

STORM OVER THE LITERARY LEFT

Unity of Work and Marxism Called Issue

Dear Editor:

In a troubled, rambling, often badly formulated essay in the Feb. 12 New Masses, Albert Maltz attacked the left-wing literary slogan "Art Is a Weapon." He declared this slogan has been vulgarized by left critics to the point where it is no longer a useful, rich guide to progressive writers, but has become a sterile, narrow "straitjacket" which usually prevents creative work.

Now Maltz has been perhaps the most outstanding writer on the literary left. Certainly year after year he has written some of the best short stories and novels to meet with the approval of the Daily Worker and New Masses. If Maltz states, as he does, that for some time he has been forced to abandon the slogan "Art Is a Weapon" because of its misuse by left criticism, his moment and criticism deserves his comment and criticism deserves rious self-criticism.

Instead, what Mike Gold sloughed off Maltz' criticism entirely, saying he guessed Maltz had sold out for Hollywood gold.

Sam Sillen took five or six columns on Maltz' statement, seizing upon Maltz' comment that writers must not be judged by their committees. Only in his last column does he get around to "admitted defects of the literary left." And then he glossed them over with the claim that Maltz' criticism is not really aimed at the vulgarization of a slogan but at undermining a class approach to literature.

DEEP STRUGGLE GOING ON TODAY

These two critics are completely unaware of the trends and problems of writers today.

Outside of small circles of writers and artists, few progressives know what a tremendous, deep struggle has been going on in the minds of socially conscious writers and artists for the last few years. Aware of the rapacious corruption of capitalism and conscious of their duties to aid and illuminate the struggles of the working class in its self-liberating role, they have been seeking to develop a deep, all embracing approach to their work. They seek to unify and consolidate it, to eliminate the dualism between their work as artists and their Marxism. They believe that Roger Garaudy of the French Communist Party hit the nail on the head when he said: "The first duty of a Communist artist is to be a great artist."

They see in a man like Aragon, poet of French resistance and editor of Ce Soir, a living example of what the Communist writer and artist can be, a man whose politics and literature are integrated not only with one another, but with his entire life.

Yet, and here's the rub, it is rather doubtful if an Aragon would be tolerated here because of the shallowness of American left-wing criticism. What would they say to an Aragon who, in the middle of French resistance to the fascist invaders, sat down and wrote, besides poems of resistance, love poems? Could he have done such a thing here without risking Mike Gold's charge of "Ivory Towerism?" Isn't this escapism? Art for art's sake? Isn't this destroying the class approach to literature?

In the good old sectarian USA it might have been. In France it was not.

RESENTS DAY-TO-DAY APPROACH

Now, nobody is brooding about pamphlet writing, as Sillen infers. But what has prompted the writer's complaint has been the half-juan reception which pamphlets have received as works of art. (See Sam Sillen's jubilant review of Albert Maltz' thinnest novel, "The Underground Stream," New Masses, July,

1940). And on the other hand, the writer asks that the serious efforts to create deep, enriching works of art be judged by something more than the requirements of the day-to-day political struggle.

In France the first duty of a Communist artist is to be a great artist. But here there is no emphasis on technique. One of the worst characteristics of American left-wing criticism has been its blowing up beyond all proportion of content and its willingness to go along with any kind of form, however thin.

Nowhere in Sillen's column is there any mention of the relation of the Communist Party to the struggle of artists and writers to establish the much desired unity between their work and their Marxism. Nor does Maltz mention it except possibly to include it in the "atmosphere of the left."

THE ONLY FORCE THAT CAN LIBERATE

Yet to my mind, it is the crux of the situation. From its struggles have followed our inspiration, our leadership, our guidance, our criterion. We have looked to the Party for our leadership, our guidance, because we recognize the working class as the only force which can liberate us from the degrading debauchery of men's souls and minds, capitalism.

Under Browder's tutelage Marx was misread and art and its functions were vulgarized. The humanist values of Marx were abandoned and despite lip-service to "culture" and many professions of loving "art," only "weapons" were in demand. Let me cite an example: a young Communist writer writing a biography of a great human being, also a Communist, accepted the guidance of certain cultural leaders. Now it so happened that the subject of his biography while not being a known Communist had left a will asking that after his death it be made known that he was a Communist and that his contributions to mankind, which were considerable, were made as a Communist. Followed a period of torment for the writer who was advised now to include the knowledge that the subject of the biography was a Communist, and now not to, according to the current tactic. A most distressing experience for him and an obviously heavy handicap in writing a worthy biography of the man involved.

At any rate to me it seems that the most positive aspect of this Maltz article is that it was published and that the issues raised are being discussed.

HARRY HUNT.

'Last Chance' At the Irving

The new bill at the Irving Place Theatre starting today (Thursday) includes the Swiss film Last Chance and the Hitchcock spy thriller Lady Vanishes.

Napoli in Moscow, Due Back Soon

According to cable advice received from Moscow, Nicholas Napoli, president of Artkino Pictures, Inc., plans to fly back to New York and is due to arrive here early in March.

Mr. Napoli, who has been in Moscow since the first of the year for business conferences with Soviet producers and to view available product, is expected to announce future plans on Artkino releases shortly after his return.

LOOK FOR . . .

An article on this page Friday on Jean-Paul Sartre and His Reactionary Philosophy by Roger Garaudy, the Communist cultural leader of France.

READERS CONTINUE THE HEATED DISCUSSION OVER THE MEANING OF THE SLOGAN "ART IS A WEAPON."

URGES ANSWERS TO SPECIFIC PROBLEMS RAISED BY MALTZ

Dear Editor:

I wish to voice my objections to the level of the discussion taking place in the Daily Worker with regard to Albert Maltz' recent article in the New Masses.

Maltz' article contained many incorrect, inadequate and somewhat contradictory formulations. Maltz himself, I think would be the first to admit that. In the beginning of his article he stated that

A Voice Against Current Ways Of Criticism

Dear Editor:

When Joseph North in the Daily Worker for Feb. 27 says "Samuel Sillen put his finger on the issue: advance with the working class or retreat into the camp of the enemy"—potent as he may think this formulation to be, it contributes nothing to the discussion: first, because to the party writer it is BEYOND discussion; secondly, because the party writer, if he's worth his salt, must not only advance with the working class, but must be able to anticipate its future both in thinking and feeling.

And when it comes to the indubitably practical proposals, one could name them off today (and one could have named them off five years ago) without having them brought forward again in the present discussion: we must have a truly Marxist literary magazine; we must have a truly working class theater; we must do something about enlarging the audience of the painter. Not that these proposals are not of the utmost importance. But it's damned ironic for the NM and the Daily suddenly to tear their hair out over the Maltz article, come to stiff Marxist attention and lay down the law to the party writers—who all these years have gone on trying to integrate their party assignments and their creative work despite the fact that the NM says their poems are good but too long; or doesn't review one of their books at all—and despite the still more difficult fact that Marxist novels and plays (especially the latter) must fight for bourgeois presentation.

It doesn't hurt any Marxist critic or writer to cut back to fundamentals and look at them—in fact we know that he should do it constantly—and Albert Maltz's mechanistic separation of politics and art did necessitate a cutback to fundamentals. But I understand him to mean, even in his inadequate formulations, that this approach should be applied, in fact it can only be applied, to the non-party writer, in which case it has some validity.

Sincerely,
ETTORE RELLA.

"GO AND SEE IT!" —WALTER WINCHELL

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some of his formulations might be wrong and inadequate. However, his article did raise issues that have to be faced by Marxist literary critics. We cannot substitute name-calling for analysis. A principled discussion of the critical problems Maltz poses, and an honest intellectual attempt to resolve those problems, must be forthcoming. So far this has not been done—the criticism of Maltz has been undertaken in a narrow and sectarian vein which substitutes spitball throwing for a principled critical approach.

I for one would like to see a discussion in the Daily on the problems Maltz raises, rather than on whether or not Maltz is a Trotskyite. Why don't Sillen and Gold discuss the problem of what the exact relationships between art and life are; the relationship between an artist's work and his politics; the specific ways in which Marxism can throw light on a work of art as art? These are the problems which Maltz poses. These are the problems which have to be resolved.
—M.K.

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