ART IS A WEAPON

By JOHN HOWARD LAWSON

DURING recent months, NEW MASSES has published a number of articles on the social function of the writer. The discussion is of unusual interest, because it indicates the transitional phase through which our culture is passing, which in turn is a reflection of social and political changes in the life of the American people and in world relationships.

Unfortunately much of the discussion has been conducted in a rather rarefied aesthetic atmosphere and not in terms of immediate political realities. The article by Albert Maltz (NM, Feb. 12, 1946) is an extreme example of the tendency to deal with art (and the desires and illusions of the artist) subjectively, without reference to the external events and forces which are the occasion for the discussion and the only frame of reference by which it can be given relevance and meaning. In asserting that the writer is obligated only to portray "abiding truths" and to serve "a broad philosophic or emotional humanism," Maltz explicitly rejects the contemporary responsibility of the artist. He also rejects, less explicitly but nonetheless sweepingly, the fundamental principles of Marxism.

Marxism regards all of life and nature as a continuous process of flux and change, decay and growth. Everything is transient; everything is in motion; everything is becoming. Marxism rejects the assumption of idealist philosophy that thought is a thing-in-itself, a "spiritual" reality that transcends the environment. Thought is an integral part of practical, human activity. Marx wrote in the second thesis on Feuerbach: "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth, i.e., the 'this-sidedness' of his thinking."

The slogan *Art is a weapon* expresses this basic truth. A weapon is used in conflict. The history of society is the history of class struggles. Art, then, serves the interest of a class; it is a weapon in the hands of one class or another. Maltz seems to accept this concept in general. He agrees that "It is broadly—not always specifically—true to say that works of art have been, and can be, weapons in men's thinking, and therefore in the struggle of social classes —either on the side of humanity's progress or on the side of reaction." The confusing and vacillating quality of this statement lies in the contrast between what is "broadly" and "specifically" true, and in the phrase "have been, and can be. . . ." Are we to assume that there are works of art which do not "specifically" serve the interests of classes and are therefore outside and above the class struggle?

As we proceed, it becomes apparent that this is precisely what Maltz means. He castigates "the writer who works to serve an immediate political purpose —whose desire is to win friends for some political action or point of view." The immediate impact of politics expresses the pressure of class interests. If the "abiding truths" to which the writer dedicates his talent are unrelated to a "current and transient political tactic," they are unrelated to the class struggle which is the driving force of change, of all that is current and transient, in a given historical situation.

One cannot understand any form of cultural expression without examining the specific social circumstances out of which it arises and which determine its purpose and meaning. This is true of a novel, a painting, a symphony or a critical article. We cannot divorce the views expressed by Maltz from the historical moment he selects for the presentation of these views. He writes at a time of decisive struggle. The democratic victories achieved in the Second World War are threatened by the still powerful forces of imperialism and reaction, which are especially strong in the United States. The American working class is achieving increasingly militant leadership in the people's movement to safeguard peace, jobs and security. Can we regard it as merely an oversight that Maltz does not say one word about this struggle, or suggest that the writer has any connection with the workers or their allies, or any obligation to take sides in the conflict? His article is entitled: "What Shall We Ask of Writers?" Obviously, he does not ask them to identify themselves with the working class.

MALTZ's inability to place the problem of the artist in its historical and social context is especially evident in his reference to Engels' estimate of Balzac. The letter written to Miss Harkness in 1888, which Maltz paraphrases inaccurately, is a brief masterpiece of Marxist literary analysis. Engels studies Balzac in the concrete relationships of his time; he points out that the *Comedie Humaine* offers "a most realistic history of French 'society,' describing, chronicle-fashion, almost year by year from 1816 to 1848, the ever-increasing pressure of the rising bourgeoisie upon the society of nobles that established itself after 1815 . . . around this central picture he groups a complete history of French society from which, even in economic details (for instance, the rearrangement of real and private property after the French Revolution) I have learned more than from all the professional historians, economists and statisticians of the period together."

Balzac was a legitimist. His love of the old aristocracy motivated his hatred of the rising class of capitalists; his portrayal of a society in which everything was subordinated to greed and lust for power served as an antidote to the romantic liberalism of the early nineteenth century. Engels points out that Balzac's "sympathies are with the class that is doomed to extinction." But it was also true of Balzac that he was "compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favorite nobles and described them as people deserving no better fate."

Engels sees Balzac as a man alive, struggling to cut the web of contradictions in which he finds himself entangled, creating out of the intensity of the struggle. Maltz sees Balzac as a man who is permanently and comfortably divided into two separate entities: the reactionary citizen and the observant artist occupy the same skin; the citizen votes and the artist writes and neither of them interferes with the other.

It is true that a split personality is characteristic of the development of culture under capitalism, reflecting the ambiguity of the intellectual's class position and the contradictions that are inherent in the system. Maltz accepts this dualism as a permanent aesthetic principle, an attribute of the creative personality. The principle as Maltz projects it is so unaffected by historical change that it applies in exactly the same way to Balzac in the eighteen-forties or to James T.

Farrell and Richard Wright a century later.

The method of historical materialism provides a key to the understanding of cultural evolution as an integral part of the movement of history. The period from the European revolutions of 1848 to the troubled beginnings of 1946 has witnessed a world-wide transformation of productive forces and relationships. The intellectual leaders of the early nineteenth century, standing at the threshold of the new epoch, tended either to view the change ideally as the dawn of a period of infinite progress and well-being, or to see only the destructive and anti-social aspects of emergent capitalism. A few of the most profound thinkers of the time, notably Hegel, Goethe and Balzac, began to explore social history as a dialectical process, and to suggest, at least tentatively and in an abstract and inverted form, that the contradictions in society are historically conditioned. Balzac is explicit in his use of the method of dialectics: "There is nothing absolute in man"; life is governed by the "law of contradictions and contrasts."

After the social convulsions that began in 1848 and ended with the defeat of the Paris Commune, the growth of industrialism and the rise of the working class resolved the complex conflicts of the earlier period into a struggle between capital and labor in which control of the means of production was ultimately at stake. Marx and Engels analyzed the historical meaning of this struggle and predicted its inevitable outcome. But culture remained the property of the dominant class. It was no longer possible for the artist to use his art as a weapon in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the old aristocracy. Nor was it possible to ignore the poverty and suffering that were inherent in the expanding capitalist economy. The socially conscious artist saw that humanity paid a heavy price for industrial expansion; he saw the clouds of war darkening the skies. But his culture—the training and background that enabled him to be an artist—was so enthralled in class allegiance and prejudices that it prevented any contact with the workers or recognition of the role of labor in the evolution of society.

"Night Club Entertainer," oil by Philip Evergood.

The intellectual life of the later nineteenth century, especially in the most advanced capitalist countries, England and the United States, was one-sided and restricted in social scope. Class taboos excluded the work of Marx and Engels from the realm of "culture"; many of the most thoughtful and creative people of the time, people who were genuinely seeking to explore the social usefulness, the "this-sidedness," of culture—were unaware of the existence of Marxist theory. Henry Adams, who reflects the intellectual climate of his age with remarkable fidelity, says of his years at Harvard: "He could not afterwards remember to have heard the name of Karl Marx mentioned, or the title of 'Capital'." When Adams went to England in 1858, he travelled from Liverpool to London through Birmingham and the Black District; he tells of the "dense, smoky impenetrable darkness" that hung over the district; "the revelation of an unknown society of the pit—made a boy uncomfortable, though he had no idea that Karl Marx was standing there waiting for him. . . . The Black District was a practical education, but it was infinitely far in the distance. The boy ran away from it, as he ran away from everything he disliked." Adams, like most of the thinkers of his period, accepted Darwinism, but he never undertook the study of Marx.

The most decisive literary achievements and influences of the later nineteenth century did not come from the countries of maximum bourgeois development, but from Russia and Scandinavia. Lenin points to the significance of Tolstoy's work in relation to the social development that preceded the revolution of 1905: "One of the principle characteristic traits of our revolution is the fact that it was a bourgeois *peasant* revolution in an epoch when capitalism had attained an extremely high degree of development throughout the world, and a comparatively high degree in Russia. . . . In the works of Tolstoy are expressed the strength and weakness, the power and narrowness of the mass movement, and particularly of the peasant movement.

"With tremendous force and sincerity, Tolstoy castigated the ruling classes. With supreme clarity he exposed the inner lie of all the institutions maintain-

ing present-day society: the Church, the courts, militarism, 'legal' matrimony, bourgeois science. Yet his teaching came into complete conflict with the life, the work and struggle of the gravediggers of the present system, the proletariat. . . . Through his lips spoke the masses of the Russian people, those millions of men who had *already* come to hate the masters of today, but who had *not yet* reached the point of waging a conscious, consistent, definite, irreconcilable struggle against them."

In a different way, Dostoevsky achieved a powerful portrayal of a disintegrating and corrupt society. In Norway, Ibsen analyzed the rotten structure of middle class family life under the comparatively "idyllic" conditions of small communities on the fringe of industrial civilization.

THESE factors explain the profound influence that Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Ibsen exerted on European and American thought. They stimulated social realism within the framework of existent property relationships, and without challenging the fundamental assumptions of class dominance in an industrial society. Maltz speaks of "the great humanistic tradition of culture" as if it were something permanent and accepted. It is difficult to assess the purport of such a generalization, but in the context of his article it seems evident that he refers to the movement of social realism that had its political origins in the American and French revolutions, developed as a critique of bourgeois society in the work of Balzac and others, and assumed a humanitarian and ethical form under the influence of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Ibsen and others. The moral and ethical values which these writers accepted, and which they found violated and debased in their own environment, were derived from the concept of the individual and the family in a free democratic society. The dignity and worth of the individual was to be achieved through moral purpose, suppression of selfish instincts, freedom and honor in family relationships.

The epoch of imperialism dissipated middle class illusions. The working class took over state power in the land of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The laboring masses of the world moved to face their historic responsibilities. Under these circumstances, to speak of a "broad philosophic and emotional humanism" as something that has always existed means to go back to the past, to deny what is new, urgent, transient and alive in the world of torment and hope that we have inherited.

The humanism of the past is debased when it is torn from its historical setting to serve as an excuse for the avoidance of present struggle. Maltz appeals to the humanist tradition to justify his defense of James T. Farrell; he seems blind to the fact that Farrell has abandoned, in his writing, everything that was honest in the earlier traditions. Maltz even goes so far as to cite prejudice against Negroes and Jews as proof that "An artist can be a great artist without being an integrated or a logical or a progressive thinker on all matters. . . . We are all acquainted with Jews who understand the necessity of fighting fascism—but who do not see the relationship between fascism and their own discrimination toward Negroes. We know Negroes who fight discrimination against themselves, but are anti-Semitic."

Yes, we know these cases. And we also know the economic and social forces that create these diseased ideas, these splits in human lives and consciences that divide people and inhibit social action. We have no illusions about the power of these forces or their corrosive influence. We know how they operate in the field of culture, both through the direct proponents of fascist ideology and through writers like Farrell, Wright or Dos Passos, who render a less obvious and frequently more effective service to reaction. When Maltz speaks of anti-Semitism and hatred of the Negro as normal human failings, to be condoned because "most people do not think with thoroughgoing logic," he is performing a political act. He is using his writing as a weapon—for reaction.

Fifty years ago, the split personality of the writer expressed a tragic personal and artistic dilemma. In grappling with the dilemma, the artist was able to produce powerful and socially meaningful work. Today the split has widened and deepened. (It may be for this reason that Maltz tends to speak of the writer and the citizen as separate persons, although they are united in the mind and body of one individual). Today the split is between the artist as a servant of the dominant class and the artist as a spokesman of the people. The artist who takes sides with reaction invariably insists on the dualism of thought and action, because it enables him to disclaim responsibility for the social consequences of his thought and at the same time to gain wider social influence by insisting on the intuitive wisdom of the artist and his devotion to larger values. (The technique is exemplified in its vulgarest and most revealing form in the emphasis on religion and "spiritual" values in the Hearst press.)

On the other hand, the artist who takes his place with the working class begins to outgrow the split personality, because his life and work are integrated. His creative activity is logical and objective. He is no longer concerned with timeless achievement, because he has real work to do in the real world. Anthropologists and sociologists use the term, culture, in its scientific sense, to describe the whole life-pattern of a society. The special meaning of culture, as a literary or aesthetic experience, has arisen because this kind of experience has been divorced from the people and reserved for the enjoyment of an educated, sensitive and well-fed minority. Today, history points the way to a culture that is whole and free, a part of the life-pattern of the people.

Marx says that "Theory becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses." This is true of all thought and of all imaginative and creative activity. It is another way of saying that art is a weapon.

Joseph Hirsch.