
Max Eastman — A Portrait

by Irwin Granich †

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I find Max Eastman hard to write about, because he is so many-sided and subtle. He has done so much, and has so much more to do. It is so hard to choose the facet of his personality that is the most important, because on all sides he is important. Is it possible to measure his significance as an agitator in the Socialist movement in America? How am I to suggest the soft, universal beauty that is in his poetry, for instance? How am I to sum up his permanent contributions to philosophy and esthetic criticism, or how can I hope to embody in poor words the personal essence of the man, so humane and charming, so melodious yet deep as the dark river of life itself?

The unique magic of Max Eastman's mind is the soft light that emanates from it, bathing all the hardness of the known world. He has a sturdy contact with the various truths; he sees things exactly as they are, and yet, when he speaks of them, there is a new trans-figuring element in them that he has put there.

It is the touch of gold. You could not mistake Max Eastman's prose even when he is writing of the arid science of economics, or in his favorite field of psychology. His style is simple, classic, beautiful, musical, possessing all the attic graces. And yet it is not flabby or sentimental. His prose is like the speech of Plato come forth from the den of metaphysics to mingle in the affairs of men.

It is a context to the content of his mind. Max

Eastman says in his book on *The Enjoyment of Poetry* that there are two classes of people in the world, the poetical and the practical, those who believe in progress, and those who live in profound static consciousness of earth's mystery. He himself is a synthesis of the two moods, of East and West, of meditation and action, of science and art. And so he writes as a poet turned scientist, his own ideal; and he acts as a scientist turned poet, one urged by mystic necessity into the leadership of men.

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His intellectual history is the explanation for this symmetry. He was born in a little farming town upstate, where his father was a liberal minister. These small, grim American communities do different things to their sons and daughters. Their sheer greyness drives the young artist to a vast, exaggerated hunger for color and rhythm. Their banality and plodding vice maddens the idealists and thinkers and forces them to fly to great extremes of social rebellion and despair. There are no bitterer rebels against society than those produced by the small towns.

Max Eastman must have haunted these arid scenes while a boy, sick of the sodden reality about him, and dreaming in his Greek soul of some more beautiful land, with happier, more gracious people,



†- Itzok "Irwin" Granich (1894-1967) is best known by the pen name he adopted in later years, "Mike Gold." During this period Granich-Gold earned his bread working for *The Call* as a copyreader.

who moved generously through sunlit days, making of their brief lives bright vessels of joy. It is the dream of all young poets and leaders of humanity.

Then he went to the usual middle class boys' preparatory school, where the bourgeois and ruling-class American youth is efficiently trained for its reactionary functions. I think this place must have depressed and driven Eastman in upon himself, too.

He next went to Columbia, where he graduated, and was appointed an instructor in aesthetic theory while still very young. It shows reality must have pained him almost physically, that he was forced to this inmost cavern of high abstraction, and could live in a platonic world of theory and speculation.

But Max Eastman has ever had the hot passion of truth burning in him. And he could not play the classroom pope to his herds of students. He tells, himself, in his book on poetry, how he taught them something like 32 abstract theories of beauty, each of which he would then proceed to puncture. The young men must have thought him queer.

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He left "the oracle on the hill," when after years of observation the whole force of the social problem broke in upon him like a deluge. And he has been a Socialist and fighter for liberty ever since.

He went directly to the managing editorship of *The Masses* from Columbia. *The Masses* was, and still will be under its new name, one of the most arresting and significant magazines in America.

The Masses! One thrills at the name. It is hard to forget the blazing splendor of that meteor of art and revolution. Month after month it appeared against the dull background of American industrialism, a star of hope to thousands plunged in despair, a noble portent of beauty and fraternity across the sky. It contained all the passion and divine scorn, all the ardor and spiritual reaching that had so long been lacking in American Socialism. It contained wisdom and youth. It was an irresistible pleader, a being of fire and pain.

It contained other disconcerting elements, as well. For its writers and artists were not always the upright apostles of "sweetness and light" that stern moralists could wish them to be. They were curiously like real men and women, "gross passionate, nude,

hankering, mystical." They were shaken by many-colored moods, they wished to fight, to exult, to sneer, to love, to hate, to revere, yes, to be drunken, even, and roll in the mire.

And they expressed all these moods, for *The Masses* was a revolutionary magazine, a temple of freedom, caring not to conciliate its friends or foes.

Of course, it made many enemies, not the least of whom were in the radical camp. Its gaiety was mistaken for mere callousness and cynicism, its furious onslaught on commercialism for lack of "scientific" balance, its truthfulness about sex for something worse. It was confessedly morbid, too, the morbidity of youth which looks out with fresh eyes upon the world, and is tortured by the spectacle of so much suffering and imperfection.

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But *The Masses* continued, despite the floods of wailing letters that followed the appearance of each issue. *The Masses!* How it roared along on its merry, lusty, beautiful, useful way. Rabelaisian, yet Christian, a lovable composite personality that heartened the youth of America by its sheer, urgent humanity. It injected a vitalism into the creaking Marxian machinery that will never be forgotten in this country. And the new magazine [*The Liberator*] will probably carry on the work.

A group of artists and writers alone made *The Masses* possible, of course. Max Eastman's was the synthetic power, however, the universal vision that brought the art and revolution into a white hot fusion and unity. Much, nearly most, of Eastman's best work through the past 6 years appeared in the pages of *The Masses*, poems, essays, "marginalia," editorials like grave, golden flashes of wisdom. He is a great journalist; never did he fail to catch the inward meaning of the hurrying event, and dissect it for all to see.

The intellectual development of Max Eastman is the story of all healthy idealistic minds. He began, as did Karl Marx, in his youth, by writing poetry. Max Eastman is more of the artist, however, and still continues to write poetry that shines like a rare and quiet flower against the lush, rank undergrowth of contemporary American literature. In his poetry, Max Eastman is akin to Keats and the Greeks; there is the same

mystic suggestiveness of form, the same soft ecstasy and aloof joy of life.

Max Eastman has also written a critical book of poetry that is among the finest of its kind in America. Every young poet and lover of the art ought to read this noble and authoritative volume, which strips all the sham of the professors, and explains lucidly the simple facts of technique, and breathes into humble plebeians of poetry a self-dependence and self-respect that make for achievement. It is a poem itself, so beautiful is the writing.

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Max Eastman's natural bent is to live on this clear, high world of the mind, to be a teacher of beauty and science, to be the aristocrat untouched by the vulgarity of action. He might have continued in these paths, as have so many of the artists and thinkers, had he not a fervent humanity that makes him love the humble men of the earth and their strivings. He is a "bourgeois" intellectual, as we of the movement roughly classify such, but he has managed to completely identify himself with the workers. There are no reservations in his Socialism — he really, actually, ardently, supremely wishes the proletariat to possess the earth and its fullness, and he works for this.

It was a hard revolution for him to have gone through. It has dragged him from the quiet haunts of beauty into the full, harsh light of events. He has had to give up the luxury of dreaming and poetry for the stern science of change. His brain has accustomed itself to the new discipline. He has campaigned in municipal and national elections; he has run for office on the Socialist ticket; he has even faced a militarist lynching mob in North Dakota.

And he has not flinched. For Max Eastman is a

true libertarian. His vision is the complete fulfillment of every man's ego, through art and fine living, and cooperation. He has a dream for a happy earth, with simple, beautiful melancholy to staunch the wound. He is a fascinating figure in the ranks of democracy here in America, this long, symmetrical Greek, with his slow voice and graceful, leisurely limbs, and face radiating calm wisdom. He will bear watching, for he is a world figure in the emerging, and one that can not long stay out of his own in times such these.

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Already Max Eastman is staking a new claim on the intellectual revolutionary horizon. He is to rise from the ashes of *The Masses*, as editor of *The Liberator*, a vigorous journal of profound thought, which will make its appearance on the anniversary of Lincoln's birth, February 12th [1918].

The Liberator will be the old *Masses*, with the vital fire of Russia's revolution a new element in its composition. Russia has given a pulsing reality to all the abstractions we used so wearily to reiterate in the old days before the tsar fell. Men are dying for and living under the ideas we believed in; a whole nation has listened to our soapbox harangues, and has taken out its red card; and this has made all the difference in the world. The new *Liberator* will be more realistic and more concerned with the actual technique of revolution than was *The Masses*. It will be more "practical," because Socialists are being asked now to take over the management of the world's muddled affairs, and they must train themselves for the task.

This will be the change in the personality of the new magazine, and it is probably the change in Max Eastman, a reconciliation and new mastery of the realistic forces of the world.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport.
Drawing of Max Eastman by Hugo Gellert, photographed from microfilm.
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