

# MOVING FORWARD

By ALBERT MALTZ

WE LIVE in a period of social convulsion greater than the world has ever seen. Poverty, depression, colonial enslavement; racism, war, political conspiracy, mass murder—these are the problems with which humanity must deal. In this world of acute struggle, writers, like everyone else, live and work. Since the nature of their work is such that it is capable of influencing the thoughts, emotions and actions of others, it is right and good that the world should hold them responsible for what they write, and that they should hold themselves responsible.

I have believed this for quite some years now. I have also believed that in our time Marxism can be the bread of life to a serious writer. With these convictions, I published an article in the *NEW MASSES* some weeks ago which was greeted by severe criticism. The sum total of this criticism was that my article was not a contribution to the development of the working class cultural movement, but that its fundamental ideas, on the contrary, would lead to the paralysis and liquidation of left-wing culture.

These are serious charges, and rendered lightly, nor taken to me. Indeed the seriousness of the discussion flows from the fact that my article was not published in the *Social Democratic New Leader* (which, to my humiliation, has since commented on it with wolfish approval), but that it was published in the *NEW MASSES*.

In the face of these criticisms, I have been spending the intervening weeks in serious thought. I have had to ask myself a number of questions: Were the criticisms of my article sound? If so, by what process of thought had I, despite earnest intentions, come to write the article in the terms I did?

Intimately connected with these personal questions were broader matters demanding inquiry by others as well as by myself. If the criticisms of my article were sound, why was it that a number of friends, who read the manuscript prior to publication, and whose convictions are akin to mine, had not come to such severe conclusions? And why was it that the *NEW MASSES* accepted the article without comment to me, indeed with only a note of approval from the literary editor? And why was it that even after the criticisms of my article

appeared, I daily received letters which protested the "tone" of the criticisms of me, but considered that at worst I only had fallen into a few "unfortunate" formulations?

I have come to quite a number of conclusions about these questions. And if I discuss the process of my arriving at them with some intimacy, I hope the reader will bear with me, since I know no other way of dealing honestly with the problems involved. I particularly invite those who have written me letters of approval to consider whether some of the remarks I have to make about myself may not be also appropriate to them.

I CONSIDER now that my article—by what I have come to agree was a one-sided, non-dialectical treatment of complex issues—could not, as I had hoped, contribute to the development of left-wing criticism and creative writing. I believe also that my critics were entirely correct in insisting that certain fundamental ideas in my article would, if pursued to their conclusion, result in the dissolution of the left-wing cultural movement.

The discussion surrounding my article has made me aware of a trend in my own thinking, and in the thinking of at least some others in the left-wing cultural movement: namely, a tendency to abstract errors made by Left critics from the total social scene—a tendency then to magnify those errors and to concentrate attention upon them without reference to a balanced view of the many related forces which bear upon Left culture—and hence a tendency to advance from half-truths to total error.

Let me illustrate this point: in the thirties, as there seems to be general agreement, left-wing criticism was not always conducted on the deepest, or most desirable, or most useful level. Its effectiveness was lowered by tendencies toward doctrinaire judgments and toward a mechanical application of social criticism. And these tendencies *must* be understood and analyzed if working-class culture is to advance to full flower. But, on the other hand, the inadequacies of criticism, such as they were, are only a small and partial aspect of the left-wing cultural movement as a whole. The full truth—as I have been aware for many years, and as I was thoroughly aware even when writing my article, is

this: from the left-wing cultural movement in America, and from the left-wing internationally, has come the only major, healthy impetus to an honest literature and art that these last two decades have provided. Compound the errors of Left cultural thought as high as you will—still its errors are small as compared to its useful contribution, are tiny as compared to the giant liberating and constructive force of Marxist ideas upon culture. As a matter of sheer fact this is such a self-evident proposition that it doesn't require someone of my conviction to state it; it has been acknowledged even by reactionary critics who, naturally, have then gone on falsely to declare that the liberating force of Left culture has run its course and expired.

This total truth about the left wing is therefore the only proper foundation and matrix for a discussion of specific errors in the practice of social criticism and creative writing. It was in the omission of this total truth—in taking it for granted—in failing to record the host of writers who have been, and are now, nourished by the ideas and aspirations of the left wing—that I presented a distorted view of the facts, history and contribution of left-wing culture to American life. This was not my desire, but I accept it as the objective result. And, at the same time, by my one-sided zeal in attempting to correct errors, etc., I wrote an article that opened the way for the *New Leader* to seize upon my comments in order to "support" its unprincipled slanders against the Left.

Of all that my article unwittingly achieved, this is the most difficult pill for me to swallow. My statements are now being offered up as fresh proof of the old lie: that the Left puts artists in uniform. But it is a pill I have had to swallow, and that I now want to dissolve.

WHO and what keep artists in uniform? In our society uniforms are indeed fitted for artists at every turn. But how? By a system of education which instructs a whole society in the belief that the status quo is unalterable, that social inequality is normal, that race prejudice is natural; by a social order which puts writing talent at the disposal of Hearst and artistic talent at the disposal of advertising agencies; by a total pressure made up of economic pressures

and intellectual pressures and moral pressures, all designed to harness writers, artists, teachers, journalists, scientists, into willing or confused or frightened support of the established order in society, into maintaining, if need be, capitalist poverty, crime, prostitution, the cycle of wars and depressions—into maintaining all of this by their *talents*. *This* is the way in which artists, unless they break loose in conscious and organized protest, are put into one of the many, elegantly-cut uniforms offered them by our Kings of Monopoly, our Lords of the Press, Radio, etc.

No, it is not the left wing that is guilty of this. On the contrary. The left wing, by its insistence that artists must be free to speak the absolute truth about society, by the intellectual equipment it offers in Marxist scientific thought, is precisely the force that can help the artist strip himself of the many uniforms into which he has been stepping since birth.

This is my conviction, and it has been my conviction for years. For precisely this reason it highlights the contradiction between my intentions in writing my article—and its result. By allowing a subjective concentration upon problems met in my own writing in the past to become a major preoccupation, I produced an article distinguished for its omissions, and succeeded in merging my comments with the unprincipled attacks upon the Left that I have always repudiated and combatted.

And this, as I said earlier, is the process by which one-sided thinking can lead to total error—it is the process by which objects, seen in a distortion mirror, can be recognized, but bear no relation to their precise features. It was this, among other things, that my critics pointed out sharply. For that criticism I am indebted. Ideas and opinions are worth holding when they are right, not when they are wrong. The effort to be useful involves always the possibility of being wrong; the right of being wrong, however, bears with it the moral obligation to analyze errors and to correct them. Anything else is irresponsible.

THE second major criticism of the thinking in my article revolved about a separation between art and ideology, which was traced in varied terms, through a number of illustrations I had used and concepts I had advanced. I suppose I might claim here that it was merely inept formulation on my part which resulted in an “impression” that I was separating art from politics, the artist from the citizen, etc. But in the

## For the Day

For the day when the world like a healed beast  
comes forth from the mud,  
and the ridiculous sparrows spangle the air with their  
twitterings;

for the day when the massed and polished armies parade  
their might  
on the avenues gladdened by girls  
and the tub-thumpers wallop away with the salvoes of  
Sunday words;

for the day when the regular forces parade before notables  
and we have forgotten the Ebro, Teruel and Madrid  
and the men in civilian clothes on the paths of the Pyrenees;

for that day, remember a face;  
let there be toasts—a ghostling call, a sinking ship,  
a fist clenched, a single bugle blown,

and one salvo from one lone gun for you,  
O International Brigade, who broke the path!

MILT ROE.

course of reading and re-reading the criticisms of my article and the article itself, I have come to agree that I did make the separations mentioned, and that I made them not only in the writing, but in my thinking on the specific problems I was discussing.

Once again, this is the result of a one-sided, non-dialectical approach. Out of a desire to find clear, creative paths for my own work and the work of others, I felt it necessary to combat the current of thought that, in the past, has tended to establish a mechanical relationship between ideology and art—a tendency that works particular harm to creative writing because it encourages a narrow, sloganized literature instead of a living reflection of society. However, in the course of this “contribution,” as has been pointed out, I severed the organic connection between art and ideology.

This is not a small matter, but a serious one. For if the progress of literature and art is separate from thought, if the ideas of a writer bear no intimate relationship to the work he produces, then even fascists can produce good art. This is not only contrary to historic fact, but it is theoretically absurd. Good art has always, and will always, come from writers who love people, who ally themselves with the fate of the people, with the struggle of the people for social

advancement. It is precisely because fascists must hate people that twelve years of Nazi Germany produced not one piece of art in any field. It is for this reason that a writer like Celine, the Frenchman, who began with a talented work of protest, but who found no constructive philosophy for his protest, ended in corrupt cynicism, in hatred of people, in the artistic sterility of the fascist. It is for the same reason that the talent of American writers like Farrell and Dos Passos has not matured but has, on the contrary, gone into swift downgrade, into sheer dullness as well as the purveying of untruth.

Here I want to interrupt for a word of comment on Farrell. I agree now that my characterization of him was decidedly lax, and that it was the inadvertent, but inevitable, result of the line of thinking in my article that separated art from ideology and politics. I want to make clear, however, that while “a mild attitude toward Trotskyites” was apparently the net effect upon readers of my comments, it was not at all what I had in mind, and it decidedly does not reflect my opinions. Actually if I had been attempting a thorough examination of Farrell, there would have been much more to say—and I want to say some of it now.

Farrell's history and work are the best example I know of the manner in