Jospeh Freeman’s "The Vision Of The Thirties" Essay, Research Paper

THE VISION OF THE THIRTIES

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The Nineteen Thirties was an important decade, a turning point in contemporary

history and literature.

It was an exciting decade — far more exciting than the Twenties, though in

quite a different way.

It was a terrible decade — a decade of blood and terror; a nightmare Time of

Troubles; an Age of Assassins who coldly and deliberately murdered millions of men, women

and children in scientifically prepared abattoirs; a decade whose full horror we are only

now beginning to comprehend; a decade of show trials, fake accusations, fake confessions,

bloodpurges, secret assassinations, genocide; a decade in which the new Ceasars worked out

the ideology and the techniques of something never before known in history –

totalitarianism: a decade that exploded in the biggest war in all history so far.

It was a progressive decade. In the United States, the New Deal put into effect

social and economic reform which the American people had been demanding since the 1870’s.

These reforms are still with us — social security and all.

The Nineteen Thirties could easily be called the Age of Democracy. Never had the

American dream of the democratic nation and the democratic man been so aflame with

conviction, so vibrant with reality; never before had the groups and classes which used to

feel like step-children, the so-called outgroups, felt so much a part of the nation. They

were heard, they were taken in, they were in and of the American family. In the 1930s our

idea and our realtiy was — Americans all and all Americans for democracy.

And, despite the horrors of the Age of Assassins, the Thirties were also progressive in

other parts of the world — in Russia, for example.

While Stalin was shooting his rivals wholesale and retail, Russia succeeded in building

a type of economy which the world had never seen before. This economy has raised Russia to

second place in the world and many people in this country are now afraid it may raise her

to first place. It is an economy that has made Russia strong, given her the lead so far in

the conquest of outer space and his made her the model of half the world in Asia, Africa

and part of Europe.

This has been a most expensive process — material progress at the cost of life,

freedom and humanity on a gigantic scale. But it is there for better or for worse. And at

this moment it is fascinating people in this country. Not the writers and artists and

actors who were fascinated by Russian economic progress in the Thirties. These are today

totally disillusioned with Russia. The Americans who are today fascinated by Russia’s

economic progress are our big businessmen and financiers.

Finally, the Nineteen Thirties was a decade of great creative power in American

literature and the arts; more creative, in my opinion, that the Nineteen Fifties have been

so far – and this decade has only nineteenth more months to go.

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You may be surprised to hear that the Thirties was creative. Legend says different.

That was the age of "social consciousness" in the arts, of political radicalism

among writers and artists, of "proletarian literature." And, the legend goes,

there was a lot of smoke but little fire.

We are too close to the Thirties to see them in proper perspective. We are still

absorbing and re-evaluating the Twenties, which until recently were also considered

sterile. Soon there will be books about the Thirties written with perspective and

we shall see how creative that decade actually was.

Take the novel. True, we did not have with us in those days the new writers who

nowadays make the best-seller lists and crowd the little reviews. But we managed somehow

with Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, James T. Farrell, Josephine

Herbst, Thomas Wolfe, John Steinbeck, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood

Anderson.

In poetry we did not have the San Francisco School. But T. S. Eliot and Robert Frost

were at the height of their powers and so were Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl

Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Robinson Jeffers, Louise

Bogan, Genevieve Taggard, Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings, Archibald MacLeish, Kenneth

Fearing, Muriel Rukheyser, W. H. Auden and others.

And what about the San Francisco School? In the Thirties, when the New Masses was

still a literary magazine, we published the poems of Kenneth Rexroth.

In the theatre we did not have the angry young men. We did have Eugene O’Neill,

Clifford Odets, Robert Sherwood, Maxwell Anderson and Lillian Hellman. There is nothing

today that is quite like the Theatre Union, the Group Theatre and the WPA theatre.

Out of the theatre movement of the Thirties came Orson Welles and Clifford Odets, Elia

Kazan and Budd Schulberg, Arthur Miller and Harold Clurman, who began his distinguished

career in the theatre as a drama critic for the New Masses. And out of the Thirties

came dozens of the best actors of stage and screen. And from the literary movement

inspired by "social consciousness" Hollywood acquired some of its best screen

writers: Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson, Michael Blankfort. And out of

the Thirties there also came some of our best literary critics: Granville Hicks, Horace

Gregory, Robert Gorham Davis, Yvor Winters, O. F. Mathiessen, Newton Arvin, Alfred Kazin.

That was the decade when many American writers and artists "went Left" as the

phrase was, and there were magazines and groups where these men and women found scope for

their energies, aroused by a passion for democratic justice, a fear of totalitariansim, an

immense hope for the future.

We have no such groups and no such magazines today. Everywhere writers and artists

complain of their isolation. It’s everyone for himself and the publisher or dealer

take the hindmost.

In the Thirties, writers and artists were creative not only individually but together.

They were bound together in comradeship by a common faith, a common basic cause, a vision

which fired their creative powers. That vision was worldwide. When we in the United

States held our writers’ congresses in the Thirties, we had fraternal delegates from

France, and exiled writers from Spain and Germany and Italy. And when President Lazaro

Cardenas called a congress of writers, artists and scientists in Mexico City early in

1937, several Americans were invited to attend as delegates.

An extraordinary number of writers of all kinds wrote for the New Masses in

those days; if you did not write for us, you wrote for New Theatre or for Dynamo,

a poetry magazine we founded; or for Partisan Review, founded as an offshoot of

the New Masses and the John Reed Clubs and edited brilliantly to this day by two

able writers who began their careers in the pages of the New Masses in the early

Thirties.

Let us note this. In those days there were magazines of that kind which

developed ideas and published writers, looked for writers and took particular pains

with unknown writers. Many distinguished novelists, poets, critics, screenwriters

and dramatists got their start in one or more of these magazines.

They were not commercial magazines and never made any profit. They were dedicated to a

dream and when they encouraged young writers it was for the sake of that dream. To find

and develop new writers was to find and develop new champions of the Cause; or as Walt

Whitman put it, echoing England’s Puritan Revolution, The Good Old Cause, The Great Idea.

This idea, this vision of the Thirties gave as all something that is lacking today. We

speak of conformity and non-conformity, but this is a byproduct. What we had in the

Thirties and what is lacking today is the inspiring vision and what it gives people.

One writer has called the Thirties The Red Decade; another, The Angry Decade. Each of

these descriptions is true–in a way. But if I may paraphrase Saint Augustine, all this is

false in a way precisely because it is true in a way.

Many people in the Thirties were angry at injustice, as Steinbeck was in The grapes

of Wrath; and many people became radical. But this was not the focal point of the

decade. The focal point was the vision and around that vision we found cooperation,

community, and communion.

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What was the dream, the vision which animated and inspired American writers in the

Thirties; roused their creative powers to the highest pitch; united them in cooperation,

community and communion with each other, with writers the world over and with millions of

men and women everywhere, from every class, race and group, every occupation, every

financial bracket, every social level?

Before I try to define this vision, let us face one other fact about the Thirties. It

is hard to write about any period, until it is far enough behind us for us to view

it with perspective. But the Thirties are a special period. They are a period of trauma

and when people think about the Thirties they encounter an emotional block.

They encounter an emotional block because the Thirties, being the Age of Assassins, was

the Age of Terror.

There is no real literature in Germany about the Thirties. Who is going to set down

today the horrors of the Hitler regime, the terror, the mass murder?

There is no real literature in Russia about the Thirties. Who would dare to tell the

truth about Stalin’s reign of terror, the paranoid murder of millions, the butchery of

rivals and friends, the enslavement of a people by force and fraud?

But it is not only Germany and Russia that went through a terror which has left us a

trauma that needs to be overcome in order that we my be free again in mind and heart to

think courageously and truly about our life in the twentieth century and our destiny in

it.

The great terror took place in Germany and Russia in the Thirties. In the case of

Germany it lasted till the Third Reich went up in flames in the spring of 1945. In Russia

it lasted till Stalin’s death early in 1953, though in some ways it is not over yet.

In the United States the terror came in the Fifties.

True, nobody in this country got shot. Nobody was gassed in a concentration camp.

Nobody was pushed into a bake oven. But do not underestimate the effectiveness or the

consequences of the terror here in the current decade.

Man lives not by bread alone and he dies not by guns alone. The terror in this country,

the so-called "witch-hunt" whose grim symbol was the late, O far too late

Senator McCarthy, ruined many lives, many innocent lives, and many of them remain ruined

to this day.

I do not want to lacerate your feelings with the details of the American Terror. There

is a reaction setting in against it. For our purpose it is important to keep in mind that the

Terror of the Fifties, whatever its connection with Korea and the Cold War, was in

effect an attack on the Thirties.

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One thing the terror meant was this: for the first time in the history of the United

States, official power was directed toward thought as such.

O there had been violations of civil liberty before. In the 1850’s — a century ago –

the Abolitionists were given a rough time. During the great industrial wars from 1890 to

1914, labor was given a rough time. During the Deportation Delirium of the early 1920’s

the radicals were given a rough time. But these were primarily economic and political

conflicts. Slave owners lynched people who wanted to abolish slavery. Industrialists

lynched people who wanted to reform the private enterprise system or to abolish it.

In the terror of the Fifties hundreds and hundreds of American writers, artists,

actors, directors, school teachers, college professors and scientists were fired from

their jobs; penalized economically and socially; and jailed for ideas! For

something they had published! For belonging to this or that radical organization. For

writing in this or that radical magazine!

And nine times out of ten, the alleged "crime" had been committed in the

Thirties!

The reaction of the Fifties made war on the vision of the Thirties and a large number

of the victims were intellectuals.

Right or wrong as these people may have been in the Thirties, they were being punished

now — in the Fifties — retroactively for thinking, feeling, talking and writing.

This was war on the mind and spirit of man!

Such was the terror. It is not really over yet. And people ask silly questions.

Why is the present so sterile in ideas? Why are people so conformist? Why are they

afraid to think, to speak up? Why have we no great ideas to inspire our writers? Why is

there so little genuine critical appraisal of current events, current literature, current

leadership?

And why is our youth — youth, the period of dreams, visions and hopes from time

immemorial — why is our youth so scared, so conservative, so timid, so lacking in

vision and hope and daring?

Why indeed!

You use the whole tremendous force of state and society to destroy people for

daring to have vision in the Thirties — and you expect this to inspire our youth to have

vision in the Fifties!

Now you can see one reason why it is hard to get good studies of the Thirties.

That decade was falsified gigantically by Stalin; it was falsified gigantically by

Hitler. And in this country it his been gigantically falsified by the Terror, the Great

Persecution, the Witch Hunt; by the war on the intellectuals, on the vision of the

Thirties.

And, as in every terror, the victims are themselves affected by this falsification.

People who are penalized for their ideas in the Thirties are not inclined to remember

that decade clearly and vividly. Nature takes care of that.

We know what memory is like when it is painful. We all tend to forget — or, as the

Freudians say, to repress — painful memories. And so, many people have written falsely

about the Thirties in books, newspapers and magazines and have spoken falsely about it on

the witness stand, all in good faith.

It was too painful to remember the truth. The Terror made it painful. And

there is that little thing called survival. It is made a crime to have shared the

vision of the Thirties, then you are asked to write about it. O yes, you did share

that vision! But it is dangerous to admit it now. So you write: WHO – ME?

The story now is that we knew all along that communism was a fraud. Communists

were all stupid, inefficient, cruel, crazy for power, corrupt, foreign agents.

We never really believed that insane, bloodthirsty ideology. We got into the Movement

as a kind of joke, by accident. We stayed there for years God knows why — secretly making

fun of the Movement and everybody in it, sabotaging everything and everyone whenever and

wherever we could.

We were always at heart patriotic in the most ultra-conservative sense of the word. We

were patriotic every day of the year, every hour on the hour, true-blue Pegler patriots

who deserved a pat on the back from the American Legion and a kiss from every Daughter of

the American Revolution between twenty and thirty.

What did we do in the Movement all those years — including the years of that frightful

Russian bloodpurge which now so haunts and horrifies us? We really don’t know. But we were

aware all the time how mad and ghoulish the whole thing was and, anyway, we are fighting

those sons-of-bitches today and we hope that our former friends and comrades do lose

their jobs and go to jail and we shall be delighted to help them get there.

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This is obviously false. A man is married to a woman for years; he lives with her, has

children with her, makes sacrifices for her and accepts the sacrifices she makes for him.

They say they are in love and everybody believes them and everything points to it.

Then they quarrel and get divorced and the man says: "Look at her. What an ugly

horror! What a lush! What a wicked, immoral dame! You know something? She was always like

that. From the day I met her, I knew she was a combination of Messalina, Fanny Hill, Becky

Sharp, the witch in Hansel and Gretel and the Gorgon Medussa !"

There are wounded lovers and there are wounded idealists who falsify the past that way.

But what they tell us cannot be true and for a simple reason.

In order to be DISenchanted you must first be ENchanted. In order to lose your belief,

you must first believe. In order to feel the hatred of shocked and soured love, you

must first love.

But who can blame the people who have falsified the past under the fire of the Great

Persecution? It is easy to ask others to be heroes or martyrs; it is not easy to be a

hero or a martyr, though we naturally respect those who are.

Once it became a crime punishable by economic and social ostracism and by prison to

have had any connection with radicalism in the Thirties, it was only natural that people

should protect themselves, their wives and their children by spinning fairy tales about

that past. The radicals of the Thirties were sincere in their convictions as long as they

held those convictions. If the story is falsified now, it is because terror is not the

best climate for memory or for truth.

In a way the Thirties may be defined as that period when many people followed an ideal

which first exploded in betrayal and for which they then had to pay by persecution.

And the Fifties may be defined as that period when you had to pay and pay and pay for

the vision of the Thirties.

And it was not only official agencies that penalized you for that vision. You were also

penalized by men and women in positions of influence and power in literature, art and

education who, often to protect themselves, persecuted you. We also have had something we

used to ridicule in Russia; we also have had denunciation, the bearing of false witness,

confession, contrition, recantation. During the Moscow Trials people in this country

wondered about the victims, the Old Bolsheviks. Why did they confess? Perhaps we ought to

ask the same question of the Penitent Radicals in this country. Comrades, why do you confess?

In both cases the fundamental fault is in the persecution not in the victim. I have

never accepted the totalitarian idea, now prevalent throughout the world, that not the

murderer but the murdered man is guilty.

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In the Great Persecution of the current decade all of us who spoke up in the Thirties

for the vision have been asked: Where do you stand?

If there was any Candide na?ve enough to think they really wanted to know where he

stands, he was soon set right. They did not want to know where you stood in the Thirties

or where you stand today. What they wanted you to do was to name names so that your

friends, or your former friends, or people you barely knew, could be fired from

their jobs, ruined professionally, economically and socially and, if possible, sent to

jail under the pretext that this great republic of ours was in imminent danger of being

overthrown. And woe to him who refused to name names!

I’ve always been curious to know what would happen if they gave Candide a chance to say

where he stands. Let us do so now. Perhaps, if we listen with patience and sympathy,

Candide will tell us where we stood in the Thirties, what the dream was which inspired and

activated American writers then, and where we stand today. I have the pleasure of

presenting a little Existentialist comedy entitled

WAITING FOR CANDIDE

[Enter CANDIDE. He takes the witness stand -- the far end of a long mahogany

conference table -- and faces the all-male investigating body. Please note that none of

these investigating bodies ever has a woman on it and hurrah for women! This investigating

body is a curious one; it contains the usual type of inquisitorial legislator; it also

contains men of influence and power in education, art, literature and science.]

CANDIDE: Gentlemen, I don’t know what capitalism is today or what

socialism is. We live in a new complex world. I’d like to study this world, to understand

it, to come to conclusions about it and about the future of man. But not on the basis of

nineteenth century theories. No, on the basis of what we can learn today about the

world today.

One thing, however, is clear. The immemorial evils are with us still!

The world is still full of poverty, tyranny, ignorance, hatred, violence and bloodshed.

There are still in every country in the world — and I make no exceptions whatsoever!

– the overprivileged few and the underprivileged many.

There is inequality of the most ghastly kind today and nowhere more so than in those

countries which call themselves "socialist" and in those which have thrown off

"the yoke of imperialism" and whose leaders strut around in fancy uniforms and

rush around in fancy Cadillacs and live it up in their fancy palaces amidst the starving

millions in the rice paddies around them and who do so with the same arrogance and

callousness as the colonial administrators they chased out a few years ago at gunpoint.

And over all this hangs the threat of the most terrible, the most destructive, the most

catastrophic war in all history, the first global thermonuclear war, a war that may

annihilate mankind, as we are reminded every day.

We are all concerned about this. But each of us is concerned in a different way and

that is good. Difference of opinion not only makes for horse racing, as Mark

Twain said; it also makes for a genuine exchange of facts and opinion and thus for a

better chance to correct error and arrive at truth.

Where I stand today, gentlemen, begins with this freedom to study, to analyze, to think

and — be they right or wrong — to utter my thoughts freely, without fear of punishment,

or of reproach for anything except sloppy thinking.

For without this freedom, no true civilization, no true progress is possible. Without

it you will get a world of Sputniks without men, and where there are no men, the people

persih.

So let’s call it a day, gentlemen! Let’s forgive each other. You forgive me all

the intolerance and fanaticism and persecution I practiced on my side of the fence and

I’ll forgive you yours.

But it’s got to be a two-way street. It must work both ways. We must really and

truly and with all our hearts and in actual fact forgive each other.

[Candide picks up the glass of water at his elbow and absentmindedly puts it down.]

Once we agree on genuine freedom of thought and discussion, gentlemen, I’d like to chip

in my two cents to the current worldwide effort to solve the contemporary human dilemma.

Call my contribution, if you like, the Midget’s Mite, but please listen.

We are in trouble everywhere, in every country, because we have made technology and

politics – the pursuit of wealth and power – the end. But they are not

ends. They are means. The end is what it has always been in one form or another.

The end, the goal is the redemption and liberation of man.

[Candide takes a sip of water, wipes his brow and goes on.]

Gentlemen, when I used to follow a fellow named Karl Marx in the Thirties, I read this

by him. The great religions told us what is wrong morally. But goodness could not be

practiced in a world of political inequality. Then came the "bourgeois democratic

revolution" and showed us what political equality could be like. Nothing could be

done, however, as long as there was economic inequality. Socialism could bring about

essential economic equality and this would at last make it possible for men to practice

the virtues taught by religion and the political equality taught by democracy.

This was a great idea until recently. It was, in a way, the idea which animated the

Thirties. Then the Socialist Fatherland, ruled from the Kremlin by a Caesar named Stalin,

made gigantic technological and industrial advances. But there is no economic,

social, or political equality in Russia. And, far from practicing the moral virtues, they

have committed some of the most frightful crimes in all history.

This is important not only for those American writers who went through the radical

movement in the United States in the Thirties. It is important for the world, since half

the world to-day is under the rule of socialism of one kind or another.

Today something is rotten not only in the state of Denmark but in every state on the

face of the earth without exception.

What is wrong? And what is to be done?

The way to find out is not by purge trial or Congressional investigation, through the

GPU or the FBI. The way to find out is by the logical methods of science, by the genuine.

democratic process in politics and by the creative methods of the arts aflame with

imagination and love.

For if we do not love each other, we will never liberate each other. And if we do not

love each other, we cannot help each other or the world. If we continue to hate each

other, we will wipe each other off the face of the earth with the greatest of our

discoveries so far — atomic energy.

Love, you say — ha! ha! That’s for the pulpit and Sunday.

You are wrong, gentlemen. Democracy and socialism would never have been possible even

as an ideal, as a dream, as a vision without the notion of man’s humanity. And this would

never have been possible without the notion of man’s divinity.

Why is it wrong for men to enslave, oppress and kill each other? Primitive man did not

think it was wrong and neither did pagan man. It became wrong when Vedantism, Buddhism,

Judaism and Christianity developed the notion that God created man in His own image or

that God is man or that man is God.

This was the birth of personality. It was also, in a way, the birth of the Blues. For

personality means not only freedom but also responsibility, sin and guilt. But the whole

point of personality is redemption from sin and guilt, the whole point is freedom!

It was then that it became wrong to enslave, oppress and kill our fellow men. Why?

Because from that point of view every one of us in every nook and cranny of the world is

the creation of God, a child of God, and he who kills man kills the divine.

It has said that resistance to tyrants is obedience to God. Who said that? Marx? Lenin?

No, gentlemen. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that. If, said the early church, men are driven

to choose between the unjust laws of the king and the just laws of God, let them rather

kill the king than disobey God.

[Candide coughs, takes another drink of water and goes on]

It was the early church that developed the idea of revolution which the leaders of

democracy in this country and elsewhere, and from them the leaders of socialism took over

as part of their cultural and moral heritage.

But I am not here to call for revolution! Far from it, gentlemen!

We who still believe with all our hearts and all our souls in the vision of man

redeemed and liberated everywhere without exception are today the most conservative people

in the world.

We are asking the leaders of democracy and the leaders of socialism to go back

to first principles. Not to the Thirties, O no! But all the way back. To the roots! For

there true conservatism and true radicalism are one. They are one at the roots of our

humanity from which all things grow and live and have a future.

When we recover these first principles and live by them, we will find the

political instruments for carrying them out. For there is no truer first principle than

the one which says that where there is a will, there is a way.

Naturally, where there is no will, there is no way. If you do not want peace,

you will have war. If you do not want justice, you will have injustice. And if we

live only by, in and for political instruments, whatever they may be, if we have no first

principles, no vision, if the means are the end, then we and the world are lost.

What are the first principles, gentlemen?

It’s a long story and should occupy a new generation of free, audacious thinkers for

the next generation — thinkers who will say with Ivan Karamazoff: I don’t want a

million dollars; I want an answer to my questions!

But here we can take one first principle briefly. You ask, gentlemen, why I entered the

Movement in the Thirties when you were clever enough to stay out of it or why I left it

the year I did when you had the genius to leave it the year before.

I entered it because the Movement in its early stages — like religion and democracy in

their early stages — called for the universal liberation of men in such terms of truth,

beauty and morality that anyone with the slightest generosity of spirit, anyone genuinely

concerned with the fate of man, had to respond, had to join.

This cannot be understood solely in terms of the technical details of political,

economic and military manoeuvres and clashes.

When a doctor is rushing in his car to save a life or to deliver a baby, you cannot

explain his mission by the car, the gear-shift cannot explain the baby.

Nobody would fight in a war if he were told that it was being waged to enrich the

elite. And nobody would join a radical movement if he were told that it would end in

nothing more than the regulation of the price index or the transfiguration of a few

obscure politicians into dictators and generals.

No, men fight and die for casue only when they think it will free them from evil and

give them some good, above all when that casue is the emancipation of mankind, or at least

of millions, a casue in some way connected with the redemption and liberation of man.

The corruption comes later — but not before some good is done. Then the early church

dies, the Jacobins and the Abolitionists disappear and, in our time, the communists may go

out of business. But the original dream, the vision of man’s universal liberation is

always there and will always find new ways to express itself.

What is that vision?

In the Book of Revelations we are told: "’And I saw a new heaven and A new

earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away, and there was no more

sea . . . And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes and there shall be no more

death; neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain, for the former

things are passed away . . . And he said unto me: It is done. I am Alpha and Omega,

the beginning and the end. I will ,give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the

water of life freely. And there shall be no night there.’"

It has also been said: All men are equal, not in capacity but in value.

This vision has haunted men for thousands of years. It reappears in the apocalyptic

utterances of the Reformation, the Puritan Revolution, the French Revolution, the

twentieth century socialist revolution — and in the American writing of the Thirties,

always in different terms appropriate to the age but always with the same hope: to wipe

away all tears, to abolish man-made death, to do away with pain by the passing away of the

former things, the old state of affairs, and the arrival of a new beginning, a new heaven

and a new earth.

This has been called the basic dream with the changing name.

And in every case the vision, once carried into practice, achieves great things and

becomes corrupt. And after a while the vision finds a new outlet; for as long as there is

pain and sorrow and crying and man-made death in the world, as long as men suffer at each

other’s hands the horrors and humiliations of slavery, exploitation, inequality,

injustice, imprisonment, capital punishment and war, so long will that vision burn in the

hearts of some and at the right time — such as the Nineteen Thirties and, who knows?

maybe the Nineteen Sixties! — it flames up in the hearts of millions the world over.

Where do I stand, gentlemen?

I stand by that vision.

The vision, the basic dream is in the Declaration of Independence, in the Bill of

Rights, in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in the Communist Manifesto, in the

Gettysburg Address, in the Emancipation Proclamation, in the Four Freedoms. And, believe

it or not, gentlemen, it is in THE PRELUDF, the masterpiece of that old tory, William

Wordsworth, the tory who began as a radical and wrote the only great poem we have about

revolution.

For it is THE PRELUDE, better than anything ever written, that tells us what a period

of reform and revolution, a period like the Thirties is like. Speaking of his own radical

generation, Wordsworth says:

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!

For mighty were the auxiliars which then stood

Upon our side, us who were strong in love!

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,

But to be young was very Heaven.

Yes, came the dawn, comes the revolution and it is bliss to be alive and to be young is

very heaven; for while we are young, the world is changing, it is being transfigured.

O

times

In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways

Of custom, law and statute took at once

The attraction of a country in romance!

When Reason seemed the most to assert her rights,

When most intent on making of herself

A prime enchantress, to assist the work

Which then was going forward in her name!

Not favored spots alone, but the whole Earth

The beauty wore of promise!

The

inert

Were roused and lively natures rapt away!

Yes, everybody is swept away by the excitement of the promise, the vision of the

good life, the better world; and whoever you are, whatever your skills may be, there is

room for you in the movement of redemption and liberation. You are called upon to exercise

your skill, to help realize the vision — where? In some far off place and time? No, here,

today, now! This was as true in the Nineteen Thirties as of the days of the French

Revolution. Nowhere has this aspect of the twentieth century vision been stated with

greater precision and power than in THE PRELUDE.

Were called upon to exercise their skill

Not in Utopia—subterranean fields—

Or some seculded island, Heaven knows where!

But in the very world which is the world

Of all of us, the place where in the end

We find our happiness or not at all.

For between the vision of the Book of Revelations, as interpreted by the Middle Ages,

and the French Revolution — of which the twentieth century revolution is a direct

continuation — a tremendous change had taken place in the minds of men in regard to

history and historic time.

Men are not content to wait milennia for their redemption and liberation through

miracle; they want to work for it here and now and to achieve it step by step not in

eternity alone but first in time.

In our own time, William Butler Yeats wrote a hymn to the vision in his poem about the

Easter uprising of 1916. This was the Irish manifestation of the basic dream with the

changing name, but it was part of the universal dream which roused Mexico in 1910, China

and Turkey in 1912, Russia in 1912, America in the Nineteen Thirties, the dream of a world

so changed that it is better.

We know their dream; enough

To know they dreamed and are dead;

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died?

All changed, changed utterly–

A terrible beauty is born.

[Candide bows]

Thank you, gentlemen.

(EXIT CANDIDE. END OF COMEDY)

Toward the end of his life, Walt Whitman wrote a poem in which he said that everything

he had ever written had one purport – Freedom; yet freedom eluded his songs.

Freedom is not only the hardest thing in the world to achieve; it is the hardest thing in

the world to write about; for freedom is at once the deepest of human desires and the

greatest of the world’s riddles.

Ours is a world where there is no darkness without light and no light without darkness.

This is the ying and the yang of Chinese thought. Out of the great darkness comes great

light; out of the great light, great darkness, (and out of great darkness again great

light.)

The hopes of the Puritan Revolution are followed by the defeat of that revolution and

the despair which the Restoration brought to lovers of liberty. Milton voiced the hope in

his great pamphlet; the mitigated despair in great Samson Agonistes.

In The Prelude, Wordsworth voices the tremendous hopes roused by the French

Revolution, then the tremendous disappointment, then the refuge in reason, friendship and

love.

The Thirties opened with many American and European writers immensely enthusiastic

about the Russian Revolution, by that time a decade and a half old. Before the Thirties

were over, most of them were disappointed in and many of them were hostile to the Stalin

regime, which they felt had brutally, cynically and with unparalleled cruelty betrayed the

vision, the Good Old Cause, the Great Idea.

In the Thirties Andr? Gide entered Russia an enthusiast and came out an opponent.

Andr? Malraux fought with the Loyalists in Spain and came out an anti-communist. John Dos

Passos was also shocked in Spain and hasn’t gotten over that shock to this day. In the

mid-thirties, many American writers lost their enthusiasm for Russia without losing their

enthusiasm for socialism. These joined Trotsky.

The Moscow Trials and Stalin’s Great Purge in the mid-Thirties and the assassination of

Trotsky in 1940 disillusioned many American writers, yet it is amazing how many remained

among the faithful in spite of the blood.

It was not till the Soviet-Nazi pact of 1939 that there was general disillusion and a

general exodus of those intellectuals who in the Thirties had seen Marxism and the USSR as

the twentieth century embodiment of the basic dream with the changing name.

In World War II, Russia became our great and gallant ally and both President Roosevelt

and Winston Churchill paid Stalin the most extravagant compliments; a courtesy which

Stalin, not being bourgeois, failed to return. Under these circumstances new American

writers jumped on the pro-Soviet bandwagon. But the Nineteen Forties were something else

again. Now the vision centered on the war against fascism and many people hoped that after

the foe was defeated, the Allies would usher in a new era of peaceful coexistence and

peaceful construction. Instead we got the Cold War, the battle between East and West, the

threat of global atomic war and, in literature, an outburst of necessary but uninspiring

muckraking in which disillusioned radical writers denounced the Stalinite empire for its

barbarism and for betraying the vision.

In the Fifties came our own Great Persecution and writers lost interest in political

reform. The vision was forgotten or distrusted and freedom was sought in modern art, in

Zen Buddhism, in nothing.

But every night ends and gives way to morning. It’s the ying and the yang. I have a

feeling that we are about to see a new awakening, a new spirit that will flourish in the

Nineteen Sixties.

You are a fortunate generation because you are an uncommitted generation.

Forty years separate us from two key events which have shaped this epoch and its

literature: America’s entry into World War I and the fall of the Winter Palace. It is an

immense distance — the distance between the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and the novels

of Stendhal and Balzac in 1830, the distance between the election of Lincoln in 1860 and

the re-election of McKinley in 1900.

Forty years is a long, long time and this epoch is now dosed and a new one is about to

begin. The writers of the Thirties, Forties and Fifties are by no means through but the

coming decade will belong to the writers of your generation.

And because you are an uncommitted generation, you are free to begin not only with the

Perennial Vision of man redeemed and liberated, but also with some truths which are

clearer to all of us today than they were to some of us two decades ago.

In the Thirties many of us thought that the source of the problems which plague man is

society. We know better now. The source of the problems which plague man is — man.

Man cannot live without society and society cannot live without man. Man without

society is a solitary savage. Society without man is the collective savage of the

mechanical nightmare we have today.

What YOU, the uncommitted generation, have to find is not an imaginary but an actual,

living, creative inter-relationship, a true dialectic of man and society.

We cannot give you any specific prescriptions for this. Nobody has the one and only key

that opens all doors; nobody has the one and only answer that is valid for all time and

all the world and all the problems of man. We cannot even give you specific answers to the

specific questions you will encounter in the next stage of the human enterprise, which is

yours. We cannot foresee your questions and answers because we cannot foresee your world

any more than you can; and we won’t be there but you will.

That world will evolve out of ours, but it will be uniquely yours. You will have to

advance your heritage and achieve your goals by asking your own questions and finding your

own answers. Better still, you will create your answers and thereby you will create

your world.

And if your questions are right, your answers will be right; and if your answers are

right, your world will be right.

The literary spokesmen of the new spring will be young writers who are now between

twenty and thirty; the writers of your generation. I have a feeling that your generation

will — in new forms appropriate to the second half of the 20th century — bring to

life again the vision, the basic dream with the changing name, the Good Old Cause, the

Great Idea.

You will turn out a new fraternity of what Professor Aaron has felicitously called men

of good hope.

And you will incorporate into your dream what many of us have learned since the

Thirties and will say, after your own fashion, what Saint Clement of Alexandria told the

Greeks in his famous exhortation:

As are men’s wishes, such also are their words,

And as are their words, such also are their deeds,

And as are their deeds, such also is their life.

Good luck and Godspeed!