

ART AND POLITICS

By HOWARD FAST

IN MUCH of the discussion raised by Albert Maltz in his *NEW MASSES* piece, "What Shall We Ask of Writers?" there has been a tendency to ignore the core of his position, the theoretical premise upon which he bases himself; and to engage instead in heated charge and countercharge concerning those many straw men which he not only destroys, but which he created for that very purpose. Thereby, fuel has been added to his fire—without too much inquiry as to what, precisely, was burning.

Also, by this process, dignity was lent to a piece which did not deserve it; but the fact is there; and whether or not we like it, the position of left-wing writing—or Marxist writing—in America must be stated in terms of the Maltz position: that is, it must be stated as a refutation of certain theoretical postulates Maltz makes. I say this because, as I intend to show, the end product of Maltz's direction is liquidation, not only of Marxist creative writing—but of all creative writing which bases itself on progressive currents in America; and this is the more unfortunate since that process of liquidation has been under way for a good while now.

Formerly, the need was to correct this trend toward liquidation; now the trend has a formal apostle, and an ideology of literary liquidation has been presented, however thin that ideology is. The task is more difficult, but more necessary; the very fact that the boil has come to a head makes it imperative that it be lanced.

The first task is to understand precisely why and how the Maltz position is liquidationist—and by virtue of that, anti-progressive — and in its final form, reactionary. Unless we brush aside the straw men Maltz has set up, we will stand upon ground as uncertain as that which he chose for himself.

What then is the core of Maltz's article? Not the charges he levels against criticism, for even he himself admits that those charges are of a tactical rather than a theoretical nature; *criticism* is one of the chief straw men he poses, and there his position is a comfortable one; for who is there in the literary left-wing who has not recognized and protested certain critical failings of the Marxist press? Of course, we are not free from critical mistakes, vulgarity,

incompetence; this we know, and the reasons for the situation are manifold. Some of these critical failings we have corrected; others we will correct. And if Maltz had merely intended to add his voice to the many that are already raised against our critical failings, no one could have had a real difference with him. Indeed, such criticism is healthy.

But Maltz's attack on left-wing criticism is merely a cover for his theoretical approach to left-wing creative writing. When you come to his estimation of the Marxist as an artist, there are no straw men to confuse the issue. Flatly and baldly, Maltz says: ". . . Engels understood that a writer may be confused, or even stupid and reactionary in his thinking—and yet it is possible for him to do good, even great, work as an artist—work that even serves ends he despises. *This point is critical for an understanding of art and artists!*"

The italics are mine. But the sentence italicized is the core of Maltz's position, and the word *critical* is the peg upon which he hangs his entire premise.

Why, we must inquire, is this point which Maltz singles out *critical* to our understanding of art and artists? If it is *critical*—and that is a term of absolute usage—to our understanding, then we are at least led toward presuming that confusion, stupidity, and a reactionary position are all qualities of art. And, conversely, clarity and understanding are detrimental to art.

We note in passing that Maltz does not quote Engels, but hinges his statement on his own interpretation of what Engels understands. This is a fallacious and opportunistic method of supporting a premise. But once embarked on that premise, Maltz goes on to state:

"An artist can be a great artist without being an integrated or a logical or a progressive thinker on all matters."

BUT who has denied that? And to take two ends of a historic pole, when has the Left claimed that either Shakespeare or Dreiser was an integrated, logical, and progressive thinker on all matters, and when has the Left denied that either of them was a great artist? One must look deeper than the obvious to understand why Maltz indulges in platitudes and truisms, and

why he puts them forth with such a thunderous crash. And in the following statement, Maltz begins to reveal his true intentions:

"For instance, in sections of *Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck writes a veritable poem to revolution. Yet we would be making an error to draw conclusions from this about Steinbeck's personal philosophy, or to be surprised when he writes *Cannery Row* with its mystic paean to Bohemianism."

Here, indeed, is something to make one's hair stand on end, were we not lulled so by the platitudes with which Maltz sprinkles the first part of his article. Not only can we draw conclusions from this about Steinbeck's personal philosophy, but Steinbeck forces us to draw those conclusions. We cannot deny them. His books themselves are the clearest statements of a personal philosophy that can be put forth; and one does not have to be a seer, as Maltz suggests, to realize that the philosophy of *Grapes of Wrath* was a militant, class-conscious philosophy, derived from close contact and sympathy with the working class, while the philosophy of *Cannery Row* is a disgusting neo-fascist philosophy, spurning the very essentials of life.

No, it is not an error to draw such conclusions—no more of an error than it would be to conclude that Maltz, in his two novels, was motivated by a class-conscious philosophy—no more than it is to see a new philosophy in this current statement of Maltz.

The Left has never denied change; it strives to understand change, which is the very essence of dialectics. But Maltz argues that change cannot be understood, and, in the above-quoted passage, he takes a familiar change in the position of intellectuals today, the change from progressivism to reaction, and denies that it has either meaning or importance.

By now, we begin to arrive at the fact of Maltz's position. It is summed up in his own words:

"Writers must be judged by their work, and *not* by the committees they join. It is the job of the editorial section of a magazine to praise or attack citizens' committees for what they stand for. It is the job of the literary critics to appraise the literary works only."

What a quiet and reasonable ring that has! But in the light of what has gone before, Maltz has arrived at his position, which rests on a double separation: firstly, a separation between politics and art; and secondly, a separation between art and life.

While we recognize that such a separation cannot exist, under any circumstances, we must also recognize that the statement of such a separation, however puerile, will attract certain trends of thought. The important factor is not merely that the position is a false one, but that because of its very falsity it leads inevitably to liquidation—whether that liquidation manifests itself in artistic decay, political reaction, or both. And so beguiled is Maltz by his own shoddy formulation, that in the very next paragraph he leaps to the defense of the Trotskyist, James T. Farrell. And once again, incredibly now, he drags in Engels to defend both Farrell and Wright. He sees no politics in either of these gentry, but when he adds Koestler, he does so with an apologetic note:

“Koestler, for instance, always writes with a political purpose so organic to his work that it affects his rendering of character, theme, etc. He must be judged accordingly.”

I MUST confess that the word *accordingly* leaves me somewhat bewildered. Koestler's politics affects his rendering of character, but the writing of Farrell and Wright is miraculously unaffected by any taint of personal politics. And all three are to be beautified by Engels who, as Maltz rendered him before, assures us:

“... that a writer may be confused, or even stupid and reactionary in his thinking—and yet, it is possible for him to do good, even great, work as an artist—work that even serves ends he despises.”

I presume that whatever good earth covers Engels must be in motion, as he reflects upon the progressive ends served by that astonishing and far from admirable trio, Farrell, Wright and Koestler. But let us not be taken in by the devious convolutions in which Albert Maltz indulges.

For as Maltz goes on to develop his thesis fully, his purpose becomes plain beyond dispute:

Art and politics do not mix. Therefore, salvation—and, of course, achievement—for the artist lie only in a separation from the Communist movement, the most highly political of all movements today. No matter how he slices



“Hoovervilles? I should say not. They're for rent.”

it, embroiders it, or disguises it, that is and emotion of sound and beauty of what Maltz advocates. He *advocates*, for the artist, retreat. He pleads with him to get out of the arena of life. The fact that life shows, and has shown for a generation now, that such retreat is tantamount to artistic death and personal degradation, cuts no ice with Maltz. Evidently, there are other factors that weigh more importantly with him. I do not know Maltz; I do not know what those factors might be; but as a writer—and sometimes, I hope, an artist—I resent fiercely his using the bogymen of art to destroy art. That is one of the more objectionable forms of philistinism.

Defending his position, once he has arrived at it, Maltz states:

“Writing is a complex process, and the sources of creative inspiration, out of which an artist works, are *exceedingly* complex.”

Now this is beyond dispute, but it must be remembered that life itself, in its very manifestation, is *exceedingly* complex, and it presents its rich and wonderful and complex face to every human being, not alone to the artist; and every human being, to one degree or another, creates out of that complexity.

The writer, however, has a singular responsibility; for he must select from life those factors which suit his purpose; he must turn them into word-pictures and thought-pictures; and he must arrange them on paper in such juxtaposition, taking into consideration rhythm

phrase, as to achieve that rare and splendid result we call art. Sometimes he succeeds; sometimes he does not; for in the best of worlds, art is not common. But unless he can engage in his original selection with a degree of clarity and understanding, and unless he can bring to his appraisal of life that relationship with life which we call philosophy, he will fail—even if he has the talent of the gods.

Webster defines politics as the art of government; but when we speak of politics in terms of the average citizen, we refer to that citizen's relationship to both the state and that class which uses the state as its instrument. And in the broadest sense, the relationship of the twentieth-century American to society is a political one. To ask that a writer divorce himself from politics is to ask that he exile himself from civilization; to ask that he be unaffected by changes in the political weather, is to ask that he relinquish his sensitivity to life. To do either is to abandon art, for art and life do not exist separately.

No, art can only be art when it is the result of a man's thoughtful relationship with society, and the closer, the more intimate, the more understanding the relationship, the greater the art. Out of the love, the compassion, the hatred, the sorrow, the despair produced by that relationship, down through the ages, has come the great art we know and remember.

This is a difficult statement to deny,

but see what Maltz does with the theory that the writer should react in humane terms to his environment. Maltz says:

“Almost inevitably, the earnest writer, concerned about his fellow man, aware of the social crisis, begins to think of his work as only another form of leaflet writing. Perhaps he comes to no such conscious conclusions. But he does so in effect—and he begins to use his talent for an immediate political end. If the end is good, it would be absurd to say that this may not be socially useful. It would also be highly inaccurate to maintain that from an approach like this *no* art can result. On the other hand, I believe that the failure of much left-wing talent to mature is a comment on how restricting this canon is for the creator in practice.”

Once again, the reasonable words and the complete negation. According to Maltz, three factors are destructive of art: sincerity, concern for one's fellow man, and awareness of the social crisis.

Again, according to Maltz, confusion, stupidity, and reaction are no real detriment to art. For these three factors, he has no harsh words.

From all of this, one cannot help but draw some unpleasant conclusions. It is no simple and straightforward attack upon left-wing criticism that Maltz puts forward. Underlying all of his arguments is a rejection of the whole progressive movement in America. It is no accident that he singles out Farrell, Wright, and Koestler to bolster an inherently reactionary point of view; nor is it an accident that he ignores the fact that for fifty years now, from Jack London to young Arthur Miller, almost every American writer of stature has drawn strength, sustenance, and a living philosophy from the left-wing movement.

Left-wing art is the result of a conscious use by the artist of a scientific understanding of society, of an identification with the working class, that class which is vital and in the ascendancy, and of a sharing of the vital ideology of that class. Such art is always a weapon—a weapon in the struggle for a better world.

Unhappily, the art which Maltz enthrones is the art of rejection, and, in the end, of annihilation. His own books, however, are a direct refutation of the theory he now propounds. He himself provided the best of arguments, in his work, for left-wing writing.

Yet he must be reminded that the road he charts here leads to sterility—whether it be the sterility of the esthete, the mediocrity, or the neo-fascist.