

SUMMARY OF THE "NEW MASSES" CONTROVERSY ON "WHAT SHALL WE ASK OF WRITERS?"

MAX BROWN

IN February and March this year the American leftist weekly, *New Masses*, published several articles and many letters concerned with certain issues raised by novelist Albert Maltz in an article, "What Shall We Ask of Writers?" Left writer Howard Fast declares: "whether or not we like it, the position of Marxist writing in America must be stated in terms of the Maltz position." The controversy, extending over many pages and many writers in several issues, is relevant to Australian conditions and is summarised here.

Maltz commences his argument by defining its limits. He says, "the left wing has also offered a number of vital intellectual assets to the writer . . . Schneider enumerated these assets and I take them here for granted."

Within such limits Maltz states a case which abbreviate by the following selections:

1. "To the degree that works of art reflect or attack these values (i.e., class values), 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."

2. ". . . . as interpreted in practice for the last fifteen years of the left wing in America, it (i.e., the concept 'art is a weapon') has become a hard rock of narrow thinking the nature of art-how art may best be a weapon . . . has been slurred over. I have come to believe that the accepted understanding of art as a weapon is not a useful guide but a straitjacket Finally in practice it has been understood to mean that unless art is a weapon like a leaflet, serving immediate political ends, necessities and programmes, it is worthless or escapist or vicious."

3. "... under the domination of this vulgarised approach, creative works are judged primarily by the formal ideology."

4. "... from this type of thinking comes the approach which demands of each written work that it contain 'the whole truth'.... This demand rests upon the psychological assumption that readers come to each book with an empty head."

5. "A creative writer ... works intellectually in an atmosphere in which the critics, the audience, the friends he respects-while revering art-actually judge works on the basis of their immediate political end. If the end is good, it would be absurd to say that this may not be socially useful ... but he is led by his goal into idealistic conceptions of character, into wearing rose-colored glasses which will permit him to see in life that which he wishes to find in order to prove his thesis."

6. "I am convinced that the work-in-progress of an artist who is deeply, truly, honestly recreating a sector of human experience, need not be affected by a change in the political weather."

7. "In his appreciation of Balzac Engels understood two facts about art: First, the writer qua citizen making an election speech, and the writer qua artist, writing a novel, is performing two very different acts. Second, Engels understood that a writer may be confused or even stupid or reactionary in his thinking - and yet it is possible for him to do good, oven great work as an artist - work that serves even ends he despises. This point is critical for the understanding of art and artists I"

8. "Writers must be judged by their work, and not by the committees they join."

9. "The political convictions of a writer or his lack of political convictions may have something to do with his growth or creative decline. Writing is a complex process There are many, many reasons why writers grow and sometimes regress."

10. "The great humanistic tradition of culture has always been on the side of progress. The writer who works within this tradition-is writing a political work in the broadest meaning of the term."

Such is Maltz' main thesis. In the same issue Isidore Schneider, New Masses Literary Editor, takes no exception to any of the above statements, but does stress the positive achievement of left criticism in establishing the analysis of the social relationships of a work of art as a standard critical procedure, against the bitter opposition of the American ruling class.

In reply to Maltz, novelist Howard Fast names Maltz as "The formal apostle of literary liquidation, not only of Marxist, but of all creative writing." He expresses no objection to Maltz' points 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

"Of course," he writes, "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 any real difference with him."

Further, Fast agrees that "an artist can be great without being an integrated or logical or progressive thinker on all matters." But when Maltz names this point as "critical for an understanding of art and artists," First replies, "if it is critical . . . then we are at least led towards presuming that confusion, stupidity, and a reactionary position are all qualities of art, and conversely clarity and understanding are detrimental to art."

From there he analyses Maltz' reactions to Steinbeck, Farrell, Koestler and others, and leads his argument to the point where he attacks Maltz' statement that "writers must be judged 'by their work, and not by the committees they join." From this he sums up Maltz' position as follows:

"Art and politics don't mix. Therefore salvation - and of course achievement for the artist lie only in separation from the Communist movement, the most highly political of all movements today." He sums up saying "underlying all Maltz arguments is a rejection of the whole

progressive movement of America, yet Maltz' own books are a direct refutation of the theory he now propounds."

New Masses Editor Joseph North comes to similar conclusions to Fast. "In his avowed intention to broaden that concept (i.e., 'art is a weapon') Maltz would abandon the weapon altogether." He attacks Maltz for his "mechanical division of politics and art," and points out that Maltz himself, writing of poet Ezra Pound, stated, "When a poet becomes the enemy of Man . . . , . betrays his heritage and talents to fascist thieves . . . , then what is he? He is unspeakable - he is carrion."

North then says, "I do not ignore the real weaknesses of the literary left. But I do not think we are today making the blunders Maltz speaks of. He fails . . . to credit the left with its achievements, its present attitudes . . . no one has told him how much 'class struggle' he should put in, nor told him he must have a conversion ending' - nor have Marxist critics in recent times raised any such issues

... the Left does not now - nor does it intend to 'narrow' any writer's work basically such errors flow from an insufficient mastery of Marxism."

"Yes," writes North, "we of the literary left fully agree with Lenin when he says, "There can be no doubt that literature is the last thing to lend itself to mechanical equalisation, to levelling, to domination of the majority over the minority. There can be no doubt that in this field it is absolutely necessary that the widest latitude be assured personal initiative and individual inclinations, to thought and imagination, to form and content. All this is beyond dispute, but all this proves only that the literary aspect of the work of a proletarian party cannot be identified in a stereotyped manner with the other aspects of its work."

Finally North stresses "the need for the mastery by all left writers of the Marxist science without which there will be further confusion and halting advance, if not retreat."

Contributing Editor, Alvah Bessie, novelist and veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, agrees with Fast and North in so far as they scarcely attack Maltz' first six points, although he contends that Maltz is flogging a dying horse..... The approach Maltz castigates was never erected into a principle," he declares..

Bessie then claims that Maltz' division of the writer into artist and citizen is product of a bourgeois concept which regards artists as sacred idiots who should be protected from popular anger even when they are fascist traitors such as Pound, whom Maltz had condemned.

Now here Bessie comes to a point which neither Maltz, Fast, North, himself, or any other of the contributors have attempted to solve.

Referring to Engels' attitude to Balzac, Bessie states that the latter was a monarchist-aristocrat at a time when the rising French bourgeoisie was the progressive class. That made him reactionary for his time, declares Bessie but the fact that his work castigates his own beloved aristocracy more bitterly than the bourgeoisie makes him progressive for Engels and us. He then asks if Maltz can cite a monarchist or fascist writer of today who can be progressive in the sense that Balzac was progressive, i.e., in spite of his political philosophy. He indicates an

answer to his own question by stating that there is a correlation between the quality of a writer's work and his grasp of human history and Marxism, which is merely repeating Maltz' ninth point as above.

Finally, Bessie state. that "if we accept Maltz' contention that all we need a: ask of writers is that they work 'deeply, truly, honestly recreating a sector of human experience" within "the great humanistic tradition of culture," then surely the need for a Communist Party as far as writers are concerned ceases to exist - it would only cramp their style.

Writes Bessie "We need writers who will joyfully impose upon themselves the discipline of understanding and acting upon working-class theory. They are the writers who will possess the potentialities of creating a truly free literature." Correspondence following in the wake of the controversy supports largely the Fast-North-Bessie criticism. Typical statements are:-

"I don't believe for one moment that Maltz shows dangerous trends. "

... "Writers like Albert Maltz vainly dream of escaping the hard necessities of a worker's life, because they hunger for a solution that will neither hurt the class whose struggles they want to abandon, nor benefit the enemy they despise - because they look on the Party as an alien thing-as still another force pulling on their unhappy souls - because they want to close their eyes and forget . . ."

... "Let us show him how and why, not with rancor but with love as Lenin showed Gorky. Maltz, like Fast, is among the best we have."

One writer compares 'T. S. Eliot with Balzac - both royalist, in politics, both brilliant illuminators of the "wastelands" of the ruling classes of their times. On the other hand, Mike Hecht writes: "The honest writer today cannot faithfully present even a slice of reality unless he has affiliated himself with the working class and its struggles for emancipation."

In all, it is apparent that while Maltz has to answer for obviously liquidationist statements, the editors of New Masses have themselves to answer for throwing so little light on the meaning of the dictum "art is a weapon" - at which point, theoretically at least, Maltz' deviation commences-and for failing to answer the question "can an artist be reactionary in his political philosophy yet great in his art?" They have almost completely confined themselves to a critique of Maltz' points 8 and 10.

In justice to Now Masses, however, let us admit that there are many in the working-class movement of this country who have no clear views on the points on which Maltz, North, Fast, Bessie and Lenin himself appear to find common agreement.

That in itself is sufficient cause why the Maltz controversy is of value to us.