

# Art and Politics

By SAMUEL SILLEN

**I**N HIS *New Masses* article on "the literary left" Albert Maltz seems to believe that he is merely criticizing a "vulgarized approach" to literature, but he is in reality undermining a class approach. His thesis goes far beyond a criticism of certain mechanical literary practises. Maltz rips out the very heart of Marxism by adopting for himself and urging upon other writers a supra-class attitude.

This results in a wholly abstract opposition between "art" and "politics." And inevitably Maltz finds himself praising a Trotskyite renegade like James T. Farrell with the same arguments used by many liberals in defending a traitor like Ezra Pound: the connection between "the artist" and "the politician" disappears. Yet Maltz himself in a recent issue of *New Masses* said Pound had betrayed not only his country but poetry! Is Trotskyism exempt from such a judgment?

Maltz tells us: "Writers must be judged by their work, and not by the committees they join. It is the job of the editorial section of a magazine to praise or attack citizens' committees for what they stand for. It is the job of the literary critics to appraise the literary works only."

This statement may seem reasonable on the surface. Of course writers must be judged by their work, though Maltz himself fails to do this. As Maltz is no doubt aware, the Communist press employs peo-

ple presumed to have some competence as literary critics for the purpose of appraising literary works. Certainly the presumed critic would not be one at all if his sole standard of judgment were membership of an author in this or that committee.

Note, however, that Maltz wants the critic to carry his political understanding in one compartment of his brain, his literary understanding in another. Note, too, that he would deny that the "editorial section" has any competence to offer judgment on novels or plays, as if the more political you are the more you disqualify yourself for "intrusions" into the realm of art.

This dualism is the core of Maltz's position. Where does it lead him?

He argues that it is possible to embrace Farrell as an artist, even though he is a Trotskyite, because Marx and Engels hailed Balzac as an artist, even though he was a Monarchist. He says: Let the editorial section appraise Farrell one way, the literary section another.

The comparison between Farrell and Balzac is, to begin with, ludicrous on "literary grounds" alone. Their names can be mentioned in the same breath only for purposes of comparison invidious to Farrell.

Besides, Maltz distorts Engels' statement on Balzac which he has evidently not read in its complete form. Engels said: "That Balzac was thus 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; that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found—that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of realism, and one of the greatest features in old Balzac."

Will Maltz apply this statement to Farrell? Will Maltz contend that Farrell shows us "the real men of the future," those who are now, 100 years after Balzac wrote, the real men of today?

Engels clearly and definitely examines Balzac's work from a working-class point of view. He emphasizes the class features realistically portrayed by the great French novelist.

Maltz's comparison between a monarchist of the 1830's and 1840's and a Trotskyite ("committee member"! ) today shows the utter collapse of a sense of history.

In Balzac's day, the proletariat was a relatively undeveloped class, and even then the novelist could sense its emerging strength. Today, in the epoch of imperialism, the working class has reached a high stage of development and has taken power in one-sixth of the earth. Farrell embodies hatred and hostility to the working class, and Maltz glowingly predicts that "he is not through writing yet," as if that were something to cheer about.

Because Maltz approaches writers statically, not in terms of their development,

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he takes a "100 Best Books" view of literature. He cites Farrell's earliest work, *Studs Lonigan*, written before he became a Trotskyite.

But even the bourgeois critics have gone beyond Maltz. For they recognize almost unanimously Farrell's steady deterioration as a novelist, though they naturally fail to realize it to his steady degeneration as an enemy of the working class.

Maltz admits there may be an art-politics parallel in the case of Arthur Koestler, because this particular Trotskyite "consciously advances political concepts" in his novels. Well, if Farrell doesn't advance po-

litical concepts, a whole world-view, in his work; if Dos Passos doesn't in slandering the Spanish Loyalists in *Adventures of a Young Man*, if Ignazio Silone doesn't in slandering Italian Communists in *Bread and Wine*, then I am ready to abdicate any claim to critical perception.

Maltz says you cannot "draw conclusions" in the case of a writer like Steinbeck, who at one time writes *The Grapes of Wrath*, at another time *Cannery Row*. Whether or not one "draws conclusions," the facts are clear. Steinbeck's greatest novel was written out of real life and under Communist influence; his shoddiest book

was written out of the Stork Club under influences anything but working class.

Maltz shows a similar lack of understanding in his remarks about Richard Wright, whose line of artistic development is not upward but downward.

Maltz's own examples reveal the need not for abandoning a class approach to literature, but for strengthening it. The struggle against Maltz's conception is part of the struggle for a truly creative literature and for Marxism.

(In tomorrow's article, Samuel Sillen will discuss "Art as a Weapon.")