

# A Reader Examines Role of the Left in Literature and Art

The feature section invites comment from its readers on this letter by Rocky who is "a waiter by trade, a family man with 2 kids" who hopes soon to "start submitting stories and poetry which I began to write once I got the monkey of sectarianism off my back."

Editor, Feature Section:

Recently, along with some of the more basic reconsiderations growing out of the discussions of the 20th Congress, I have noticed a careful but noticeable turning toward intellectual and cultural questions. Foster suggests that we look into some of the causes for the undeniable mediocrity of much of Soviet literature. Howard Fast hopes that we begin to examine the negative role the left has played in America "in truncating the hopes and aspirations of writers." These are strong words, but they contain undeniable truth.

It is time to take another look at Soviet cultural policy during the Stalin era—for example, Zhdanov's statements in Literature, Philosophy and Music, and test the results of government control, however benign, of the arts.

In the case of Fast himself, the narrow view of literature which he set down in his "Literature and Reality" has weakened his art during the past 6 or 8 years. Fast is writing about himself as much as about Dos Passos when he states of the artist that "right or wrong his necessity is not merely to create but to create without fetters."

IT HAS BEEN obvious for a long time that Marxism, in the sectarian and heavyhanded manner in which we have employed it, has not answered a great many questions about the nature of artistic creation. Marx and Engels, enormously gifted and intellectually developed thinkers, were far less rigid in their approach to literature than their present day descendants.

Marx's statement that man must create according to the laws of beauty was ignored for years by Masses and Mainstream, which presumably has literary standards of some kind, when they consistently printed some of the "worst poetry" ever to appear in a cultural journal, writing with an undeniably noble purpose, but with all the emotional impact of a well drawn leaflet.

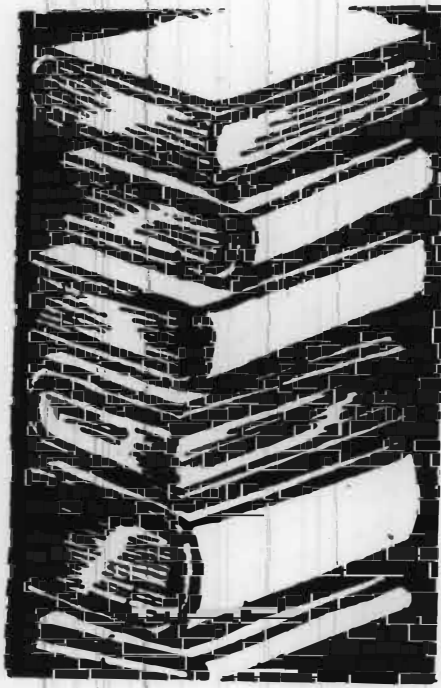
The truth in its artistic expression cannot be ground out with a mimeograph machine; the left must earn the right to be read if we want our literature to have the kind of appeal and strength which revolutionary art demands. Eluard and Aragon earned that right, and thank you, Pablo Picasso, although I do not like most of your painting, for insisting on the right to paint as you please!

We have good reason to wonder why a nation of the size of America, with her magnificent traditions and her many sorrows, has not produced one left writer in con-

temporary times with the stature of O'Casey, Neruda, Hikmet, Jorge Amado, Nexo, Laxness, or Anna Seghers. We have not even writers today who can be compared in terms of originality or influence with the Dos Passos of the twenties or the Farrell or Wright of the thirties, renegades though they have become.

MARX AND ENGELS demonstrated effectively enough to start a critical movement in America that literature is a reflection of reality, that it is a mirror of the social activities of men in a particular era, and that the forms which any literature takes is determined by the activities, intellectual, philosophic, religious, in which men of the era participate.

Just as the social base of society



is continually revolutionizing itself, so are the elements of the superstructure revolutionizing themselves, including the form and content of literature, although not always at the same speed or with the same relation to society. Many factors, shifts in taste, the discovery of new techniques, the application of new critical theories, influence the growth of literature, and must be understood and dealt with.

Whitman wrote eloquently, and for all time in a massive free verse, but our "left poets" of today take advantage of Whitman's achievement as an excuse to avoid study of the techniques of poetry, and turn out reams of journalism, artfully broken into lines of irregular length, and call it poetry.

We cannot afford to ignore bourgeois poetry, reactionary though it may be—and it is not, always — any more than a socialist society destroys all of the bourgeois-originated factories or government buildings, or sends the old engineers to clean sewers.

Marx and Engels never insisted that literature must always advance the class struggle, but looked instead for its human, its positive content; it was not their belief that literature must become a political weapon advancing the struggles of the working class for socialism.

This idea was one which developed quite properly during the Russian Revolution, during a time of heroes and heroic deeds, and produced some very stirring litera-

ture — Mayakovsky, Blok, Alexei Tolstoy, among others.

Even in the thirties, when Sholokhov turned to the heroic period of the revolution, he wrote the epic novel The Silent Don, which aroused the admiration of the world.

But when this same principle, labelled socialist realism, was applied to an entirely different sort of struggle, with the struggle to industrialize the Soviet Union, it resulted in dull, tasteless, Stalin-prize romances, industrial chivalric tales, in which the worker-Galahad achieves a Holy Grail production goal, defeating the black knights of subversion and the dragon of Bureaucracy.

These novels, which were actually literary posters, were judged and approved along with efficiency charts and quotas for coal production, often by the same men. Writers were trained to turn out these novels.

There was no room for originality, for probing character, for questioning aspects of Soviet society in the manner of Ehrenburg's cautiously prophetic post-Stalin novel, The Thaw. There was room for nothing but uniformity, and artistic and creative thought is always absent when uniformity becomes the rule.

IN AMERICA we accepted the statements of Soviet thinkers without question that socialism creates a higher type of literature, without comparing this theory to Marx's that the technological degree of development in a society does not determine the degree of development of the culture of that particular society. For example, the ancient Greeks, living in a society which we would consider technically backward, produced a great and lasting culture, probably without parallel.

America, on the other hand, the most technically advanced nation which ever existed, with more schools and universities and means for mass appreciation of the arts, has produced phenomenally little in the recent past, and this is true of the left in America as well.

If Soviet culture were indeed a higher type, why then we must copy their techniques and their critical theories, ran the argument, and in the thirties American writers formed congresses, acting as though the revolution were at hand, making the rules for writing stricter and stricter, until there were no members left in the congresses and no more regard for the classic writers than for dried bugs in a museum.

Soviet and American writers alike failed to notice that the best Soviet writers, possibly excluding Gorki and Sholokhov, were far inferior to the great nineteenth century Russians, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and that Sholokhov and Gorki were best because their heroes were not stereotyped but beset with conflicts.

Furthermore, all worthwhile literature is not concerned with

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# A Reader Examines the Arts

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struggle, even though we would like to think so. Shakespeare's sonnets advanced no struggle, except against some of the artificialities of the sonnet form, and when we come right down to it, neither did his plays, although we learn much from them. Milton was a well known political pamphleteer in his day, but Paradise Lost advanced no struggle on this earth.

Certainly as many poets, Donne, Pope, Keats, avoided social comment in the sense in which we use it, as Swift, Byron, or Shelley were concerned with society. Struggle for its own sake is not the key ingredient in great art, contrary to the opinions of many of our literary historians, and certainly the story with the moral is not the best story. Because what Byron wrote about freedom corresponded to what millions were yearning to express, he became the great poet of his era, inspiring Heine, Pushkin, and the poets of Poland and Italy.

Because Keats expressed the almost inexpressible search for the permanence of beauty and of life,

he too became a great poet. Neither was great because of his ideas, neither was less great because of them. For a poet to concern himself with what the left snobbishly terms idealism is not in itself criminal, since the ideal is only another viewpoint of reality.

**OUR YOUNG POETS** must first learn to describe the complex experience of a city sunrise, of human love, or the furry warmth of an infant sleeping, before they can hope to handle the complexities of a man's relations with himself, with other men, with the world.

Our novelists and story writers must set for themselves the same high standards of style and technique which the bourgeois writers seek, if only because the truth which Marxism has uncovered deserves the best writers to depict it.

Socialism, at least to me, is not only a means to plenty in terms of commodities, but a source of beauty in every way, offering each individual the knowledge and the leisure to enjoy life to the fullest.

If we close our minds and our art to everything not related to the central struggle, then we forget what the struggle is for. If we conceive of socialist realism as a means for molding reality to our point of view, rather than as a means for getting to the truth, then we are advocating dishonesty, which is a synonym for sectarianism in art.

If we are writing for a nation in which Communists represent .0045 percent of the people, then our novels are sectarian and un-

tried to give a game of month, but important news has often crowded out the games. Am I wrong in my estimate?

Some of you want chess problems, but the paper has no facilities for printing diagrams.

I've just received from the International Union of Students (Prague) a number of copies of a booklet on the 2nd World Student Chess Championship held in Lyons, France, May 1955. Want one? Write in; first come, first served.

"Chess Manners" by Jules Lazard (France)

Don't chatter, don't read,  
Don't smoke a cheap weed,  
Reckon smoking and humming  
a sin;  
Don't titter, don't frown,  
Don't hang a piece down,  
And NEVER exult when you  
win.

Warm weather is on us, so a visit is in order to city parks with chess facilities. For example, Washington Square Park (lower West Side), and Central Park (near the skating rink). In Brooklyn, Lincoln Terrace Park on Eastern Parkway.

## BEG PARDON

Due to a typographical error, Miss Maurine Holbert, who plays Nora in the Greenwich Mews staging of "A Doll's House," was referred to in Friday's review of the play as "Maurice." Sorry.

true if they deal almost exclusively with a situation in which half the characters are communists and the other half waiting to be recruited.

If we are not sectarian, then we will be able to write sympathetically of the millions whose only mass organization is a rod and gun club, who spend much of their time in the basement making a chair, or in the parlor watching television, or in bars, or in churches, or taking courses guaranteeing instant wealth and success—but who come out, to a man, at a strike call. Marxism is a means to the truth, and so is art. They have never been incompatible.

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