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Harvey Swados

PAUL MARX

When Harvey Swados died in December of 1972 at the age of 52, there was no funeral. He had willed his body to science. The rational won over the sentimental. The indulgent uses of a funeral were set aside in order to implement convictions.

This unwillingness to yield to indulgence is one reason why none of his four novels ever became a best-seller.* All the novels are contemporary and are about familiar kinds of people, but there is not a trace of cleverness in them and very little ridicule. Everything that Nixon stands for was repugnant to Swados, but he did not despise the Middle Americans who put Nixon into office. In an age in which literary talent greedily feeds on the abnormal, Swados devoted most of his writing life to trying to understand ordinary Americans.

Swados was the kind of socialist who believed that change had to be change that the majority wanted. Change must not be simply what intellectuals think the majority should want. That Middle Americans act more often out of their fears than out of generosity grieved him deeply.

Swados, born and raised in Buffalo, was one of our few contemporary writers who have actually worked with their hands for wages. His experiences on the assembly line stayed with him, and gave him that primal sympathy for and understanding of laboring Americans that has become so rare among intellectuals. Unfortunately, it is even rarer among workers themselves. That is the meaning of Swados's most important short story, "Joe the Vanishing American." As far back as the 50's Swados was alarmed by the fragmentation taking place in American life and even within the working class. In the shop and on the line men no longer involved themselves with each other's lives. Compassion was dying out. Allegorical Joe has an eagle tattooed on his wrist, which, he says, is "screaming with rage at what's happened to the republic." What's happened to the republic is that in a place like an automobile plant "a man's life goes down the drain like scummy water." Not because he is exploited by the company but because both the company and the men are unaware of the need for the social amenities that produce solidarity and compassion—and ultimately contentment.

What Joe does is to make his fellow metal-worker, young Walter, who is trying to save up a stake for college, aware of what these amenities are, what needs to be done to make a man's work life less frustrating and shameful. As Joe says, "No one who comes here wants to admit

* *Out Went the Candle* (Viking, 1955), *False Coin* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1960), *The Will* (World, 1963), *Standing Fast* (Doubleday, 1970).

that the place has any real connection with his real life. He has to say that he is just putting in his time here, and so no matter how friendly he is by nature he has to think of the people around him as essentially strangers, men whom he can't even trouble to say goodbye to when he quits or gets laid off."

Swados suggests that there was a time when you could find in a work situation wise heads like Joe who would intervene and educate young newcomers about the feelings of other men. Someone has to say what Joe finally says to Walter: "Don't you think somebody like that inspector had his ambitions? Don't you think he still has his man's pride? Did you ever figure the cost of the job in terms of what it does to the personality of a clever, intelligent fellow like him? He says if you're going to be trapped you might as well make the best of it, and by his lights he may be right. Anyway don't be too quick to blame him—he probably never had the opportunity to save money and go off to college." Joe exhorts Walter to remember after he has made his escape "what it was like for the people who made the things you'll be buying . . . the sweat, exhaustion, harrying, feverish haste, and stupid boredom."

The Walters have made it to college, or, if something blocked their escape, their sons have made it, and the professors don't give much thought to what it's like for the people who make the things they buy. The escapees hear that the men in the plants and down in the manholes are a bunch of grubby bigots. Swados usually respected his characters too much to use them, to set them up as straw men to be blown over by a burst of scorn. But not always. He occasionally reaches the point where he can find nothing to redeem the evil in a character. He writes in the George Eliot tradition in which the social and the interior causes of behavior are thoroughly scrutinized for extenuating conditions, yet at times, unlike the master, he loses patience and pours the whole bucket of tar; sympathetic understanding be damned.

Standing Fast, the long, last novel about the lives of a group of 1930's radicals is marred by such failures of sympathy. After the War, when political allegiances have been thoroughly scrambled, two of the group emerge as seizers of the main chance. Fred Vogel, the formerly devout socialist professor, now powders himself with charm and becomes a highly popular TV quizmaster. Harry Sturm, former Party official and ideologue and gentle son to an aged father, now uses his ingenuity to become a millionaire, the art-collector type. Swados's scorn turns his characters into caricatures.

However, through most of the 600 pages of *Standing Fast* Swados succeeds in his delineations of the pressures, distractions, temptations that push people off course and sometimes down blind alleys. Between the 30's and the 60's prosperity has made socialism a less urgent goal, dis-

tant and vague. From being the obvious solution to present difficulties, socialism becomes a fond memory of the ardor of youth and a distant vision invoked under pressure to state an ideal. But Joe Link has come into middle age and into the 60's with the ideal as clear and close as ever. Having transcended his California-plastic upbringing, Joe continues to insist on giving his life to raising the revolutionary consciousness of the labor movement. The likes of George Meany remain untouched, and Joe is on the way to burning himself out and losing a worthy wife and talented sons.

New York Norm, on the other hand, who earlier had demonstrated considerable leadership in the Party, returns from the War realizing that Marxism is no longer applicable. Union members are on their way to becoming Middle Americans. And so Norm concludes that "you can't persuade people to do what you think they ought to simply because it's moral or logical People are going to react from a whole series of motives—most of which have no relation to logic." Norm, closing his Marx, becomes one of the breed Marx most despised, a liberal reformist journalist.

Particularly memorable in *Standing Fast*, much of which is set in Buffalo during the 30's, is the marriage between Irwin, the dentist with friends in the Party, and Carmela, self-educated, apolitical, restless. It is a marriage whose foundations are sapped from the beginning. Their son, Paul, comes of age in the 60's. He is the focus of a scene that is probably the best Swados ever wrote. Paul grows up to be one of the gallant band of young civil rights workers. He is intelligent, sensitive, utterly selfless. After doing good work in the South, he becomes involved with a number of quiet projects in New York. As he returns one night to the cell-like room he has chosen for himself in Harlem, he is accosted by three black toughs. Listening to Paul being taunted, first for being on the prowl for black pussy, then for having "the hots for nigger boys," we realize that nothing, absolutely nothing, could bridge the gap between saintly but white and educated Paul and the three urban barbarians. A picture is torn from Paul's wallet. It is from a black friend named Paul. It bears the inscription, "For Paul from Paul with love." This really amuses one of the attackers: "How about that, you think this mothafucka done gone and got hisself a nigger baby." Then "he spread his legs and shoved the photo between his buttocks. 'I gonna wipe my ass with this Paul-shit.'" A few minutes later Paul lies in the street, kicked to death. Swados has written this scene with complete honesty. The political misuses it could be put to did not affect him here. If such a scene perfectly expresses the fears of those whose politics he abhors, so be it.

One of Swado's last pieces was a remarkable article in the second issue of *The American Poetry Review*. Swados tells of his involvement

with the McGovern-Shriver campaign, specifically as a writer for Shriver. Swados is very aware of the role he played as a writer actively engaged in politics. He feels chastized, however, by the position taken by Joseph Brodsky, the young Russian poet now at Ann Arbor. For Brodsky has argued that political commitment and activity are a lesser service to humanity than detached dramatization of the greatness of the human spirit. "What is particularly striking about his apolitical (or antipolitical) stance is his implicit revulsion from the tyranny of the majority," Swados writes. Brodsky in 1956, having witnessed the support of the Russian people for the crushing of the Hungarian insurrection, became dubious that it made much difference who ruled. What is important is to ennoble a people's spirit. Brodsky seems convinced that it is beyond the power of any government, any group of politicians to achieve that goal. Ennobling the human spirit is a task that falls to the poet.

Swados feels the appeal in Brodsky's position. But he is not capable of Brodsky's detachment in the face of outrage. He chooses the position of Solzhenitsyn: the poet cannot be relieved of "the responsibility of denouncing the old regime or the old President." For such denunciation surely must have some effect in mitigating the evils of those in power; that is only logical. On the other hand, if ennobling the people is the poet's goal he cannot deny that a concerned, compassionate government would have a much more pervasive influence than the work of poets. Thus, it would be self-indulgent, if not hypocritical, for the poet to remain on the sidelines when there is such a clear choice as there was between McGovern and Nixon.

But the hardest truth for Swados to swallow is that the denunciations and enthusiasms of writers cut no ice with the majority. That lesson, of course, was driven home with the results of the 1972 election, in which at least 99% of the writers who spoke out were for McGovern. "The painful point now that it is over is that all of us, from literary lions to obscure poets, have been forcefully reminded yet again of our impotence. None of us, even the most celebrated, has demonstrated his ability to sway the American people to any measurable degree."

What does one do in facing up to such futility? "The temptation has to be enormous: either to curse the people, or to join them in an abdication of the basic principles that have animated one's writing life." In deciding what he will do, Swados again echoes Solzhenitsyn who says that "once having taken up the word it is never again possible to turn away." The temptation to quit is strong. To stand aside, to nurse one's bruises and let the unenlightened march straight into hell is very tempting. But it will not do, in Solzhenitsyn's words, "merely to impart from the sidelines our bitter observations on how hopelessly corrupt is humanity, how degenerate people have become, and how hard it is for delicate

and beautiful souls to live among them.”

No, it won't do to say these things from the sidelines. But will it do to speak this language anywhere? For it sounds suspiciously indulgent. Brodsky would not nominate himself for elevation to the ranks of the delicate and beautiful. He knows, as Dostoyevsky knew, that the truly delicate and beautiful do not gravitate to any one camp. The majority may not be in such need of a Joe these days to remind them to be decent to each other; while the work they do is still exhausting and demeaning, history has brought them together and they have known the satisfaction of making a President. It is those who have escaped from lives of labor who seem more in need of Joe, to remind them of what laboring is like and the frustrations and the whole range of fears that make men act stupidly and hatefully.

