


6. Spectators Or Creators?

By SAMUEL SILLEN

In concluding this series I want to emphasize my deep conviction that the line of thinking in the *New Masses* article by Albert Maltz would not lead to the "strengthening" of the literary left, but rather to its weakening and dissolution. For the collapse of the left literary movement would inevitably proceed from the sapping of its Marxist base.



This base is undermined by minimizing and in the last analysis denying the organic connection between art and the class struggle. Maltz sets up a structure of divisions between art and politics, art and ideology, the artist as artist and the artist as citizen. These divisions are clearly less real in our epoch than in any previous period of history, since the world has never been so sharply class-divided.

The dualism leads to utterly false conclusions. It leads to an unreal distinction between a Trotskyite as a Trotskyite and a Trotskyite as a writer, "the best case in point," as Maltz says, being James T. Farrell.

It leads to a sharp whittling down of the concept of art as a weapon.

It leads to an absolutely complete ignoring of the corrupting influence of bourgeois society today on cultural values, so that the real enemies of culture are in effect shielded and the problem of any

writer today is divorced from the context of social reality.

It leads to a literary approach that can only feed an atmosphere of passivity and withdrawal. The rationale is provided not for challenging Richard Wright's course of development but for assuring him that his "is not the work of an artist who has gone downhill." We find that we cannot tell John Steinbeck that there is a relation between the quality of his work (*Grapes of Wrath* and *Cannery Row*) and the deterioration of his social attitudes.

Thus Maltz's line of reasoning removes not only a social base of criticism, but deprives us of a motive force. We become academic spectators of a literary scene, rather than people seeking passionately to create a literature that expresses the life of the people and molds their consciousness. We cease to stand for and to struggle for any special course of literary development. We cease, in short, to be a movement.

"In an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, not tendentious, allegedly non-political," the first All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers was reminded by A. A. Zhdanov in 1934.

"And I think that every one of our Soviet writers can say to any dull-witted bourgeois, to any philistine, to any bourgeois writer who may talk about our literature being tendentious: 'Yes, our Soviet literature is tendentious, and we are proud

of this fact, because the aim of our tendency is to liberate the toilers. . . ."

To liberate the toilers, to free all mankind—this is the one ennobling mission of our time, and the literary left is privileged to participate in it by reflecting the truth of our lives.

To do this effectively requires mastery of literary technique, but all questions of the how of literature in our time cannot possibly be solved until we have securely grasped the why.

We cannot make headway as a literary left if we separate "literary" and "left." That is indeed to fall into a "conflict of conscience."

Maltz's whole approach would lead not only to the dissolution of a literary left wing, but also to the negation of his own great gifts as a writer. Will Maltz probe the depth of his departure from a Marxist conception of literature?

The struggle for correct theory must be as sharp on the cultural front as on the political front, for they are two fronts in a common battle. Capitalism bombards us with its ideas virtually every moment of our lives. We dare not relax our vigilance.

For a progressive culture will flower only if it is deeply rooted in the people, in the forward movement of humanity. The precondition for solving the many-sided problems of the literary left is a solid understanding of the epoch in which we live and the free world we seek to create. This will not automatically solve our problems. But we can proceed to a solution only by refreshing our knowledge and purpose.