

WHAT IS FREEDOM FOR WRITERS?

By ALVAH BESSIE

Alvah Bessie, novelist, a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, currently working in Hollywood, and Sanora Babb, a writer living in Hollywood, are authors of the articles below, on the issues that have arisen since the publication of the article by Albert Maltz several weeks ago. Following these are some typical letters from our readers.

ALBERT MALTZ's recent article (NM, February 12) would not have been half so astonishing had it appeared in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, a publication that is forced by its very nature as an organ of bourgeois thought to perpetuate the utterly baseless categories Maltz resurrects in his article.

Let us first examine his overlying thesis, a cliché with which anyone can readily agree: that left-wing criticism in America for too long a time tended to be narrow, doctrinaire and paralyzing in its effects on both writers and critics. As a former critic for NM who suffered acutely under its then sectarian approach to books, plays and motion pictures, I can utter a fervent Amen to Maltz's attack.

At the same time it is possible to contend that Maltz is beating a dying horse, for there is more than ample evidence that the Left has been building—slowly and painfully as needs must be—a sounder Marxist approach to the arts. (The sounder the party of Marxism becomes, the sounder will be its approach to the arts, as well as its approach to the people.)

What is more important, however, is the fact that the approach Maltz castigates, narrow as it was, was *never* erected into a principle. We have had good Marxists who were bad critics and vice versa (and we still have both), but I cannot remember anyone ever insisting, in the name of Marxism, that art works of any category were automatically to be praised because they said the "right" thing or damned because they said the "wrong"—irrespective of their other attributes.

What is so astonishing about Maltz's article, however, after he has disposed of this moth-eaten straw man, is the fact that his basic contentions are not only un-Marxist, but actually anti-Marxist. Perhaps I do Maltz a disservice in thus associating him with Marxism, for he

nowhere identifies himself in his article as anything more than "a working writer," whatever that may be. He nowhere states his frame of reference or identifies the point of departure from which he launches what is, objectively, not only an attack on Marxism but a defense of practically every renegade writer of recent years who ever flirted with the working class movement: Farrell, Wright, Fearing. (And why not John Dos Passos?)

The un-Marxist character of Maltz's approach is revealed in the almost endless series of idealist categories into which he divides writers and writing: "artistic activity" and "journalism"; the "social novelist," the "political novelist" and perhaps, by extension, the "working" novelist; the writer "*qua* artist"; the writer "*qua* citizen"; works written for an "immediate political end" and works written, presumably, for eternity.

I think a Marxist would contend that these categories are idealist, unreal and basically reactionary. I think a Marxist would contend that when Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* he was at least under the influence of working class ideas—and people; that these served him as powerful inspiration, gave him a certain clarity and offered him a springboard into a work that served both "an immediate political end" and the questionable standards of "eternity."

Now it is common knowledge that not only Steinbeck but also Farrell, Wright, Fearing and Dos Passos have consciously repudiated the working class movement; all have found a place, or hope to find a place, in the very bosom of a class they once affected to despise. And the contention could be supported with every kind of evidence that not one of them has written anything since that repudiation that is worth reading—either "artistically" or "politically." (And I include in this *Black Boy*, which, whatever the obvious distortions of *Native Son*, cannot hold a candle to that work, in either depth of conception, scope or penetration.) This is not a question of "literary taste"—nor do I understand what Maltz is talking about when he opposes literary taste to "an immediate political utility." Did *Grapes of Wrath* possess both immediate political utility and literary taste? Or didn't it? Did *The*

Silent Don? Or even *The Cross and the Arrow*?

BUT the attempt to perpetuate these idealist categories (a daily phenomenon in the literary columns of the *New York Times*) leads Maltz to dangerous conclusions: that an "artist" is a self-contained phenomenon whose "art" bears no "inevitable, consistent connection" with what the artist thinks or believes. An artist may be "confused, or even stupid and reactionary in his thinking" and still do "good, even great work" as an artist.

This sort of thinking is a product of the bourgeois concept that regards artists as sacred idiots who should be protected from popular anger even when they are fascist traitors (Ezra Pound)—but Maltz himself told us (NM, Dec. 25, 1945) that Pound "is more guilty *because* he is a poet." And yet he echoes the concept that says, "You don't have to have any brains" to be an actor, a writer, dancer, painter, composer; all you have to have is talent—whatever the hell that is—and you should be "free" to create without it being "incumbent upon [you] that [you] relate [your] broad philosophic or emotional humanism to a current and transient political tactic."

Maltz quotes us Engels on Balzac, who was a great writer and a "reactionary" at the same time. Well, what about Balzac? He was a monarchist at a time when the rising bourgeoisie of France was the historically progressive class; that made him a reactionary, for his time. He loathed, hated and despised the power of money *and* the corruption of his own beloved aristocracy, whom he castigated more bitterly than the shopkeepers, merchants and bankers themselves. That makes him for us (and for Engels) a progressive. What is more, to quote Engels' famous letter to Miss Harkness: "And the only men of whom he speaks with undisguised admiration are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloitre Saint-Merri, the men who at that time (1830-1836) were indeed the representatives of the popular masses."

If this is true then it is not enough to catalog Balzac as a reactionary and thus "prove" that it is possible to be a reactionary and a great writer at the

same time, Q.E.D. To do so is to remove Balzac from his historical context and to isolate the word reactionary as though it were a constant, equally applicable to all times, places and persons. For it has frequently happened that what was progressive yesterday is reactionary today and vice versa.

Balzac was a monarchist in a period when the modern industrial proletariat was practically nonexistent. Can Maltz cite us a monarchist writer today who could at the same time be a "great" writer? Today's ultra-reactionaries are fascists. The proletariat rules a country covering one-sixth the land surface of the globe. Can Maltz cite us a fascist writer who is "great"? Will he contend that it is even possible for a fascist to write a great novel when the mere fact of being a fascist premises an attitude toward human beings that makes it categorically impossible for a person to see or write the truth about anything?

No one will deny the possibility of a writer coming out of the mountains of Wyoming, never having heard of Karl Marx in his entire life, and still writing a book that will be great—because he has profoundly observed, deeply felt and honestly and felicitously set down what he has seen. But if it is true that Marxist historical materialism can equip the writer with an insight into human relations that is more valid than that provided by any other philosophy of life, then it *can* be denied that a writer, having once accepted that philosophy and then repudiated it (talent being equal), will thereafter write anything possessing the validity of the work he wrote under the influence of that philosophy.

I AM *not* saying here that a bad writer automatically becomes a good one when he becomes a Communist; nor am I saying that a writer who is not a Communist is necessarily a bad writer. But I am saying that there is a correlation between the quality of a writer's work and his grasp of human history. And I am proceeding from the assumption that a sound understanding of Marxist theory and practice will provide a writer with a sounder grasp of human history—which is human character.

What Maltz actually seems to be saying when he defends such pipsqueak talents as Farrell, Fearing and Blankfort is that the trouble with them is not that they are minor writers who never developed but that Marxism itself, applied as a critique to their work at the time they fondly imagined themselves of the Left, stunted their development.

They failed because we failed to appreciate them, nourish them, praise them, tolerate their peculiar political, social and personal vagaries!

The facts simply will not support such a contention. Not one of them was ever a major talent to begin with—and neither was Dos Passos. But it *is* a fact that when they were on the periphery of the Left, when they themselves—for the moment—placed their work at the service of the working class, they wrote better than they ever wrote before or



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have ever written since. And the same is true of Clifford Odets—the only real talent of them all—who, since he became separated from the people he knew best, loved best and whose interests he attempted to defend (as an artist *and* as a man), has "gone downhill"—both as an artist and as a man. For the artist and the man are inseparable, and there *is* "a commanding relationship between the way an artist votes and any particular work he writes." It may not be immediately evident in "any particular work" but it *is* evident in the totality of his work, and Maltz himself is an example of this relationship.

Maltz springs of the middle class, yet in the depression he first made an identification with the working class and he has maintained that identification.

The stories he wrote in the thirties are instinct with a true—if scarcely profound—understanding of the people who suffered most during that crisis. In *The Underground Stream* Maltz wrote a poor novel. It is not, however, a poor novel because it possessed immediate political expediency—in frankly asking sympathy and understanding for

the auto workers and their Communist leader. It was a poor novel simply because Maltz did not profoundly understand either the Communist leader, his party, the workers he was trying to lead or their antagonists. So the characters became well-intentioned stereotypes (the workers), and the fascist became a rubber stamp.

The Cross and the Arrow has many of the faults of *The Underground Stream*, in its earnest and uninspired attempt to understand and project people with whom its author is really unfamiliar. And while it deals with one of the crucial issues of our time (political expediency) its faults do not stem from the fact that its author is deeply concerned with the nature and the fate of the German people. Its faults spring from an imperfect (a synthetic and researched) examination of the German people under Hitler. And its virtues—which are far greater than any Maltz displayed in his earlier work—spring from the growing maturity of the writer, both as a man, a novelist and a student of politics. This is a contradiction which is the essence of the truth about Maltz.

FOR there *are* no constants—in the individual or in society. We cannot say, "This is a social novel," "This is a political novel," this is "art" and this is "journalism." (Paine was a journalist—and he was an artist. Ehrenbourg is an artist—and he is a journalist. So is Aragon.) Should "a new headline in the newspapers" cause a writer to rewrite a novel? No—if it is a headline and nothing more. Yes—if the "headline" involves a fundamental reorientation of human history. So far as the American Communist movement is concerned, the Duclos letter was not a headline. Neither was it a strategy or "a current and transient political tactic," to which a Communist writer must willy-nilly "relate his broad philosophic or emotional humanism."

For if we should accept Maltz's contention that all we need ask of writers is that they work "deeply, truly, honestly recreating a sector of human experience" within "the great humanistic tradition of culture" (whatever that *may* be), then surely there is no need for a Communist Party so far as writers are concerned, and certainly there is no need for them to join it, for it would only cramp their style. By the same token, there is no need for the Party or even for a trade union, so far as workers are concerned, if we only ask them to behave themselves, keep their noses

clean, live deeply, truly and honestly—and if they will only do so.

I do not mean to vulgarize Albert Maltz's approach to this complicated problem or offer ready-made solutions for it. But this is what he seems to be asking for in his article—"freedom" for the artist to "create" irrespective of party or working-class needs, aspirations and criticism. "Let them leave us alone," he seems to say, "to work deeply, truly and honestly, and we will be on their side, and we will automatically write the truth." This is nonsense, but it follows inevitably from the separations Maltz makes between the artist *qua* artist and the artist *qua* citizen.

No. We need more than "free"

artists. We need *Party* artists. We need artists deeply, truly and honestly rooted in the working class who realize the truth of Lenin's assertion that the absolute freedom they seek "is nothing but a bourgeois or anarchist phrase (for ideologically an anarchist is just a bourgeois turned inside out). It is impossible to live in a society and yet be free from it. The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist, or actress is nothing but a self-deceptive (or hypocritically deceiving) dependence upon the money bags, upon bribery, upon patronage." Lenin wrote these words in 1905 and they still touch the very heart of the liberal dilemma.

We need writers who will joyfully impose upon themselves the discipline of

understanding and acting upon working-class theory, and *they* are the writers who will possess the potentialities of creating a truly free literature.

"This literature will be free," said Lenin, "because rather than careerism and pecuniary motives it will be the socialist cause and sympathy with the workers that will draw ever new forces into its ranks. This literature will be free because it will serve not the overfed heroine, not the overweight and bored 'upper ten thousand,' but the millions and tens of millions of workers who are the flower of the country, its strength, its future."

This is what we shall ask of writers. And in time we will get it.