

I. Mischarting the Course

(The first of a series.)

By SAMUEL SILLEN

The current issue of *New Masses* features an article by Albert Maltz entitled "What Shall We Ask of Writers?" Its announced purpose is to help chart the course of "a rich, expanding literature in America." Its actual effect is to mischart the course and misdirect the writers.

Maltz arrives at false and dangerous conclusions about literature by substituting a bourgeois liberal for a Marxist approach. Maltz's non-Marxist analysis would not lead to the correction of certain admitted defects in left-wing writing. It would lead to the complete dissolution of the working-class and progressive literary movement.

We were amazed that this view was not vigorously challenged by *New Masses*.

Maltz makes the following points among others:

1—He believes "the accepted understanding of art as a weapon is not a useful guide, but a straitjacket." He has decided to "repudiate it and abandon it."

2—He believes we should embrace Trotskite James T. Farrell as a writer, since there is no "commanding relationship" between his politics and his novels.

3—He traces the difficulties of American literature not to the corrupting atmosphere of capitalism, which he ignores, but to "the intellectual atmosphere of the left

wing."

4—In the process of asking writers not to "narrow" their art—an appeal which could in another context serve a worthy purpose—he dissolves class consciousness and class-struggle in a rarefied mist not distinguishable from "Art for Art's Sake." To bolster his position, he misreads the views of Marx and Engels on literature.

The trend of thinking reflected in the article requires the sharpest examination. For what is involved is a clash between Marxist and non-Marxist ideas of a writer's role in capitalist society.

Some of the things Maltz says are too obvious for comment. Nobody will debate the proposition that a novel is not the same thing as a leaflet. Nobody will argue that a writer's talent can be measured solely by how he votes.

That there are weaknesses in the literary work of the left, that the "atmosphere" is not as vigorous and creative as we should desire, is beyond question. These weaknesses need to be discussed and corrected, though without ignoring, as Maltz does, the actual achievements and progress of left-wing writers.

But the shortcomings are not, as Maltz seems to believe, the result of two much political sensitivity to the life-and-death struggles of our time, but of too little. They do not flow from excessive working-class and Communist consciousness, but

from too little. Maltz would have us liquidate still further, when we need to build the working-class base of a people's culture.

Maltz fears that our writers may have become too politically conscious. On the contrary, they will move forward as artists only as they gain in political understanding.

Maltz fears the "immediate political ends" which press on the writer and in effect warns him against becoming too involved in struggle. Such passivity would only strengthen the enemies of culture.

Maltz tells the artist that he "need not be affected by a change in the political weather." But the change in "political weather," if it is really a change, registers a change in reality, in the relationships of people and classes. And the left-wing artist will not evade this change; he will not brood over whether he is being turned into a "pamphlet writer."

At the outset of his article, Maltz says that "It is likely that some of my statements are too sweeping, others badly formulated." But the problem here is not one of mere emphasis or formulation, important as that is. A study of the article reveals a dangerous departure from Marxism which we hope Maltz will recognize as the discussion develops.

(In tomorrow's article, Samuel Sillen continues this series with an article on "Art and Politics.")