

# WHAT SHALL WE ASK OF WRITERS?

By ALBERT MALTZ

**I**SIDOR SCHNEIDER's frank and earnest article on writers' problems (NM, Oct. 23, 1945) is very welcome. In attempting to add to his discussion, I ask that my observations be taken for what they are: the comments of a working writer, not the presentation of a formal aesthete. It is likely that some of my statements are too sweeping, others badly formulated. I urge that the attention of readers, however, be directed to the problem itself, rather than to formulations which may be imperfect. All who are earnestly desirous of a rich, expanding literature in America have the obligation of charting the course. This common effort must not languish while we search for unassailable definitions.

It has been my conclusion for some time that much of left-wing artistic activity—both creative and critical—has been restricted, narrowed, turned away from life, sometimes made sterile—because the atmosphere and thinking of the literary left wing has been based upon a shallow approach. Let me add that the left wing has also offered a number of vital intellectual assets to the writer—such as its insistence that important writing cannot be socially idle—that it must be humane in content, etc. Schneider enumerated these assets and I take them here for granted. But right now it is essential to discuss where things have gone wrong—why and how.

I believe that the effects of the shallow approach I have mentioned—like a poison in the bloodstream—largely cause the problems Schneider mentioned. Indeed, these problems are merely the pustules upon the body, the sign of ill-health.

Let me underscore that I am referring only to artistic activity, not to journalism. Schneider differentiates generally between writing for the moment and writing enduring works. There are other ways of phrasing this distinction, but his is a useful one—provided it is not taken with mechanical literalness. For instance, certain works have been written for the moment which nevertheless prove to contain enduring values. Such examples do not alter the true meaning of Schneider's categories.

Schneider went on to state, correctly, that: "... to report immediate events or to propagandize for immediate ob-

jectives . . . is an honorable as well as a useful function. (John Reed . . . Ehrenburg.) "The harm," he added, "is in confusing the two. Some writers have sought to solve a conflict of conscience by trying to do the two in one" (i.e., journalism and art). "They have written books in such a way as also to serve immediate political expediencies. The results showed either in weakened and schematic writing—or wasted writing."

In these remarks, Schneider recognizes the problem, describes it accurately—but does not go on to uncover the deep source of it. Left-wing writers have been confused, yes. But why?

The answer, I believe, is this: *Most* writers on the Left have been confused. "The conflict of conscience," resulting in wasted writing or bad art, *has been induced in the writer by the intellectual atmosphere of the left wing.* The errors of individual writers or critics largely flow from a central source, I believe. That source is the vulgarization of the theory of art which lies behind left-wing thinking: namely, "art is a weapon."

Let me emphasize that, properly and *broadly* interpreted, I accept this doctrine to be true. The ideas, ethical concepts, credos upon which a writer draws consciously or unconsciously are those of his period. In turn, the accepted beliefs of any period reflect those values which are satisfactory to the class holding dominant social power. To the degree that works of art reflect or attack these values, it is broadly—not always specifically—true to say that works of art have been, and can be, weapons in men's thinking, and therefore in the struggle of social classes—either on the side of humanity's progress, or on the side of reaction. But as interpreted in practice for the last fifteen years of the left wing in America, it has become a hard rock of narrow thinking. The total concept, "art is a weapon," has been viewed as though it consisted of only one word: "weapon." The *nature* of art—*how* art may best be a weapon, and how it may *not* be, has been slurred over. I have come to believe that the accepted understanding of art as a weapon is not a useful guide, but a straitjacket. I have felt this in my own work and viewed it in the works of others. In order to write at all, it

has long since become necessary for me to repudiate it and abandon it.

Whatever its original stimulating utility in the late twenties or the early thirties, this doctrine—"art is a weapon"—over the years, in day-to-day wear and tear, was converted from a profound analytic, historical insight into a vulgar slogan: "art *should be* a weapon." This, in turn, was even more narrowly interpreted into the following: "art should be a weapon as a leaflet is a weapon." Finally, in practice, it has been understood to mean that *unless* art is a weapon like a leaflet, serving immediate political ends, necessities and programs, it is worthless or escapist or vicious.

The result of this abuse and misuse of a concept upon the critic's apparatus of approach has been, and must be, disastrous. From it flow all of the constrictions and—we must be honest—stupidities—too often found in the earnest but narrow thinking and practice of the literary left wing in these past years. And this has been inevitable.

First of all, under the domination of this vulgarized approach, creative works are judged *primarily* by their formal ideology. What else can happen if art is a weapon as a leaflet is a weapon? If a work, however thin or inept as a piece of literary fabric, expresses ideas that seem to fit the correct political tactics of the time, it is a foregone conclusion that it will be reviewed warmly, if not enthusiastically. But if the work, no matter how rich in human insight, character portrayal and imagination, seems to imply "wrong" political conclusions, then it will be indicted, severely mauled or beheaded—as the case may be.

**L**ET me give a recent example of this unhappy pattern: When Lillian Hellman's magnificent play, *Watch on the Rhine*, was produced in 1940, the NEW MASSES' critic attacked it. When it appeared, *unaltered*, as a film in 1942, the NEW MASSES' critic hailed it. The changed attitude came not from the fact that two different critics were involved, but from the fact that events had transpired in the two years calling for a different political program. This work of art was not viewed on either occasion as to its real quality—its deep revelation of life, char-

acter and the social scene—but primarily as to whether or not it was the proper “leaflet” for the moment.

There is an opposite error, corollary to this: NEW MASSES’ critics have again and again praised works *as art* that no one (themselves included) would bother to read now, ten years later. In fact, it once even gave a prize to such a book. This is not due to the fact that those who have written criticism for the magazine have been personally without taste, or intelligence or integrity. The evil lies in the *abandonment* of taste because a shallow approach does not permit it. Literary taste can only operate in a crippled manner when canons of immediate political utility are the primary values of judgment to be applied indiscriminately to all books.

Again, from this type of thinking comes that approach which demands of each written work that it contain “the whole truth.” An author writes a novel, let us say, about an unemployed Negro during the depression. The central character, after many harsh vicissitudes, ends by stealing and is sent to the penitentiary. If a book with this content were to be richly rendered, it might be highly illuminating in its portrayal of an aspect of Negro life in America. But, again and again I have seen such works, justifiably confined to only one sector of experience, severely criticized because they do not contain “the whole truth.” Upon examination this “whole truth” reveals itself to be purely political. The narrow critic is demanding that the novelist *also* show that some unemployed Negroes join the Unemployed Councils, etc. This demand, which I have seen repeated in varied ways in the pages of the NEW MASSES, rests upon the psychological assumption that readers come to each book with an empty head. They know nothing, understand nothing. Therefore, all they will *ever* know of Negro life in America must be contained in *this* book. Therefore, if the author has omitted to say that some unemployed Negroes join organizations, it is a deficient book because it doesn’t contain “the whole truth,” and it doesn’t properly fill the total vacuum of the reader’s mind.

The creative writer, respecting this type of criticism, is faced with insuperable difficulties. He is confronted with the apparent obligation of writing both a novel and an editorial that will embrace all current political propositions remotely touching his material. Whether or not his character *would* join the Unemployed Council is of no matter;

whether or not the material and artistic concept of the book forbid the examination of other characters—that, too, is of no matter. By hook or crook the material *must* be so rendered that the whole political “truth” of the scene is made visible, and the empty-headed reader is thereby won to new horizons—Q.E.D.

This is not a method by which art can be made rich, or the artist freed to do his most useful work. Let those who deny this ask working writers.

## II

FROM this narrow approach to art another error also follows rather automatically. If, in actual practice (no matter how we revere art), we assume that a writer making a speech is performing the same act as writing a novel, then we are helpless to judge works written by those who make the “wrong” sort of speeches. Engels was never bothered by this problem. For instance, he said of Balzac (I paraphrase) that Balzac taught him more about the social structure of France than all of the economists, sociologists, etc., of the period. But who was Balzac? He was a Royalist, consistently and virulently anti-democratic, anti-socialist, anti-communist in his thinking *as a citizen*.

In his appreciation of Balzac, Engels understood two facts about art: First, as I have already stated, the writer, *qua* citizen, making an election speech, and the writer, *qua* artist, writing a novel, is performing two very different acts. Second, Engels understood that a writer may be confused, or even stupid and reactionary in his thinking—and yet, it is possible for him to do good, even great, work as an artist—work that even serves ends he despises. This point is critical for an understanding of art and artists! An artist can be a great artist without being an integrated or a logical or a progressive thinker on all matters. This is so because he presents, not a systematized philosophy, but the imaginative reconstruction of a *sector* of human experience. Indeed, most people do not think with thoroughgoing logic. We are all acquainted with Jews who understand the necessity of fighting fascism—but who do not see the relationship between fascism and their own discrimination toward Negroes. We know Negroes who fight discrimination against themselves, but are anti-Semitic. I am acquainted with the curator of a museum who has made distinguished contributions in his scientific field, but who sees no contradiction between his veneration for science and

his racist attitude toward Negroes. Out of these same human failings, many artists are able to lead an intellectual life that often has a dual character. Ideas which they may consciously hold or reject do not always seriously affect their field of work where, operating like a scientist upon specific material, they sometimes handle an aspect of human experience with passionate honesty—in spite of the fact that the very implications of what they are writing may contradict ideas they consciously hold.

For instance, in sections of *Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck writes a veritable poem to revolution. Yet we would be making an error to draw conclusions from this about Steinbeck’s personal philosophy, or to be surprised when he writes *Cannery Row* with its mystic paean to Bohemianism. Similarly, we can point to John Galsworthy, a successful, wealthy, middle-class Englishman. As a thinker, Galsworthy may not have understood the meaning of the phrase “class justice.” But as an artist, honestly and earnestly recreating what he saw in English society, he wrote two plays, *The Silver Box* and *Justice*, which gave a searing portrait of class justice in human terms—and which no socially-conscious, theoretically sagacious, left-wing writer of today has come within two hundred miles of equalling.

Unless this is understood, the critics on the Left will not be able to deal with the literary work of their time. 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.

THE best case in point—although there are many—is James T. Farrell. Farrell is, in my opinion—and I have thought so ever since reading *Studs Lonigan* over ten years ago—one of the outstanding writers in America. I have not liked all of his work equally, and I don’t like the committees he belongs to. But he wrote a superb trilogy and more than a few short stories of great quality, and he is not through writing yet. *Studs Lonigan* endures and is read by increasing numbers. It will endure, in my opinion, and deserves to. But if Farrell is to be judged solely by his personality or his political position—then the NEW MASSES is left in the position of either ignoring his work or attacking it. Let’s face it: Isn’t this exactly what has happened? Farrell’s name was a

bright pennant in the NEW MASSES until he became hostile to the NEW MASSES. Very well; for his deeds or misdeeds as a citizen, let him be editorially appraised. But his literary work cannot be ignored, and must not be ignored. And, if Engels gave high praise to the literary work of Balzac—despite his truly vicious political position—is not this a guide to the NEW MASSES' critics in estimating the literary work of a whole host of varied writers—Farrell, Richard Wright, someone else tomorrow? What is basic to all understanding is this: There is not always a commanding relationship between the way an artist votes and any particular work he writes. *Sometimes* there is, depending upon his choice of material and the degree to which he consciously advances political concepts in his work. (Koestler, for instance, always writes with a political purpose so organic to his work that it affects his rendering of character, theme, etc. He must be judged accordingly.) But there is no inevitable, consistent connection.

Furthermore, most writers of stature have given us great works *in spite of* philosophic weaknesses in their works—Doestoyevsky, Tolstoy, Thomas Wolfe, are among many examples. All too often narrow critics recognize this fact in dealing with dead writers, but are too inflexible to accept it in living writers. As a result it has been an accepted assumption in much of left-wing literary thought that a writer who repudiates a progressive political position (leaves the intellectual orbit of NEW MASSES, let us say) *must* go downhill as a creative writer. But this is simply not true to

sober fact—however true it may be in individual cases. Actually it is impossible to predict the literary future of Richard Wright at this moment. At this moment he takes political positions which seem to many to be fraught with danger for his own people. He may continue to do so. But *Black Boy*, whatever its shortcomings, is not the work of an *artist* who has gone downhill. It is to the credit of the NEW MASSES that it recognized this in dealing with the book. Equally, it is impossible to predict now the future literary achievement or failure of James Farrell, of Kenneth Fearing, of Lillian Smith—as it is of Van Tillburg Clark, of Howard Fast, of Arnold Manoff, of Michael Blankfort. Books must be weighed like new coins—in terms of what they are. No other standard is valid. Writing is a complex process, and the sources of creative inspiration, out of which an artist works, are *exceedingly* complex. There are *many, many* reasons why writers grow and sometimes retrogress. The political convictions of a writer, or his lack of political convictions, *may* have something to do with his growth or creative decline, and certainly will if he writes highly politicalized novels (Koestler). But they don't always have to do with it (Marquand—Steinbeck), and any assumption that as a writer's politics do, so inevitably does his art go—forward or backward—is the assumption of naivete.

### III

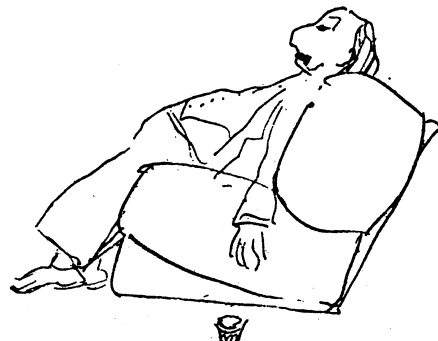
I HAVE discussed a number of the general evils which seem to me to flow from the vulgarization and one-sided

application of the doctrine, "Art is a Weapon." I'd like now to examine its specific effect upon creative writing.

A creative writer, accepting the aesthetic standards I have described, almost inevitably begins to narrow his approach to the rich opportunities of his art. He works intellectually in an atmosphere in which the critics, the audience, the friends he respects—while revering art—actually judge works on the basis of their immediate political utility. It is, moreover, an *urgent* social atmosphere—one of constant political crises. Almost inevitably, the earnest writer, concerned about his fellow man, aware of the social crisis, begins to think of his work as only another form of leaflet writing. Perhaps he comes to no such conscious conclusions. But he does so in effect—and he begins to use his talent for an immediate political end. If the end is good, it would be absurd to say that this may not be socially useful. It also would be highly inaccurate to maintain that from an approach like this *no* art can result. On the other hand, I believe that the failure of much left-wing talent to mature is a comment on how restricting this canon is for the creator in practice.

The reason for this does not come primarily from the fact that works written for the moment are of interest only for the moment. Sometimes, as I pointed out earlier, they prove to have enduring interest also. It goes deeper—into the way a writer views his task, into the way he views people and events. The opportunity of the artist is conditioned by the nature of art itself. We read textbooks for facts, theories, information. But we read novels, or go to the theater, for a different purpose. The artist, by the nature of his craft, is able to show us people in motion. This is why we revere good writers. They let us observe the individual richly—a complex creature of manifold dreams, desires, disappointments—in his relation to other individuals and to his society.

"The James Awakening," five impressions inspired by the current Henry James controversy, by Pvt. Frank Russell, now in the Philippines.



"His passions are a storm in a tea cup..."

"The denunciation is added throughout..."

"And it's of a ponderousness..."

The artist is most successful who most profoundly and *accurately* reveals his characters, with all their motivations clearly delineated.

But the writer who works to serve an immediate political purpose—whose desire it is to win friends for some political action or point of view—has set himself the task not primarily of revealing men and society as they are (the social novelist)—but rather of winning a point (the political novelist). I am not saying that an artist should be without a point of view on life and society, or that his point of view does not inevitably guide his selection of materials, characters, etc., or that any book, profoundly written, will be without political implications (*The Brothers Karamazov*). But there is a difference between possessing a philosophic point of view, which permeates one's work (the social novelist), and having a tactical axe to grind *which usually requires the artificial manipulation of character* and usually results in shallow writing (the political novelist or political propagandist working in the novel).

One can gain a useful lesson by examining *And Quiet Flows the Don*. The central figure, Gregor, is a man who ends up as the political enemy of the Soviet revolution. I have always remembered a brilliant scene in the book: Gregor, who had fought with the Reds in the Civil War and then gone over to the Whites, returns to his village. He wants no more of fighting or politics. He asks only to live quietly as a farmer. But he is not allowed to remain at peace. Retribution, in the form of a Communist, catches up with him. The Communist comes to his house, listens to Gregor's earnest plea to be left alone and replies, with passion, "No, we will not leave you alone; we will hound you."

One cannot read this scene without sympathizing with Gregor and yearning for the Communist to be more tolerant. Yet—one understands both men. Their characters, history and motivations have been clearly presented. The position *each* takes is inevitable. The sympathetic insight into Gregor, the humanity of his presentation, does not, however, corrupt the historical point of view in the book. Rather, it deepens it.

The social illumination of this novel and its political meaning would not be possible with a different handling of Gregor. This is so because profound characterization presents all characters *from their own point of view*, allowing them their own full, human justification for their behavior and attitudes, yet allowing the reader to judge their objective behavior. *This is the special wisdom art can offer us*. But if Sholokhov had had a narrow political axe to grind, he would not have allowed Gregor his humanity, he would have wanted only to make the reader hate him—and so the breath of life would have gone from the book. It would have been weaker socially, psychologically, artistically and politically.

The pitfall of the socially conscious writer who uses his art in a shallow manner is that his goal all too often subtly demands the annihilation of certain characters, the gilding of others. It is very, very difficult for him *not* to handle characters in black and white since his objective is to prove a proposition, not to reveal men in motion as they are.

Consequently, it is more than likely that he will "angle" character and events to achieve his point. He may not wish to do this. But he is led to it by his goal—led into idealistic conceptions of character, led into wearing rose-colored glasses which will permit him to

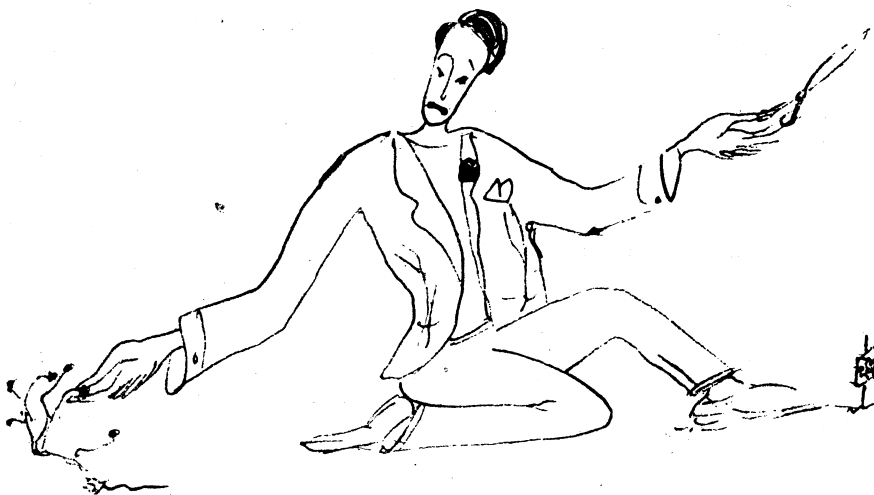
see in life that which he *wishes* to find in order to prove his thesis—led into the portrayal of life, not as it is, but as he would like it to be. And this is not only inferior art but shallow politics as well. He becomes the author of what Engels called "pinch-penny" socialist novels. This is why "the conflict of conscience," of which Schneider spoke, has resulted so often in schematic writing or wasted writing—and, in not a few instances, in a book or a play which must be discarded when a change of newspaper headlines occurs.

THIS latter calamity is the very symbol of the pitfall dug for the artist by his own narrow approach to his art. I know of at least a dozen plays and novels discarded in the process of writing because the political scene altered. Obviously the authors in question were not primarily bent upon portraying abiding truths, either of character or the social scene, but were mainly concerned with advancing a political tactic through the manipulation of character. Otherwise, a new headline in the newspapers would not have made them discard their work. I even know a historian who read Duclos and announced that he would have to revise completely the book he was engaged upon. But what type of history was this in the first place?

I am convinced that the work-in-progress of an artist who is deeply, truly, honestly recreating a sector of human experience, need not be affected by a change in the political weather. A journalist's work, on the other hand, usually is affected. This is not an invidious judgment on the journalist. It is merely the difference between journalism and art. When the artist misuses his art, when he practices journalism instead of art—however decent his purposes—the result is neither the best journalism, nor the best art, nor the best politics.

The great humanistic tradition of culture has always been on the side of progress. The writer who works within this tradition—offering his personal contribution to it—is writing a political work in the broadest meaning of the term. It is not also incumbent upon him that he relate his broad philosophic or emotional humanism to a current and transient political tactic.

He may do so if he wishes. That is up to him. But if he does, he must remember that, where art is a weapon, it is only so when it is art. Those artists who work within a vulgarized approach to art do so at great peril, to their own work and to the very purposes they seek to serve.



"But really, that Mandarin style...."