

worst of both, her book permits a comparative view that, so far as I know, no other book has yet furnished us.

The conclusion one comes to inescapably is this: that in the Soviet system human energy is productive; whereas under capitalism it is wasted or perverted. We have of course observed in contemporary American life, crop destruction, forced under-consumption, the suppression of scientific advances. We have less frequently seen comments upon the perversion of human achievements because these perversions have been almost taken for granted. The commercialization of radio is one instance; but a subtler instance is the seizure by exploiters of pornography, by the Macfaddens and other magazine publishers, of the literary liberties fought for and won by courageous and persistent writers like Dreiser, Dos Passos and Anderson. Another instance is the Lindbergh episode. When Lindbergh's heroism became an instrument in the hands of an aviation company, it lost its social values; he was no longer a people's hero. Today there is even to be noted an undercurrent of hostility to him. And somehow the kidnaping and death of his child fits in the dark picture. It was another and illegal attempt to profit on this act of heroism. It is part of the pattern. Compare with this the social acceptance and use of the Soviet Chelyushkin heroes and the difference at once becomes clear. The qualities of the Soviet system are such as to make a social and progressive good of all human achievements, and by an act of heroism the hero is bound closer to the people, not estranged from them.

Unquestionably it is the realization of this that kept Miss Strong close to the Soviet world in spite of disappointments and personal frustrations. She arrived in Russia in the worst years of the 1922 famine as an American relief worker; she saw what appeared a dissolution of socialism in the NEP period; she saw the disorganization and exhaustion that followed the first overwhelming drive of collectivization; yet, somehow, in this system even the mistakes and the errors were useful. Some of her own undertakings in Russia, her John Reed colony for homeless youngsters, an enterprise for the establishment of American workshops, her initiation of an English newspaper in Moscow, all failed in their first intentions, yet all became successes beyond her first intentions. In this social system orientated toward the common good and caught in what is obviously one of the strongest creative currents in human history, nothing is wasted.

What happened to her American efforts? At her very first job, on a religious publication, her youthful enthusiasm was callously exploited. She was discharged, because it was a policy of the magazine to staff its office with ambitious and talented young people who would be kept until all that could be gotten out of them at low pay had been extracted. As the victim of a similar dodge, I can understand the bitter memory it left in Miss Strong's mind. Later she organized child-welfare exhibits which, in the newer Western

cities became foci of social change; but competing and more "practical" exhibits by the heavily endowed Russell Sage Foundation reduced the movement to innocuousness. She became active in the labor movement in Seattle, a successful labor editor, without however understanding the reality of the class struggle. And because of this lack of understanding it was not till long afterwards, in Russia, that she arrived at a mature knowledge of the event in which she had taken a leading part, the Seattle general strike. Then, at last, she understood the confusion of the leaders: then she realized the role of the government in Washington, which, merely by transferring its construction orders to other cities, did most to break up labor strength in Seattle. Thus, one by one, in her capitalist homeland, all her successes became defeats.

A second achievement of *I Change Worlds* is to give a sense of the democracy in Russian life, more tangibly than it has been given in any other book I have read. The two outward signs of Russian life are first devotion and obedience, commonly translated by hostile observers as tyranny; and the enormous amount of committees and meetings which are often translated, even by friendly observers, as inefficiency. The discussions seem endless, while the decisions are unrecordable, existing in implications. But as a result of these seeming, endless conferences, this untiring march of meetings from the factories and fields to the council chambers in the Kremlin, the collective will is slowly discovered and then applied, and it is obeyed gladly because it is the collective will. In a sense impossible in any other political system yet developed, the Soviet citizen enacts his own decision, and enjoys the completest democracy yet evolved.

Another achievement of *I Change Worlds* is its frank illustration of the psychology of the liberal, especially of the liberal of the

author's generation. It explains the twelve years experience needed to turn her into a Communist; and the vacillations of such of her contemporaries as Dreiser, Anderson and others who have come close to the revolutionary movement, then unaccountably veered away, who exhibited toward it astonishing alternations of arrogance and humility.

Miss Strong achieved a personal efficiency which gave her an illusion of freedom. Like Dreiser, who made his living when he needed to as a journalist and as an editor, like Anderson who made his living when he needed to by running a factory, writing advertising copy and editing country newspapers, Miss Strong could turn at will to lecturing, organizing, writing, social work. It gave them an illusion of economic powers, an illusion of success. At one time, in a moment of humility, Miss Strong declared that her greatest ambition was to be "used" to the full extent of her powers. There is of course egotism in such a declaration, an intimation that she has special powers that can be used. The passive quality of such an offering did not occur to her until, soaked in Russian experience, she realized that it is better to act than to give. When liberals so identify themselves with the revolutionary movement that they feel actors in it, not people coming to it with gifts, then they become revolutionists; then the hesitations and the doubts disappear. Their solitary independence, a rare enough achievement in the capitalist system, but decreasingly possible in that system, can then become a collective value.

I have indicated, I hope, the more important values of Miss Strong's book. It remains to be added that the writing is vivid, though at times her ardor drops into sentimentality; and that in the range of her experiences and equally in their intensity her book is one of the most absorbing autobiographical records of our time.

ISIDOR SCHNEIDER.

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A South American Classic

THE VORTEX, by José Eustacio Rivera.
Putnam. \$2.50.

THIS book has for several years been widely and on the whole justly acclaimed as a great South American novel. It is, however, characteristic of the literary insularity of the United States and in particular of its pronounced apathy toward the culture of the Hispanic republics that the American version of *La Voragine* appears so late, in fact seven years after the death of its author. Yet in a broad and significant sense it is an American novel because, breaking away from a servile colonialism that has too long hindered the development of Hispanic literature, it is an authentic record of experience in the Western Hemisphere.

The Vortex relates the adventures of the narrator, the young poet Arturo Cova, first in the tropical pampas of his native Colombia where a half-chivalrous, half-carnal love for Alicia has drawn him, and then in the adjoining jungles and rubber plantations whither he is led by desires compounded of that same love, revenge and a lofty egoism. The second part, which deals with conditions on the rubber plantations, is a rare social document. If only for this reason, the book cannot fail to move the reader very deeply; but the novel as a whole is marked by an intensity of emotion and an unmistakable feeling of truth that distinguish it as a work of art.

Rivera, nevertheless, will puzzle the reader in no small degree. Here is a powerful piece of naturalistic writing that somehow does not belong to the tradition from which a Zola or a Dreiser or a Caldwell spring.

The difference between Rivera and our more familiar contemporaries lies not so much in the topic or the setting of the novel, but in a certain reckless, savage and wholly spontaneous manner of describing crude natural phenomena and even cruder human conduct, and in an extraordinary mixture of quixotic and eloquent romanticism, of bold, glamorous exoticism and dashing, verbose lyricism which the poetic Cova has injected into his tale.

Stating it in more general terms, one may perhaps account for the unusual qualities of *The Vortex* by saying that it represents the blending, through the medium of a sensitive and highly articulate imagination, of two cultural and class points of view: a feudal, aristocratic idealism and a primitive, elemental realism. Cova (who must be none other than Rivera himself) is the hero of some 16th or 17th century Spanish romance come to life in a pre-historic wilderness whose dread realities, natural and social, he experiences. The sophistication of bourgeois realism and naturalism, its straining for objectivity and its obsession with the horrendous or the miserable as an end in itself are lacking here. In fact it is Rivera's naïve and obvious sincerity, both in his cloak-and-sword chivalry, his fierce hatred of the jungle's cruelties and his outspoken sympathies with the oppressed, that keep the story from ever becoming absurd or grotesque.

However, it takes a tough stomach to hold some of the dishes that Rivera serves. On the rubber plantations there are tortures for the workers that even Hitler has never heard of. Here "Christians," literally sold into slavery, perish by the thousands, while dead

Indians are not even counted. There are times when Rivera clearly senses the class struggle, and though he understands the immediate reasons for the terrifying human exploitation which he depicts, he is ignorant of the underlying causes and vents his rage and indignation on an inhospitable nature. His efforts to rescue the jungle victims of imperialism end in failure and he does not understand why they were doomed.

FRANK L. GORDON.

Mansion and Mill

IN THEIR OWN IMAGE, by Hamilton Basso. Chas. Scribner's Sons. \$2.50.

IT IS probably a mistake for a reviewer to read over the outline of a novel on the jacket. Since I might as well acknowledge in the beginning that I am a critic of no experience, I will also acknowledge this mistake I made. For the mistake has had an influence on my general opinion of this novel. Here is what part of that outline on the jacket said:

"The head of this household of American aristocrats is a harassed widow who made her millions in mayonnaise. At her palatial Aiken cottage she has gathered her stolid son, married to a girl whose purse is as lean as her blood is blue and her morals purple; her daughter doomed to wed an Italian princeling; a few choice guests, most of them cagging their way through the season.

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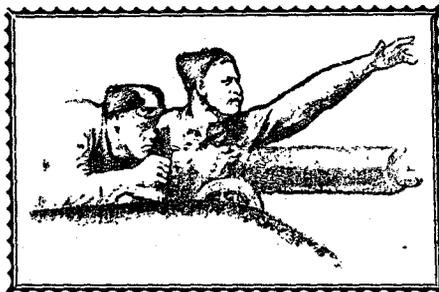
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