

MOVING FORWARD

By ALBERT MALTZ

WE LIVE in a period of social convulsion greater than the world has ever seen. Poverty, depression, colonial enslavement; racism, war, political conspiracy, mass murder—these are the problems with which humanity must deal. In this world of acute struggle, writers, like everyone else, live and work. Since the nature of their work is such that it is capable of influencing the thoughts, emotions and actions of others, it is right and good that the world should hold them responsible for what they write, and that they should hold themselves responsible.

I have believed this for quite some years now. I have also believed that in our time Marxism can be the bread of life to a serious writer. With these convictions, I published an article in the *NEW MASSES* some weeks ago which was greeted by severe criticism. The sum total of this criticism was that my article was not a contribution to the development of the working class cultural movement, but that its fundamental ideas, on the contrary, would lead to the paralysis and liquidation of left-wing culture.

Now these are serious charges, and were not rendered lightly, nor taken lightly by me. Indeed the seriousness of the discussion flows from the fact that my article was not published in the *Social Democratic New Leader* (which, to my humiliation, has since commented on it with wolfish approval), but that it was published in the *NEW MASSES*.

In the face of these criticisms, I have been spending the intervening weeks in serious thought. I have had to ask myself a number of questions: Were the criticisms of my article sound? If so, by what process of thought had I, despite earnest intentions, come to write the article in the terms I did?

Intimately connected with these personal questions were broader matters demanding inquiry by others as well as by myself. If the criticisms of my article were sound, why was it that a number of friends, who read the manuscript prior to publication, and whose convictions are akin to mine, had not come to such severe conclusions? And why was it that the *NEW MASSES* accepted the article without comment to me, indeed with only a note of approval from the literary editor? And why was it that even after the criticisms of my article

appeared, I daily received letters which protested the "tone" of the criticisms of me, but considered that at worst I only had fallen into a few "unfortunate" formulations?

I have come to quite a number of conclusions about these questions. And if I discuss the process of my arriving at them with some intimacy, I hope the reader will bear with me, since I know no other way of dealing honestly with the problems involved. I particularly invite those who have written me letters of approval to consider whether some of the remarks I have to make about myself may not be also appropriate to them.

I CONSIDER now that my article—by what I have come to agree was a one-sided, non-dialectical treatment of complex issues—could not, as I had hoped, contribute to the development of left-wing criticism and creative writing. I believe also that my critics were entirely correct in insisting that certain fundamental ideas in my article would, if pursued to their conclusion, result in the dissolution of the left-wing cultural movement.

The discussion surrounding my article has made me aware of a trend in my own thinking, and in the thinking of at least some others in the left-wing cultural movement: namely, a tendency to abstract errors made by Left critics from the total social scene—a tendency then to magnify those errors and to concentrate attention upon them without reference to a balanced view of the many related forces which bear upon Left culture—and hence a tendency to advance from half-truths to total error.

Let me illustrate this point: in the thirties, as there seems to be general agreement, left-wing criticism was not always conducted on the deepest, or most desirable, or most useful level. Its effectiveness was lowered by tendencies toward doctrinaire judgments and toward a mechanical application of social criticism. And these tendencies *must* be understood and analyzed if working-class culture is to advance to full flower. But, on the other hand, the inadequacies of criticism, such as they were, are only a small and partial aspect of the left-wing cultural movement as a whole. The full truth—as I have been aware for many years, and as I was thoroughly aware even when writing my article, is

this: from the left-wing cultural movement in America, and from the left-wing internationally, has come the only major, healthy impetus to an honest literature and art that these last two decades have provided. Compound the errors of Left cultural thought as high as you will—still its errors are small as compared to its useful contribution, are tiny as compared to the giant liberating and constructive force of Marxist ideas upon culture. As a matter of sheer fact this is such a self-evident proposition that it doesn't require someone of my conviction to state it; it has been acknowledged even by reactionary critics who, naturally, have then gone on falsely to declare that the liberating force of Left culture has run its course and expired.

This total truth about the left wing is therefore the only proper foundation and matrix for a discussion of specific errors in the practice of social criticism and creative writing. It was in the omission of this total truth—in taking it for granted—in failing to record the host of writers who have been, and are now, nourished by the ideas and aspirations of the left wing—that I presented a distorted view of the facts, history and contribution of left-wing culture to American life. This was not my desire, but I accept it as the objective result. And, at the same time, by my one-sided zeal in attempting to correct errors, etc., I wrote an article that opened the way for the *New Leader* to seize upon my comments in order to "support" its unprincipled slanders against the Left.

Of all that my article unwittingly achieved, this is the most difficult pill for me to swallow. My statements are now being offered up as fresh proof of the old lie: that the Left puts artists in uniform. But it is a pill I have had to swallow, and that I now want to dissolve.

WHO and what keep artists in uniform? In our society uniforms are indeed fitted for artists at every turn. But how? By a system of education which instructs a whole society in the belief that the status quo is unalterable, that social inequality is normal, that race prejudice is natural; by a social order which puts writing talent at the disposal of Hearst and artistic talent at the disposal of advertising agencies; by a total pressure made up of economic pressures

and intellectual pressures and moral pressures, all designed to harness writers, artists, teachers, journalists, scientists, into willing or confused or frightened support of the established order in society, into maintaining, if need be, capitalist poverty, crime, prostitution, the cycle of wars and depressions—into maintaining all of this by their *talents*. This is the way in which artists, unless they break loose in conscious and organized protest, are put into one of the many, elegantly-cut uniforms offered them by our Kings of Monopoly, our Lords of the Press, Radio, etc.

No, it is not the left wing that is guilty of this. On the contrary. The left wing, by its insistence that artists must be free to speak the absolute truth about society, by the intellectual equipment it offers in Marxist scientific thought, is precisely the force that can help the artist strip himself of the many uniforms into which he has been stepping since birth.

This is my conviction, and it has been my conviction for years. For precisely this reason it highlights the contradiction between my intentions in writing my article—and its result. By allowing a subjective concentration upon problems met in my own writing in the past to become a major preoccupation, I produced an article distinguished for its omissions, and succeeded in merging my comments with the unprincipled attacks upon the Left that I have always repudiated and combatted.

And this, as I said earlier, is the process by which one-sided thinking can lead to total error—it is the process by which objects, seen in a distortion mirror, can be recognized, but bear no relation to their precise features. It was this, among other things, that my critics pointed out sharply. For that criticism I am indebted. Ideas and opinions are worth holding when they are right, not when they are wrong. The effort to be useful involves always the possibility of being wrong; the right of being wrong, however, bears with it the moral obligation to analyze errors and to correct them. Anything else is irresponsible.

THE second major criticism of the thinking in my article revolved about a separation between art and ideology, which was traced in varied terms, through a number of illustrations I had used and concepts I had advanced. I suppose I might claim here that it was merely inept formulation on my part which resulted in an "impression" that I was separating art from politics, the artist from the citizen, etc. But in the

For the Day

For the day when the world like a healed beast
comes forth from the mud,
and the ridiculous sparrows spangle the air with their
twitterings;

for the day when the massed and polished armies parade
their might
on the avenues gladdened by girls
and the tub-thumpers wallop away with the salvoes of
Sunday words;

for the day when the regular forces parade before notables
and we have forgotten the Ebro, Teruel and Madrid
and the men in civilian clothes on the paths of the Pyrenees;

for that day, remember a face;
let there be toasts—a ghostling call, a sinking ship,
a fist clenched, a single bugle blown,

and one salvo from one lone gun for you,
O International Brigade, who broke the path!

MILT ROE.

course of reading and re-reading the criticisms of my article and the article itself, I have come to agree that I did make the separations mentioned, and that I made them not only in the writing, but in my thinking on the specific problems I was discussing.

Once again, this is the result of a one-sided, non-dialectical approach. Out of a desire to find clear, creative paths for my own work and the work of others, I felt it necessary to combat the current of thought that, in the past, has tended to establish a mechanical relationship between ideology and art—a tendency that works particular harm to creative writing because it encourages a narrow, sloganized literature instead of a living reflection of society. However, in the course of this "contribution," as has been pointed out, I severed the organic connection between art and ideology.

This is not a small matter, but a serious one. For if the progress of literature and art is separate from thought, if the ideas of a writer bear no intimate relationship to the work he produces, then even fascists can produce good art. This is not only contrary to historic fact, but it is theoretically absurd. Good art has always, and will always, come from writers who love people, who ally themselves with the fate of the people, with the struggle of the people for social

advancement. It is precisely because fascists must hate people that twelve years of Nazi Germany produced not one piece of art in any field. It is for this reason that a writer like Celine, the Frenchman, who began with a talented work of protest, but who found no constructive philosophy for his protest, ended in corrupt cynicism, in hatred of people, in the artistic sterility of the fascist. It is for the same reason that the talent of American writers like Farrell and Dos Passos has not matured but has, on the contrary, gone into swift downgrade, into sheer dullness as well as the purveying of untruth.

Here I want to interrupt for a word of comment on Farrell. I agree now that my characterization of him was decidedly lax, and that it was the inadvertent, but inevitable, result of the line of thinking in my article that separated art from ideology and politics. I want to make clear, however, that while "a mild attitude toward Trotskyites" was apparently the net effect upon readers of my comments, it was not at all what I had in mind, and it decidedly does not reflect my opinions. Actually if I had been attempting a thorough examination of Farrell, there would have been much more to say—and I want to say some of it now.

Farrell's history and work are the best example I know of the manner in

WHITEWASH ON THE BLACKBOARD

By VIRGINIA HARTNETT

which a poisoned ideology and an increasingly sick soul can sap the talent and wreck the living fibre of a man's work. This has been clear for quite some time now; his literary work has become weak, dull, repetitious. But precisely because this is so, and because his one outstanding work, *Studs Lonigan*, which ranks high among contemporary American novels—deservedly, I believe—was written before he became a Trotskyite, it is essential to trace dialectically in his work—as in the work of others like him—the process of artistic decay. It was not something I was “cheering” about, but it is something to reckon with as sheer fact that Farrell, Wright, Dos Passos, Koestler, etc., are “not through writing yet,” that they are going to produce other books. If no one in America read these authors, one could settle by ignoring them. But this is not the case; they are widely read. As I see it, the effective manner of dealing with their work is not to be content merely with contemptuous references; this will not satisfy those who, ignorant of their political roles, know only their novels. What is needed is profound analysis of the method and logic by which their anti-Soviet, anti-people, anti-labor, attitudes enter their work, pervert their talents, turn them into tools and agents of reaction. Only in this manner can other writers be made to see clearly the artistic consequences of political corruption, only in this manner can the struggle for a mass audience be conducted in a truly persuasive and mature manner.

AT THIS point I should like to ask a question particularly of those who read my earlier article with approval, or with only sketchy criticism: What is the sum of what I have been saying up until now?

It seems clear to me, as I hope it is already clear to them, that I have been discussing and illustrating revisionism, and that my article, as pointed out by others, was a specific example of revisionist thinking in the cultural field.

For what is revisionism? It is distorted Marxism, turning half-truths into total untruths, splitting ideology from its class base, denying the existence of class struggles in society, converting Marxism from a science of society and struggle into apologetics for monopoly exploitation. In terms of my article I think the clearest summation was given by Samuel Sillen in the *Daily Worker*:

“A hasty reading of the article may give the impression that it merely offers suggestions for correcting admitted de-

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AT THIS moment the educational leadership of the City of New York is being lit up in all its bankruptcy, corruption and reaction by the lurid glare of the May Quinn case.

Before that light is extinguished, before the fires of public indignation die down, it would be well for all progressive organizations, and in the first place the trade union movement, to make a fundamental analysis of the role they must play in creating a decent educational apparatus.

Let us face the facts. Our children are being robbed of an education. The great democratic, anti-fascist ideals for which the people—if not their leaders—fought this war, are being made a mockery of in our school system. Leadership in that system is educationally bankrupt. It is completely unrepresentative of the best educational and democratic thought in our city. It is completely unrepresentative of the parents, the teachers, the trade union movement, the Negro people, or any other democratic people's groups. It has been responsive only to the reactionary interests of the Chamber of Commerce, the real estate boards and the Catholic hierarchy.

Historically, it was the trade union movement which was the major force in fighting for the creation of a free public school system in this country. The labor and progressive movement is now faced with the equally grave responsibility of becoming the primary force in influencing the course of democratic education.

No one would deny that our unions are faced with tremendous tasks in conducting their economic and political struggles. But the stakes being played for in our educational system are also very high—the education of our children. What is at stake is the future investment of organized labor. And labor must either battle for the minds of the citizens of tomorrow or surrender them to reaction.

To put the question in its baldest form, can organized labor afford to allow our schools to turn out regularly

hundreds of thousands of boys and girls imbued with anti-union prejudices, thoroughly steeped in the ideas that the enemies of labor pour into our school system through a thousand daily channels? What type of leadership is being exercised now by our educational authorities?

Let Commissioner George Chatfield speak for the members of the Board of Education who perpetrated the majority decision in the Quinn case.

Said he: “Mr. Marshall gave it (the Quinn case) a gravity we did not feel. I think the issue was one of those casual things that developed out of all rightful proportions.” — “One of those casual things!”

Let us remember that the board was not dealing alone with a teacher whose callous indifference and bigotry made her unfit to associate with children. It was not dealing alone with a teacher who used a scurrilous, subversive Christian Front leaflet which attacked the patriotism of the Jewish people; who called Italians “greasy foreigners”; who praised Hitler; who argued against the principles of equality and tolerance; who stated that “all labor leaders were gangsters and Communists”; and who, if we are to believe the evidence, was more than guilty of perjury. Nor was it dealing alone with a teacher who attacked our war effort at the blackest period of our military history; who spoke against rationing, the sale of war bonds, women's participation in the war effort, our armed forces, and the democratic aims of the war.

It was dealing here with a conscious leader of reaction. It was dealing with a woman who was the president of the American Education Association, which from its inception acquired a notorious reputation for spreading anti-Semitism and other bigoted propaganda among teachers in New York City. This was an organization that attacked the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (representing 28,000,000 Protestants in the US) as “too radical”; an organization that apologized for the Christian Front.

and length of service, I can get \$204 a month. Where could I get that kind of money in civilian life?" We know a lot of guys who are going to end up back in the Army, contrary to what they would like to do.

My brother and I got back very much disgusted, but at least we can see with our own eyes and hear with our own ears that the veterans are learning the facts of life very fast. They may not have a clear understanding of what they fought for, but one thing—they sure as hell know what they want in the USA and if they don't get it, I've a hunch everything that has happened up till now will look like pink-tea affairs. Philadelphia. SAM KOVNAT.

Jews in Europe

TO NEW MASSES: May I thank you for Mr. William Zukerman's article, "Outlook For Europe's Jews"? [NM, February 19]. I have found it an exceptionally clear-cut and all-embracing review of the Jewish position in Europe such as we seldom read in our press of late.

There is a great amount of confusion on the problem of the Jews in Europe, and much of it, I fear, is deliberately created by Jewish nationalists and Zionists in pursuit of their special nationalistic aims. There is no denying that their object is to create a general impression that the position of all the remaining Jews in Europe (more than four million) is the same as that of the hundred thousand or more displaced Jews in the camps, in order to present a stronger case for Zionism. With this in view they inflate and deliberately confuse the situation so as to make it appear that there is no hope for all the Jews in Europe except through mass evacuation to Palestine.

This is not true, as Mr. Zukerman has clearly shown. He is to be thanked for making a sharp distinction between the "displaced" and the European Jews. But I wish he had been as clear and explicit about the role of the extremist Jewish nationalists as he was about the situation in Europe. He failed to point out the danger into which these people are now driving all the Jews of Europe and of the rest of the world too, by their exaggerated propagandea about the need for mass emigration to Palestine. For it is obvious that once Jews maintain that wherever there is an increase of anti-Semitism, the only solution is to escape to Palestine, the position of the Jews is undermined not only in Europe but in the United States and everywhere else. There is no lack of anti-Semites in every country in the world and if they find that by increasing their activity and by staging a few pogroms the Jews will start a mass evacuation from their homes (at their own expense too), it will be an invitation to them to imitate Hitler, and soon we shall have a movement in this and in other countries for Jews to evacuate their homes and go to Palestine.

A good many Jewish nationalists in this country are now in a state of hysteria about Palestine and they are succeeding in infecting non-nationalist Jews with their excitement, exaggerated fears, defeatism and funk. It is the duty of clear-sighted Jews to counteract

this hysteria before it leads to the greatest moral collapse of a frightened people. Mr. Zukerman has contributed something to this cause with his article. But I cannot help feeling that he has not done enough because he failed to accentuate the role of the Jewish nationalist extremists in deliberately whipping up passions and fears. This is why I shall be grateful to you, if you will publish my few words to supplement Mr. Zukerman's article. Brooklyn. A. S.

Wanted: Reprints

TO NEW MASSES: I have found increasing satisfaction in your publication since your revision of policies and would like to make the following suggestions: (1) that all the poetry published in the NM during the course of a year be printed in book or pamphlet form; (2) that all the reproductions of paintings, sketches, etc., published in the NM during the course of a year be printed in pamphlet or book form.

These two might be combined in one, but in either case I believe that there would be enough demand for these to warrant their printing—at least I'd buy one.

W. O. NOVILLE.

San Francisco.

The Other Side

TO NEW MASSES: Out here on Saipan each issue of NM has meant a great deal to me. Each issue was almost like a furlough. Other magazines are American imperialism's loyal opposition; the NM is the opposition. Other magazines show different approaches to the same point of view; the NM is the alternate point of view. American liberalism, which prides itself on seeing both sides of the question, will learn ultimately that here, and here alone, is the other side to the question.

APO San Francisco.

Sgt. E. F.



Leon Miller.

Moving Forward

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fects of the literary Left. But a deeper study of the article reveals that these suggestions, some of which might be valuable in another context, are here bound up with a line of thinking that would lead us to shatter the very foundation of the literary left, Marxism. This is the main issue. On this issue we must have utmost clarity.

"While Maltz seems to believe that he is merely criticizing a 'vulgarized approach' to literature, he is in reality undermining a class approach. While appearing to challenge an over-simplified identity between art and politics, he severs their organic relationship in our epoch. In repudiating the 'accepted understanding' of art as a weapon, Maltz whittles down the concept itself to a point approaching non-existence. In centering his fire on the 'literary atmosphere of the Left,' he ignores the basic problem of an honest writer in capitalist society, the 'literary atmosphere of the Right.'

"The article cannot be viewed simply as a challenge to mechanical application of fundamental truths, The truths themselves are crushed under the structure of Maltz's reasoning. . . . What is the main problem of the literary Left today? It is to reestablish its Marxist base. In the past few years that base has been sapped by revisionism."

I BELIEVE that Sillen's summation is correct. The process he describes here is a revisionist process; it is the result of a failure to break deeply with old habits of thought. This failure was, I believe, at the core of the main tendencies in my article and it was the key to its uncritical acceptance by more than a few in the cultural field, both before and after publication. The intense, ardent and sharp discussion around my article, therefore, seems to me to have been a healthy and necessary one—and to have laid the foundation whereby a new clarity can be achieved, a new consciousness forged, and a struggle undertaken to return, deeply, to sound Marxist principles.

For it is essential that everyone who appreciates that a healthy culture must be based on the needs of the people and the needs of the working class, appreciate also that Browderism could not lead to such a culture. A literature that would be *uncritical* of monopoly capital and its effect upon human lives, indeed a literature based on the concept that monopoly capital can serve the Ameri-

can people progressively—such a literature would be wholly out of step with life, it *could not* represent the facts of life. Creative writers who approached life with this philosophy would have to avoid realistic, honest writing. However much they might feel ardent sympathy for the people, they would be forced into the position of ignoring reality—and hence their actual work would finally become indistinguishable from the empty literature to be found in the popular magazines.

This, with all of its implications, is the reason why a serious and sharp discussion was required of the ideas developed in my article.

I SHOULD like now to take up a question that has disturbed many of those who have written letters to me: the question of the tone of the criticism offered my article.

In a debate over ideas and theory, the tone taken by the participants is not an unimportant matter. This is so for purely human reasons, for reasons of psychology that everyone must take into account. Criticism conducted in an unreasonable tone—however correct—is self-defeating, since those who follow the controversy sometimes become too angry to think. I make a point of this solely because not a few letters to me have indicated that some readers of the *NEW MASSES*, for instance, utterly failed to assess many of the points Howard Fast had to make about my article because they were incensed by his manner of presentation, and by what I myself believe was a considerable looseness on his part in dealing with my remarks. In such a situation, rightly or wrongly, there are some who cannot see the wood for the trees.

On the other hand, I definitely feel that those who wrote to me in this vein forgot to put first things first. In no sense was the *major* question whether or not Howard Fast or anyone else was minutely accurate or “fair” in all he said. The major question revolved about the fundamental issues themselves, and it was necessary to ask first upon what major platform Howard Fast based his case, and what major ideas I was offering. To write me and “forgive” me my errors of “formulation,” while applauding other things I had to say—but to deplore errors that my critics may have made, while ignoring the core of their comments—this serves no one. We are dealing with serious matters, and it is a moral obligation upon all interested people to evaluate the total debate and the main issues, and

not a minor portion of the discussion alone.

Perhaps I can best present how I myself feel on this question of tone by a rather mundane illustration: Consider that there are two swimmers in a pool, Bill and Jim. Jim is trying to improve Bill's stroke. But in the course of his earnest instruction, Jim pushes Bill's head under water. It thereupon becomes the duty of spectators around the pool to set up a sharp cry of protest. For the issue is no longer: will Jim improve Bill's stroke—but, will Bill drown?



Deckinger.

And unless, by their outcry, Jim can be made aware that he is indeed pushing Bill's head under water, then the spectators are helping Bill drown. And furthermore, until Bill's head is above water, and he has had a chance to breathe normally again, it is futile to discuss improving his stroke.

Now it is an important, but nevertheless minor, aspect of the situation to point out that if some of the indignant spectators shout so vehemently that they become incoherent, then they are not helping the drowning swimmer in the most effective manner because they cannot be thoroughly understood. That this is so, however, does not alter the main question: the major requirement is that they not keep silent; the major question is what they are indignant about in the first place.

And this question was altogether missed by many people who protested the “tone” of the discussion.

IN THE course of these remarks, I have not attempted to trace out all that I said in my first article, or all that was said of it in subsequent criticism. Much has been written—it is there to be read—and I have not wanted here to go in for a point by point discussion that might blur the main issues. What

should be clear is that my article made fundamental errors, and that these had to be dealt with before anything else I had to say could be evaluated. I have been attempting here to return to common ground. If I have been successful, then discussion of the strength, weaknesses and path of the literary Left can move ahead.

FOR now, certainly, the times call for moving ahead. We have in America today the opportunity for a flowering of a profound art, one that will deeply enrich the great tradition we inherit. If this flowering comes to pass, it will be based upon a passionate, honest rendition of the real, mutual relations in society; it will be a true art based upon the real lives, the disappointments, struggles, aspirations, of the American people. Such an art, being realistic, will be socially critical; this follows as night follows day. But, by being tied to life as the source of true artistic inspiration, it will not substitute slogans for rich events, or substitute mechanical selectivity for a description of real mutual relations in society. Marxism will be the interpretative guide; the raw material will be the facts of life, faced absolutely, with burning honesty.

The struggle to win American writers to the production of such a literature is the struggle to help them overcome personal confusions, to present to them, in the last analysis, a simple proposition: that whatever their talent, whatever their past achievements because of their fundamental health and honesty in approaching life, they cannot adequately, in *long-time* work, deepen, grow, mature, unless they understand the world in which their characters move. This understanding must be the objective foundation for work, but it has a subjective side as well, of great importance to individual creators. Life is hard, and events themselves in this troubled world can be vastly confusing. The convulsions of an outworn social system plunge humanity into brutal conflict, turn people, even nations, brutish. If the writer is to retain inner firmness, if he is not to sink into cynicism and despair, if he is to maintain his love for people, without which true art cannot flourish, then he must understand that events have a meaning, that history has a direction, that the characters he portrays are part of a social web based upon the life and death struggle of classes. For this understanding, for inner firmness, for the spiritual ability to retain faith in people and faith in the future, he must, in this epoch, turn to Marxism.