at the First Writers’ Conference, where John Chamberlain derided the United Front’s concessions to “hobo bohemians.” Aaron, 232, 294.

46 James Thurber, The Years With Ross (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959), 172.

47 Kinney, 621, 626-7.
Thurber’s opinions as a modern fabler, in that the ethical debate was defined not by political theory or forces of right and wrong but by the unchangeable pettiness of human nature. He interpreted the proletarian/bourgeois literary debate not as constructive political dialogue, but as any other public altercation, in which both sides shout abuse and blindly disregard even the sound arguments made by the opposition. He characterized Joseph Freeman, who wrote Hicks’ introduction, as juvenile, argumentative, and neurotic with his bitter attacks on bourgeois literature. In fact, Thurber exposed the fervent and undoctrinal tone of the critiques, which “[degenerated] into what [had] the thin ring of an absurd personal insult” rather than legitimate literary interpretation. As we have seen, historians have thoroughly supported his appraisal of Freeman, although that does not justify his disregard for the proletarian movement’s intellectual base. Understood in the context of Gold and Freeman’s *kulturkampf*, what appeared to Thurber as personal vindictiveness and political smokescreen emerges rather as a measured political tool, a means to an end.

Thurber’s second point was the stories’ lack of artistic detail. Although he conceded that art could be political, he maintained that politics alone do not constitute art. Armed with embarrassingly inept excerpts, he presented the writing as pedantic, the dialogue unconvincing, and the supposedly proletarian characters utterly lacking in ethos. At one point he quoted Josephine Herbst: “A newsboy sang out, ‘Big strike at Cumley’s, night crew walk out, big strike threatened, mayor urges arbitration.’” Whatever Herbst wanted to hear a newsboy sing out, Thurber wrote, no newsboy in America had ever used such a cry. Thus, more than the partisan material, for Thurber it was the style of its presentation that discredited much of *Proletarian Literature* as propaganda.

His poor opinion of the book’s artistry becomes ironic when one considers that Lionel Trilling, Gold, and other writers for the *New Masses* and *Partisan Review* had fought for years to establish the aesthetic value of proletarian art among their own circles; even as late at 1936, the Left often labeled them “too damn literary” for any practical

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48 Freeman knew Hicks from the *New Masses*, and he and Gold were both contributing editors to *Proletarian Literature in the United States*.

good. By publishing *Proletarian Literature* during a period of cultural acceptance, Communist writers hoped to finally prove that their politics could be incorporated into skillful art. Yet, when it appeared, critics—many of them recently harassed by the same Communists authors they now judged—claimed that the art was not skillful enough. Thus, every political position was exposed to criticism: Bourgeois writers were talented, but complicitly detached; Communists were either artistically intolerant or incompetent, overly dependent on their political message; and for all its good intentions, the United Front was caught in the crossfire of an ideological no-man’s land. If critics intended to snipe at him for apoliticism, Thurber relished the opportunity to return fire over their lack of artistry.

Yet, he found himself increasingly in the minority. As the Depression continued into the late Thirties and the literary environment grew more polarized, the *New Yorker’s* position began losing ground to the United Front. Even those who did not convert to Communism felt its artistic influence. Daniel Aaron specifically notes the historical and literary differentiation between the Lost Generation and the Crisis Generation; the latter coming of age under the rhetoric of radicalism, its writing internalized the somber language and outlook of the era. The transition between the two was pointedly felt in the *New Yorker’s* offices beginning around 1937, as young writers’ submissions, to Ross’s despair, took more serious stances on contemporary issues. E.B. White alluded to the change when he wrote to Katharine that “nobody writes funny pieces anymore; all [are] written by 23 year old Jews, about life.”

A major movement was underway in the literary environment, and the *New Yorker* could not help but reflect it. The second and final cover to deal with Communism appeared on May 1, 1937. Shaded gray and looking sorrowful, a young girl with crown and maypole stood amidst a crowd of angry adults wearing red caps and holding signs that read “DOWN WITH CAPITALISM,” “FASCISM IS UNAMERICAN,” and “UNFAIR TO LABOR.” It echoed the disappointment voiced among the staff that

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50 Aaron, 205, 299.

51 Aaron, 152.

52 E.B. White, letter to Katharine White, c.1937-1938, Bryn Mawr College Special Collections.
cultural politics were getting ‘too important,’ the artistic palette too monochrome. Rather than the subtly patronizing tone adopted in 1934, by 1937 the besieged magazine was voicing a nostalgic wish for more innocent times.53 Yet the old guard of the magazine would suffer one more blow before gradually adopting the political conscience introduced by its junior writers.

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53 Complete Book of Covers, 77. See Appendix.
Part III: The Trouble With White

We walked over to Union Square the other morning to dry out our soul in the sun, and sat a while with the dismal on the benches—the men who were thinking, and waiting. (We ourselves were only waiting.) Before leaving the Square, we read the motto on the monument, a quotation from Thomas Jefferson: “How little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of…” Uneasily we glanced around at our countrymen. The only precious blessing most of them were in possession of was the cup of coffee they had recently got from the relief shanty nearby. In such graven words, it seemed to us, the disconsolate must taste the ultimate bile.

--Notes and Comment, March 5, 1932

In 1934, Ralph Ingersoll, a onetime *New Yorker* employee who *Time-Life’s* Henry Luce had since hired as the managing editor of *Fortune*, published a complimentary article about Ross’s magazine, then almost a decade old and a booming success. However, despite its positive tone, the article marked the beginning of two negative trends in the *New Yorker’s* ensuing history. First, in addition to listing balance sheets and managerial practices, Ingersoll’s piece also contained items that offended the *New Yorker* offices, such as estimated salaries—all of them notably high—for several writers and editors. Feeling slighted, the *New Yorker* retaliated with some public jabs at Ingersoll and a sarcastic Profile of Luce, which initiated a feud between the *New Yorker* and *Time* that lasted over twenty years.54

Although the matter of salaries was taken as mere mischief and responded to in kind, a second excerpt had a more serious impact on the editorial staff’s political mindset.

If you complain that *The New Yorker* has become gentler and gentler, more nebulous, less real, it is the Whites’ doing: Andy’s gossamer writing, in his increasingly important ‘Notes and Comment,’ [and] in his flavoring of the whole magazine with captions and fillers, [and] Katharine’s…civilizing influence on Ross.55

54 Wolcott Gibbs expertly lampooned Luce not only by joking about his entrepreneurial and political ambitions, but writing the entire Profile in an exaggerated “Timespeak” style—which Ross abhorred on grammatical grounds—at one point exclaiming “backward ran sentences until reeled the mind!” *Time* would respond in 1937 by doodling a mustache on a snapshot of Ross, transforming him into Joseph Stalin. Kunkel, 291-293.

Essentially, Ingersoll charged that through “gossamer writing” E.B. White, the *New Yorker’s* professional conscience, was evading his responsibility to cover contemporary issues of unemployment and poverty. The criticism took White completely by surprise; it was a personal attack from an old friend. At the time, he did not know that Ingersoll’s politics had shifted far to the left, that his friend was being greatly swayed by Communist intellectual circles in New York City. Undoubtedly, this political leaning directly spurred his criticism of White’s editorials, for at the time hardly anyone other than a Communist would have complained about the *New Yorker* becoming “gentler and gentler.” Its readers expressed not a hint of moral consternation about the editorial policy: after reviewing all of the reader correspondence up to that time, I found not a single letter seriously addressing issues of class, poverty, or the *New Yorker’s* political detachment.

Yet the leftist minority’s accusations struck a sensitive nerve with White, who was very aware of the plight of the city’s poor and had been growing increasingly cognizant of such critiques on his work. While he occasionally tried to include more earnest commentary, such as the introductory piece about the “disconsolate [tasting] the ultimate bile,” his efforts were stifled by the established and expectedly light tone of the magazine and his perpetual anonymity, voiced in the editorial “we.” Furthermore, although there are no records of Ross specifically rejecting political pieces, James Thurber recalled many times “when he invaded my office, or White’s, or Gibbs’s, to lament the dwindling of humorous pieces with the growth of what he always called ‘grim stuff.’” White presumably took the grumbling about “grim” writing personally, feeling that his role at the heart of the magazine should abide by Ross’s original humor formula. This created a serious ethical dilemma for him, for despite a limited knowledge of

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56 Ingersoll’s leftist sentiments peaked in 1935, when he had a year-long affair with the playwright Lillian Hellman. In order to please her he briefly joined the Communist party, and it was under her influence that he would found the leftist tabloid *PM* in 1940. Kinney, 620.

57 Section III: Editorial Correspondence and Section IV: Editorial Business of the *New Yorker* records, Rare Books and Manuscripts, New York Public Library.

58 Elledge, 188.

59 Thurber, *Years With Ross*, 170-171.
politics and economics, he agreed with his critics that a professional writer had an obligation to social commentary. His guilt over the *New Yorker*’s aloofness remained tangible twenty-five years later, when he admitted to a friend that during the Depression “everyone else was foundering [while] we were running free, and I still feel that I escaped the hard times undeservedly.”

Ingersoll would again attack White’s editorial responsibility in March of 1937, this time with personal letters rather than publicly. On March 4th, President Roosevelt gave a public address pronouncing his plan to ‘pack’ the Supreme Court with judges sympathetic to his New Deal legislation, a program he had been advocating for months. In a rare instance of political engagement, that week’s *Notes and Comment* column called Roosevelt’s speeches “the utterances of a petulant savior,” and chided that “America doesn’t need to be saved today; it can wait for tomorrow. Meanwhile, Mister, we’ll sleep on it.” Although he favored most aspects of the New Deal, White could not support Roosevelt’s blatantly unconstitutional actions and, like many Americans, favored a more conservative plan. Ingersoll chanced to see the issue before it was printed and wrote two scathing letters to White, outraged at what he considered privileged reticence. Among his more piercing comments:

> I am no one to defend Roosevelt whole—too many things about him enrage me. But, so does your gentle complacency. ‘Let us sleep on it….’ Andy, Andy!! Doesn’t that well-fed stomach of yours ever turn when you think what you’re saying? Let us sleep on suffering, want, malnutrition….

> What I think I believe in is the dignity of man. And I know starvation is a very undignified thing. So is that kind of callousness that the gentle and the delicate and the very old have in common—a willingness to hide behind the philosophy which excuses them from feeling or doing anything about the suffering of the world.

These letters mirror Gold and Freeman’s critiques in their tone and intention, leveling the charges of classism and evasiveness that had become commonplace at the *New Yorker,*

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60 Kunkel, 183-184.

61 Specifically, Roosevelt wanted to sidestep constitutional checks and balances by expanding the Court from nine judges to fifteen and instituting a mandatory retirement age, both of which would have allowed him to nominate several extra justices.

62 Elledge, 198-199.
but voicing them powerfully and personally enough that White could think of only one appropriate response: He quit.

It was not unexpected. White had for some time been considering a leave of absence from the *New Yorker* and the city itself. In his own words, the period from 1934 to 1937 was one of “death and distemper,” a time when he felt confined by his job and burned out by the frequency of his deadlines. In addition to the moral debate surrounding his column, he was physically suffering from headaches and dizzy spells. His best friend Thurber had remarried, moved to Connecticut, and had not been an office regular since 1935. In May of 1936 he learned that his mother was dying—she would pass away later that year, a mere nine months after the death of his father. Thus, it was by piquing the overwhelmed White at a time of personal vulnerability that the Communist *kulturkampf* reaped its first and last *New Yorker* casualty, in the form of a resignation.

After taking a few months off, Andy and Katharine White settled permanently into their summer home in Maine. Katherine continued editing fiction for the *New Yorker* part time while Andy set to work writing a monthly piece for *Harper's* entitled *One Man’s Meat*, a public journal that recorded observations on his daily life. These essays were not inherently political, but they were signed and they were forthright. Interspersing farm anecdotes with his reflections on the Munich Pact, Jim Crow legislation, and the outbreak of war in Europe, White “projected the character of a sensitive, thoroughly honest, decent, and reliable human being.” His writing became hugely popular for its philosophic eloquence, and *Harper’s* sales almost immediately jumped by twenty percent. Although he regretted that the monthly deadlines prevented more topical writing, *One Man’s Meat* offered White a chance to voice his opinion in a tone that the *New Yorker* had not. He would do so for almost five years, publishing fifty-five essays and earning national acclaim.

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63 E.B. White, letters to Katharine White, 18 September 1935 and 31 May 1937, Bryn Mawr College Libraries, Special Collections.

64 E.B. White, letter to Katharine White, 1 May 1936, Bryn Mawr College Libraries, Special Collections.

65 Elledge, 218-220.
Back in New York, Wolcott Gibbs was assigned responsibility for *Notes and Comment*, primarily because he could best imitate the style that White had perfected over the years. However, the issue of editorial succession would not be so easily resolved, as the pressure of weekly deadlines quickly revived Gibbs’s alcoholism, forcing St. Clair McKelway and others into service as needed. Thus from 1937 to 1943 the magazine lacked a permanent editorial writer, a source of perpetual angst for Ross, who viewed the position as the backbone of his magazine. Although White would contribute occasionally, Ross was desperate to get him back on staff full-time—as he lamented in multiple letters to Katharine, “Comment is by far the most glaringly weak thing now, and if White should write some it would save the day.”

Several staff members tried to convince White to return to New York, Ross and Thurber foremost among them. In an imploring letter of January 20, 1938, Thurber punctuated his long-running argument for White’s return with a proactive defense of the *New Yorker’s* stance, concurrently presenting the researcher with an intimate characterization of the larger debate surrounding the magazine. He opened by saying,

> Never has there been so much to laugh at off and on. Those of us who are able to do that must keep on doing it, no matter who or what goes to hell, if only because Joe Freeman and his gang says we should not. It is the easiest thing in the world nowadays to become so socially conscious, so Spanish war stricken, that all sense of balance and values goes out of a person.…

He continued by deriding the artist’s impulse toward political activism as supreme egotism. To Thurber, Communist intellectuals were not only self-righteous but, by sacrificing the responsibility of independent creativity for the “grimly gray” Party line, their accusations of escapism rang with hypocrisy. What could be more escapist than forfeiting one’s point of view in favor of mandatory politicization, capitulating to artistic peer pressure? From his perspective, the *New Yorker’s* aloof editorials provided balance, preserving social normality and cultural objectivity during a national crisis, which he considered as much “a point of moral necessity” as the Communist demand for engaged

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67 Harold Ross, letter to Katharine White, Date unknown, 1939-1940? Bryn Mawr College Libraries, Special Collections. The reader should note that Ross’s tone on the subject was rarely as proper as this quote suggests. At more exasperated moments he frequently swore “He just sails around in a goddamn boat all day!” Kunkel, 298.
writing. Moreover, it was desperately apparent to Thurber that no one was better qualified than E.B. White to provide that commentary.\textsuperscript{68}

Again, the correspondence between White and Thurber revolved around the Communist/bourgeois debate over the nature of art and the integrity of artists, questioning whether it was necessarily political, or whether aestheticism—or in this case, humor—could not transcend contextuality. The New Yorker’s critics strictly adhered to the former belief, as outlined in the 1937 Macdonald article and elsewhere, and although White never fully adopted a Marxist view of his profession, he acknowledged that during a crisis “the writer almost inevitably becomes propagandist and advocate.”\textsuperscript{69} Conversely, in his contempt for Communists, the Spanish Civil War, and all other things political, Thurber was intoning the classic plea of ‘art for art’s sake,’ hoping to protect the New Yorker’s right to detachment and amorality. Using these perspectives as guideposts, my later analysis will examine the degree to which the New Yorker’s eventual politicization compromised Thurber’s amoral ideal, as well as the degree to which it fulfilled the ethical demands of its critics.

White’s absence from 1937 to 1943 represented the climax of the New Yorker’s moral crisis, an era in which its voice was literally muddled by substitute writers and political uncertainty, mirroring its wavering ethical stance. Yet the hardship that the absence created would elicit tangible changes upon the Whites’ return, as would the threat of war in Europe and the rise of a young man named William Shawn.

\textsuperscript{68} Helen Thurber and Edward Weeks, eds., \textit{Selected Letters of James Thurber} (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), 15. Although Thurber’s opinion of the Party line does not reflect the historical nuances of independent Communist writing, his argument echoes that of Ernest Walsh to Michael Gold a decade earlier. Walsh denounced Gold’s “simple black-and-white dichotomy of ‘good’ labor and ‘bad’ capital, [because] no cause or party had a monopoly on virtue [and] the writer had no business tying himself down to a party.” Aaron, 201.

\textsuperscript{69} Elledge, 230.
Part IV: Shawn and the War Years

Editorially speaking, we are fifteen years old this week, an awkward age. The voice is, or should be, beginning to change, the beard to sprout, the mind to broaden and mature.

--Notes and Comment, February 17, 1940

I think circumstances killed the Ho Hum Department. These are not Ho Hum times…

--Harold Ross, 1946

The strength of Communist criticism in America, and the cultural lifeblood of Communism worldwide, abated in 1939 with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Intellectual circles had rallied behind the Spanish Civil War three years earlier, in which the Communist Party supported a democratically elected government against Franco; they had raised their eyebrows, but initially accepted the outcomes of Stalin’s highly publicized purge trials; but when Stalin and Hitler divided Poland, it was unmasked ideological betrayal, forfeiting international Communist values for Russian security and contradicting the spirit of solidarity that had thence sustained the United Front. The intellectual move leftward ebbed, and those who remained loyal to the Comintern, Michael Gold among them, forfeited mainstream credibility in doing so.70

The drop in leftist literary influence checked the amount of direct criticism against the New Yorker, but political disillusionment did not significantly alter values and opinions, and as late as 1941 the debate over engagement remained basically unchanged. During that year Dwight Macdonald reviewed Hemingway’s For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940) in the Partisan Review, and gave it low marks “because of its rejection of political consciousness.” In his opinion, it stripped politics from art and created a false antithesis between the two, and he contrasted Hemingway’s approach with those of Silone and Malraux, two writers more consistently affiliated with Communism.71 On the other hand, Clifton Fadiman’s New Yorker review adopted a typical position by focusing first on

70 For the Pact’s disillusioning effects on several prominent writers, see Crossman, The God That Failed. For more on Stalin’s ideological betrayal see Arthur Koestler, Darkness at Noon (New York: MacMillan, 1941).

cadence and writing style, and then by celebrating Hemingway’s blurred politics. To Fadiman, descriptions of the “disorganization and political chicanery of the Loyalist command [impeded] the story,” dettracting from its universal truths and dedication to human justice. These nebulous virtues epitomized Fadiman’s political message, which perceived Hemingway’s trademark preoccupation with death morphing into a conflict between “those who deny life and those who affirm it,” presumably a euphemism for fascists and their opponents. The political vagueness continued as Fadiman quoted extensively from the John Donne sermon which furnished Hemingway’s title: “No man is an Iland…any mans death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankinde.” In view of the European situation at the time, these lines grew more relevant by the day. Yet Fadiman used them only to champion the sanctity of life and the “common human being,” and took no initiative to suggest more practical means of their application.72

Thus it is clear that, White’s departure aside, the kulturkampf achieved little effect on Ross’s organization; the New Yorker’s ivory towers had weathered the Communist storm. Unfortunately, they got little reprieve, for the same historical forces that caused the collapse of Communist criticism presented a new challenge to Ross’s political aloofness. Shortly after Russia divided Poland with Hitler, the mechanized German blitzkrieg invaded, initiating the Second World War in Europe. Inevitably, England and France mobilized, and the letters the New Yorker published from London and Paris grew foreboding.

For Ross, war was scarcely as debatable an issue as Depression politics had been, nor could it be as laughable. He cringed at the prospect of drafts, deployment, and death creeping into his pages, but “convinced himself that most of it was important,” and more than anything “he wanted his magazine to be important.”73 The chief domestic debate at the time concerned America’s duty to enter or abstain from the European war, and to what degree it could support the Allies as a noncombatant. At Ross’s insistence, the shift acknowledging the war began conservatively, quietly opposing involvement in European affairs. On October 7, 1939, the Notes and Comment column mused:

72 Clifton Fadiman, “Ernest Hemingway Crosses the Bridge,” New Yorker, October 26, 1940: 66-69.

73 Thurber, Years With Ross, 156.
We hear people, who must remember the waste and idiocy of the last war, talking with a sort of nervous eagerness about this one, accepting America’s entry into it as proper and inevitable. We don’t see how this can be.74

Ross claimed no expertise in international affairs, and with memories of the Great War still fresh in the public consciousness, it seemed that one could not go wrong by opposing another bloody confrontation. In general, the editorial position was to wait for a unified popular dictate either for or against involvement, and to shift accordingly.

As it had with the Depression coverage, this minimalist editorial approach suffered from wartime critics. One was E.B. White, to whom Ross wrote in June of 1941,

I [am] suspicious that you disapprove of what we have been doing in the Comment page and elsewhere in relation to the international situation. I am not positive of this, of course, but I gather you would have gone a lot further. My decision is that we have been doing it right and that we ought to go on as we have been going, call it slacking, call it escapist, call it what you will.

Ross justified his stance by saying that because no one was qualified to tell him the ‘correct’ course of action, because there was not a clear moral case for war, he was content with hedging his bets and “drifting.”75 The correspondence between White and Ross, as that between White and Thurber three years before, epitomized the New Yorker’s internal struggle over the lingering issue of social responsibility.

Yet the war brought change, in spite of Ross’s hesitance, and its tragedies had a sobering effect on American humor. In a bulletin sent to all artists and cartoonists directly after the British evacuation of Dunkirk, the editorial office admitted that the European fighting has caught us with several drawings which we think wouldn’t be funny in view of what’s happened and will have to be saved for a quiet—or less tragic—period, if any. We must forego things which might seem calloused…76

74 “Notes and Comment,” New Yorker, October 7, 1939: 11.


76 Kramer, 520.
This sudden acknowledgement of—even preoccupation with—editorial callousness has prompted historians to speculate about the *New Yorker*’s political transition. Had its standards shifted, or had anything less than cannon fodder previously been considered fodder for the humorist? I believe that, in trying to understand the editorial incongruity between the Depression and the first years of war, scholars have slightly distorted the change. For example, Lee views the growing political coverage as a “correction” to the lack of Depression reporting, and Thomas Kunkel contrasts it with the “feigned ignorance” and “smug detachment” of the 1930’s in an attempt to directly link the two eras.77

I respectfully disagree with this line of reasoning. As we have seen, Ross never changed his stance as a result Communist attacks. However, in 1940 he painfully noted that “great pressure is being put on me to have the *New Yorker* swing over strong to…the hop-right-over-and-aid-the-Allies viewpoint.” Certainly, the American vigor for war could have been coercive without lingering guilt over Communist criticism; Communism was a fringe movement by comparison. Furthermore, although Ross was showing discretion, the war itself caused little change in rhetorical voice, and overall the *New Yorker* remained light and detached even during the war years. The tendency to reduce the *New Yorker*’s politicization to a simple cause-and-effect case of individual guilt oversimplifies the process and misrepresents Ross’s personal contribution to the change. When faced with socially conscious writing, especially on domestic issues, he remained unrepentant, unconvinced, and uncommitted to the very end of his life.78

Once the bombing of Pearl Harbor settled any questions about America’s entrance into war, however, the *New Yorker* adjusted quickly. It took only two weeks for a wartime cover to appear. In September of 1943, a condensed “pony” edition of the magazine, subsisting largely on cartoons and fiction, was made available to troops overseas. This marketing strategy, proposed by Ross’s ex-wife, introduced thousands of middle-class soldiers to the *New Yorker*, and played a huge role in its post-war success.

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78 Kunkel, *Genius*, 347.
While it began as a miniature, monthly endeavor, it went weekly in 1944 and by the end of that year had an overseas circulation of 150,000, rivaling its parent publication.\textsuperscript{79}

Wartime constraints were one of the largest factors in politicizing the \textit{New Yorker}. In addition to nationwide rationing of paper and ink, there was a staggering loss of manpower at the offices. Either voluntarily or by draft, St. Clair McKelway, Charles Cooke, Hobart Weekes, Rogers Whitaker, and Malcolm Anderson all left for basic training, leaving Ross with a skeletal operating staff.\textsuperscript{80} The ongoing void behind \textit{Notes and Comment} especially troubled him, as he continued to petition for White’s return, and at this point it prompted him to make concrete concessions for his friend’s political interests and ability. In exchange for his services, Ross offered \textit{Comment} as a platform from which White could address the war. He admitted, “No one is writing on the war for us…I think it buffaloes everybody; either they have no convictions or they haven’t confidence enough to put them out if they have.”\textsuperscript{81} In a period of national mobilization he needed White’s moral clarity. The Whites accepted, and returned from Maine in March of 1943. Thus their absence, initiated by a Communist call for the \textit{New Yorker’s} political engagement, eventually proved coercive to that end, as \textit{Notes and Comment} became a venue for political commentary.

The \textit{New Yorker’s} politicization at the outbreak of World War II was full of these small compromises in policy. Because so many writers were abroad in the line of duty, Ross gradually allowed them to tackle serious issues, but in doing so refused to forfeit his magazine’s cultured image. One compromising strategy was to incorporate only “factual, non-interpretive reporting on military and naval themes, types of weapons and so on—\textit{[an editorially] safe area which also} [had] the virtue of interesting the fact-hungry wartime public.”\textsuperscript{82} Another, somewhat antithetical, method was the advent of a new style of journalism that the \textit{New Yorker} popularized, known as “narrative reporting” or “literary journalism,” which embellished news stories by focusing on setting and

\textsuperscript{79} Kunkel, \textit{Genius}, 367.

\textsuperscript{80} Thurber, \textit{Years With Ross}, 165. Kramer, 520.

\textsuperscript{81} Kunkel, \textit{Letters}, 179.

\textsuperscript{82} Kramer, 521.
character-development. The style was not exactly new, as Kunkel notes like qualities in the work of Stephen Crane, Turgenev, and Defoe, but conveyed by impeccable *New Yorker* writing, its reinvention was hugely successful. Initially, it appeased both Ross’s taste for solid reporting—he was a newspaperman at heart—and his demand for elegance.

However, Ross did not anticipate the political shift that accompanied the new style, nor its subsequent effects on editorial subjectivity and empathy when commissioned to younger writers. As previously mentioned, the United Front’s political influence in the literary world had broken primarily along generational lines. Of all the new writers and editors emerging from the Crisis Generation, the one with the most lasting influence on the *New Yorker* was William Shawn, who joined the staff full-time in 1934. Hired as a freelance reporter and researcher, by the outbreak of war he had become Fact editor—in charge of all non-fiction—where he displayed a noticeable inclination toward conscientious journalism. He was not alone. St. Clair McKelway, who Ross had charged with bolstering the magazine’s quality of reporting, hired a slew of Crisis Generation writers in the late Thirties, among them A.J. Liebling, E.J. Kahn, Brendan Gill, Philip Hamburger, Andy Logan, Lillian Ross, and John Hersey.83 With their arrival, the tone began to change toward more socially conscious, “grim” writing.

Even at the height of the war Ross’s timid politics resisted full commitment, and the *New Yorker* was never truly hawkish. However well affected, the engaged tone strained its gentle sensibilities, and in 1943 the editors were already petitioning artists for a peace cover, ready to use at short notice.84 Yet by the end of the war the magazine had crossed an ethical threshold. Reporters were sending in stories from all over the world: Janet Flanner’s “The Beautiful Spoils” about Nazis plundering European art; dispatches accusing Peron of harboring Nazi criminals in Argentina; and accounts of the Nuremberg war trials. White began using “Notes and Comment” to oppose the destructive nationalism that had brought such strife, lobbying for the United Nations and world peace, “that rarest of sounds—the concord of nations.” These editorials—and, to a point,

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84 Kramer, 521.
the magazine’s entire tone—took on greater urgency with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the terrifying dawn of the Atomic Age.\(^{85}\)

In 1946, William Shawn commissioned John Hersey to write a ten thousand-word piece on the bombing of Hiroshima. Hersey submitted his draft in July. The article was a powerful example of narrative reporting, as it followed the lives of six survivors while they witnessed the deaths of thousands. Unhurried and disarming, it included humanizing details about the last day of life in the doomed city—stories of children’s playmates, nightly indigestion, and neighborhood gossip. These lapsed abruptly into scenes of grisly horror:

He saw there were about twenty men, and they were all in exactly the same nightmarish state: their faces were wholly burned, their eyesockets were hollow, the fluid from their melted eyes had run down their cheeks. (They must have had their faces upturned when the bomb went off; perhaps they were anti-aircraft personnel.) Their mouths were mere swollen, pus-covered wounds, which they could not bear to stretch enough to admit the spout of the teapot.\(^{86}\)

The story also included interviews taken several months after the initial blast, describing the ongoing suffering of radiation sickness.\(^{87}\)

In a letter to Hersey, Ross vehemently disagreed with those who called “Hiroshima” the story of the year. He thought it decidedly “the best journalistic story of my time, if not of all time.”\(^{88}\) But how was he to present it? The magazine had divided other long articles, usually celebrity Profiles, serially over several weeks. Would this approach work with Hersey’s piece? Shawn, who as Fact editor assumed responsibility for the article, did not think so, and suggested that the most ethical treatment of such a grave subject would be to allot it the week’s entire editorial space. This was a radical proposition. In lieu of the usual cartoons, newsbreaks, and Comment, readers would open to a chilling reconstruction of hundreds of thousands maimed and dying. It was with reserved concession, and with echoes of his Communist era fears, that Ross said Shawn’s

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\(^{88}\) Kunkel, *Letters*, 300.
idea “would make the Nyer a pamphlet for that week.” Yet one hears the moral urgency, the idealistic energy, that Shawn conducted through him. “He [Shawn] wants to wake people up and says we are the people with a chance to do it, and probably the only people that will do it, if it is done…”

The fervor convinced Ross, and the article composed the entire issue of August 31, 1946. It appeared behind an unassuming cover—coincidentally, another park scene—accompanied by a small note, which explained that the entire editorial space for the week was being devoted to an article about the complete obliteration of a city by atomic bomb, in the conviction that few Americans had yet comprehended the weapon’s destructive power or the ethical implications of its use. The layout that Shawn suggested perfectly illustrates the dynamic effect of change at the ultra-traditional *New Yorker*. People immediately took notice of “Hiroshima,” and Corey writes that “allowing the piece to explode long-standing *New Yorker* formulaic constraints greatly magnified its moral force.”

Despite Ross’s worries, the readers’ reaction was edifying. A few indignantly cancelled their subscriptions, but otherwise the response was overwhelmingly positive, and the issue soon sold out of newsstands. The article’s accusatory tone prompted a British radio program to comment on—and, in view of the *New Yorker’s* own ethical history, perhaps understate—the irony of “American governments [being] less responsible than a satirical, sophisticated magazine.” Hersey’s exposé dramatically altered America’s perception of atomic warfare. Before its printing, major publications had only written about the scientific aspects of the bomb and its future—a safe line of coverage, much like Ross’s “factual reporting” during the war—and had not bothered to examine the human horrors that it had already caused. Afterward, Henry L. Simson, government publicist for the atomic program, wrote his apologetic essay “The Decision to Drop the Bomb” largely as a response to the discussion that “Hiroshima” provoked.


90 Hersey, “Hiroshima,” 15.

Yet Leftist critics remained skeptical. If “Hiroshima” meant to make a moral statement, they questioned why it ran among the usual spread of luxury advertisements. Mary McCarthy attacked the *New Yorker* for casting “Hiroshima” as a human-interest story, sentimentally focusing on only six people, trying to make an unthinkable historical moment more palatable by populating it with “busy little Japanese Methodists.”\(^92\)

Although Shawn and Hersey clearly used this personal perspective to accentuate their editorial message, McCarthy thought it glib, and ominously wrote that “to do justice to the enormity of the bombing…Hersey would have had to interview the dead.” To her, “Hiroshima,” as with the *New Yorker*’s overall increase in political writing, was not intended to effect change, but to provide readers with a “suitable attitude” toward world tragedies, to inculcate the prosperous, paternal liberalism that would pervade American culture for the twenty years following the war.\(^93\)

She may have been right, for “Hiroshima” was certainly the high-water mark, and the *New Yorker* did not become a muckraking journal. Ross had backed into the war, and was thrilled to return to peacetime. However, “Hiroshima” set a precedent for the *New Yorker*’s politics: its publication signaled the standardization of literary engagement that had seemed radical only a decade before.

\(^{92}\) Two of the six survivors interviewed were clergymen.

Conclusion

We [had] armed ourself with a feather for tickling a few chins, and now, twenty years later, we find ourself gingerly holding a glass tube for transfusing blood… We feel like a man who left his house to go to a Punch-and-Judy show and, by some error in direction, wandered into ‘Hamlet.’

--Notes and Comment, February 17, 1945

The period from 1934 to 1946 brought substantial changes to the political outlook of the maturing *New Yorker*, primarily resulting from criticism over its conspicuously apolitical stance at the beginning of that era. Yet, as we have seen, the political shift was not, as E. B. White mused, as coincidental as wandering into “Hamlet.” Nor was it simply an individualistic “correction” by Ross, White, or Shawn—the tendency of modern historians to present it as such results from what one could call a ‘personality cult’ clouding the magazine’s early history.\(^\text{94}\) Attacks on the *New Yorker* were actually a subsection of broader cultural criticism, the *kulturkampf* program of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, and therefore must be read within the social context of the period.

Essentially, *kulturkampf* was an incendiary movement within the socio-political scene of the 1930’s, staking out an extreme position and using arguments so offensive, sensational, and “neurotic” that it demanded publicity and debate. The reason that it was ineffective before 1934 is that, although inflammatory, the program itself was much less radical than the cause for which it petitioned. Because it was aimed at those outside the Party, the *kulturkampf* approach was necessarily dialogic, and therefore initiated political negotiation. It did not intend to abruptly convince artists and writers of the sanctity of Communist theory, but merely to bait them and engage them, eventually shifting the definition of ‘moderate’ leftward, and thereby inciting progressive artistic change in conjunction with, or in anticipation of, the political revolution that Gold and Freeman believed was inevitable. Yet, before 1934, when Communism was intent on separatism and revolution, the Party line was anything but dialogic and negotiable, and, reading

\(^\text{94}\) Although she perpetuates the myth herself, Lee opens her introduction by quoting Charles McGrath on “the common failing of *New Yorker* historiography—the tendency to reduce everyone, and every event, to colorful anecdotes.” The lack of reliable sources, and the abundance of stilted memoirs and biographies like Thurber’s *The Years With Ross*, has frequently biased scholarship toward the magazine’s celebrities rather than its institutional identity. Lee, 9.
accounts of strikes and political subversives, none in the intelligentsia mistook its goal for ‘a gradual shift leftward.’ In order for a radical position like Gold and Freeman’s to bring about changes in mass culture, there had to be a more moderate, intermediary ground, a space for public dialogue, which was lacking at the beginning of the decade.

When the Comintern softened its revolutionary policy in order to oppose Hitler in 1934, the United Front provided that space for political negotiation. The Front legitimated Communist artists, previously marginal within both the literary establishment and their own Party, by loosening the demand for artistic orthodoxy. While advocating proletarian art, Gold and Freeman could harangue bourgeois writers in hopes of gradual cooperation, rather than complete conversion. Thus, the United Front made their extremist literary criticism more effective by making the Left more approachable, allowing opponents to drift into Marxism, as many prominent writers soon did.

However, despite its overall success in New York, Communist criticism achieved limited results with the writers of the New Yorker, mainly because of the latter’s economic success and the strength of its editorial tradition. During the Thirties, leftist critics only managed to temporarily disaffiliate White, and achieved no direct impact on the magazine’s light editorial tone. Instead, lasting results were indirect and came later, partially realized upon White’s return, but more profoundly felt through Communism’s influence elsewhere in the literary environment, as the emerging Crisis Generation writers dragged the New Yorker into the political fray.

Although the popularity of American Communism faded before the New Yorker truly politicized during World War II, an ironic historical shift would soon unite the two. After the war, as reactionary McCarthyism swept through American society, the New Yorker championed the constitutional rights of blacklisted Communists, thereby inviting criticism from the Right, which crassly nicknamed it the “New Worker.” For Ross, as with many in the media, there was no question that the unconstitutional Hollywood Ten trials were “dictatorial government bludgeoning,” and he set his magazine firmly on the side of free speech and politics.95 The New Yorker’s “pink” label also alluded to its

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95 Kunkel, Letters, 328-329. Thurber summarized the period with a barnyard fable about a well-mannered goose. Seeing him strut, someone murmured, “There is a very proper gander!” A hen mistook this for a mention of “propaganda,” told the rooster, and soon rumors circulated that the goose was seen throwing a bomb, might have said “To Hell with the flag,” and was actually a hawk in goose’s clothing. Needing no
adoption of several Communist writers who were trying to rejoin the literary
establishment after the Nazi-Soviet Pact. With its entrance into politics, the magazine
became an attractive venue for unaffiliated liberals to whom Communism had formerly
appealed. Thus, even leftist writers like Dwight McDonald and Mary McCarthy, both
vocal critics during the Thirties, often wrote for the New Yorker during the Forties and
Fifties.96

This union would not put an end to the New Yorker’s ethical struggles, however.
As America settled into post-war prosperity the New Yorker followed suit, subordinating
its newfound political voice to a gentler liberalism, while strengthening its trademarks of
elite editorialism and unparalleled advertising lineage. This format played a critical role
in assuaging its readers’ ambivalence toward their cultural privileges, mitigating

a structural antipathy between the material and ethical considerations of its
readership, by simply providing a locale in which the two could co-exist. By
smoothing the edges both of consumption (by selling only select items) and
democratic principles (by exhibiting geo-political concerns), the magazine
enabled these two potent components of postwar culture to dovetail comfortably
into the rubric of good taste—of knowingness.

McCarthy referred to this compromise in her critique of “Hiroshima,” the luxury of
knowing what one should think about social ills, but having that knowledge pointed
toward safely distant locations. Thus, even the New Yorker’s politicism did not directly
respond to its critics, who continued to question the magazine’s stance on domestic
issues.97

more evidence than this, all the animals drove the goose out of the barnyard. “The moral: Anyone who you
or your wife thinks is going to overthrow the government must be driven from the country.” James

96 Aaron, 151.

97 Mary F. Corey, “Mixed Messages: Representations of Consumption and anti-Consumption in the New
Josephine Hendin leveled similar charges against the apparent liberalism of the New Yorker. She said that
the New Yorker’s politics were liberal, but not democratic: they were inclusive in scope, but exclusive in
response, limiting its editorial treatment to a dense description of issues rather than offering alternatives.
She wrote, “The New Yorker mystique permits us to believe we are concerned with others while treating
their lives from a position of detachment, voyeurism, or even hostility. It exploits the lives of those ‘in
charge’ to find the ‘secret’ of their influence, and it exploits the damaged, the poor, the insane for their
grotesquerie,” evidence that “its noblesse oblige is mostly noblesse.” Josephine Hendin, “The New Yorker
Harold Ross died in 1951 and Shawn assumed the reins for the next thirty-five years, during which time history would once again replay the 1930’s tensions about editorial ethics. On July 15, 1967, Shawn printed a story by Jonathan Schell about the atrocities taking place in Vietnam, making the *New Yorker* one of the first major American publications to morally question the war. Thereafter, it adopted a thoroughly anti-war position, which pervaded its articles and editorials. This stance estranged some of the magazine’s conservative readers, while making it wildly popular with college students.

Ben Bagdikian writes that the shift in readership had an unexpected but dire effect on the *New Yorker*. Despite leading the industry in advertising profits for over a decade, from 1967 to 1970 its advertising dropped by 2,500 pages, almost fifty percent! While some companies withdrew their ads in political protest, the majority did so because the *New Yorker’s* demographics were shifting; the average reader was younger, and therefore less attractive to the purveyors of luxury goods. Despite the huge financial loss, the editorial staff stood behind its convictions. While Ross had avoided political commentary by insulating himself with tradition, Shawn used the same technique to defend the opposite position. In a Hegelian manner, he synthesized the Communist social conscience and Ross’s editorial independence to establish a new moral directive at the *New Yorker*, rejecting economic criticism in favor of ethical reporting.98

The subject of the *New Yorker’s* moral rhetoric has also gained recent significance with the emergence of terrorism as a cultural force. For the past two years editor David Remnick has consciously centered the magazine’s focus upon the September 11th attacks in New York City and the ensuing “war on terror.” In a statement reminiscent of William Shawn and E.B. White, he claimed in 2002, “There are phases of the culture where it is all about nihilistic irony and then there are cultural epochs where that doesn’t seem good enough…It is no longer uncool to have a moral compass.”99 Although the magazine is beginning to change more rapidly these days, by recognizing the equivocation and apoliticism associated with the *New Yorker’s* past, by adhering to the evolving editorial

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98 Bagdikian, 52-54. As it had with the wartime “pony edition,” Shawn’s political line yielded long-term benefits, as college students graduated, climbed the corporate ladder, and renewed their subscriptions.

traditions that have since brought it such success, Remnick’s polished engagement bodes well for its future.
Appendix

“It’s broccoli, dear.”
“I say it’s seaweed, and I say the hell with it.”

“I say it’s spinach, and I say the hell with it.”

(1927)

The emergence of *New Yorker* revolutionized modern American humor. Two distinct advances included the reversal traditional character-types, visible in the first cartoon, and shortening captions to one line, visible in the second. The tone has become so recognizable that the *New Yorker* can often parody itself, tweaking older cartoons to amuse its core readership, which the second cartoon also demonstrates. E.B. White wrote the original caption.

The original drawing of Eustace Tilley, now reproduced for every anniversary edition of the magazine, communicated the *New Yorker’s* aloof tone, its nostalgic sophistication, and its upper-class leanings.
[Page 24] The first *New Yorker* cover to address Communism, from April 28, 1934, showed a disinterested crowd milling around the upcoming Union Square demonstration (d). It was thematically consistent with several previous panoramic covers, all depicting park scenes. Covers (a) and (c) were drawn by Adolph K. Kronengold, (b) and (d) by Ilonka Karasz.
James Thurber’s unique line drawings usually focused on the battle of the sexes, and played a huge role in the development of *New Yorker* humor. Thurber was also the most aggressive member of the staff to deflect, dispute, or trivialize Communist criticism. This cartoon illustrated both qualities.

The last *New Yorker* cover to deal with Communism in the Thirties appeared April 1, 1937. The girl with the maypole, besieged by Communist demonstrators, embodied the magazine’s nostalgic, apolitical style. The dull color scheme reflected the “grim” tone espoused by contemporary leftist writers, who by this time were heavily criticizing the *New Yorker’s* stance.


“Notes and Comment.” *New Yorker* 17 Feb. 1934: 11.

---. *New Yorker* 24 Feb. 1934: 11.


---. *New Yorker* 7 Oct. 1939: 11.


All personal communications cited are available at the Bryn Mawr College Special Collections department.

The *New Yorker*’s editorial correspondence and business records are available at the New York Public Library’s Special Collections department.