John Reed and the Writing of Revolution

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Ten Days That Shook the World

The Rising Tide of Revolution

So. Lenin and the Petrograd workers had decided on insurrection, the Petrograd Soviet had overthrown the Provisional Government, and thrust the coup d’état upon the Congress of the Soviets. Now there was all great Russia to win—and then the world! Would Russia follow and rise? And the world—what of it? Would the peoples answer and rise, a red world-tide?

—John Reed, Ten Days That Shook the World

Ten Days That Shook the World is John Reed’s attempt to measure the rising tide of class revolution in what he believed was to be a transformed universe. Within that universe, “human society flowed molten in primal heat, and from the tossing sea of flame was emerging the class struggle, stark and pitiless—and the slowly cooling crust of a new planet” (717–18). Subsequent events in the Soviet Union and the eventual collapse of the Soviet system by necessity inject a certain measure of irony to any contemporary reading of Ten Days. Yet the author of Ten Days, as in all of his best writing, renders it impossible for the reader to separate his politics from his poetics. Assessing the achievement of Ten Days That Shook the World—the book that built Reed’s lasting reputation and in many ways still defines his contemporary reception—therefore requires that we judge the book’s reporting and writing achievements against the personal and political transformation forged in its author by the events of November 6–15, 1917.¹
Although he had lost all but the most marginal of his writing markets and faced federal indictments for sedition, the Reed who climbed to the second floor above the Greenwich Village Inn during the last two months of 1918 to write his account of the Bolshevik Revolution was far more sure of his own identity than the younger Reed who had written *Insurgent Mexico*. As detailed in chapter 4, Reed, before the end of 1918, already was disinherited from the ruling interests of the United States and had been abandoned by most of his countrymen. By the time he wrote *Ten Days*, Reed seems to be past worrying about his acceptance by his nation and instead looks with hope toward worldwide revolution. A year earlier, in “Almost Thirty,” Reed had declared: “I have not any God and don’t want one; faith is only another word for finding oneself” (143–44). Now he seems sure of his citizenship on the new earth he believed was being formed in Soviet Russia, a significant change from his status in Mexico, where he was always the outsider looking in, unable to shed the privilege of race and nationality, no matter how deeply he buried it in his fictions.

Reed therefore constructs interlinking metaphors—the figures of rising tide and revolutionary fire—in *Ten Days That Shook the World* to foreground that personal and political transformation. Together, these metaphors produce the steam that powers the turbines of change. When Russian reformers are overwhelmed by revolutionary workers at Tsarskoye Selo, “hordes of the people, gathering in the darkness around the battle, rose like a tide and poured over the enemy” (776–77). On the streets of Petrograd, the Russian people fight for newspapers with the latest political information, “pouring in slow voluble tides up and down the Nevsky” (625). Before the storming of the Winter Palace, “the tides of people flowed endlessly” (640–41). When Reed joins the revolutionaries in overwhelming the palace, he is “carried along by the eager wave of men” (675). Later, at revolutionary headquarters, “[t]he hall of meetings was crowded with people roaring like the sea” (681). The morning after the Winter Palace is taken, “[d]ay broke on a city in the wildest excitement and confusion, a whole nation heaving up in long hissing swells of storm” (685). And of the end of the ten days, when Moscow’s Kremlin falls to the Bolsheviks, Reed wrote “This was the Day of the People, the rumor of whose coming was thunderous as surf. . . . Already through the Iberian Gate a human river was flowing [into] the vast Red Square” (806; Reed’s ellipsis). Finally, Reed summons “a river of red banners, bearing words of hope and brotherhood and stupendous prophesies . . . the proletarian tide” (808).

Reed’s many water images are kindled to a revolutionary boil by the fires of insurrection: “molten primal heat”; “tossing seas of flame” (717–18). Elsewhere, the engine of revolution “buzzed and hummed all day and all night . . . hummed like a gigantic hive” (653). And at the Bolsheviks’ headquarters, “the
Military Revolutionary Committee flashed baleful fire, pounding like an overloaded dynamo” (735). Like Henry Adams, Reed seems to see this dynamo as “wholly new,” a “symbol of infinity,” a “moral force,” “humming an audible warning” (H. Adams, 380).² And as with Adams and his patron Samuel Pierpont Langley a generation earlier, Reed is intrigued by the transformational or “anarchical” forces he discovers in the dynamo of revolution: “Always the methodical muffled boom of cannon through the windows, and the delegates, screaming at each other,” Reed observes. “So, with the crash of artillery, in the dark, with hatred, and fear, and reckless daring, new Russia was being born” (667).

Reed’s belief that he may have found a new world in Bolshevik insurgency developed almost immediately after he arrived in Petrograd in September 1917. Carrying credentials from the New York Call and The Masses, Reed met Albert Rhys Williams, a reporter for the New York Post, who was an old acquaintance of Reed’s from labor coverage in New Jersey and Massachusetts and from various meetings around Greenwich Village. Williams’s memories of that exciting fall in Petrograd (published in 1969 in his Journey into Revolution: Petrograd, 1917–1918) provide a first-rate perspective on Reed’s romance with the Bolsheviks. Williams recalls that Reed “viewed me as almost a veteran on the scene, and he immediately proceeded, like the good reporter he was, to sound me out on all I had seen and heard and much that I had not” (22). According to Williams, the two reporters made a good team because “Reed always came to grips with the meanest part of the problem; I always saw the glowing overall picture” (39). Williams says he and Reed were the only American reporters in Petrograd who put socialism before patriotism—that is, before the United States’ need to prosecute its role in World War I successfully (35). Having already studied the speeches of Lenin and Trotsky, Williams communicated his enthusiasm to Reed, who told Williams: “You sound like a full-blown Bolshevik” (34). Somewhat nettled, Williams retorted, as best as he can recall: “No, I was not a Bolshevik, I said, if he wanted to be literal about it. And then, before I knew it, I had made a decision and found myself saying, almost belligerently, for some reason: ‘I expect to be working with them, just the same, when they find something for me to do, because as I see it, the Bolsheviks want the sort of social justice you and I want. They want it more passionately than any other group here. They want it now’” (35; Williams’s emphasis).

The two reporters’ support of the Bolsheviks seemed to galvanize around two issues: their program to seize the means of production and their refusal to fight World War I under the terms set by the allied armies. As the two men mulled the issues over in their minds, Williams recalls, they became more and
more convinced that Lenin’s boldness might pay off in what they believed would be a far-reaching revolution. “[T]he Bolsheviki were the only party in Russia with a constructive program and the power to impose it on the country,” Reed would write in his preface to Ten Days. “If they had not succeeded to the Government when they did, there is little doubt in my mind that the armies of imperial Germany would have been in Petrograd and Moscow in December, and Russia would again be ridden by a Czar” (579).

Williams remembers a key moment when one door seemed to open in Reed’s mind and another door closed: “Reed burst into a guffaw, slapped me on the back, and wanted to know: ‘Do you think we’ll ever make the grade? Or are we tagged for life—the humanitarians, the dilettantes?’” Reed then grew moody, according to Williams: “‘What counts is what we do when we go home,’ he said somberly. ‘It’s easy to be fired by things here. We’ll wind up thinking we’re great revolutionaries. And at home?’ He laughed bitterly. ‘Oh, I can always put on another pageant’” (41).

The most interesting point in Williams’s assessment of Reed is how anxious the latter was to prove his worthiness to some greater cause. As in Mexico, Reed expended a great deal of emotional capital in earning his stripes among the insurgents he covered. Although he does not make quite so direct an issue of his agenda in Ten Days That Shook the World as in Insurgent Mexico, that underly­ing urge—as well as Reed’s genuine belief that a new world was at hand—explains much about how Reed the reporter and writer covered the Russian Revolution. Williams recalls an anecdote that makes Reed’s impulse clear. The two reporters met a worker who, like them, was less than impressed by a Menshevik speech he had just heard at the Duma (the Petrograd council controlled by reformers). According to Williams, Reed decided to test the worker: “Ask him if you’re right. If no one but the Bolsheviks wants the job now.” Williams recalls the worker regarding the two Western reporters suspiciously. He “spat out a sunflower seed or two, shook his head, and said slowly, ‘I don’t know why you ask. This is not my government. This may be your war, but it’s not mine. You are bourgeois’—he called it burzhuy—‘and I am a worker.’ And he stalked away. Reed was delighted” (29–30). In retrospect, it is easy to see that Reed spent the fall and winter of 1917–18 trying to earn acceptance from men like the Bolshevik worker. “It was Reed’s curse,” Williams observed, “to have this contradiction in his personality—a buoyant, lighthearted spirit, a creative talent, and at the same time a mocking self-judge within him. It had driven him into many unexplored channels in which he found success too easily; the judge was not satisfied” (41–42). Building on this biographical context, this chapter makes a fresh reading of Ten Days That Shook the World. I examine Reed’s attempt to
make good with his impulse for Bolshevism—to write a unified narrative adequate to what he believed was the rising tide of world insurgency and the fire of revolutionary possibility.

Structurally, the book is built around the swell, ebb, and inevitable triumph of revolutionary events: beginning with the Bolshevik uprising in Petrograd on November 6, 1917, and culminating with the White Guards’ surrender of Moscow’s Kremlin to the Bolsheviks ten days later, on November 15. Artistically, Reed weaves his ten days of drama from extraordinarily careful reporting, evidenced by hundreds of pages of handwritten notes and boxes of speeches, flyers, and handbills that the journalist took home with him from Russia. That strength of evidence provides the backbone for Reed’s skillful narrative effect; he foregrounds the inevitability of history by constructing a dramatic immediacy in the narrative within a background of historical determinacy. That is, the book achieves genuine present-moment suspense even though most of its readers know that the Bolsheviks already had prevailed. Finally, Reed manages these techniques from his own gently ironic narrative persona: a persona that completes the political and artistic transformation that Reed began in Insurgent Mexico and that had altered significantly in his political opposition to the war in Europe.

Smolny and the Duma: The Structure of Revolutionary Inevitability

*Ten Days That Shook the World* is the only one of Reed’s three books that was conceived and designed as a volume from the moment the author began its writing. Unlike *Insurgent Mexico* and *The War in Eastern Europe*, which Reed later arranged from the monthly dispatches he had published in *Metropolitan* magazine, *Ten Days That Shook the World* took shape in Reed’s mind virtually in a single sitting—the two months he spent above the Greenwich Village Inn during November and December 1918. Surrounded by pamphlets, newspapers, notes, and memories, Reed wrote chapter after chapter whose titles reawaken the real-life drama of what he called the “pageant of the rising of the Russian masses” (604): “The Coming Storm,” “On the Eve,” “The Fall of the Provisional Government,” “Plunging Ahead,” “The Committee for Salvation,” “The Revolutionary Front,” “Counter-Revolution,” “Victory.” Reed’s overall narrative effect is one of present suspense (the revolutionary struggle) within a web of past-tense historical inevitability, and the book’s title reflects this strategy: *Ten Days That . . . Shook the World*. *Ten Days* gains from having a clearer structural plan than
those of Reed’s other books. As in all of his best writing, Reed strives in Ten Days to weave his narrative drama within a larger fabric of historical background and research—even as he had built the sawdust trail drama of his Billy Sunday profile atop the systematic examination of the evangelist’s economic and political construction.

The Reed who wrote Ten Days expects quite a bit from his readers. He imagines that readers will wade through page after page of “Notes and Explanations” about the byzantine inner workings of Russian politics before they arrive at two background chapters outlining the events between the overthrow of the Russian czar in March 1917 and the developing political crisis that by early November had begun to overwhelm Russia. “I am aware that these two chapters make difficult reading,” he admits, “but they are essential to an understanding of what follows” (575). Perhaps Reed imagines that his readers will make this commitment to history because he knows that the inner core of his drama will succeed: ten days and nights filled with the march of boots in the streets, the fall of the Winter Palace, the great orations and heated arguments in the municipal halls of Petrograd, the massing of loyalist troops against the Bolsheviks on the outskirts of the city, and the eventual flight of reformist Alexander Kerensky as the Bolsheviks consolidate power in Petrograd and spread out across Russia. That Ten Days That Shook the World—despite its exacting “notes and explanations” and some eighty-four pages of historical minutia in its sprawling appendix—has remained in public circulation since its publication in 1919 appears to vindicate Reed’s confidence in his story and his readers. “No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism,” he writes in the book’s preface, “it is undeniable that the Russian Revolution is one of the great events of human history. . . . In the struggle my sympathies were not neutral. But in telling the story of those great days I have tried to see events with the eye of a conscientious reporter, interested in setting down the truth” (580).

Reed’s belief in his project is further underscored by his assertion that Ten Days will be but the first of several volumes about the Russian Revolution and will be continued in Kornilov to Brest-Litovsk, a second history whose scope was to carry to the German armistice (575). Reed’s zest for the arcana of Russian politics seems to contradict the conclusion of his biographer that “it would be a serious mistake to see him basically as a political animal. The regular activities of that normally practical process—elections, campaigns, coalitions, compromises—never held his attention long” (Rosenstone, “Reform and Radicalism,” 144). In Russia, at least, Reed had found that commitment.

Within the core ten days of the finished book, Reed orchestrates two competing motifs that swell, ebb, and swell again until the central movement of Ten Days That Shook the World
Days—the rising tide of revolutionary transformation—becomes inevitable. At the center of the competing motifs are the Duma (the municipal council of Petrograd that at the beginning of the book is under the control of the Mensheviks, the constitutional democrats, and other reformers loyal to Kerensky [587]) and Smolny Institute (the former women’s college on the banks of the Neva River, where the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies and the Petrograd Soviet are plotting the Bolshevik takeover of Russia [618]). Although each of these coalitions is formed from a bewildering array of smaller and somewhat fluid factions, Reed employs metonymy for clarity and often refers to the competing factions simply as the Duma and Smolny. The Duma remained committed to the political transformation of Russian society following the March overthrow of the czar, Reed concludes, while the Bolshevik factions at Smolny became increasingly committed to its economic transformation. In Reed’s most concrete terms, the Duma’s “only reason for failure to hold the masses during the Bolshevik Revolution was the general decline in influence of all purely political representation in the face of the growing power of organizations based on economic groups” (587; Reed’s emphases).

Ten Days That Shook the World thus gains its structural momentum from the shifting political fortunes of the Duma and Smolny during the ten days of November 6–15. Early in this central chronology, Smolny-backed Bolshevik revolutionaries wrest control of the Winter Palace in Petrograd from pro-Duma Kerensky reformers. At its midpoint, this more extreme form of revolution seems almost certain to be quashed as Duma forces align with parties loyal to the czar so as to counter the Bolsheviks. Finally, however, the Smolny forces prevail: Kerensky is sent packing, while the Kremlin in Moscow falls to the Reds amid all-night funerals for revolutionary workers and soldiers. Throughout the core scenes of his narrative, Reed employs an “I was there” eyewitness strategy as he hurries through the darkening Petrograd streets—first to the Duma and then to “great Smolny” (653). He frequently addresses his readers directly in the text, presents political arguments as virtually Socratic dialogues, and reprints texts and speeches verbatim to present a pastiche of revolution.

The ten days of Reed’s book begin in the “On the Eve” chapter (November 6). Reed witnesses Kerensky’s “passionate and almost incoherent” (643) speech at the Marinsky Palace in which the reformist leader states his “firm conviction that the Provisional Government, which defends at this moment our new liberty, that the new Russian state, destined to a brilliant future, will find unanimous support except among those who have never dared to face the truth” (645–46). Against Kerensky’s assertion, Reed pits Leon Trotsky, with whom he had gained an exclusive interview some days earlier. “The Provisional Govern-
ment [Kerensky loyalists] is absolutely powerless,” Reed quotes Trotsky as saying. “The bourgeoisie is in control, but this control is masked by a fictitious coalition. . . . One sees revolts of peasants who are tired of waiting for their promised land; and all over the country, in all the toiling classes, the same disgust is evident” (633). The reporter thus scrambles from Smolny, where the Petrograd Soviet is meeting continuously (649), to the headquarters of the provisional government, where he discovers that the Duma, for all intents and purposes, has made a “declaration of war against the Bolsheviki” (655).

Reed slept very late on the morning of November 7, perhaps because he sensed that the day and the following night were to be among the most important in Russian history. His chapter “The Fall of the Provisional Government” becomes the book’s second day and contains some of his more compelling eyewitness reporting, as in my next section I demonstrate by a detailed comparison of Reed’s finished text with the original notebooks that he wrote in Petrograd. Structurally, “The Fall of the Provisional Government” accomplishes the first direct clash between Reed’s metonymic Duma and Smolny, thereby rendering inevitable their fight to the finish. Reed runs with the Red Guards through downtown Petrograd and is with them when they burst into the Winter Palace, taking control of it from the provisional government. The Bolsheviks’ battle inevitably will be joined. Later the same night, the reporter walks into the City Duma Building to discover that the Kerensky loyalists have formed the Committee for Salvation of Country and Revolution, its strongest anti-Bolshevik coalition to date. An eyewitness, Reed reaches for a symbolic detail that will foreground the coming clash. Outside the Duma “were Red Guards and soldiers squatting around fires,” while inside, “the City Duma Building was all illuminated. We mounted to the galleried Alexander Hall hung with its great gold-framed red-shrouded Imperial portraits” (680; emphasis added); it is around these portraits that the constitutional democrats plot their revenge on the Bolsheviks. With his imagery, Reed attempts to ally the moderates with the despised imperial monarchy and suggest that the “red” Bolsheviks will serve as their funeral shroud. Meanwhile, an hour later, across town, Reed sees that “the windows of Smolny were still ablaze, motors came and went, and around the still-leaping fires the sentries huddled close” (681). Inside, Trotsky declaims: “[T]he whole task of defending and saving the Revolution rests on our shoulders, it is particularly necessary to work—work—work! We have decided to die rather than give up” (682).

The third of Reed’s ten days brings V. I. Lenin out of hiding to address the Second Session of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Meanwhile, Kerensky is said “to be leading a great army against the capital,” and Reed reprints a fiery
Kerensky speech published in the loyalist Volia Naroda: “The disorders caused by the insane attempt of the Bolsheviki place the country on the verge of a precipice,” Kerensky charges, “and demand the effort of our entire will, our courage, and the devotion of every one of us, to win through the terrible trial which the fatherland is now undergoing” (685). Kerensky’s rhetoric is matched thematically and structurally by Lenin’s historic speech at the Congress of Soviets, a scene that again will provide the opportunity for a comparison between Reed’s notes and his finished draft. For the purposes of the present discussion of Reed’s vision for Ten Days That Shook the World, it is sufficient to note that the first wave of Bolshevik ascendency reaches its pitch in the “Plunging Ahead” chapter’s account of day three. Reed finds himself shoulder to shoulder with other revolutionary delegates at the chapter’s climax, singing the “Internationale” and the “Funeral March” and listening to Lenin read the proclamation that effectively ends Russian participation in World War I.

Were Ten Days That Shook the World a single-voiced celebration of Soviet victory, Reed most likely would not have launched the second movement of the book, wherein the anti-Bolshevik Committee for Salvation of Revolution and Country amasses its forces (Reed labels the three subsequent chapters “The Committee for Salvation,” “The Revolutionary Front,” and “Counter-Revolution”). The reporter spends most of the fourth of his ten days at the Duma building, where Reed builds a narrative primarily about the reaction of middle-class political insurgents to the Bolshevik takeover. Although his sympathies lie on the opposite side, Reed is physically with the Duma in the dramatic centerpiece of day four as the hall is surrounded by Red Guards and the rumor flies that it will be stormed by Bolshevik sympathizers (723). Reed asks a Duma leader if the council will be disbanded. The man responds, “My God, no! . . . It is all a mistake” (724). In these sections, Reed develops the contrast between the varying approaches to revolution at the level of more common Russians, observing: “Everywhere the same thing happened. The common soldiers and the industrial workers supported the Soviets by a vast majority; the officers, yunkers, and middle class generally were on the side of the Government—as were the bourgeois Cadets and the ‘moderate’ Socialist parties. In all these towns sprang up Committees for Salvation of Country and Revolution, arming for civil war” (717). Meanwhile, the Smolny revolutionary headquarters “flashed baleful fire, pounding like an overloaded dynamo” (735).

On day five, Reed travels to the outlying Petrograd suburb of Tsarskoye Selo to see for himself whether the Kerensky forces will, as is rumored, join with White Russian Cossacks loyal to the czar and counterattack the Bolsheviks (736). Here, at the center of the book, Reed hears everywhere that the Bolshe-
viks’ time is numbered: the Social Revolutionary Party has voted to expel all Bolshevik sympathizers, key provincial leaders are declaring against the Bolsheviks, the garrison at Luga has remained loyal to the provisional government, the railway workers are putting on pressure, and the Bolsheviks are rumored to be interested in compromise. “If they last that long!” laughed the City Engineer, a stout ruddy man (740). Western and Russian journalists who had been barred from the Bolshevik-controlled Smolny are delighted by the rumors. “One confided to me, in the strictest secrecy, that the counter-revolution would begin at midnight” (752), Reed reports.

Thus, at the midpoint of Ten Days, Reed’s dramatic strategy—which his literary journalism borrows from fictional plotting—makes it appear that the world won’t be shaken so much after all. Yet the reporter’s careful readers are treated to inside information; Reed’s surreptitious trip to Tsarskoye Selo, accomplished under a pseudonym, reveals that many regular soldiers are siding with the Red Guard. At the book’s center, Reed presents an extraordinary three-page dialogue between one such revolutionary soldier and a moderate student. The dialogue provides a microcosm of his book’s structural argument and deftly echoes the challenge from a worker that Reed himself faced soon after arriving in Russia in the incident recalled by Williams: “There are two classes, don’t you see?” says the soldier, “the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. We—” The student bursts out in response: “Oh, I know that silly talk! . . . A bunch of ignorant peasants like you hear somebody bawling a few catchwords. You don’t understand what they mean.” The student assures the soldier that Lenin is a German collaborator and declares his opposition to the Bolsheviks, “who are destroying our Russia, our free revolution” (748). The soldier can only respond: “I’m not well educated. It seems like there are only two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. . . . And whoever isn’t on one side is on the other” (748–49).³ Back in Petrograd, Reed discovers “Smolny—not abandoned, but busier than ever, throngs of workers and soldiers running in and out, and doubled guards everywhere” (740).

On day six, Kerensky enters Tsarskoye Selo in command of loyalist Cossack troops. Reed can’t resist adding two symbolic details that might resonate ironically for his North American audience: “Kerensky himself riding a white horse and all the church-bells clamoring” (754; emphasis added). This white knight, showered as he is by the approvals of state religion, is doomed to failure in Reed’s narrative universe if not in the dominant symbolism of Reed’s home country. By Reed’s way of thinking, Kerensky has made the fatal mistake of assuming that the regular army will not oppose him—that the regulars will lay down their arms and will remain neutral before the Cossack invasion. As
Reed had predicted one chapter earlier, many Russian soldiers instead choose to fight on the side of the Red Guards. In this chapter, Reed relies on critical eyewitness reports from his wife Louise and from his reporting colleague Albert Rhys Williams for proof that Kerensky’s provisional government no longer is able to control any but the most pro-czarist soldiers.

With the aborted counterrevolution clearly stalled, Reed’s day seven remains mostly a stalemate. “The eyes of all Russia were fixed on the gray plain beyond the gates of Petrograd, where all the available strength of the old order faced the unorganized power of the new, the unknown” (765), Reed reports. He travels to the Petrograd Soviet for a progress report from Trotsky, who tells the Bolshevik delegates that the Cossacks are falling back on one side of Petrograd, though he admits that from Moscow the news is not so good for the Bolsheviks. “The Kremlin is in the hands of the [loyalist] yunkers, and the workers have only a few arms,” Trotsky reports. “The result depends upon Petrograd” (772). As the book enters its final third, therefore, Reed has set up his ten days of narrative to his structural advantage. Reed’s swell of revolution has first given way to burgeoning counterrevolution, but a second wave is coming that will overwhelm Russia with what Reed believes will be the irresistible rising tide of revolt. And the arena for the final battles will be Petrograd and Moscow—one city that the reporter will witness firsthand.

Writing a year after the events, Reed of course knew how the final act of his ten days would play out, so it is not surprising that Kerensky’s forces are rebuffed at Tsarskoye Selo on the eighth day of Reed’s narrative. Again, as the reporter had predicted from insider knowledge gained during the preceding two days, an army of the proletariat, “gathering in the darkness around the battle, rose like a tide and poured over the enemy (776–77). From Moscow, the news is similar: although loyalist White Guards and Yunkers still hold the Kremlin, they are surrounded by forces from the Military Revolutionary Committee, and an attack by Bolshevik troops appears imminent. With momentum now firmly on the revolutionary side, Reed again visits Smolny: “I noticed that everywhere on the floor, along the walls, men were sleeping. Rough, dirty men, workers and soldiers, spattered and caked with mud, sprawled alone or in heaps, in the careless attitudes of death. Some wore ragged bandages marked with blood. Guns and cartridge-belts were scattered about. . . . The victorious proletarian army!” (778; Reed’s ellipsis). Ironically, just as the Red Army appears to be in control of Russia’s important urban centers, Reed himself must survive a potentially fatal challenge to his legitimacy, as this study will detail in a subsequent description of the echoes between Insurgent Mexico and Ten Days That Shook the World. In the present discussion of the book’s structure, it is enough
to note that the Bolsheviks and their sympathizers have gained a dramatic momentum that now seems impossible to stop.

Sure enough, on Reed’s ninth day (November 14), Kerensky is forced to flee from Gatchina in the disguise of a Russian sailor, after first agreeing to travel to Petrograd for surrender negotiations. “I ought to commit suicide,” an overthrown Cossack general quotes Kerensky as saying in a deposition that Reed secured among the papers he later brought back from Russia. When the former head of the provisional government instead adopts a disguise and disappears, Reed reports with some scorn, “[B]y that act [Kerensky] lost whatever popularity he had retained among the Russian masses” (794). An elated Reed returns from Tsarskoye Selo to Petrograd on the front seat of an “autotruck” filled to the brim with Red Guards. The scene reveals Reed’s eyewitness reporting at its most personal. “Immense trucks like ours, columns of artillery wagons, loomed up in the night, without lights as we were. We hurtled furiously on, wrenched right and left to avoid collisions that seemed inevitable, scraping wheels” (794). “Across the horizon spread the glittering lights of the capital, immeasurably more splendid by night than by day, like a dike of jewels on the barren plain,” Reed reports. An old workman drives the troop truck with one hand, “while with the other he swept the far-gleaming capital in an exultant gesture. ‘Mine,’ he cried, his face all alight. ‘All mine now! My Petrograd!’” (794).

The structure of *Ten Days That Shook the World* can be completed after Reed chronicles November 15, when news spreads that the Bolsheviks have bombarded the Kremlin as well as other political and religious landmarks in Moscow. The reporter understands quite clearly that the political stakes have been raised. “Nothing that the Bolsheviki had done could compare with this fearful blasphemy in the heart of Holy Russia,” Reed reports with some irony. “To the ears of the devout sounded the shock of guns crashing in the face of the Holy Orthodox Church, and pounding to dust the sanctuary of the Russian nation” (797). Not content with secondhand reports and rumors, Reed sets off with the *Post*’s Williams to witness in person the changing of Moscow’s governmental guard. What he finds in the central Russian capital provides some of his most vivid reporting and extends the personal contrasts between Reed’s projects in Mexico and Russia in ways that will be explored more deeply later in this chapter. At the funerals in Moscow’s Red Square for those who have died for the revolution, the street chapels are now locked and dark, their candles out for the first time since Napoleon occupied the city. “Dark and silent and cold were the churches; the priests had disappeared,” Reed reports. “There were no popes to officiate at the Red Burial, there had been no sacrament for the dead, nor were any prayers to be said over the grave of the blasphemers” (806). Yet the
sun rises as the last mourners cross Red Square, and the scales drop from Reed’s
eyes. “I suddenly realized that the devout Russian people no longer needed
priests to pray them into heaven. On earth they were building a kingdom more
bright than any heaven had to offer, and for which it was a glory to die. . . .”
(808; Reed’s ellipsis).

With his “ten days that shook the world” structure now in place, Reed has
only to supply two summary chapters to bookend the twin background chap-
ters at the book’s opening. Reed’s “Notes and Explanations” section is balanced
by a copious appendix at book’s end, resembling a steamer trunk stuffed with
handbills tumbling out on Reed’s printed page. From the book’s beginning
to its close, therefore, the reporter has managed the ebb and flow of the com-
peting interests represented by the Duma and Smolny over ten days of narra-
tive bracketed by a documentary frame. He has managed the complementary
metaphors of revolutionary fire and rising tide to explain the creation of his
new universe. Here, at the book’s end, Reed envisions those revolutionary fires
burning brightly—“the lasting accomplishment of a just peace and the victory
of Socialism” (852).

Reed’s Russian Notebooks and
the Construction of a Dramatic Present

An examination of the more than seven hundred pages of Reed’s Russian note-
books and the boxes of handbills, speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers he car-
ried back with him from Petrograd proves that the reporter labored hard to
deliver structural and dramatic power to his Ten Days manuscript. Some of the
book’s most memorable scenes—Lenin’s return from hiding on day three to
join the presidium of the Congress of Soviets, the moving funeral dirge as the
new Soviet government votes to end its participation in World War I, the trip
to Tsarskoye Selo on day five, Reed’s near shooting by zealous revolutionary
soldiers on day eight, and the culminating, somber funeral in Moscow’s Red
Square on day ten—are painstakingly crafted from Reed’s three-by-five-inch
notebooks or from quarter-folded stationery he borrowed from the J. Negley
Farson Company on Gogol Street in Petrograd. The notes provide an eyewit-
ness historical foundation for Reed’s reporting, the theme on which Reed can
work out his narrative variations of dialogue, details, and controlling metaphor.
“For Reed himself,” says Abel Startsev, “these notes were a kind of shorthand
which he, of course, could decipher without difficulty the next day [when he
wrote up his reports], being still under the impression of what he had just
seen” (165).
As in Mexico, the notes formed the foundation of Reed’s literary journalism. But while the Mexican notebooks mostly are made up of diary-like impressions of the people and events he saw directly, Reed deepens his Russian notebooks to include more ambitious background reporting as well as the personal impressions that always serve his writing well. Reed follows debates point by point, placing a straight line in his notes between comments. He includes little attribution unless the words come from a well-known speaker, but he has a sure sense of all the parties and where they stand on Russia’s political spectrum. Whole notebooks (e.g., bMS Am 1091:1322) are devoted to determining the background positions of the many factions of Russian politics and to learning all he can about the role of the church in Russia and the variations of faith and practices among religious and social groups. In some sections, when he could take a moment to reflect, Reed’s handwriting grows smaller and his writing is more polished, lending to his notes the appearance of a journal. By contrast, in interviews or at the many tumultuous meetings during his ten dramatic days in Petrograd, Reed’s handwriting blooms into a rounded scrawl as he dashes from page to page, scribbling quotes as quickly as he can and adding background impressions as he has time. In those interviews and meetings, Reed seems to give priority to the words of soldiers who are aching for peace and often quotes these soldiers verbatim for whole pages. Ever the reporter, Reed, presumably having asked people how to spell their names, carefully writes them out. Sometimes a person Reed is interviewing will scribble an address in the notebook in his own hand, probably to set up a later meeting. The notebooks also include rough phonetic transliterations of the Cyrillic alphabet and a translation from the Julian to Gregorian calendars.

Reed inserts scores of documents into the text of *Ten Days*—handbills he had ripped from the walls in Petrograd, texts of speeches cranked from the printing presses each night by supporters of the various political factions, and broadsides from the Kerensky and Trotsky/Lenin factions. “Much of the material in this book is from my own notes,” Reed writes in “Notes and Explanations.” He says he relied on “a heterogeneous file” of Russian, French, and English-language newspapers, the daily reports of the French *Bulletin de la Pressè*, the official publication of all Russian government decrees and orders, and the secret treaties and documents discovered when the Bolsheviks took over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Finally, he says, “I have in my possession almost every proclamation, decree and announcement posted on the walls of Petrograd from the middle of September 1917 to the end of January 1918” (590).

The relationship between Reed’s notes and his finished text can be shown by a close reading of scenes from days two and three, beginning when the workers storm the Winter Palace on November 7 and culminating the following day
at the Second Session of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. An examination of the notebooks against the book’s version of these central scenes shows how Reed’s notes lay the foundation for the narrative strategy of the completed book. Reed was in Williams’s hotel room when the two heard, across from the Winter Palace, the commotion of soldiers massing at the Telephone Exchange, on a square known as Admiralty Quay. Reed’s notes sketch the square: “covered with soldiers in front of the telephone office . . . police great bunch of sailors and soldiers. Across middle of square a cordon thrown. Nobody allowed to pass, either Palace or down streets at sides for two blocks palace side of square blocked both sides. On fortress side thousand or so troops and sailors—more coming as fast as can see. At both ends sweeping square a big armored car . . . At one end great boxes barrels and old bed springs . . . piles of lumber. Before palace all across from building barricades logs” (bMS Am 1091:1328, p. 135–37).

Writing from the immediacy of these notes a year later, Reed adds the descriptive grace of accomplished sentences to the initial impressions he scrawled on his notepad. First, the “great bunch of sailors and soldiers” of his notes becomes a finished sentence, continuing his use of water metaphors: “Like a black river, filling the street, without song or cheer we poured through the Red Arch” (675). Then Reed adds direct, dramatic dialogue: “Look out, comrades! Don’t trust them. They will fire, surely!” (675). Next he introduces the immediate scene: “In the open we began to run, stooping low and bunching together, and jammed up suddenly behind the pedestal of the Alexander Column” (675). Unidentified soldiers in Reed’s notes are separated into the loyalist yunkers and the Bolshevik Red Guards, in keeping with Reed’s book-long structural strategy: “By this time, in the light that streamed out of all the Winter Palace windows, I could see that the first two or three hundred men were Red Guards, with only a few scattered soldiers,” Reed reports. “Over the barricade of firewood we clambered, and leaping down inside gave a triumphant shout as we stumbled on a heap of rifles thrown down by the yunkers who had stood there. On both sides of the main gateway the doors stood wide open, light streamed out, and from the huge pile [of firewood] came not the slightest sound” (675).

Reed’s finished text thus establishes an “I was there” tone of personal reporting that is anchored by the documentary facticity of his notes. From his memory and his ear for language, he adds scraps of dialogue and adopts a controlling metaphor that contrasts darkness and light. The essentials of Reed’s finished passage build from his notes: the mass of advancing soldiers and Red Guardsmen, the roadblocks of scrap wood, the retreating loyalists. The finished passage moves the scene from the “black river” of repression toward the “streaming light” of human liberation, from the regulating piles of scrap wood toward the “wide open” doors of political self-determination.
With the Winter Palace taken, the stage is now set for a Bolshevik-controlled Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. Reed sets up the suspense of day three at the opening of his “Plunging Ahead” chapter: “Day broke on a city in the wildest excitement and confusion, a whole nation heaving up in long hissing swells of storm” (685). Although all is superficially quiet, a war of leaflets already has begun, and Reed can document it because he has the tracts in hand. Kerensky blames the Winter Palace disorders on “the insane attempt of the Bolsheviki,” while the revolutionaries post their own handbills calling for their followers “to take every measure for the immediate arrest of Kerensky and his conveyance to Petrograd” (685–86). The central drama of November 8 forms around the arrival of Lenin from his hiding place and the successful resolution at the Congress of Soviets to end Russian participation in World War I.

Of Lenin’s appearance, Reed mixes quick visual impressions of the man with dashed notes of his remarks. His notes read: “8.40—Entrance Hall. Lenin. Bald-headed man with snub nose, strong chin . . . Lenin practical measures to realize peace—great mouth—to offer peace Soviet formula. Soviet treaties to be repudiated: Anglia, Francia, Germaine (Why not America?). Little winking eyes, hoarse voice, faces looked up adoringly” (bMS Am 1091:1328, pp. 152–55). In his finished prose, Reed’s amplification of his notes retains the same blend of visual impression and political content. An extended description that strays into hagiography, it is an example both of Reed’s gift for the brief word-sketch and his lack of objectivity. It stays in the present, clocking time as it passes from the evidence in Reed’s notes, but it also shifts from the certainty of the past to the inevitability of the future as it suits Reed’s needs: “It was just 8.40 when a thundering wave of cheers announced the entrance of the presidium, with Lenin—great Lenin—among them,” Reed reports. “A short, stocky figure, with a big head set down on his shoulders, bald and bulging. Little eyes, a snubbish nose, wide generous mouth, and heavy chin: clean-shaven now but already beginning to bristle with the well-known beard of his past and future. Dressed in shabby clothes, his trousers much too long for him. Unimpressive, to be the idol of a mob, loved and revered as perhaps few leaders in history have been” (697).

Over the outcry of Bund and Mensheviki objections, Lev Borisovich Kameniev, Lenin’s supporter and the chair of the congress, declares the abolition of capital punishment, the restoration of the rights of propaganda, the release of dissident prisoners, and the nationalization of food supplies. As Lenin stands to speak, Reed revels in the scene he is about to present, signaling his engagement and forcing the reader into the present by using the adverb now and describing the response of the crowd: “Again that overwhelming human roar.” It is as if Reed has been preparing for this moment since that day on Billy Sunday’s
sawdust trail when he found himself swayed by a religious zeal he could not endorse. Here, Reed seems to have found his political and spiritual home:

Now Lenin, gripping the edge of the reading stand, letting his little winking eyes travel over the crowd as he stood there waiting, apparently oblivious to the long-rolling ovation, which lasted several minutes. When it finished, he said simply: “We shall now proceed to construct the Socialist order!” Again that overwhelming human roar. . . . “We shall offer peace to the peoples of all the belligerent countries upon the basis of the Soviet terms—no annexations, no indemnities, and the right of self-determination of peoples. . . .” His great mouth, seeming to smile, opened wide as he spoke; his voice was hoarse—not unpleasantly so, but as if it had hardened that way after years and years of speaking—and went on monotonously, with the effect of being able to go on for ever. . . . For emphasis he bent forward slightly. No gestures. And before him, a thousand faces looking up in intent adoration. (698; first two ellipses added; the final ellipse is Reed’s)

The initial visual impressions in Reed’s original notes (bald, snub-nose, strong chin, great mouth, winking eyes, hoarse voice, adoring crowd) thus are pressed into the service of his scene, which Reed presents as immediate history although he interjects a reference (“well-known beard of his past and future”) that reminds the reader that Reed can foretell the future. In Ten Days, Reed then amplifies the historic moment of Russia’s withdrawal from World War I with a printed version of the peace declaration that he brought back with him from Russia and inserts verbatim into his book.

After Lenin’s speech, the delegates of the second congress vote on the peace resolution, an action for which Reed has been waiting. Because he had sacrificed his mainstream journalism career to his opposition to World War I and had argued unsuccessfully with his socialist friends in the United States that the “traders’ war” did not deserve leftist support, Reed seems thrilled to bear witness as the first socialist nation declares its separate peace. He remembers to jot down the historic time in his notes: “10.35 Kameniev, All in favor of immediate peace say aye! Lift cards. Against? [indecipherable] tumult, laughter, cheers, lots of tears, sing Internationale.” Listing the names of the notables at the table toward the front of the hall (Lenin and Trotsky among them), Reed then notes that he hears, “voice from rear: ‘Let us remember those who have died for liberty’ all stand immense singing ‘Death March.’ Kollontai winking. Emotion. Lenin now going to abolish private property and land” (bMS Am 109:1331, pp. 1–2).

Reed’s notes, anchored by his recall of the exact time of the historic vote,
the songs, and the personal details of Alexandra Kollontai’s tears and the voices from the crowd, form one of the more compelling eyewitness scenes of Ten Days That Shook the World, worth quoting at some length:

It was exactly 10.35 when Kameniev asked all in favour of the proclamation to hold up their cards. One delegate dared to raise his hand against, but the sudden outburst around him brought it swiftly down. . . . Unanimous. Suddenly, by common impulse, we found ourselves on our feet, mumbling together into the smooth lifting unison of the Internationale. A grizzled old soldier was sobbing like a child. Alexandra Kollontai rapidly winked the tears back. The immense sound rolled through the hall, burst windows and doors and soared into the quiet sky, “The war is ended! The war is ended!” said a young workman near me, his face shining. And when it was over, as we stood there in a kind of awkward hush, someone in the back of the room shouted, “Comrades! Let us remember those who have died for liberty!” So we began to sing the Funeral March, that slow, melancholy, and yet triumphant chant, so Russian and so moving. (702–3)

Reed quotes the “Funeral March” words: “[B]ecause you believed that justice is stronger than the sword . . . The time will come when your surrendered life will count. That time is near; when tyranny falls, the people will rise, great and free!” (703; Reed’s ellipsis). The reporter, his objectivity long since burned at the altar of partisanship (“By common impulse, we found ourselves on our feet”), allows himself the summative rhetoric: “For this did they lie there, the martyrs of March, in their cold Brotherhood Grave on Mars Field; for this thousands and tens of thousands had died in the prisons, in exile, in Siberian mines. It had not come as they expected it would come, nor as the intelligentsia desired it; but it had come—rough, strong, impatient of formulas, contemptuous of sentimentalism; real” (703; Reed’s emphases). The passage culminates with a line that brings full circle the Kerensky-Trotsky contrast that anchors Reed’s motifs of the Duma and Smolny, a line whose power to implicate at least some readers still results in its suppression from Communist Party–sponsored anthologies (Education of John Reed, 206–7): “Then up rose Trotsky, calm and venomous, conscious of power, greeted with a roar” (705). Ironically, Reed pulls the powerful line from an innocuous, far less dramatic jotting in his notes: “Trotsky (ovation) Those arrested ministers not our comrades because they arrested our comrades” (bMS Am 1091:1331, p. 5).

A close reading of the Russian notebooks, therefore, shows that, from raw notes, Reed was able to add polished sentences, dialogue, evocative details, controlling metaphors, and graphic descriptions of scene. Reed’s overall strategy
—buttressed by the raw material of his notes and by the hundreds of tracts, pamphlets, and handbills he carted back from Russia—clearly seeks to build a narrative immediacy to his reporting that makes the reader a vicarious participant in the historic event. Such is the enduring project of literary journalism, and Reed’s was one of the early U.S. nonfiction books to have practiced it in detail.

Narrative Form in *Ten Days*: Across the Dramatic Present to the Inevitability of History

As long ago as Horace, critics of the historical epic have recognized the subtle interplay between the received historical text to which an author must remain more or less faithful and the author’s being invited to write compellingly and dramatically. “[L]iterary property that belongs to everybody is the hardest to invent well,” Horace says in *The Art of Poetry*. “Poets who carve up songs of ancient Troy, constructing the well-shaped plays, work harder than poets that make it all up as it falls on the page.” Then Horace slips in a warning beneath the overt invitation of the passage: “Old stories are yours for the working—if you walk somewhere off the beaten path and *never* use the names without the substance and spirit” (70; emphasis added). Horace’s point is that the historical epic offers plenty of opportunity for compelling storytelling and dramatic tension within a matrix of larger historical inevitability; that is, the dramatic wandering that a skillful writer can summon in the “substance and spirit” of received tradition. Agreement on that “substance and spirit,” of course, is more easily suggested than accomplished because both writer and readers share deeply held and sometimes conflicting ideas about the events and traditions that underlie the historical narrative. Those underlying ideas may trigger the sorts of deeper social implications that derive from the best and most compelling historical epics.⁵

In *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Reed uses a writing strategy common to the epic form. He holds his readers in a “present action” of the narrative (the ten days of November 1917) to generate suspense even as he sweeps toward a conclusion that many readers outside the written text already know to be inevitable (the triumph of Bolshevism that, by the time of the book’s publication in 1919, was well known). And in *Ten Days*, the triumph of Bolshevism is a conclusion that many of the book’s readers, particularly in the United States, will despise—both in Reed’s time and in ours.⁶ Therefore, Reed’s fusion of narrative immediacy, historical context, and political implication at its best moments achieves great power. “[A]n artillery shell, a peal of thunder, or ocean surf does
not possess the power of the book that is lying on that desk,” Reed told a visitor shortly after *Ten Days* was published by Boni & Liveright in 1919 (quoted in Duke, 54).

Reed’s first big scoop as a reporter in Russia provides an extended occasion to observe his intertwining of present scene and prophetic future. When, in *Ten Days That Shook the World*, a week before the Bolshevik Revolution he interviews Alexander Kerensky, the reform prime minister, Reed notes that it is “the last time [Kerensky] received journalists”—a comment that throws the reader outside the immediacy of the narrative into a wider context, one that can foretell that the interview will be the last one Kerensky will give as prime minister: “The world thinks that the Russian Revolution is at an end,” Reed quotes Kerensky as saying during the interview. “Do not be mistaken. The Russian Revolution is just beginning.” Reed cannot resist interjecting, with some irony, “Words more prophetic, perhaps, than he knew” (624).

At the time of the interview, Kerensky meant that the March revolution, the one he had led and the one to which he remained deeply committed, had not yet run its course, and that the Bolshevik threat, which Kerensky never considered a true revolution, would be denied. But in 1918, when Reed wrote *Ten Days*, as well as the following year when it was published, both Reed and his readers knew otherwise: they see that the Bolshevik version of the Russian Revolution is “just beginning” and that Kerensky will be deposed. Reed, as he sat in his room above the Greenwich Village Inn a year after the Bolsheviks took power, knew Kerensky would be proved wrong. His choice of the word perhaps is therefore deliberately rhetorical: meant to pull his readers back into the moment when he sat in Kerensky’s study and the future seemed uncertain. Reed thus exploits the drama of present action (Kerensky’s discounting the Bolshevik threat) to build the suspense and inevitability of the future (the successful Bolshevik Revolution). A brief contrast of that rhetorical strategy to a version of the Kerensky interview that Reed wrote six days after their meeting for the radical periodical *Liberator* (Homberger and Biggart, 64) shows that Reed was not then sure of the unintended irony of Kerensky’s remarks and thus did not make a comment like “words more prophetic, perhaps, than he knew.” In this earlier version, Reed quotes Kerensky at length as the Russian leader compares his nation’s political situation to that of the French Revolution. “Remember that the French revolution took five years,” Kerensky says, and he elaborates on this. Then he concludes: “No, the Russian revolution is not over—it is just beginning” (66). With no undercutting aside available in the original article, Reed moves directly to another subject; no subtle narrative strategy, such as the one Reed used in *Ten Days*, is to be found.
Reed’s intertwining of present-tense drama and historical inevitability is perhaps most readily seen in cliff-hanger passages he sprinkles throughout *Ten Days*. In his initial “Background” chapter, Reed paints a picture of increasingly unstable political and social life in Russia under the Kerensky government. Speculation and food shortages are endemic as merchant families hoard scarce supplies: “And so, while the masses of the people got a quarter pound of black bread on their bread cards, [a chocolate merchant] had an abundance of white bread, sugar, tea, candy, cake, and butter” (598), Reed reports. The ill-equipped Russian army is growing sick of World War I, and political tensions are rising. Then comes Reed’s foreshadowing final sentence: “It was against this backdrop of a whole nation in ferment and disintegration that the pageant of the Rising of the Russian Masses unrolled” (604). Two strategies are worth noting in Reed’s sentence: his belief that the future already is tangible and needs only to be unrolled or revealed; and his idea that this inevitable revolution will resemble some great “pageant”—perhaps like the one Reed had staged five years earlier at Madison Square Garden for the Industrial Workers of the World.

Reed’s narrative strategy deepens in the chapter “The Coming Storm.” Here, as we have seen, he has begun to alternate between meetings called by the Kerensky loyalists at the Winter Palace and those at the Bolshevik center on the east side of Petrograd at the Smolny Institute. The social ferment he had spotted in the earlier chapter is now deepening. “On the streets the crowds thickened towards gloomy evening, pouring in slow voluble tides up and down the Nevsky, fighting for the newspapers,” he writes. “Hold-ups increased to such an extent that it was dangerous to walk down side streets. On the Sadovaya one afternoon I saw a crowd of several hundred people beat and trample to death a soldier caught stealing” (625–26). Reed presents living history here, characteristically examining the larger political picture through a close-up of the daily lives of people. This technique of literary journalism draws most readers into the time of action, while the author controls the larger narrative project. Reed thus ends “The Coming Storm” chapter by extending the metaphor of its title: “And in the rain, the bitter chill, the great throbbing city under gray skies rushing faster and faster towards—what?” (626). The answer to Reed’s rhetorical question is “revolution,” of course, though he won’t say it here. At the time of action, therefore, Reed means to project genuine suspense, but at the time of composition, the author has predetermined the answer to his own question.

Reed’s narrative persona manages other subtle rhetorical shifts between past, present, and future in subsequent passages. For example, on the night of November 5, Reed is hurrying from his interview with Trotsky, held in a small bare room of the Smolny revolutionary headquarters of the Bolsheviks, toward the Winter Palace, which houses the reform Council of the Russian Republic.
For almost thirty pages, Reed has carefully tightened the circle of revolution and counterrevolution, first interviewing the reformer Kerensky, then the revolutionary Trotsky—pitting the two in inevitable conflict, now traveling to the Winter Palace, now to Smolny. Outside the Winter Palace, Reed reports, “an armoured automobile went slowly up and down, siren screaming. On every corner, in every open space, thick groups were clustered: arguing soldiers and students. Night came swiftly down, the wide-spaced street-lights flickered on, the tides of people flowed endlessly. . . . It is always like that in Petrograd just before trouble” (640–41).

The dramatic description of this passage provides further evidence of Reed’s rhetorical strategy. He uses the present tense (“It is always like that in Petrograd just before trouble”) to drag the reader into the immediacy of the scene as the sky darkens and lights flicker on. Reed’s present-tense drama thereby tempts the reader, willingly or unwillingly, to suspend knowledge of how soon or in what manner the “gathering storm” will break. Later, Reed will use the same strategy to report the mood of Petrograd on November 7 just before the storming of the Winter Palace. “Always the methodical muffled boom of cannon through the windows, and the delegates, screaming at each other,” writes Reed, with a quality of description that draws the reader into the immediacy of the scene. And then the prophetic edge that herds the reader toward historic inevitability: “So, with the crash of artillery, in the dark, with hatred, and fear, and reckless daring, new Russia was being born” (667).

At the center of Ten Days That Shook the World, when Kerensky’s provisional government falls and the Bolsheviks plunge ahead to construct the socialist state, Reed combines his most dramatic scene writing with his most rhetorically ambitious foreshadowing. He strives to capture a dramatic present while revealing his strategy of historical inevitability at its most audacious. Although Reed’s notes include Trotsky’s most famous words of the revolution only as an afterthought (“Last night said ‘refuse will be swept into the garbage heap of history’—Trotsky” [bMS Am 1091:1328, p. 151]), the final Ten Days version delivers their power in scenic immediacy. An extended passage shows the building animosity between Trotsky and Rafael Abramovich, a member of the social democratic Bund, who accuses the Bolsheviks of armed attack on the Winter Palace. The passage thus builds a critical contrast between Trotsky partisans and Kerensky partisans: “Unarmed,” says Abramovich, “we expose our breasts to the machine guns of the Terrorists.” Abramovich, says Reed, is shouted down in “a storm of hoots, menaces and curses which rose to a hellish pitch.” Then Trotsky rises, like some chief demon in the Pandemonium of revolution: “And Trotsky, standing up with a pale, cruel face, letting out his rich voice in cool contempt, ‘All these so-called Socialist compromisers, these frightened
Mensheviki, Socialist Revolutionaries, Bund—let them go! They are just so much refuse which will be swept away into the garbage-heap of history” (671).

In the scene, the Winter Palace in Petrograd has fallen to the rebels, Lenin is ready to come out of hiding to address the assembled Soviets, and Krylenko, “staggering with fatigue,” has begun to read a telegram from the Twelfth Army on the Northern Front, declaring that the army is under the command of a Military Revolutionary Committee. “Pandemonium, men weeping, embracing each other,” Reed observes of Krylenko’s news, then continues:

So, Lenin and the Petrograd workers had decided on insurrection, the Petrograd Soviet had overthrown the Provisional Government, and thrust the coup d’etat upon the Congress of Soviets. Now there was all great Russia to win—and then the world! Would Russia follow and rise? And the world—what of it? Would the peoples answer and rise, a red world-tide? Although it was six in the morning, night was yet heavy and chill. There was only a faint unearthly pallor stealing over the silent streets, dimming the watch-fi

In this passage, Reed’s series of rhetorical questions crosses the line from those answers he knows to those answers he believes he knows. In 1918, writing the book, Reed and his potential readers already knew the answer to the question “Would Russia . . . rise?” The accompanying queries: “ . . . the world, what of it? Would the peoples answer and rise, a red world-tide?” are considerably less certain—both to the Reed writing in 1918 and most certainly to present-day readers after the fall of the Soviet bloc. Writing near the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Reed hoped that the historic inevitability of his narrative would sweep his readers into an affirmation of his global rhetoric. That Reed is able to construct the dramatic core of Ten Days That Shook the World compellingly enough to coax readers toward its revolutionary inevitability is what drives the book rhetorically and what made it so controversial as to be effectively suppressed at various times both in the Cold War West and in Stalinist Russia.

From Insurgence to Revolution: The Political and Artistic Transformation of John Reed

A close reading of the notes and the narrative strategy of the final text reveals fascinating echoes of Insurgent Mexico in Ten Days That Shook the World: in Mexico there are scenes of Reed’s acceptance or rejection by the subjects he is covering; in Russia there are moments when he and Williams attempt to distrib-
ute gifts to the rebels to buy their acceptance. In both books, Reed rides at some personal risk in a battered conveyance that is carrying bombs; in both he is challenged by hotheaded revolutionaries who contest his identity and threaten to take his life. In both narratives, Reed contrasts a reformer (Carranza/Kerensky) with a revolutionary (Villa/Trotsky and Lenin). And in both books, the rebels question him closely about U.S. embarrassments such as Tammany or the Mooney scandal. But in *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Reed has traded in a compromised personal identity for a fresh one; thus, although his descriptive style remains consistently polished in both books, his writing is more triumphant and assured in *Ten Days*.

An exchange of letters between Reed and his long-time mentor Lincoln Steffens during June 1918 offers insight into the manner in which Reed had changed between his stint in Mexico and his reporting from Russia. On his return to Manhattan on April 28, 1918, after being detained in Oslo for two months without a visa, Reed was interrogated and searched. His trunks of notes, Russian handbills, newspapers, and speeches were seized by the U.S. Department of State. “With Louise Bryant I waited at the pier for hours, while a swarm of Department of Justice men stripped him, went over every inch of his clothes and baggage, and put him through the usual inquisition,” recalls Michael Gold, an eyewitness to Reed’s arrival.

“Reed had been sick with ptomaine on the boat. The inquisition had also been painful. But I like to remember how he kissed his girl again and again as our old-fashioned open carriage rolled through the New York streets and how hungrily he stared at the houses, the people on the sidewalk, the New York sky, with his large honest eyes” (9–10).

Burning to write what he believed to be the greatest story of his life, Reed asked for advice from Steffens, who for years was his role model as a progressive journalist, muckraker, and the closest political associate to Reed’s late father. As the man who had arranged Reed’s assignment to the Mexican Revolution, Steffens was an important link to his early success. Reed tells his mentor that no newspaper will touch his syndicated events in Russia:

Collier’s took a story, put it in type, and sent it back. Oswald Villard told me he would be suppressed if he published John Reed! I have a contract with Macmillan to publish a book, but the State Department took away all my papers when I came home, and up to date has absolutely refused to return any of them. . . . I am therefore unable to write a word of the greatest story of my life, and one of the greatest in the world. (Quoted in Rosenstone, 319)

Steffens’s reply counsels patience. Publishing the story of the events in Russia, even if truthful, might be undemocratic while the United States is at war: “Jack, you do wrong to buck this thing. . . . It is wrong to try to tell the
truth now. We must wait. You must wait. I know it’s hard, but you can’t carry conviction. You can’t plant ideas. Only feelings exist, and the feelings are bewildered. I think it is undemocratic to try to do much now. Write, but don’t publish” (bMS Am 1091:854). Reed’s response to his mentor is brusque: “I am not of your opinion that it is undemocratic to buck this thing. If there were not the ghost of a chance, if everybody were utterly for it, even then I don’t see why it shouldn’t be bucked. All movements have to have somebody to start them and, if necessary, to go under for them” (Rosenstone, 320).

Steffens remained unconvinced. “Convictions were what I was afraid of,” he wrote later. “I wanted to steer him away from convictions, that he might play, that he might play with life, and see it all, love it all, live it all, tell it all; that he might be it all; but all, not any one thing. And why not? A poet is more revolutionary than any radical.” Reed’s longtime mentor believed that Reed had become single-minded and doctrinaire in Bolshevik Russia. “He became a fighter; out for a cause; a revolutionist at home here, and in Russia a communist. He didn’t smile any more” (Steffens, n.p.).

Reed was undeterred. If Steffens represented Reed’s entrance pass into insurgent Mexico, a pass underwritten by the inherited fortunes of Metropolitan Magazine, Reed’s chronicle of revolutionary Russia seemed destined to evoke significant echoes between his first book, Insurgent Mexico, and his last, Ten Days That Shook the World. An early draft of Ten Days—written for the Liberator while Reed still waited for his notes to be released (published as “A Visit to the Russian Army” in April/May 1918)—reworks the image of a Western journalist trying to buy acceptance from revolutionaries with the price of a gift. In Mexico, Reed had bragged of buying the friendship of Antonio Montoya with the gift of a watch and buying Pancho Villa’s favor with a pistol and silencer. But in “A Visit to the Russian Army,” Reed and his companion, Williams, decide that “we might as well give away our superfluous cigarettes. Accordingly we sat down on a trunk and held out a big box making generous sounds” (56). Several hundred soldiers are milling about, and only a few take the gifts that Williams is offering them. “Williams sat alone in the midst of an ever-widening circle. The soldiers were gathered in groups talking in low tones,” Reed reports. “Suddenly he saw them coming toward him, a committee of three privates, carrying rifles with fixed bayonets, and looking dangerous. ‘Who are you[,]’ the leader asked. ‘Why are you giving away cigarettes? Are you a German spy, trying to bribe the Russian revolutionary army?’ All over the platform the crowd followed, slowly packing itself around Williams and the committee muttering angrily—ready to tear him to pieces” (56).

Reed’s notes of his and Williams’s trip survive in the Harvard archives and
present a fine example of how the reporter builds quality journal description into an article with deeply developed images. This aspect of Reed’s Russian writing builds on the compelling antiwar reporting Reed had done in Mexico and Europe—particularly at the Battle of Torreon and in the trenches of France—and the way that reporting had broken with the tradition of Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis. In Russia, a more secure vision allows Reed to stand out of the way and train his journalistic eyes on the emotions of others. During their visit to the Russian army, Reed and Williams attend the funeral of three Latvian soldiers. “First come the carts full of fir boughs and cedar, with two soldiers tossing out on the road,” read the reporter’s notes. “Before cemetery carts stop. One of the soldiers brushes hands off, pulls out cigarette, lights it, and cries (bMS Am 1091:1322, p. 65). In the final article, Reed considerably strengthens the verbs and rhythms of his sentences and adds details: “They were burying three Lettish sharpshooters, killed in action yesterday. First came two carts, each with a soldier who strewed the road with evergreen boughs. At the gate of the cemetery one of the soldiers brushed off his hands, heaved a sigh, took out a cigarette, lighted it, and began to weep” (54). In his notes we find: “an aeroplane drifting down the sky, anti-aircraft guns begin”; and, after noting nine volleys of honorary gunfire during a funeral hymn against the backdrop of applause from a distant meeting: “here death, there life” (bMS Am 1091:1322, pp. 62, 67). These notes are compressed into near-omniscience and sharpened imagery in the final version:

No funeral has the poignant solemnity of a funeral at the front. Almost all these men and women have lost some men in the war; they know what it means, death. And these hundreds of soldiers, with stiff, drawn faces; they know these three dead—perhaps some of them even spoke with them, heard them laugh, joke, before the unseen warning shell fell out of the sky and tore them to bloody pieces. They realize well that perhaps next time it will be their turn. To the quiet deepness of the pastor’s voice and muffled sobbing everywhere, the coffins are lowered down, and thud, thud, drops the heavy wet earth, with a sound like cannon far away. The chairman of the Iskostrel is making a revolutionary speech over the graves. The band plays, and a quavering hymn goes up. Nine times the rifles of the firing squad crash on the still air. . . . Overhead is the venomous buzz of an aeroplane. From the woods comes a faint roar of applause. Here death—there life. (54–55)

Reed had cause to remember the principled and brave Latvian men and women when he returned to Petrograd, and—as evidence of the way that his material was shaping his life even as he was shaping his material—soon had
reason to cast one such Latvian soldier in a starring role. In *Ten Days*, in the most pivotal scene of the most pivotal day (November 7, at the Congress of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies) Reed sets up a confrontation that symbolically passes the torch from the Cadets (constitutional democrats) to the Bolsheviks. In his exhaustive catalog of Russian factions in the “Background” section of the book, Reed identifies the Cadets as the Russian equivalent of the (U.S.) Progressive Party, Reed’s boyhood heroes and the party of his father’s and Lincoln Steffens’s reform politics. As the argument at the congress ebbs and wanes, and as rumors spread that counterattack is on its way to Petrograd, a lean-faced Latvian soldier stands amid the clamor and cuts the Russian reformers to the heart:

“No more resolutions! No more talk! We want deeds—the Power must be in our hands!” . . . The hall rocked with cheering. In the first moments of the session, stunned by the rapidity of events, startled by the sound of cannon, the delegates had hesitated. For an hour hammer-blow after hammer-blow had fallen from that tribune, welding them together but beating them down. Did they stand then alone? Was Russia rising against them? Was it true that the Army was marching on Petrograd? Then this clear-eyed young soldier had spoken and in a flash they knew it for the truth. . . . *This* was the voice of the soldiers—the stirring millions of uniformed workers and peasants were men like them, and their thoughts and feelings were the same. (670; Reed’s ellipses and emphasis)

Reed thus symbolically disassociates himself from the reform politics of his father and the fatherland. In the writing of *Ten Days*, he resolutely will break Steffens’s advice not to “buck this thing.” “It is wrong to try to tell the truth now,” Steffens had counseled. “[Y]ou can’t carry conviction. You can’t plant ideas. . . . I think it is undemocratic to try to do too much now. Write, but don’t publish” (bMS Am 1091:854). Reed’s articles on the Russian front for the *Liberator* and on the Latvian soldier in *Ten Days That Shook the World* were his answers to such counsel.

In fact, “A Visit to the Russian Army,” stylistically as effective a piece of artistic reportage as any Reed wrote, identifies Reed straightaway in the article’s lead as the bearer of a note proving him to be a member of the American Socialist Party “authorized to proceed to the active army to gather information for the North American Press” (28). The access to material that Reed had hidden or purchased in *Insurgent Mexico* is here laid bare for his reader. Similarly, the two trips that Reed made to Tsarskoye Selo on November 10 and 13 replay key identity moments that Reed had traced in *Insurgent Mexico*, wherein the re-
porter had been challenged to make clear his mission and allegiance. In the first trip, Reed accompanies the Bolsheviks as they attempt to respond to a counterattack planned by Kerensky forces three days after the taking of the Winter Palace. As in his journey to the Mexican front with Mac of “Mac-American,” Reed is less than candid with his readers about his access, but in an intriguingly different way. This time, instead of hiding his conduit out of shame for Mac’s xenophobia or burying his disappointment in near-comic intrigues as in “Shot at Sunrise,” Reed hides his own identity to save the Bolshevik officers who are granting him and Williams access to the front without official authorization. Lenin, himself, had turned down Williams’s request for a pass (Williams, 139), and the reporters were anxious not to embarrass him or get his soldiers into trouble. Reed calls himself Trusishka (what an American might now call a “wimp,” or “nerd”) and reports that Trusishka “got in [the officers’ car] and sat down and nothing could dislodge him” (745).8 Diﬀidently asserting that he sees no reason to doubt Trusishka’s version of the trip, Reed weaves one of the few really comic tales in Ten Days as the Peoples’ Commissars for War and Marine first try unsuccessfully to borrow a military vehicle from the troops they now command, then must hail a battered taxicab ﬂying the Italian ﬂag. The Bolsheviks eventually must borrow a notebook and ﬁnally a pencil from the ever-accommodating Trusishka, so they can write a requisition for ammunition for the Red troops at the front. The signiﬁcance of the scene is that Reed has such ﬁrm access to the material he wants that he is able to withhold evidence of his solidarity with Russian insurgents for their sake, rather than withhold evidence of his complicity with North American business interests for his own sake as he had in Insurgent Mexico by burying the gunrunner Mac in his ﬁctions.

Even more importantly, on a second trip to Tsarskoye Selo on November 13, Reed—without in any way acknowledging it—replays the scene he had drawn in Mexico on the way to the front with Urbina’s troops. On both journeys, Reed is packed into a conveyance with a load of incendiary bombs. In both cases the bombs bump and jounce on the rutted roads as the good-natured Reed hangs on for dear life. The Russian journey even features the same sort of close questioning of Reed about U.S. embarrassments like Tammany or the Mooney case with which the Mexican rebels had challenged him in Mexico. Finally, on the road to Tsarskoye Selo, Reed is forced out of the Sixth Reserve Engineers truck and is interrogated by Red soldiers as a suspected spy. Reed’s ﬁrst account of the incident is in a notebook: “As we rush along bombs bang around the floor between legs. . . . Further on stopped passes asked for. I am arrested R.G. [Red Guard] protests, I submit. Sentries see only that my pass not like others, though can’t read. Around corner are going to lynch. I persuade take me to soldier
who can read. Then to barracks where almost lynched again. Dinner at officer’s mess.”

From that abstract, Reed builds the following dramatic scene in *Ten Days*. For an irrepressible reporter who often overestimated his own importance, the scene is notable for its relative understatement, yet it clearly makes the point that Reed wishes it to make. “The soldiers consulted in low tones for a moment,” Reed writes in *Ten Days*, “and then led me to a wall, against which they placed me. It flashed upon me suddenly; they were going to shoot me” (789). At the point of a gun in Mexico, Reed had bought off his accuser Montoya with a two-dollar watch, then shared a private joke with his North American audience as the childlike Montoya marveled at the movement of the watch’s hands and pledged his undying fealty to Reed. Here in the new Soviet Russia, Reed—who a few days earlier had donated his reporter’s pad and his pencil to the cause under the pseudonym of Trusishka—finally finds a local committeeman who can read his pass from Smolny: “The bearer of this pass, John Reed, is a representative of American Social-Democracy, an internationalist.” The committeeman is convinced. “Comrades,” he says, “this is an American comrade. I am chairman of the committee and I welcome you to the regiment.” Reed reports “a sudden general buzz grew into a roar of greeting, and they pressed forward to shake my hand” (790–91). As his original notes attest, Reed has dinner as a guest in the Red Army mess hall. Reed has been personally accepted by the revolutionaries—closing the gap that Williams remembered when Reed had been brushed aside as bourgeois, burzhuy, by the Russian worker. As in so many other scenes in *Ten Days*, the story bridges the gap between Reed and the subjects of his reporting, but opens the gap between the author and a majority of his Western readers, both then and, subsequently, throughout the cold war. Reed makes no pretense of objectivity in the scene; the Bolsheviks are his comrades and his story of their revolution will be impassioned and partisan.9

After *Ten Days*: Reed as Citizen of a New World?

In the article “A New Appeal” that he wrote for *Revolutionary Age* within a few weeks of completing the typescript of *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Reed explains why he clearly preferred the Bolsheviks’ revolutionary socialism over the more cautious reform tactics of Kerensky and the Mensheviks. Socialist reformers, Reed believed, “give an impression that Socialism is really Jeffersonian democracy,” that all workers want are “reasonable reforms, labor legislation, the full dinner pail.” Instead, Reed insisted, the Bolsheviks “found out from the
working people what they wanted most. Then they made those wants into an immediate program and explained how they were related to the other demands of the complete Socialist Revolution" (1–2).

Reed wrote *Ten Days* to re-create in prose the rising tide of revolution he believed he saw in the Bolshevik program. He wanted to write a book that would connect with his readers in visceral ways, that would draw readers into the details and scenes and personalities that would make revolution sympathetic and palatable. And, certainly, Reed believed that the historical destiny of such a process was inescapable. “Comrades who call themselves ‘members of the Left Wing’ have an immediate job to do,” Reed concludes in “A New Appeal,”“and they must explain this in terms of the whole Labor movement, and they must make the workers want more—make them want the whole Revolution” (2).

Such were the beliefs that prompted Steffens to conclude ruefully that Reed “got a conviction and so, the revolutionary spirit got him” (Steffens, n.p.). Reed had written the birth pangs of a nation—the Soviet Union—that would, later, become his own country’s greatest enemy, and he had presented it as truth, as living history, with the power to attract and repel its readers both inside the book and in the larger political sphere. The price Reed paid for that ambition was that for more than half a century after his death his nonfiction deeply alienated both the West and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Trotsky had been banished to his own refuse heap, Lenin was dead, and Reed had committed the unpardonable sin of ignoring Stalin. The Soviet writer Anatoli Rybakov summarizes the case for the Stalinist prosecution: “The main task was to build a mighty socialist state. For that, mighty power was needed. Stalin was at the head of that power, which meant that he stood at its source with Lenin. Together with Lenin he had led the October Revolution. John Reed had presented the history of October differently. That wasn’t the John Reed we needed” (quoted in Homberger, *John Reed*, 1).

Meanwhile, Reed’s crime against the United States, if it was a crime, was that he believed in Petrograd that a red tide was rising to sweep the world. And in his fervor to be the chronicler of that story he obliterated any opportunity he had to come back inside his nation’s fold. By 1919, Reed’s only U.S. publishing outlet in addition to the *Liberator* was the *Revolutionary Age*, edited by Louis C. Fraina from Socialist Party headquarters in Boston. Reed was listed as a contributing editor to the journal, and he sent a series of articles in which he laid the groundwork for a social revolution in America. What he has to say is unflinchingly polemical; he does not attempt the graceful scenes and descriptions that represent his best writing over the years. For example, compare the immediate dramatic writing from *Ten Days* that evokes V. I. Lenin’s entrance at
the second congress (“Now Lenin, gripping the edge of the reading stand, letting his little winking eyes travel over the crowd” [608]) with his account of the same historical event in the Revolutionary Age of July 12, 1919, in an article entitled “Aspects of the Russian Revolution”: “On November 7th, 1917, the Soviets—which in the meanwhile had developed a Bolshevik majority—took over the government,” Reed says flatly. “And the Provisional Government, supported by the ‘moderate’ Socialists, was unable in all Russia to rally to its aid more than a handful of Cossacks, junkers, and White Guards!” (8). This sort of summary writing was to mark most of Reed’s articles that year; in his rush to defend the Bolshevik insurgency amid a generally hostile America, rarely does Reed pause to build a scene or capture an immediate moment. The Constituent Assembly, Reed says in “Aspects of the Russian Revolution,” refused to ratify either the People’s Government of Soviets or the popular demands: “So the people dissolved it—and the dissolution provoked not a ripple of protest among the Russian masses; only the Soviet intellectuals and the New York Times objected” (8).

The foregoing is the sort of writing that causes at least one reader, Robert Humphrey in A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism, to conclude that Reed “became an apologist of the [Bolshevik] regime and a political activist, thereby ending his career as a literary journalist” (159). Humphrey’s assessment seems to ring true when applied to articles like “A New Appeal” or “Why Political Democracy Must Go,” published in the Revolutionary Age and the New York Communist, respectively. In the former article, Reed flatly rejects the thinking of what he describes as American Mensheviks in favor of what he terms practical, programmatic socialism. Yet even here, while Reed is declaiming rather than describing, one senses the searching rhythm of words that marks Reed’s best writing. “My idea is to make Socialists, and there is only one way of doing that—by teaching Socialism, straight Socialism, revolutionary Socialism, international Socialism.” Building his repetitive cadence to a revival pitch, he continues: “This is what the Russian Bolsheviki did; this is what the German Spartacus group did. They approached not Socialists, but people: workers, peasants, soldiers, who did not know what Socialism was. First they found out from working people what they wanted most. Then they made those wants into an immediate program. . . . They explained, explained, eternally explained” (10). And in “Why Political Democracy Must Go”—a title (and forum: the New York Communist) that was calculated to alienate even his most ardent non-Bolshevik supporters—Reed contends that even the capitalist class in the United States now understands “that government is not carried on in legislatures, but in banks and Chambers of Commerce” (4). Still, Reed contends,
American workers believe against all the evidence that political democracy can solve the problems of wage earners. Pressed to a new service, Reed’s writing can ring crisp and clear during this period, but it is unfailingly declamatory, fueled by a sense of injustice that “makes me write propaganda when I would rather play” (“Almost Thirty,” 142).

Reed’s best writing of the postrevolution period appears in the *Liberator*, which published the compelling profile of Eugene V. Debs and the gracefully written coverage of the IWW trial before Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis. As I attempted to show in chapter 1, the *Liberator* articles prove that Reed’s writing had not diminished by the end of his life. In fact, the evidence of his typescripts at Harvard is that at that time Reed was making more pencil corrections, polishing his prose for rhythm and precision, than at any other time of his career. Thematically, what comes through both the Debs and IWW articles is a Reed reluctantly saying goodby to his homeland as he prepares for the new world he believes to be at hand. When Reed visited Gene Debs in Terre Haute on July 4, both were under indictment for sedition, and the long sun lingered across the Indiana prairie as the two shook hands on the porch and clapped each other on the shoulder. “I have a picture of Gene Debs,” Reed writes, “his long bony head and shining face against a backdrop of bright petunias in a box on the rail, his lean hand lifted with the long, artist’s fingers giving emphasis to what he said: ‘Say, isn’t it great the way most of the boys have stood up? Fine! If this can’t break them down, why then I know nothing can. Socialism’s on the way’” (191). And in the courtroom of Judge Landis (as we saw in chapter 1), Reed deliberately allows his eyes to swim into a new vision in which the IWW defendants were trying the judge for counterrevolution. “These hundred and one are outdoor men, hard-rock blasters, tree-fellers, wheat-binders, longshoremen, the boys who do the strong work of the world.” Reed is comfortable in an imaginary nation that accepts them. “They are scarred all over with the wounds of the industry—and the wounds of society’s hatred. They aren’t afraid of anything” (177).

A third post–Bolshevik Revolution piece that displays Reed’s still-robust descriptive and poetic style is “America, 1918,” his long poem that I discussed earlier (also in chapter 1). On that occasion I cited it for its rhythms, for its quick sketches of working people, for its Whitmanesque enumerations. Here I note it for its preamble—twelve lines over which Reed labored, crossing them out on one typescript and then reasserting them in another (bMS Am 1091:1277). The preamble reveals the lengths to which Reed had gone in surrendering his lease on his native country for a citizenship in a new world. His pain is apparent as he waits for his native land to live up to its ideals:
Across the sea my country, my America,
Girt with steel, hard-glittering with power,
As a champion, with great voice trumpeting
High words, “for liberty . . . democracy . . .
Deep within me something stirs, answers—
(My country, My America!)

(bMS Am 1091:1277)

Only two years earlier, in “Almost Thirty,” Reed still had the hope that the United States might be redeemed through the ideals of liberty and democracy that stir in the hearts of the writer and his nation. “I cannot give up the idea that out of democracy will be born the new world—richer, braver, freer, more beautiful. As for me, I don’t know what I can do to help—I don’t know yet. All I know is that my happiness is built on the misery of other people, so that I eat because others go hungry, that I am clothed when other people go almost naked through the frozen cities in winter; and that fact poisons me, disturbs my serenity” (142).

After the November revolution in Petrograd, Reed thought he knew what he could do. And it required saying farewell to his lost one, to his first lover.

Deep within me something stirs, answers—
(My country, My America!)
As if alone in the high and empty night
She called me—my lost one, my first lover
I love no more, love no more, love no more . . .

(bMS Am 1091:1277)