Mary Heaton Vorse

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Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent.  

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Mary Heaton Vorse is one of the most compelling and representative figures in the history of American radicalism. That she has been slighted in its annals shows the effect upon scholarship of sexism and the Cold War. She spent fifty-four years of her life in active struggle for libertarian socialism, feminism, and world peace. This union of ideas was far too radical for most of her contemporaries to consider—another reason for the scholarly inattention paid her life.

As the foremost pioneer of labor journalism in the nation, and as a correspondent covering international events from 1912 through the late 1940s, her impassioned reporting pulled her audience to a wider vision of democracy. Millions of Americans were agitated and informed by her interpretation of world events, war and peace, labor battles, and feminist demands. Along with many other Americans of her time, she protested the social and political conditions created by the advance of industrial capitalism. Her life also spanned the period when significant numbers of middle-class women found work and purpose in the public arena. The issues raised by economic inequality and gender conflict compose the core of her thought and address the fundamental questions of her age.

She had many audiences. Vorse provided the news coverage that could bridge the communication gap between union leadership and the general reading public. Unlike most labor journalists, Vorse was often a strike participant. Her inside knowledge of union strategy, combined with her fervent commitment to accurate reporting, brought uncommon depth and feeling to her work. Her measured, knowledgeable accounts found easy
entry into major journals like Harper's, Scribner's, and the Atlantic, outlets that were normally closed to writers closely identified with the left, and thus labeled “propagandists” by the mainstream press. But Vorse also wrote for intellectuals and reformers in the Masses, the Nation, and the New Republic, and for the workers themselves in her hundreds of dispatches for union newspapers, newsletters, and broadsides for the union press. Her appeal to every class of readers was a call for common-sense application of traditional national ideals—liberty, equality, justice—all carefully placed within the global context of the socialist movement.

Always, her writing recreated the human drama within a context of factual detail. Under her hand, the workers' determined faces, rough clothing, and excited speeches become visible and noisy. One feels the fear on the picket line as the armed goons or awesome mounted police approach. The defiant strength of hundreds of marching unionists, or suffragists, or farmers, or unemployed, is evident. We absorb the memory of the work-reddened hands of the miner's wife resting lightly on her son's shoulders, or the gray silence of the crowd of thousands in the Russian famine area, or the anguished French mother with three sons dead shaking her fist at the beribboned soldiers parading outside her door.

Vorse's unique contribution to the journalism of her time is her consistent attention to the special concerns of women. The immigrant wife, the Serbian orphan, the mean tenement home, the starved children, the courage of girl pickets—these are the core of her material. Through Vorse's eyes, we see the contribution of women to labor's advance.

Mary Heaton Vorse wrote sixteen books, two plays, and hundreds of articles and stories in major journals, newspapers, and magazines. For several decades she was one of the most popular writers of women's fiction in the United States. She wrote short fiction only to support her three children and to finance her political work. Yet her stories of women's lives so appealed to the concerns of her age that in 1906, although she had been writing only two years and had not yet published her first book, her work was included in a composite novel written by a group of distinguished American authors that included William Dean Howells and Henry James.

In 1930, at age fifty-six, Vorse purposely renounced her comfortable literary reputation and income, determined to concentrate her effort on labor reporting. After that, it was only when she literally ran out of money, and that was often, that she would hole up to dash off another "lollypop" to pay her way for a few more months. Yet despite her disrespect for it, much of her popular fiction rises above formula to provide stunning apparitions of female unity and discontent.
But perhaps Mary Heaton Vorse’s most remarkable achievement was her ability to sense the moment and find the center where action would occur. “There was always an easy rule for locating her in time and space,” Murray Kempton wrote, “whenever you read across forty years about an event in which men stood in that single, desperate moment which brings all past, all present, and all future to one sharp point for them, you could assume that Mary Vorse had been there.” Her uncanny ability to move to crucial places at critical moments took her to major strikes, international conflicts, and radical and women’s meetings in Europe and the United States. She appeared in Lenin’s Moscow and Hitler’s Germany, at sophisticated literary salons, and on dangerous picket lines, at luncheons with Senators or with impoverished sharecroppers, at feminist rallies and at CIO strategy sessions.

Far more than most thinkers of her time, Mary Heaton Vorse was dominated by the great social movements that operate under the surface of events. She caught the rising tide of radical revolt, of unionization, of feminism, and was moved by all its retreats and advances. Intrigued by her valor, John Dos Passos took her life as symbol for an era, using her as counterpart for Mary French, one of the twelve main characters in his classic trilogy, U.S.A. Later, in his right-wing period, Dos Passos returned to Mary Vorse as model for his portrait of Anne Comfort in his semi-autobiographical novel, Chosen Country, where Dos Passos interpreted Vorse’s experience to express his theme of womanhood defeated by ancient circumstance.

When Mary Heaton Vorse died in 1966 at age ninety-two, her passing was only briefly noted by the mass-circulation media. In a quick and guilty bow to an honored but slightly intimidating past, Time and Newsweek ran short obituaries. The New York Times noted her exit under a two-column headline: MARY HEATON VORSE, A NOVELIST AND CHAMPION OF LABOR, DEAD, FIGURE OF MAJOR STRIKES OF 20s AND 30s—REPORTED FROM EUROPE BEFORE THE WAR. Since most of her friends were long dead, Walter Reuther was the only notable who issued a press release. “She was one of the great labor writers of all time. . . .” he said. “This magnificent woman. . . . was. . . . of invincible spirit and fearless courage. . . . Hers was a life that brought richness and beauty to all mankind.”

Essentially, however, she had outlived her own reputation. With the end of the labor wars in the 1930s, her literary standing faltered. With the beginning of the Cold War, her style of political expression was quieted. With the ascendance of the Feminine Mystique, her generation of fighters lay largely forgotten.
But even at the moment of her death, a new feminist movement was stirring toward birth, a new radical generation was arising. In the eighties, her books and articles were reprinted, her fiction featured in Ms., and a vignette of her life presented as part of the series “American Portraits” on CBS television.

This would not have surprised her. Mary Vorse thoroughly understood the momentary extinction of her work—for all her life and all her writing had centered on the relationship between individual and society. Times were sure to change, she knew, even in her last years. She was confident that her experience contained lessons to teach another generation. She fully expected to be studied and understood. Her life had carried exceptional impact. Her ideas would endure.

Born into a wealthy New England family in 1874, Vorse first was inspired by the social ideal of the New Woman of the time. Vorse rejected her mother’s demand that she follow the familiar path to marriage and maternity. This, her premier and most difficult rebellion, led to Vorse’s escape to Paris and New York City as an art student in the 1890s.

In Greenwich Village, she was happily situated at the center of the social revolution that began in 1912. An editor of the Masses and a charter member of the Liberal Club, she was both a conduit for the younger men and women entering the world of the avant garde and a core participant in the ongoing revolt. Due in part to her influence, Provincetown, her home since 1906, became a kind of summer suburb for the New York intelligentsia. The famed Provincetown Players were born in 1915 on her fish wharf. In these same years Vorse helped to found that Greenwich Village nursery of modern feminism, the remarkable Heterodoxy Club.

Vorse came late to the support of labor’s cause. She was a thirty-eight-year-old mother of two when the Lawrence textile strike of 1912 altered the course of her life. “I leaped lightly to my fate one morning when I got up and went out to get an order to go to Lawrence,” she wrote in 1926.

I entered into a way of life I never yet have left. . . . Before Lawrence, I had known a good deal about labor, but I had not felt about it. I had not got angry. In Lawrence, I got angry. . . . Some curious synthesis had taken place between my life and that of the workers, some peculiar change that would never again permit me to look with indifference on the fact that riches for the few were made by the misery of the many.

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Preface
Until World War I she continued her important alliance begun at Lawrence with the radical union, the Industrial Workers of the World, or Wobblies, as they were known.

Later, on her tour of the war zones, Vorse ignored the political and diplomatic events of the time and reported the effect of war on the ordinary people of Europe, especially women and children. One of the few American reporters to visit Bela Kun’s short-lived Communist government in Hungary, her June 1919 mission was marked by embroilment in political intrigue. On her return to the United States, she worked as publicist for the Great Steel Strike of 1919 and organized women shirtmakers in Pennsylvania. Reaching the Soviet Union several weeks before the male reporters from the great American dailies were admitted, she was Moscow correspondent for the Hearst papers during 1921. Hounded all the way by agents of the Department of Justice, she returned home to report the campaign to free American political prisoners incarcerated during the Red Scare.

Vorse returned to labor work as publicity director for the Passaic, New Jersey, textile strike of 1926. The revolutionary publicity tactics she developed at Passaic would set the pattern for the successful techniques that marked the labor uprisings of the next decade. Vorse was a firstcomer at the southern textile war in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929, and at Bloody Harlan County in Kentucky in 1931, where her group, which included Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley, was expelled from Kentucky by nightriders. That same prescience took her in the thirties to unemployed marches, the farmers’ strike, the Scottsboro Boys’ trial, and to early New Deal Washington, D.C., where she worked at the Indian Bureau under the controversial reformer John Collier. While in Washington, she was for a time associated with what would come to be called the Ware group, a network of radicals later fated to receive wide attention for its connection to the Alger Hiss case.

She was, of course, present at the pivotal struggle of the CIO at Flint, Michigan in 1937, and went on to report CIO battles across the nation. In the 1930s, she recorded the rise of Hitler in Germany and the rule of Stalin in the USSR. During World War II, she was perhaps the oldest official American war correspondent. After the war, she served in Italy with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.

In the 1950s Mary Heaton Vorse lived in semiretirement in her beloved beach house in Provincetown, Massachusetts. But she continued to write—of Mafia-connected union chiefs, of migrant workers, and of civil rights work in the South. Her last big story to receive national attention was...
the 1952 exposé of crime in the waterfront unions, published in Harper's when she was seventy-eight. In her eighties and nineties, the scope of her battleground shrank to Cape Cod. She helped to organize a Provincetown protest against offshore dumping of nuclear waste. At age ninety-one, she began her last crusade. She backed Provincetown's young Episcopalian minister, one of the first to march against the Vietnam War.

Just as Lawrence shaped her social outlook, her experience at Heterodoxy and at the Women's International Suffrage convention held in Budapest in 1913 determined her feminist vision. Vorse's work in the suffrage movement led to her appointment as the delegate from the New York City Woman Suffrage Party to the peace congress held at The Hague in 1915. In Germany and France, Vorse saw troop trains filled with soldiers who were laughing and drinking from bottles, happy young men en route to the places where they would be killed. "There is that which makes man his own enemy and every woman's," she wrote in her diary then. "Man takes passionate joy in risking his own life while he takes the life of others. When women's understanding of this becomes conscious, it is called feminism."

Twice widowed, in 1910 and 1915, Vorse was a single mother most of her life. In Paris in 1919, she fell in love with Robert Minor, the famous American cartoonist and anarchist. One year later, Minor converted to communism. In 1922 her affair with Minor ended disastrously when, four-months pregnant with his child, she suffered a miscarriage, and he deserted her for a younger, more politically compliant woman. As a result of her medical treatment after the miscarriage, Vorse was for some years addicted to morphine.

In the 1920s, with the labor movement quieted, the feminist movement crushed, a Republican government in power, Vorse returned home to be a mother. During that dark decade, her massive depression centered around her conviction that she must pay whatever price necessary to compensate for what she believed to be the negative effect on her children of the years spent away from her family. For seven torturous years, she placed her work second to the presumed needs of her children.

"My story wouldn't be important if it were the story of one woman," she wrote in 1922. "My failure is that of almost every working woman who has children and a home to keep up, whether she scrubs floors, or works in mills, or is a high-priced professional woman. It's nearly impossible to do both jobs well. So most women fail in either or both. Their energy and thoughts are divided. . . . Don't housewives deserve a sabbatical year? . . .
I have never wanted to write as much as I do now. On the other hand I have never realized my children's needs so clearly and have never wanted so much to fill them. Are the two things possible? Must there always be a double failure?"

Forty years later, at age eighty-eight, Vorse was absorbed in the task of arranging her papers for preservation in Detroit's new library of labor history. She sorted through the mass of letters, clippings, manuscripts, and diaries, the memories of husbands, lovers, children, and friends. She paused now and then to add marginal comments to the documents, to correct, deny, or elaborate on a previous statement. She spoke to the future inquirer—a last attempt to give coherence to the imperfect documents spread before her.

“You must understand,” she wrote, "that when I was very young, Life said to me, 'Here are two ways—a world running to mighty cities, full of the spectacle of bloody adventure, and here is home and children. Which will you take, the adventurous life or a quiet life?'

'I will take both,' I said.'"

The choice seemed to be between love, security, warmth—and ambition, creation, risk. Both were defined and separated for her by the weight of her entire culture. Her words speak to the decision peculiarly pressed upon women. And here, encapsuled for us, does lie the explanatory core of her living. Modern women will instantly recognize the common links between Vorse's desperate shuffle and their own everyday effort to balance love and work, home and job.

Few women writers suffered more from lack of self-permission, space, quiet, and leisure to write than Mary Heaton Vorse. Tillie Olsen, Joanna Russ, and others have written about the deterrents to women authors. They describe the fear of impropriety, the lack of female models or a female literary tradition, the inclusion of only extraordinary women writers in the literary canon, and the devaluation of women's experience and consequent attitudes, values, and judgments as less representative or less important than male experience. Foremost among these discouraging obstacles to women writers through the ages, the simple lack of time in which to write is surely the most common and the most heartbreaking handicap. Most of us appreciate the difficulty of being full-time writer, full-time housekeeper and mother, full-time breadwinner. To add labor activist and reporter is to strain the imagination. Yet Vorse managed it all, usually well, sometimes badly, at times just barely. Like many of her generation of talented and ambitious women, she would know more defeats than victories.

Surely Mary Vorse would have been more honored had she been more
conventional. She fit nowhere in the shifting political groups of the 1920s and after. She had long laid down the illusion of some liberals that reasoned appeals alone could cancel the capitalist-fueled repression of radicalism. Nor did she share the faith of the Communists. She learned the failure of the Communist promise in Hungary and Moscow, at Passaic and Gastonia. It was the Bolshevik massacre of Soviet peasants, which began in the late twenties, that she could not forgive or forget. She learned earlier than many of her socially engaged friends, and her popularity fell victim to her premature awareness.

But she also balked at the point where liberals and democratic socialists turned right. She refused to bait the Communist rank and file in the trenches, for she knew they often served justice with more constancy and courage than most. Vorse never confused embattled labor activists, many of whom were women, with the Communist Party functionary or the carping bystander, most of whom were men.

She cared little for political abstraction. Her attention veered inexorably to the concrete. She judged people by what they did, not by what they said, by their action, not their theory. She did not admire those inactive on the sidelines who felt compelled, with righteous fervor, to continue beating the dead horse of American communism. More than that, she shamed those who did. Her usefulness to many literary and political figures lessened accordingly.

Not liberal, Communist, or anti-Communist, she eluded categorization. Even though Communist officials considered her unreliable and unreasonable, she was harassed for over thirty years by private and federal spy hunters. In 1944, the FBI placed her on the list of dangerous citizens to be jailed immediately on presidential order. To ensure her rapid arrest, the agency maintained an up-to-date record of her location for at least another twelve years—until she was eighty-two years old. This distinction may have earned her a place as some sort of record holder among the targets of federal intelligence agencies.

Yet the legacy of another's life can never be complete, for it must be spun and edged from fragments. Mary Heaton Vorse understood the dilemma. "Life, as it happens," she wrote in 1914, "fails often to have a recognizable pattern—for you may bleed your heart out and die of the wound, and yet the pain of which you die, the drama which caused your heart to bleed, will have had neither logical beginning nor definite end, and in the whole course of it, though it has been life and death to you, there will have been
none of those first aids to the reader—suspense, dramatic contrast, or plot. You have suffered and died but it may not make a story.”

It is the task of the biographer to present that story. Assiduously collected from oral testimony and a clutter of paper, the life-telling facts can be placed methodically in order. But the biographer must also search for the reality behind the subject’s public pose—to find what Leon Edel has called “the figure under the carpet, the evidence in the reverse of the tapestry, the life-myth of a given mask.” It is the unwritten and unstated construction—the inner personal myth we all create in order to function—that gives breath and meaning to an individual’s life. And it is this interpretation that is so difficult for the biographer to glimpse—in subject as in self.

For Mary Heaton Vorse, the reverse of the tapestry is the mirror opposite of the outward pattern. What seems to be excessive mother love conceals furious resentment. Militant feminism is accompanied by traditional romantic dreams. Brave adventures are undertaken to avoid self-knowledge. Frenetic movement masquerades as purpose. These are the contradictions in Vorse’s useful and creative life. Taken together, they can be seen as an individual adjustment to a personal past, as well as part of a collective response to an inequitable society and to the fast-changing position of women within it. Vorse’s struggle to resolve these contradictions gives her life its greatest poignancy.

Her front-row view of the momentous clashes in American labor history provides a striking perspective on one of the most consequential social transformations in national life. Her intimate knowledge of the world of socially involved intellectuals is filtered through the critical intelligence of the natural outsider—the achieving woman of the period—to enrich the flavor of American radicalism and to increase our awareness of its evolving boundaries. Her story is in large part a recital of those changing environs, especially the relation of American rebels to the worldwide socialist movement.

Although Vorse very early on rejected the denial of civil liberties and the subordination of society to state that marked Soviet-style communism, she also knew that for many thousands of American citizens, those far removed from the rigid doublespeak of party leadership, the American Communist movement in the late twenties and thirties often seemed the only organization on the left that effectively linked a Marxist class analysis to combative daily action, not only on the labor front, but also among the poor and unemployed. And she understood that the virulent Cold War strain of anticommunism, which ignored the crimes and derelictions of the capitalist democracies, was, like its predecessor in the post–World
War I period, the dominant weapon used by conservatives to stem the radical pressures for change generated by both wars. From 1921 on, Vorse assumed a lonely stance. She stood in opposition not only to American conservatives, but also to the American Communist leadership, and, later, to Cold War-convulsed democratic socialists and liberals as well. Her prophetic anticipation of today's most pressing issues of world peace and revolutionary change connect us to this often overlooked but highly significant lineage within American radical history.

Yet as a woman, Vorse was perceived by some not as a radical, but as a bleeding heart. What commentators called steadfastness or vision in a male, is often judged naiveté or idealism in her. The political journalist Marquis Childs, in his introduction to one of her books, tried to capture in his description that complete sense of love of freedom, which everyone noted as such a strong trait in her, almost embarrassing to some, so simple and strong and steady was her belief. It was the same lack of concern for immediate realities that moved her in the 1960s, when she received her small amounts of money, much of it donated to her by friends who had little to spare, to send at once a large portion of the tiny sum on to César Chavez and the farmworkers in California or to various civil rights groups in the South. For the world was in motion again, and it was her fight, too—had always been.

Above all else, her life carried passionate conviction. Her own radical generation was forged in bohemian Greenwich Village, transformed by the world's first great socialist upheavals, and buried by the witch hunt that followed World War II. Whatever its political mistakes, misplaced visions, and moral failings, it had a kind of glory that always made it more right than wrong, more heroic than foolish. And whatever her errors along the way, Mary Heaton Vorse had been there, from start to finish, an unrepentant rebel to the last. Hers is a rich bequest, to our present as much as to our history.