

NO RETREAT FOR THE WRITER

By JOSEPH NORTH

FEW would disagree, I believe, that we in America today live in an epoch that witnesses a gigantic conflict for the minds of men. Those at the controls of our nation have unleashed the most powerful propaganda campaign of our time. The lords of the trusts, surfeited with billions, are acutely conscious, and consequently fearful, of the surging opposition of the people, and primarily of the working class.

In this assault the enemies of the people have drawn up their heaviest guns against those of the working class who possess the clearest views of our times—those most prescient of reality—the vanguard of the working class, the Communists. There is a frenetic fear of Marxist ideas, of the Marxist world outlook, of its uncompromising criticism of capitalism's crimes, and of its socialist solutions.

The attack upon Marxist ideas obtains in every field, without exception. A heavy load of anti-Marxist books is being hauled to print by commercial publishers — vile, scurrilous works like Trotsky's "biography" of Stalin, the traitor Kravchenko's "memoirs," the renegade Louis Budenz' book, and others too numerous to mention here.

There is reason for this violence: the people of the world are on the move, challenging the age-old shibboleths of capitalist life.

The capitalist assault assumes various guises. One of these is represented by Earl Browder, who under false colors maligns and seeks to crush the most advanced sector of the working class, the Communists. Browder strives to undermine Marxism, to smash the party of Marxism. He has been expelled from the Party; his ideas have rightly been branded for what they are—the ideas of monopoly capitalism.

Today the struggle for clarity of basic theory is of utmost importance for the working class, and its allies in the cause of progress.

I believe that this background is most pertinent to the discussion of ideas in the cultural field as in all other fields. It is pertinent to the ideas in Albert Maltz'

article in NM, Feb. 12, 1946. Elsewhere in this issue Howard Fast presents his reaction to Albert Maltz' thesis. I wish herein to dwell on what appear to me to be a few fundamental points.

As our readers will recall we began a discussion on literary and cultural questions in our October 6 issue, with an article by Isidor Schneider, that reported several meetings held in NM's offices by a group of left-wing writers and artists. We sought to examine their problems, those of left-wing literature, and the arts, and to lay the basis for rapid improvement in our Marxist approaches to culture. We recognize that much spadework had to be done here: we of the Left are far from satisfied with the record of achievements in this field. Maltz' article came in response to a general invitation to writers to contribute their ideas on these issues. We know that we do not have all the answers to the problem of strengthening the literary Left; we are searching for them, and we shall continue, in these pages, and elsewhere, to search for them.

But one thing I do know: that Maltz, raising his criticisms, does so within a context which is fundamentally false. No gardener would chop down a tree to cure some weak branches. The logic of Maltz' position proposes this. He would, if his counsel were heeded, destroy the fruitful tree of Marxism. His is an anti-Marxist position.

For this reason I believe, **NEW MASSES** was seriously at fault in failing to initiate the discussion with criticisms framed in a firm Marxist context. The only way to build a powerful left-wing cultural movement in our land is through a Marxist approach. Whatever elements of validity may appear in Maltz' criticisms, they are more than cancelled out by his fundamental thesis that has nothing in common with Marxism.

HERE is why I think so: in Maltz' objection to the "narrow" concept of "art as a weapon" which he attributes

to the Left, in his avowed intention to "broaden" that concept, he would abandon the weapon altogether. Maltz attributes the mistakes of left-wing writing and criticism to the "intellectual atmosphere of the left wing." He attributes that error to "a vulgarization of the theory of art which lies behind left-wing thinking: namely, 'art is a weapon.'" That phrase, as Samuel Sillen has pointed out in the *Daily Worker*, is "merely one of the sloganized forms in which the general theory is expressed. The theory of art which lies, or should lie, behind 'left-wing' thinking, is Marxism." This world outlook, which has amply proved itself as the social science, is the basis for the perception of truth. This is the *sine qua non* of our argument. This is what, by the logic of his argument, Maltz would abandon.

He departs from Marxism when he cleaves the writer in two—seeing him as "citizen" and as "artist." He says, in various ways and explicitly, "It is the job of the editorial section of the magazine to praise or attack citizens committees for what they stand for. It is the job of the literary critics to appraise literary works only."

This is only one form of Maltz' rigid and mechanical division of politics and art. He separates the writer from citizen, separates a man's acts and thought from his art, a man's world outlook from his artistic creation. This orientation toward the writer of our time has

nothing in common with Marxism.

For we cannot approach the writer as a special kind of man who is above classes, who can depict reality by ignoring the fundamental reality of our life—the struggle between classes.

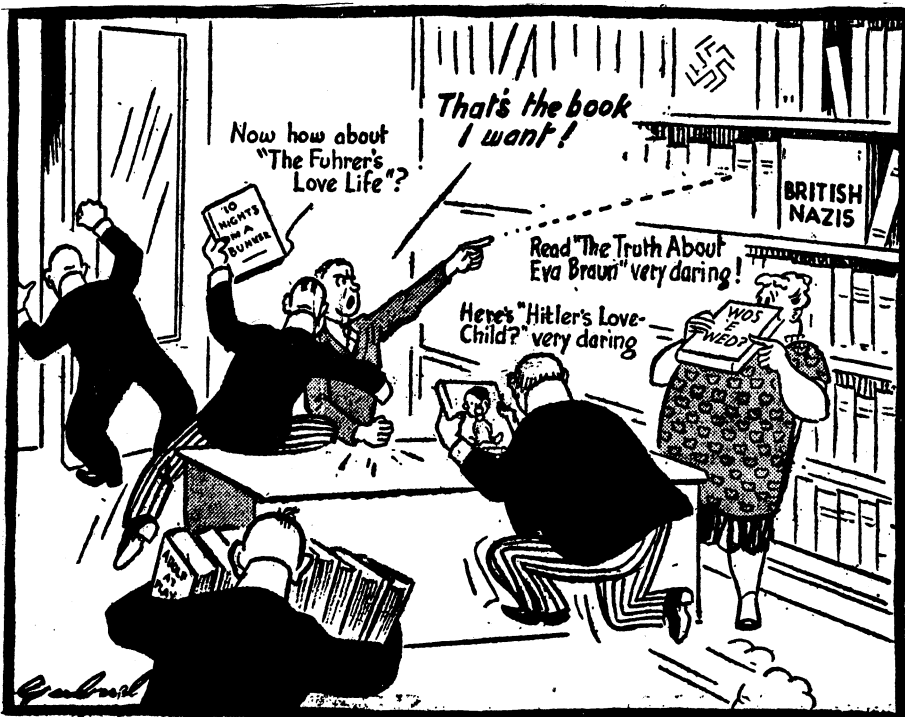
This approach leads to Maltz' position on James T. Farrell, which is, I feel, a key expression of the fundamental falsity of his position. Maltz argues that we should consider Farrell's writings, as distinct from Farrell as "citizen." The very euphemism which Maltz employs: "I don't like the committees" to which Farrell belongs, is an earmark of the howling error into which his position leads him. What committee is he referring to? It is no secret that Farrell belongs to the Trotskyite conspiracy, and I don't think it is necessary to elaborate that further here. The Trotskyites have been proved enemies of the people, traitors to their country and to the working class. Maltz' present position is diametrically opposed to what he wrote in NM several weeks ago in discussing the case of Ezra Pound. There Maltz wrote: "When a poet becomes the enemy of Man—when a poet stoops to the vile selfishness of racial hatred—when a poet, who inherits the humanitarian culture of the ages betrays his heritage and his talents to fascist thieves, sadists and murderers—then what is he? He is unspeakable—he is carrion." If any of our readers are still unaware that Trotskyism stands for essentially

the same things Pound stands for, I would refer them to the invaluable, recently-published book, *The Great Conspiracy*, by Albert Kahn and Michael Sayers. In effect what Maltz proposes would lead him to sit down at a table with "carrion" and discuss "literary works." As well to sit down with Ezra Pound and discuss poetry.

IN ALL I am saying, I wish it to be understood that I do not ignore many real weaknesses in the literary Left. But I do not think we are today making the blunders Maltz speaks of. He fails, I believe, to credit the Left, with its achievements, its present attitudes. Nobody has prevented Maltz from writing the kind of books he wishes; that he must admit in all honesty. Nobody of the Left told him how to write *The Cross and the Arrow*, or the current movies he may be working on. Nobody told Ben Field, Meridel Le Sueur, nor any other writer, to write the kind of book he has written, nor told him how to write it, nor told him how much "class struggle" he should put in, nor told him he must have a "conversion ending"—nor have the Marxist critics in recent times raised any such issue that I know of. The Left does not now—nor does it intend to—"narrow" any writer's work. Has Maltz found more "freedom" in the "intellectual atmosphere" of the Right?

It is indisputable that errors have been made in the past, and are still being made by Left critics. Basically, such errors flow from an insufficient mastery of Marxism. Maltz's position, however, leads not to a mastery of Marxism, but to its abandonment.

Maltz departs from the principal contention of the Left, "Literature must become a part of the proletarian cause as a whole." The man who said that, Maltz would admit, had a prescience far beyond any man of his time. His name was Lenin. The Left writer, that Marxist scientist declared, must become identified with the cause of the working class, with its vanguard, the Marxists, and derive from them the full strength of their world outlook, of their aspirations, of their reality as the nascent class of our time—which is the fundamental truth of these days. A literature based upon such integration will be, as Lenin says, "free because rather than careerism and pecuniary motives it will be the socialist cause and sympathy with workers that will draw ever new forces into its ranks . . . this free literature will infuse the last word of mankind's revolutionary thought with the experi-



"Bedtime Story"—a comment on British book-publishing. Gabriel, in the London *Daily Worker*.

ence and the living work of the socialist proletariat, it will create a permanent interaction between the experience of the past (scientific socialism culminating the development of socialism out of its primitive, utopian form) and the experience of the present (the active struggle of worker-comrades)." Will Maltz, the author of *The Underground Stream*, deny this? Will Maltz, the author of "Man on the Road," published in NEW MASSES a decade ago, deny this?

Yes, 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 equalization, to levelling, to domina-

tion 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 to 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." I believe we have made and are making mistakes, in the proper understanding of this injunction of Lenin's. But I believe we will shortly master it, because we believe fundamentally with Lenin when he says, "Literature must become a part of the proletarian cause as a whole."

To conclude, NEW MASSES welcomes a full discussion of the artist's role and problems today, within the context of a Marxist and progressive approach to the issues involved. That is the reason for this brief piece, in which I have indicated only a few of the fundamentals in question. We shall return to this subject in subsequent issues, and indicate further NEW MASSES', and the Left's, responsibility on this subject.

Finally, I wish to underscore the imperative need for the mastery by all Left writers of the Marxist science. Without that, in the framework of the struggle for progress today, there will be unclarity, further confusion, and halting advance, if not retreat.