

SPEAK YOUR PIECE

Lawson Writes To David Platt

LOS ANGELES

May I suggest that a little less finality and more respect for the magnitude of the problems would improve the tone of the useful discussion of aesthetic freedom which you have opened in your columns.

Albert Maltz and V. J. Jerome are my friends. Both are distinguished writers. Both, like you and me and everyone, have been wrong on many occasions.

I have spent my life in the search for the truth of art. I have found no ultimate answers, and have learned painful lessons in the dangers of dogmatic assurance. Therefore, I am loathe to canonize my own opinions and I know that art dies without freedom. I also know that my freedom is not an easy prize. The blacklist restricts my rights as an artist, but I am less troubled by the blacklist than by my ability to give wings to words.

The Maltz discussion was not, as you suggest, a debate on abstract principles of free expression. It related to difficult problems of art and its function, at a moment when tides of change were sweeping the world. It may be relevant to review the discussion, but it must be examined with some sense of history, and an understanding of the questions at issue, which were not answered, by Maltz or anyone else. I believe that Maltz erred in many of his judgments.

But I remember the generosity and sober modesty with which he met his critics. I think this is the measure of his stature as a writer. Discipline in the sense of bowing to authority is mean and unproductive. But the discipline of the creative spirit, never ceasing to learn and grow, is the means by which the artist achieves ordered beauty and revelation.

So we come back to the hard question of values. Freedom, however dear to us, cannot be embraced in a vacuum. It relates to the goals to which the artist's work is dedicated, his place in society, his outlook on life, his contact with people, his mastery of the materials of art.

In my own work, I have been immeasurably aided by creative criticism. No one has helped me more generously than V. J. Jerome. I would be less than generous if I failed to acknowledge the debt.

I can understand the bitterness that has characterized criticism of Jerome in recent months. Bureaucracy and authoritarian methods have done much damage, and the fight against these evils is not won. But bureaucracy is not caused by personal weaknesses. Its identification with persons is subjective and impedes the real struggle against doctrinaire attitudes and practices. In fact, subjectivism leads to dogmatism.

This is not the occasion for an appraisal of Jerome's complex personality, his errors and achievements. The accounting will be made in time. It must include recognition of his passion for art, a zeal not shared by many of his political colleagues, his temperament, his poetic gift, his difficult position in a movement which has systematically disregarded cultural questions.

I am aware that many progressive intellectuals have strong disagreements with Jerome's *The Negro in Hollywood Films*, as well as with my own *Film in the Battle of Ideas*. This is all to the good, and the debate should bring new insights. Jerome's essay is a serious work. I cannot feel that you offer any illumination in stating that his conclusions are "preposterous." If this is so, it should be a conclusion, and not a priori assumption.

Your a priori position takes for

granted that the views you oppose are politically dictated and that the rejection of them is automatically less political and more suitable to a climate of artistic freedom. This is a very sweeping presupposition. In practice it tends to equate any sharp attack on mediocre or corrupt art as "politics"; freedom of discussion is thus achieved by the relaxation of critical standards.

I find Lydia Bailey objectionable as a work of film art. But I base my judgment on study of the film which I find badly constructed, an unbelievable story, lacking in human emotion and told without taste. I may be wrong, but I am not likely to be swayed by your irrelevant assurance that your views are less "political" than mine.

I am not quite sure what it means to be less or more political in dealing with the arts. Many aesthetes, such as the New Critics or T. S. Eliot, are extremely political. Let us hope that Marxists avoid the sterile dogmatism of the aesthetes.

Marxism approaches art with humility and wonder, knowing its power to stir the soul and change the world. Such modest wisdom may lead us toward new horizons of artistic freedom.

Sincerely,

JOHN HOWARD LAWSON

Feb. 11, 1957

Disagrees With DW Edit on Fast

Editor Daily Worker:

I was surprised to read your editorial on Howard Fast because your criticism was unjustified. Although the intent of the editorial was friendly your criticism that "Fast went to another publication" will not enhance your reputation.

I found the failure of the Daily Worker to print anything about why Howard Fast was not writing for the paper not in keeping with your new approach. Perhaps you would have preferred to keep the whole thing in the dark.

Mr. Fast had been a contributor to the paper and a very popular one at that. Did you imagine that his absence went unnoticed? You owed your readers an explanation at the proper time.—A.B.

[Ed. Note: As Howard Fast

explained in a letter we published months ago, charges that his writing was being suppressed in the DW were unfounded; he said he felt unable to write for us at the time and expressed appreciation for the freedom afforded him by the paper.]

What Emerson Once Wrote

Editor Daily Worker:

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote: "The sailor loses fear as fast as he acquires command of sails and spars and steam. . . . To the sailor's experience every new circumstance suggests what he must do. The terrific chances which make the hours and minutes long to the passenger, to (the sailor) whiles away by incessant application of expedients and repairs. To him a leak, a hurricane or a water spout is so much more work—no more." It was in an essay entitled "COURAGE" that this was written and a few lines later

Emerson defined his theme of courage, saying: "In short, courage consists in equality to the problem before us."

It is saddening that the fine intellect and compassionate talent of Howard Fast has decided to become "equal" to the problem before us all, by tossing himself into the evil seas of capitalism, alone. To swim, or drown alone.

It is saddening to lose a man at sea.

But life is stormy. Life always was stormy and always will be. Your best shipmate is only a human being, always rough and decent, but spawned from the womb of capitalism. A child of society he named Joe Blow or Joseph Stalin. And the port of socialism is populated after all by human beings and always will be . . . no port is Heaven.

To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson again; "the danger of dangers is illusion."

Some who thought they were on their way to Heaven in a ship manned by angels are entitled to their disillusionment. In some ways it was inevitable.

We, the rank and file Communists, expect no Heaven.

We will settle for socialism; and we intend to have it.

WATERFRONT

Feb. 2, 1957

An Exciting Chapter In Michigan History

DETROIT. — An exciting chapter of this city and state's role in the fight against slavery, is told in the story of William Lambert, Negro leader, colleague of John Brown, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglas, the great Abolitionists.

Lambert was the manager of the Underground Railway here and helped Negroes into Canada, across the Detroit and St. Clair Rivers.

Lambert's father was a slave and Lambert himself was educated by a Quaker before coming to Detroit in 1838 and lived on Larned St. until his death in 1892.

He argued before the Michigan

State Legislature in 1843 demanding that the right to vote be granted to all citizens and not to "white" only, as the Michigan Constitution declared at that time.

Due to the work of Lambert and the Michigan Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1840, the Michigan State Legislature, in order to hinder application of the Fugitive Slave Act, which said that slaves could be arrested in any state and extradited back to the South, passed a state law prohibiting the use of county jails to lock up slaves. The Legislature also directed prosecuting attorneys in all counties to defend the slaves and fight extradition.

Another important fight led by this sterling Michigander was for the right of Negro children to go to public schools here. He and his friends in the Abolitionist movement won that battle.

History tells us that in the spring of 1858 John Brown, the famous Abolitionist leader, arrived in Detroit and worked as a conductor on the Underground Railway here. Brown lived at Lambert's on East Larned St.

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