Chapter Five

Banner of Revolt

From about 1912 until the First World War, New York City's Greenwich Village was the heart of intellectual, artistic, and radical life in the United States. Descriptions of the Village in its heyday—whether written by nostalgic participants, distant scholars, or disapproving conservatives—throb with superlatives. Words seem too limited to express the mood of that brief explosion of challenge and exuberance before the war. Yet so impelling is the task, that, with sneers or with cheers, many commentators have tried.

Alfred Kazin dubbed it the "first great literary society in America since Concord," a "center of contagion" where there "leaped a young generation so dashingly alive, so conscious of the great tasks that lay ahead, that it was ever afterwards to think that it had been a youth movement." For Henry May, Greenwich Village was the "beginning of a major change in American civilization," for Van Wyck Brooks, a "new insurgent spirit" revolutionizing American painting, literature, drama, and dance. Floyd Dell called it a "moral health resort." An aging Irish painter in New York, reflecting on the scene, thought he heard "the fiddles . . . tuning . . . all over America." But, as George "Jig" Cram Cook reminded his friends, "an American Renaissance of the twentieth century is not the task of ninety million people but of one hundred. . . . It is for us or no one to prove that the finest culture is a possibility of democracy."

For others, the Village exuded sophomoric idealism—utopian thinking which could only stall in a personal and political dead end. Daniel Aaron cited the wit who agreed that the Village crew behaved like overgrown college students, with Bill Haywood as their football hero, the *Masses* as
their college paper, and John Reed as their cheerleader. Some, from either the heights of sophisticated ennui, or the prim environs of Marxism, have bemoaned the “lyrical left” as frivolous romantics. But all commentators agree on several points. The prewar Village represented youth in notous rebellion and the arts in transition to modernity. An unstable fusion of culture and radical politics, the Village proclaimed hostility to business and religion—and a shocking new sexual freedom.

As the respected elder-warrior of the pre-1912 Village, Mary Vorse served as a model for the younger men and women enlisting in the ongoing revolt. The early Village dwellers, Floyd Dell recalled, “such as John Sloan and Art Young, Mary Heaton Vorse, Inez Haynes Gillmore [Irwin], Susan Glaspell, Theodore Dreiser . . . already had positions of importance in the realm of art and letters. . . . They had most of the familiar middle class virtues, and in addition some of their own; they were an obviously superior lot of people.”

Five organized groups gave birth to the prewar Village spirit—the Heterodoxy Club, the staff of the Masses, the Liberal Club, the Provincetown Players, and those who met at Mabel Dodge’s Fifth Avenue salon. Mabel Dodge instantly recognized Vorse as a rival force attracting the Village notables; their relationship was cool from the beginning. Dodge thought Vorse “small and domestic.” Vorse thought Dodge “a woman of shallow curiosities about the things in which I was most interested” and “a rich woman amusing herself in meeting celebrities of different kinds”—a kind of liberal version of Vorse’s mother. Thus, Vorse was only an infrequent, and often miffed, visitor at the Dodge evenings.

However, because she was one of the first editors of the Masses, Vorse’s Village status was secure. She helped to found the Heterodoxy Club in 1912, and she and O’Brien were charter members of the Liberal Club, organized in 1913. Two years later, the Provincetown Players began on Vorse’s fish wharf. In part due to her influence, Provincetown had already become, by 1913, a kind of summer resort for the New York intelligentsia.

Though lacking Mabel Dodge’s flair or financial resources, Vorse was the core around whom many of the young intellectuals gathered. The source of her gentle attraction was that she combined in one person a nurturing listener, a successful writer who encouraged budding talents, a sparkling wit, and a companion in revelry that belied her thirty-eight years. Vorse could hold her own as a drinker and a talker into the wee hours. She shimmered with a radicalism so sweetly sincere in its optimism and anger that it entranced the wayward young. Lincoln Steffens and Hutchins Hapgood were also early citizen warriors. But Vorse’s traits inspired in
a way that Steffens's stiff perfection, or Hapgood's heated navel gazing, could not.

In the close confines of the Village, O'Brien and Vorse could find, at almost any hour, on MacDougal Street, or at one of the bars or hotels, a group of like-minded people. "Within a block of my house," John Reed said, "was all the adventure in the world; within a mile was every foreign country." Villagers knew one another, saw one another daily, and enjoyed the intimacy of a rural community without the moral restriction and intellectual rigidity of the small towns from which so many of them had escaped. "There is village intimacy, village curiosity, village gossip," Dell wrote. Susan Glaspell relished "the flavor of those days when one could turn down Greenwich Avenue to the office of the Masses . . . after an encounter with some fanatic at the Liberal Club, or (better luck) tea with Henrietta Rodman, on to the Working Girl's Home (it's a saloon, not a charitable organization) [it was Vorse who named it] or, if the check had come, to the [Hotel] Brevoort." In this atmosphere, it was easy to organize a picket line, a birth control demonstration, or a suffrage march.5

Like the 1960s rebels, the Villagers knew that one of the best ways to show their difference was in dress and home decor. So they painted their apartments in shades of orange and black and wore the Village uniform—bobbed hair, brown socks, and loose flowing gowns or tunics for the women, long hair and soft-collared, bloused shirts for the men. They stayed up all night to discuss poetry or politics, often with wine-soaked fervor. It was not until the 1930s that the moral and political structure of the late nineteenth century collapsed completely in the face of drilling armies and economic disaster. But it was Vorse and her friends in the Greenwich Village of 1912–1917 who tore the first great pieces from America's Victorian armor.

Although artistic revolt, radical politics, and the need to escape from Philistine America accurately characterized the Village leadership, the prime element attracting many to the Village was considerably more mundane. Above all else, the Village allowed a new sexual freedom to those who lived there. Just as in the youth revolt of the 1960s, sexual experimentation was as vital a component of intellectual and social release as was a new political consciousness. Focusing too narrowly upon high culture or political activity, most later commentators have tended to underemphasize this truth, even though the Villagers themselves were quite clear in their assessment of the central excitement in their lives. Much of polite scholarship has also obscured the fact that it was the woman feminist resident of the Village who pioneered and led this sexual rebellion. Rolling in
her wake was her thrilled, but also startled and somewhat uncertain, male companion.

Although her male counterparts gamely supported the new feminist, the men understandably had a difficult time of it, inasmuch as they were forsaking their time-honored property rights to the female body. Still, the sexually radical woman paid the heaviest price. She risked the slanderous epithets branding those women who broke Victorian limits. Because her transgression was considered more shocking than that of the male, her commitment to sexual freedom was more consequential. Recognizing the risk, she also knew that sexual, political, and intellectual freedom had always been associated with each other in the public mind—and she believed herself to be the intellectual cream of her generation.

Of course it was urban life itself, as well as feminism and women’s movement into the public sphere and paid employment, that dissolved the nineteenth-century barriers known to separate middle-class women and men. Village night life, with its restaurants, cabarets, clubs, and casual street life, prompted an easy familiarity with the opposite sex. “Sex itself was not the main object we [Villagers] thought,” wrote Joseph Freeman. “You could have that in Brooklyn, Chicago, Bronxville or Davenport. But in the provinces you could not talk to your lovers.” This communicative freedom allowed Villagers to envision a new male–female friendship, with or without sex, which could be emotionally and intellectually stimulating. Randolph Bourne described the unique “Human Sex” born in the Village. This “was simply a generic name,” he said, “for those whose masculine brutalities and egotisms and feminine pettiness and stupidities have been purged away so that there is left stuff for a genuine comradeship and healthy frank regard and understanding.” This was a far cry indeed from the Victorian sexual order.6

The supreme seriousness with which Village rebels treated their breach of sexual tradition seems strange to jaded moderns. Their fascination with the subject and their excessive delight as the advance guard have the overtones of a smug youngster who has just robbed the cookie jar. One has only to read the memoirs of some of the leading Villagers to catch the sense of self-absorbed, childlike pleasure they found in breaking sexual bounds. Their concentration on genital activity—their own and everyone else’s—bordered on obsession and sometimes threatened to define the limits of their world. In the summer of 1914, for example, when the Western world was dissolving into war, Max Eastman, the admired Village spokesman, was holed up in an apartment in Provincetown. Here he sought “the nature of his being” and endlessly agonized over his sexual life, its origins,
objects, quality, direction, and spiritual content. Yet we must acknowledge
the repressive childhoods from which the Villagers had fled. Henry May
cautions us that “if they sounded a little shrill and self-conscious when
they talked about joy and freedom, we should remember that it took more
courage, in the teens, to advocate free love than it took to preach social
revolution.”

Four ideas shaped the sexual ideology of Greenwich Village at this time.
One was a commitment to “free love.” In Village parlance this did not
mean sexual promiscuity, or anything approaching it. It meant the right
of women to adopt the male behavior of “varietism.” But this premarital
sexual pleasure for women had to be informed by political intent if it was
to meet the Village standard. When the coequal woman bedded down
with her partner, Joseph Freeman wrote, “let her . . . be an enemy of the
established tyrannical order, a socialist, anarchist or communist. Let her
love . . . out of an uncorrupted heart defying the oppressive mechanics of
contemporary society.” Hutchins Hapgood admired the schoolteachers in
the Village who during the daytime taught high school youth to respect
the flag and honor the government, but at night slept with Bill Haywood.
“Many of our brave young women are adapting themselves in this way of
life,” he said, “and thus doing their share toward a final disintegration of
the community.”

The other two components of sexual freedom were of concern primarily
to the woman. Her commitment to economic independence was the best
assurance that she was not pledging her body, as well as her soul, to
her male friend. The women Village leaders also shared a dedication to
working and organizing as women, for women’s causes. Most of them were
active, at one time or another and to varying degrees, in the suffrage, birth
control, and women’s peace movement. For them, sexual freedom was
symbolic of both personal achievement and a new sense of female unity.
“All woman movements and organizations taken together form a part of
feminism,” said Marie Jenney Howe, a founder of the Heterodoxy Club.
“[Feminism means] woman’s struggle for freedom. Its political phase is
woman’s will to vote. Its economic phase is woman’s effort to pay her
own way. Its social phase is woman’s revaluation of outgrown customs and
standards . . . . Feminism means more than a changed world. It means a
changed psychology, the creation of a new consciousness in women.”

Women also took the lead in creating the hotbed of political and artistic
radicalism in the Village. Henrietta Rodman, the radical feminist school-
teacher who founded the Liberal Club, has often been recognized as the
most vital force in the formation of the Village spirit, although, as we

66  1910–1915
shall see, her most important institutional contribution to the creation of Greenwich Village generally has gone unnoticed. Mabel Dodge's deepest interest was sex, but Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, and countless other Village women were far more active in the practice of free love than was Dodge. Edna St. Vincent Millay, a latecomer to the Village, has become the symbol of the feminist who burned her candle at both ends. But the roll call of subversive females is most notable in that nursery of modern feminism—the Heterodoxy Club.

Most historians of American Bohemia agree that when Henrietta Rodman brought the Liberal Club to 132 MacDougal Street in 1913, the Greenwich Village era could be said to have begun. But in fact the Village community had assumed organizational form almost a year earlier, when Rodman and Marie Jenney Howe, along with about twenty other women, including Vorse, formed the Heterodoxy Club. The group was for unorthodox women only, for women “who did things and did them openly,” as Mabel Dodge put it. “We're sick of being specialized to sex,” Marie Jenney Howe said. “We intend simply to be ourselves, not just our little female selves, but our whole, big, human selves.” This unique luncheon club was a meeting place for activist women of widely differing political views who shared a loyalty to women's rights and personal fulfillment. It promised its members complete tolerance of ideas and freedom of expression: “The Tribe of Heterodites is known as a tabooless group. There is the strongest taboo on taboo. Heterodites say that taboo is injurious to free development of the mind and spirit.”

Equally important, the club assured its members that all conversations there were to remain strictly off the record. Club members, most of them famous leaders in their fields, took vast pleasure in the opportunity offered them at Heterodoxy to express their ideas openly without fear of later retribution or misrepresentation by the press. With complete confidence in their privacy, Heterodites debated the burning issues of the day. They also listened to “background talks” given by the members about their childhood, intellectual development, and experience as women. In many ways Heterodoxy functioned like the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s, enabling the women to know one another on intimate terms and to discover their mutual rage—a sympathetic female support group nowhere else available to its members.

Amazingly, in light of the strong personalities and conflicting philosophies involved, the ban on public discussion of the club meetings was faithfully adhered to through the years. Thus, for a time, knowledge of Heterodoxy was all but lost to modern feminists. Even today, historians

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know very little about the actual meetings. But the centrality of the club to the emotional life of its members is evidenced in their memoirs. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn’s comment is typical: “I had worked almost exclusively with men up to this time . . . . It was good for my education and a broadening influence for me to come to know all these splendid ‘Heterodoxy’ members and to share in their enthusiasms. It made me conscious of women and their many accomplishments. My mother, who had great pride in women, was very pleased by my association with them.” Vorse’s papers show that from 1912 through the late 1930s, whenever she was in New York, she adjusted her schedule in order to attend Heterodoxy meetings. Yet, in observance of her pledge of silence, and with the loyalty shown by almost every Heterodoxy member, she left no evidence of her experience there.¹¹

The membership included radicals, anarchists, socialists, and reformers —suffragists, professionals, social workers, writers, artists, and housewives—all of them among the most unruly women of their time. By 1920 the membership had grown to sixty, but it never exceeded seventy-five before the club’s disbandment in the early 1940s. Most of the members were in their late twenties to early forties. Nearly all of them were economically independent; few were well off. Among them were several famous lesbian couples. In Heterodoxy, sexual preference posed no barrier to sisterhood. The anniversary dates of lesbian couples were recognized and the women couples received emotional support from other Heterodoxy members when one of the partners became ill or died. But the majority of the members were heterosexual, with about half having been married at some time in their lives. Their marital patterns were as unorthodox as their lives. Between 1900 and 1920, Heterodoxy members showed a divorce rate of 33 percent.¹²

Heterodoxy meetings brought together the largest group of intellectually exciting American women ever gathered in one room. Behold the astounding collection of the eastern seaboard female intelligentsia. And imagine the clash of nimble minds. Among the writers, beside Vorse, were Rheta Childe Dorr, Zona Gale, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Susan Glaspell, Bessie Beatty, Fannie Hurst, Inez Haynes Irwin, Edna Kenton, Helen Hull, Nina Wilcox Putnam, Anne O’Hagan Shinn, and Ida Wylie. Professional women included the stockbroker Kathleen de Vere Taylor, the anthropologist Elsie Clews Parsons, the psychologists Leta Hollingworth, Grace Potter, and Beatrice Hinkle. Among artists and actresses were Helen Westley, Beatrice Forbes, Robertson Hale, Ida Rauh, Margaret Wycherly, Fola La Follette, and Lou Rogers. Radicals and reformers included Rose
Strunsky, Rose Pastor Stokes, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Sara Josephine Baker. Some of the suffrage leaders were Vida Sutton, Alice Ducr Miller, Inez Milholland, Paula Jakobi, Crystal Eastman, Doris Stevens, Mary Ware Dennett, Alison Turnbull Hopkins, Vira Whitehouse.

With such a feast, Heterodoxy members went to great lengths to attend the biweekly luncheons. For most, it offered their first communal experience of women loving and supporting one another—"one of the emotional treasures of life which all women desire, many of them fear, some of them seek, and a few of them find," their Heterodoxy Album stated.13

Josephine Baker, head of the Bureau of Child Hygiene in New York City, was one of the few members who broke the "off the record" rule. She tells in her autobiography of how Amy Lowell, lesbian and Brahmin, was asked to read her poems to Heterodoxy. Member after member requested selections from Lowell, which were so emotionally received that the socialist leader Rose Pastor Stokes actually collapsed in sobs.

Lowell couldn’t go on. "I’m through," she said, glowering. "They told me I was to be speaking to a group of intellectual, realistic, tough-minded leaders in the woman’s world. Instead I find a group that wants nothing but my more sentimental things. Good afternoon!" Lowell poked her cigar into her mouth and left the meeting. This memorable occasion, Baker must have felt, was too good to keep to herself. The memoirs of other Heterodites present few details of the club meetings, but many speak of Howe constantly banging her gavel as she attempted to bring order to the uproarious proceedings.14

Nearly all the charter members of Heterodoxy had met as suffrage workers. Marie Jenney Howe proclaimed her deviance when she trained as a minister in the 1890s. When she moved to New York in 1910, she became active in the suffrage movement and the National Consumers' League, a group of middle-class women who sought to improve conditions for working women. In 1910 she became chair of the Twenty-fifth Assembly District division of the New York City Woman Suffrage Party. It became known as the "Fighting Twenty-fifth" under her leadership. Here she met women like Vorse, Crystal Eastman, and Henrietta Rodman.

Many Heterodites left the mainstream suffrage organization in the war years and joined the more militant National Woman’s Party. Several club members were among the first suffragists arrested for picketing the White House. Four received jail sentences; several were force fed while in prison. Later, members of Heterodoxy helped to form the leadership of the Woman’s Peace Party and the international women’s peace movement. Radicalism “was in the air,” Vorse recalled years later: “It was the time of
Hull House. It was the time of social change. It was a natural thing. It was a time when great quantities of our people joined with the Socialist Party. . . . Rose Strunsky, a Heterodoxy member, had a lot of dynamite in her room that she'd cached for someone. The owner of the house would come in and say 'I smell something stuffy in here!' Being social minded—you didn't have to search at all, as you might today, because it was in the air. It was natural." 

The first group effort of Heterodoxy, soon after the formation of the club, was to sponsor a series of public forums in which suffragists were given five minutes to answer a trite objection to female suffrage. The staccato speeches of these articulate women proved to be a brilliant publicity tactic. Heterodoxy members went on to address wider feminist issues at the famous mass gatherings at Cooper Union in 1914. Here club members spoke on topics like "What Feminism Means to Me" and "Breaking into the Human Race."

The coming of war to Europe in 1914 shook the club. Rheta Childe Dorr and Charlotte Perkins Gilman resigned in protest over the opposition to war expressed at Heterodoxy meetings by members like Rose Pastor Stokes and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. Stokes was later sentenced to ten years under the Espionage Act. Her sole crime was writing to a Kansas newspaper: "I am for the people, while the Government is for the profiteers." Flynn was also arrested under the Espionage Act during the 1917 roundup of labor organizers.

The war issue polarized and shattered the male-led left groups like the Socialist Party. But at Heterodoxy, there was no corresponding fracture, for the women were bound by more encompassing ties than politics alone. Mabel Dodge told how Fola La Follette, daughter of the progressive Wisconsin Senator Robert La Follette, was persecuted during the war for her father's "pro-German" attitudes. Fola rarely attended public events, Dodge said, but came to Heterodoxy luncheons: "That was a safe refuge. Everyone was glad to see her, no one there paid any attention to war hysterias. Fola was Fola, as she had always been. She would come in looking somewhat pale and pinched, but after an hour in that warm fellowship her face flushed and her muscles relaxed. It must have been a comfort to come there." 

During the war, members of Heterodoxy were harassed and kept under surveillance by the Bureau of Investigation, the forerunner of the FBI, because the club contained so many radicals and pacifists. Josephine Baker remembered how Heterodoxy had to shift its meeting place every week to keep from being watched. "It was just like an E. Phillips Oppenheim
novel,” Baker wrote. “All except the characters, that is. My colleagues in
treason were not sloe-eyed countesses, with small pearl-handled revolvers
in their pocketbooks, but people like Crystal Eastman, Fannie Hurst, Rose
Pastor Stokes, Inez Haynes Irwin, Fola La Follette, and Mabel Dodge
Luhan.” 17

The members of Heterodoxy moved far beyond the fight for the vote
and envisioned the women’s movement as a complete social revolution.
Marie Jenney Howe wrote in 1914: “The feminist does not find all of life
in a love affair. . . . She is able to be happy though unmarried. She does
not adjust her life according to the masculine standard. . . . She thinks for
herself. . . . Feminism is woman’s part of the struggle toward humanism.
After feminism—humanism.” Heterodite Edna Kenton laid it on the line:
“Feminism is sex-war; who doubts it. . . . For women are thinking at last
not on man’s terms, but in their own, and thought in a slave class is always
dynamic.” 18

A disapproving Hutchins Hapgood was one of those who guessed that
Heterodoxy members were “shunted on the sliding path” from the suffrage
movement into the “passionate excesses” of feminism. In Heterodoxy’s no
man’s land, Hapgood reported, the “vital lie” was developed “that men had
consciously oppressed women since the beginning of time, enslaved and
exploited them.” His suspicion was justified. “What a Unity this group of
free-willed, self-willed women has become,” Heterodoxy members wrote
in 1920. “We have been scarcely aware of what has been happening to us
in this little order, seemingly so loosely held together, so casual, so free.”
A decade later, when Ella Winter spoke at Heterodoxy, she remembered:
“I felt a camaraderie among these women (‘girls’ they called themselves),
an understanding almost like a secret that could be shared because men
weren’t around.” 19

Many of the Heterodites were socialists, but these knew that feminists
would face a bitter separate struggle even within a socialist state. The
contacts at Heterodoxy refined and challenged the political ideas of the
members. And all the Heterodites threatened the older stereotype of the
spinster reformer. The new women of the Village were apt to combine
professional training with sexual freedom, or activism with radical goals.
Their socialist beliefs gave them a class analysis of root economic ills.
Their feminism gave them a value system for socialist culture as a whole.

A few months after the formation of Heterodoxy, Henrietta Rodman
organized the Liberal Club in Greenwich Village. Although H. L. Menc-
ken described it as the home “of all the tin pot revolutionaries and ad-
vanced sophomoric thinkers in New York,” its members called it “A Meet-
ing Place for Those Interested in New Ideas.” Rodman also brought with her to the Liberal Club the band of independent Heterodites. This faction comprised fourteen of the twenty-three women members of the Liberal Club. Rodman “was especially in touch with the university crowd and the social settlement crowd and the Socialist crowd,” Floyd Dell wrote, “and it was these . . . who mixing with the literary and artistic crowds in the Liberal Club, gave the Village a new character entirely. . . . Ideas now began to explode there, and soon were heard all the way across the continent.”

The coed Liberal Club encouraged debate, poetry reading, drama production, and socializing. “Of novelists and story writers the Club boasted a round dozen or more. One of the most popular was Mary Heaton Vorse,” Lawrence Langer remembered. The walls of the Liberal Club also featured the latest in modern art. An old electric piano allowed dancing in a close embrace—the modern style. Langer recalled that holding tightly to one another was not only sexually invigorating but also a political statement: “As you clutched your feminine partner and led her through the crowded dance floor at the Club, you felt you were doing something for the progress of humanity, as well as for yourself and, in some cases, for her.”

If the Liberal Club was the coed social center of the Village, the Masses was its intellectual organ. Founded in 1911, the magazine was first cooperatively owned by Vorse, Louis Untermeyer, Ellis O. Jones, Inez Haynes Irwin, and Horatio Winslow. The artists on the staff were John Sloan, Art Young, Maurice Becker, Charles Winter, and Alice Beach. The first issues published fiction by European authors and American socialists and muckrakers. A Masses cover of 1912 featured Vorse’s story “The Day of a Man.” Her tale portrayed a poor and unemployed worker, driven to drink by despair, but refusing work offered him by a patronizing Christian do-gooder. The magazine provided artists and writers, who received no pay, a place to publish the work that the mainstream media would not accept, but by the summer of 1912 the magazine was bankrupt.

The original group decided to reorganize. They chose Max Eastman as editor in August 1912, primarily because Art Young had told them that it was Eastman who had organized the Men’s League for Women Suffrage. Vorse signed the now-celebrated note to Eastman: “You are elected editor of The Masses. No pay.” With Eastman’s appearance, the magazine assumed its legendary status in American cultural history. Eastman, a recent pupil of John Dewey at Columbia University, was enthralled by his first meeting with the staff. “The talk was radical,” he recalled. “It was
free-thought talk and not just socialism. There was a sense of universal revolt and regeneration, of the just-before-dawn of a new day in American art and literature and living-of-life as well as in politics. I never more warmly enjoyed liking people and being liked by them.” Eastman recognized Vorse as “the popular story writer” and found her “pale and fragile.

. . . Although abounding in energy [she] had a permanently weary look.”

The resurrected Masses became the rebel-Bible of its nearly sixteen thousand readers, many of them in small towns across the nation. It attacked capitalism and gentility, spoke for feminism, birth control, and artistic realism. The journal instructed its supporters to join the class struggle. It pulled no punches. A revolution, Eastman wrote, “is a sweeping change accomplished through the conquest of power by a subjected class.”

The Masses offended patriotic, religious, business, and aesthetic conventions. Its combination of high gaiety and revolutionary fervor was expressed best in its political cartoons. These portrayed the capitalist press as a brothel, or showed Christ lecturing on the rights of labor, or pictured an emaciated working girl kissing the fat, greasy hand of a priest, or a bloated industrialist trampling on the bodies of the poor. Within two years, the magazine had been banned from university bookstores, expelled from subway stations, excluded from Canadian mails, and swept from public libraries.

The devotion of the Masses to feminism was deep and consistent. In the first issue after Eastman’s arrival on the staff, Vorse published an attack on the Goddess of Domesticity. Her target was the “sisterhood of amalgamated wives”—the women whose allegiance to Womanhood made them so uninteresting, intolerant, and sexless that their husbands fled from them. Traditional marriage, Vorse taught (and she must have been thinking of her experience with Bert), made women into domestic drudges, parlor objects, or barriers to social change. By contrast, the advanced Village Woman was free to seek unlimited goals. The Masses’ comments on the economic cause of prostitution, the need for birth control, and the value of liberated women made it very different from the orthodox socialist publications of the time, which showed little interest in such matters.

The monthly editorial meetings, at which contributions were criticized and accepted or rejected, were stormy events. The lively gatherings attracted close friends of the staff like Clarence Darrow, Bill Haywood, or Carl Sandberg. Few journals can claim such scrutiny. In the later years of the magazine’s existence, before it was closed down by federal authorities in 1917, these meetings were most often held at Vorse’s house. Here the
two factions, the writers and the artists, divided over questions of content and format. The artists pressed aesthetic considerations; the writers were for more militant political agitation. First the cartoons were submitted to the group as a whole and then noisily voted on, often with rude comments and howls of derision. Then would come the turn of the writers.

"Nothing more horrible can be imagined than having one's pieces torn to bits by the artists at a Masses meeting," Vorse said. Nevertheless,

there was no greater reward than having them stop their groans and catcalls and give close attention; then laughter if the piece was funny, finally applause. This was the way that the decisions were come by in the first years. The meetings were large and tumultuous. There would arise from the clamor and strife of those meetings something vigorous and creative of which we were all a part. The flame was present here too, as well as in Lawrence.  

In the summer of 1912, Vorse and O'Brien left the Village for their first shared experience of Provincetown. They remained there for eight months in an idyllic interlude. The house Vorse loved assumed a different atmosphere, free now of marital and financial tensions. Her tendency to closet her emotions had been strengthened during the unhappy last years with Bert and her time as sole breadwinner. It seemed to Vorse that Joe O'Brien's presence opened her spirit in a way she had never before known. Her descriptions of him are cast in metaphors of clear light, opening spaces, and fresh air. In the few years they were together, Vorse formed her lifelong habit to "try and see events through his intelligence, which so quickly pierced sham and subterfuge" in an assessment of reality. Far more than anyone she had known well, Vorse said, O'Brien "wanted light and truth and looked at the world with a long view."

In that summer the children were eleven and five. O'Brien was an eager new stepfather. Vorse felt vast relief at sharing the burdens of child care. Best of all, O'Brien genuinely supported her writing efforts and need to achieve.

He had a real flair for domesticity. Unlike Vorse, he found housekeeping both easy and enjoyable. He at once began renovation—knocking down walls, adding a workshop and study. Soon they had a children's playroom, window boxes, and a garden and chickens. She marveled at the unconscious ease with which he brought shine to the house, "the book he put in place or the picture he straightened or the garment he picked up... as if he weren't really thinking about it at all." All her life as a mother, Vorse had felt pressed, resentful, and inadequate. In imitation
of her childhood experience (but without the ample funds that had been available to her own mother), Vorse entrusted the daily care of her children to a procession of nurses and maids as much as possible. She thus sought to duplicate her mother's ordered domesticity, while also trying to find time to write and to earn her family's living. The struggle to perform both roles had been unsuccessful in many respects. Automatically, Joe O'Brien straightened her life as he straightened her house. "Order followed him around like a dog. . . . The house was rich in children," she wrote. Living was full, precious, and symmetrical.26

In the summer of 1913, Vorse and her household, Neith Boyce and her husband, Hutchins Hapgood, along with Susan Glaspell and Jig Cook, formed the nucleus that would bring the town its renown as a suburb for the Villagers and as the birthplace of the Provincetown Players. That season Vorse's house was busy with the comings and goings of friends, most of them writers filled with discussion of plots and characters, all of them bubbling with talk of socialism and the workers' struggle. Wilbur Daniel Steele roomed at Vorse's house again and wrote his stories, always sure that every word he produced would be his last, his gloom alternating with periods of raucous gaiety. Joe was writing a book. Mary ground out her money-making "lollypops"—short stories for the women's magazines. Joining the three in Mary's kitchen for frequent blueberry-pie orgies was young Sinclair Lewis, who was writing his first novel.

Just as she had encouraged Steele, Vorse inspired the writing of the lanky outcast, "Red" Lewis. He later credited her with giving him the recipe for writing that he passed on in lectures and articles to young hopefuls: "Place your unpaid bills before you, then apply the seat of your pants to the seat of the chair—and write." The support and practical advice of someone with Vorse's literary sophistication could never be repaid, Lewis wrote, "except in lasting affection." The gawky, graceless Lewis was nine years her junior. Over the years he often appeared at her door in New York or Provincetown with the simple statement that he wanted to be with her. It was Vorse, Lewis said, who "taught me the three Rs—Realism, Roughness and Right-Thinking."27

In February 1913, Joe and Mary left Provincetown for Europe. Vorse had an assignment from the Woman's Home Companion to do a series on the Montessori method of education being developed in Italy. After a brief vacation in Morocco, the trip was climaxd by her reporting of the international women's suffrage convention in Budapest.

The sudden explosion of American interest in Maria Montessori's work reached a peak in 1913 and 1914. First developed in schools for deprived
children of the poor, the Montessori method claimed to teach three-, four-, and five-year-olds disciplined behavior, as well as how to read and write, in as little as six weeks. The fundamental principle was the release of the spontaneous interests of the child. Child development was thus purported to proceed primarily from the liberation of the child’s capacities, rather than through interaction with nurturing adults or through the more rigid control traditionally practiced in the classroom. The new pedagogy looked to many progressive-minded Americans like an easy route to fundamental reform. It seemed possible to use the method for Americanizing the large numbers of immigrants arriving from Europe, alleviating social inequalities of class, and bringing everyone to middle-class respectability—instantly and at little cost. Vorse was converted to the method and given every facility for observation of the experimental schools. Her series of articles in the *Woman’s Home Companion* did much to popularize the new education among American mothers.

As Vorse described the Montessori method to American women, she stressed that strict controls stifled children’s natural, harmonious development. Some American critics of Montessori were already beginning to point out that self-control could not be learned through self-indulgence. But Vorse voiced little understanding of the possible misapplication of Montessori’s teachings. Indeed, Vorse’s description of Montessori’s work came close to resembling Floyd Dell’s facetious account of the new education. “Why, my dear,” Dell wrote, “it’s simply a lot of things. And you put the baby down among the things—and you never have to bother about it again.”

Vorse’s Montessori articles reflected her guilty hope that her own children actually had little need of discipline or of her constant presence and attention to parenting.

Actually, O’Brien was a far wiser and more patient disciplinarian than Vorse. To her great relief, he assumed much of the responsibility for her children’s nurturance. He published a series of stories on his experience as a Montessori father. O’Brien described a household in which the busy mother retreats from her rambunctious children in order to work, while he, the only remaining adult guide, is left to maintain family order through the application of old-fashioned methods. “Look out,” the fictional Heaton Vorse warns his younger sister, “you may have a Montessori mother, but you’ve got a mighty sore father!” The son adds, “My mother has an angel face, her little brain is full of grace. My mother’s never cross with me. She only hollers ‘Let me be!’”

Vorse and O’Brien left the Montessori school for Budapest where Vorse was to report the International Woman Suffrage Alliance meeting.
seventh of its kind, the meeting drew delegates from twenty-six countries and an audience of three thousand. The year 1913 marked the height of militance in the English suffrage movement. The Pankhurst-led suffragists had moved from public demonstration, window breaking, and hunger strikes, to being arrested for arson. In June a radical suffragist had thrown herself under the king's horse at Ascot, dying in protest against the government's failure to provide votes for women. Vorse delighted in the Pankhurst movement's turn to lawbreaking. She publicly attacked the propriety of the American suffrage movement and privately hoped that the English militants would not win suffrage too soon, for they were doing so much to destroy the demon of respectability that kept American women in thrall. "Respectability is really what is the matter with marriage," she wrote Arthur Bullard. "The moment we have learned to keep respectability from our homes, we will have happy ones. I am trying for nothing so much in my own personal life, as how not to be respectable when married. Up to now I have succeeded quite well." 30

Thus, when Vorse arrived at the Budapest convention, she was mildly contemptuous of the relatively conservative nature of its American leaders, women like Jane Addams, Carrie Catt, and Anna Shaw. Yet she also came to the meeting with curiosity, eager to meet these personalities. She did not anticipate that she would be "stirred and thrilled to the depths."

Vorse was unexpectedly moved by her first experience of a large congregation of women, of all classes and ages, who had gathered to proclaim female solidarity and worth. "It seemed as if I had been present at something at once deeply touching and deeply thrilling," she wrote, "as though I had watched a young and hopeful army getting ready to march on to victories of peace such as no other army had dreamed of attempting; as though I had watched, too, one of the most impressive things in the world—the loosing of long pent up and hitherto unused forces." As at Venice and Lawrence, her carefully controlled self vibrated to masses in motion.

Vorse suddenly felt passionate oneness with women who joined to defy male power. The Fisher-Bastion, where the women met, was set high on a hill between the Gothic spire of the Church of St. Mathias and the ministry buildings. Vorse was impressed by the symbolism of Church and State, magnificently set side by side—that Church and that State that had at all times denied women equality, on the grounds that women were unable to defend the ramparts of the nation-tribe against the attacks of other males.

Yet no woman at the meeting who fought for the franchise, Vorse felt, could ever be reproached for not understanding politics: "There was
no shifty trick or turn with which she will be unfamiliar, since all have been used against her." Observing the assembly, and remembering that it had been merely ten years ago that she had first traveled without father or husband, Vorse marveled that it was only in the past few years "that women had been able to move freely up and down the earth in such large numbers." 

Like many women since, Vorse was struck by the unique emotional tone of an assembly composed of women. Gone was the ego posturing, the barely veiled aggression, the pompous, dissembling rhetoric common to male gatherings. Throughout the women's meeting Vorse found "present a certain quality of informality; there was seriousness, but no solemnity, and there was much wit and humor. Perhaps the entrance of women into public life will put an end to the quivering voice, the chest thumping . . . and the other oratorical tricks that have so long made the public utterances of the average man so difficult to listen to," she wrote. The meeting at Budapest propelled Vorse into radical feminist thought. It seemed to her that it was against the "worst of all tyrannies"—the oppression of women by men—"that the highest forces and the deepest feeling of this Congress of women was directed." Vorse's realization of the courage and beauty of women was consistent with her awakened anger at the hierarchy of male controls. Previously, she had frequently written with distaste of the tradition-bound woman who unthinkingly opposed industrial justice and progressive reform. As a deviant woman from the Village, Vorse had never considered solidarity with all women; rather she had often celebrated her distance from the majority of them, especially those of her own class.

But in her coverage of the Budapest meeting, one can clearly sense the emotional shock that accompanied her acceptance of the spirit of sisterhood. Her descriptions of the women delegates are tender and respectful. She was inspired by two "wonderfully touching" elements. One, the group of gallant old suffrage leaders, each accompanied by the ghosts of their former companions, "women now dead who fought when no victory was in sight . . . women who for years unflinchingly faced . . . ridicule and misunderstanding." The other affecting element was the group of Hungarian peasant women, their heads covered with handkerchiefs. They had been willing to walk over 100 miles to attend the meeting. Their shrewd faces reflected "the sacrifices that had been made by no one can tell how many other women." The "white aspiring flame" of women united was ignited at the congress, she wrote. It sprang out in the meeting's protest against unwanted motherhood, against the existence of class differences between women, against the persecution of prostitutes.
Vorse was indelibly stamped by her impression of the women's meeting of 1913. She would meet again with a women's convention within a year and a half, this time to protest war. For some years to come, Vorse would even cherish the hope that women across the world might combine to stop the ancient slaughter between males. After 1913, she would discuss the average female's submission to cultural mores with more sympathy and understanding. Permanently kindled too was her mistrust of the male structuring of intellectual and political values. Perhaps the most immediate consequence of her feminist vision, however, would be her attention to the part played by women in the industrial conflicts she would report in the years to come.