Excerpts From Joseph Freeman’s NEVER CALL RETREAT Essay, Research Paper

It was for her sake that he was occasionally invited to the house, for there was little

love lost between Father and Uncle Peter. The latter, a devout Catholic, had objected to

his sister’s marrying "a freethinker, a Mason, a downright infidel." This

my father never forgave him, especially since he did not like Uncle Peter and called him a

"superstitious relic of the Middle Ages."

At some of our Saturday night parties, Uncle Peter would sit in the corner near me,

listen to the Babel of argument and drop caustic remarks in an undertone. He would puff

hard at his pipe, stroke his walrus mustache and grumble through clouds of smoke:

"Ah, they’ve found salvation at last. . . . It’s all in the magic word new!"

A monarchist and clerical, Uncle Peter was especially irritated becasue he knew that

sometimes, after most of the guests had left and a few intimate friends sat down with

Father around a fresh bottle of wine, there was even talk about a "new society."

The fact is, my father had begun calling himself a socialist. I doubt whether he

belonged to any political party; more likely dramatic criticism had led him from a

consideration of social problems as presented in the theater to a consideration of social

problems as they appeared in real life. His views on the evils of the old order and the

marvels of the new were abstract and for the most part, I suspect, a tribute to a

prevailing literary fashion. But my father was an eloquent man; when he denounced the

evils of "child labor, imperialist exploitation, poverty, inequality and war,"

my young heart trembled with a nameless fear and hatred for the prevailing world. On the

other hand, his glowing pictures of the future classless society filled me with a

wonderful sense of hope and longing, though if anyone had asked me what it was I longed

for, I would have had a hard time explaining.

While my parents loved me, they neglected me a great deal, too. Father had to write an

article a day for his paper, but into that one piece went months of the most complex

social life and all the intricate intrigues of the theater and the literary caf?s. I

didn’t see him all day; at night I saw him sometimes only after the theater. Mother

had little life outside of her husband’s; all her time and attention were devoted to

furthering and sharing Father’s career. Even in the summertime, when we went to the

Semmering mountain in the eastern Alps for our vacation, my parents were busy entertaining

friends and placating enemies. They were a wonderfully devoted couple, as I look back on

them today, I think they are to be envied; but as a child I sometimes secretly resented

their neglect. I will not be angry, doctor, if you tell me that I was somewhat jealous of

my father. [25]

[. . . .]

"If you did not consider it a trifle," I said, "you might be able to

write better poetry. Then, perhaps, you wouldn’t like anyone to censor it."

I’m no Milton, if that’s what you mean."

"If you were, you would fight as hard as he did for the right to utter your

thoughts without that magisterial interference which you find so delightful in

Plato."

I opened the, window and looked out into the deserted street. The skies were dark blue

and clear and there were brilliant stars over the spires of the great, sleeping town. I

began to feel sorry for some of the things I had said. My skepticism, which spared

nothing, spared my own thoughts least of all: How can you belittle a giant like Plato who

tried to find a way to establish justice among unequals? You know damned well that Kurt

submits to the magistrates because he identifies them completely with the best interests

of his community. Isn’t it true that great men of action understand the world of fact

better than the poets, whose province is the world of truth? Only true law perfects the

noblest of dramas. If Kurt knew English history better he might have said to me: how can

you look at Milton and not see the immense figure of Cromwell behind him? For the world of

fact, Cromwell; for the world of truth, Milton. Yes, Milton never submitted his poems to

the censorship of any magistrate and you are asking Kurt to act like a demigod. How many

men could bear the loneliness that went with Milton’s grandeur? The great English

poet had God to lean on. Kurt does not believe in God, and he needs someone to lean on,

someone to resolve his doubts, palliate his sense of guilt with censure, sustain his

self-regard with praise. He leans on Hans Bayer the way I once leaned on my father, Uncle

Peter, Professor Boucher. Upon whom do you lean now? A shadow called Man–a shadow that

may never exist in a future that may never come. Your arrogance is more shameless than

Kurt’s fear. [194]

[. . . .]

You can understand how it was, doctor. My story of man’s struggle toward democracy

had already briefly sketched the rise of man from the amoeba to Amos, and had indicated

the atrocities and advances of four thousand years of recorded history from the days when

the Assyrians flayed their war prisoners alive and nailed their skins to the walls of

their fortresses and Hammurabi issued his enlightened code, to the days when Pontius

Pilate was procurator of Judaea and the multitudes heard the Sermon on the Mount. And now

the amoeba who had grown into a two-legged hunter, a cannibal, a warrior; a slave in the

galleys, the fields, the mines; a priest, a poet, a philosopher, a Caesar; this creature

which for thousands of years had shed blood copiously in triumph and torrents of tears in

despair was now faced with the most tremendous idea that had yet filled the earth with

light; that all men are equal in the sight of God and love is the absolute condition of

the resurrection and the life. Equality and love and the essential unity of mankind the

world over, announced with such felicity and power by St. Paul: "There is neither Jew

nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are

all one in Christ Jesus," and that great luminous phrase which transcends the deadly

barriers of race: "And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all

the face of the earth."

The most sublime things in Western literature have been written about that idea and

people have slit each other’s throats and burned each other at the stake to settle the

real meaning of the gospel of love, and it would be stupid and unpardonable presumption on

my part to do art than indicate its most obvious outlines. But how could I make the

readers of my book see the thing in practice? How could I give living shape to the old

problem which in the folly of my youth I used to call "the square and the

circle"? What single episode could I select which would show the effect of the gospel

of mercy and justice upon the amoeba which became first a cannibal, then a warrior

seething with wrath and vengeance? How could I make vivid the power of contrition and

forgiveness which the new faith set up like a mighty, luminous dam against the furious

seas of blood and tears raging across the world? And how could I make real the most

terrible chastisement which the church had at its disposal–the power to cast the sinner

out of the fold, to exile him into the greatest loneliness known to man, leaving

him utterly abandoned, utterly hopeless in the outer darkness whose borders led to

infinity? And how could I make anyone today believe that this awful power affected the

greatest as well as the humblest? It was at this moment that the second story about St.

Ambrose and the Emperor Theodosius leaped to my mind, and I set it down hastily in my

notebook. [387]