

489 Maple St.
Winnetka, Illinois

March 14, 1945

Mr. Frank R. Fraprie, Editor
American Photography
353 Newbury St.
Boston 15, Mass.

Dear Mr. Fraprie:

Communications to the Editor of American Photography do not rank high as features of the magazine. Whether this is owing to a scarcity of valid criticism or a disinclination on the part of the editors, for reasons best known to them, to publish criticism, I do not know; but occasions for disagreement with the editors have not been lacking.

In the March issue appeared a statement by Herbert C. McKay in "Notes From a Laboratory", which should not be allowed to pass unchallenged in spite of Mr. McKay's attempt to disarm his critics in advance by assuring his readers that what he is about to say are his own opinions, and, therefore, presumably either unimportant or irrefutable. An editor is morally obliged, because of his advantageous position in respect to his audience, to clarify, justify and defend, if necessary, his ideas.

In the statement, "There is even more severe criticism due those who make of photography or any other medium of self-expression a tool for the furtherance of 'Causes', and only the deepest contempt can be felt for those who drag politics and sociology into their hobby, for this, is nothing but the most degraded prostitution of an art form", the only thing with which I am able to agree is the exclamation point at the end. It appears that Mr. McKay believes that an art must exist in a political and social vacuum if it is to retain integrity; but if the work of an artist betrays the influence of, or more especially is designed to promote social or political ideas, it is deserving of the greatest disparagement. It follows, therefore, that contemporary political and sociological forces, though they may be rocking the foundations of our civilisation and affecting every detail of men's lives, must not be permitted to become manifest in works of art. No artist may, in political controversy, use his chosen medium in which he is most suited both innately and by training to express his deepest feelings. It matters not that issues touch him closely, he must, never-the-less, practice the most rigorous self-suppression of all inspiration to state, through his art, ideas with political or sociological significance. There shall be no peace of mind for him since he must condemn himself to a life of frustration in order to retain the respect of his contemporaries.

To hold to such a doctrine is to advocate a static

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spiritless, regressive form of art, certain never to become a cultural force in the world. However, since art, especially in its broadest sense, has played an enormously important role in the history of civilization, this point of view is prima facie unrealistic. The very meaning of the Renaissance is a negation of the doctrine of the insulation of art. During the Middle Ages art and society had fallen under church domination, which produced in the one a rigid inflexibility and in the other feudalism. With the Renaissance, art began to express the growing need for social interpretation to relieve the past oppressive stagnation and stultifying doctrinairism of the Church. This rebirth of vigor was detectable in all aspects of society - no part was isolated from other parts. Artists were commissioned by the Church and by its prelates to paint religious pictures depicting factional points of view. This was not considered a corruption of art, but rather the fulfillment of its ultimate purpose.

At the end of the eighteenth century Goya used his skill as a portrait painter to portray the degeneracy of the Spanish aristocracy and royal family. Such a bold exposure of ruling class degradation had seldom been dared previously. It can not be said that Goya's motives were not political for he was a peasant by birth who had knowledge of the ruthless exploitation of the poor. Subsequently, as a result of his experiences during the Peninsular Campaign, he executed a series of paintings and etchings on the horrors of war, which expressed his hate of militarism and violence and all that stands behind them. Goya did not feel that, to preserve his integrity as an artist, he was morally bound to remain aloof from social and political affairs - quite the opposite.

Among present day painters let us consider the work of Rivera, Grosz and Picasso who have never been condemned by reputable authorities on account of their social bias. Rivera's satiric, anticapitulist Mexican murals, though not widely acclaimed, have not resulted in serious aspersion of his character. Grosz has for many years used his art to deride and rebuke the wealthy classes of contemporary society. More recently he has taken up the cudgel against totalitarianism, but he has not been vilified for his partisanship or had his sincerity impugned. Picasso's *Guernica*, a painting of the destruction by bombing of the Basque town of that name, is quite frankly antifascist propaganda, generally admired for that very reason in democratic countries.

There are other forms of self-expression than painting. Several branches of literature, which are commonly considered to lie within the realm of art, have been used for the purpose of influencing the course of human affairs. First, let us consider poetry. Poets have usually freely expressed their social and political convictions. Milton wrote a verse entitled *ON THE LATE MASSACRE IN PIEDMONT* in which he took note of a

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political event by condemning its perpetrators. Burn's LIBERTIE - A VISION was inspired by the American Revolution and written on the occasion of Washington's birthday. Shelley produced several poemshaving a political bias. His sonnet on POLITICAL GREATNESS and SIMILES FOR TWO POLITICAL CHARACTERS OF 1819 are more or less general criticism, while LINES DURING THE CASTLEREAGH ADMINISTRATION and SONG - TO THE MEN OF ENGLAND are much more specific, especially the latter, which openly advocates to workers the seizure of the product of their labor. Pitt was devastatingly condemned for his responsibility for warin FIRE, FAMINE, AND SLAUGHTER by Coleridge. The attack was, in fact, so severe that Coleridge was subsequently prevailed upon to apologize. Wordsworth wrote many poems on liberty and political freedom inspired by Spanish resistance to Napoleon's puppet government. INDIGNATION OF A HIGH-MINDED SPANIARD, THE FRENCH AND THE SPANISH GUERRILLAS, and SPANISH GUERRILLAS are examples. He wrote many other verses in which bias is unmistakably expressed such as OVERSEEING STATESMEN HAVE FULL LONG RELIED -, and SONNETS UPON THE PUNISHMENT OF DEATH. His purpose can be no other than to bring about a change in the conditions described. Pushkin's MESSAGE TO SIBERIA and Alexander Blok's THE TWELVE are mentioned also as examples of partisan verse. The last was inspired by the proletarian revolution of 1917. Many other cases could be cited but this is not intended to be an exhaustive list.

The drama is another branch of the literary arts, which has been used extensively to promote causes and exert political influences. Ibsen was a social reformer whose play AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE was an attack on political short-sightedness, selfishness and reaction. Gorky, more exposer than reformer, removed the veil from the depths of social degradation. Bernard Shaw, iconoclast and satirist, does not believe in art for art's sake. In his controversial plays Shaw, the undeceiver, the advocate of straight thinking, exposes hypocrisy and insincerity. He finds nothing in the structure of society too sacred to be brought under the X-ray of his criticism. Can it be that his purpose is solely academic; that he intends no effect beyond the appreciation of his wit and masterful satire?

Finally we come to fiction, a division of literature which supplies the most numerous examples of sociological proselytism. It should hardly be necessary to do more than mention the works of some of the greatest writers to establish the precedent for and the propriety of this practice. Voltaire's CANDIDE, Tolstoy's WAR AND PEACE and WHAT MEN LIVE BY, Dostoevsky's CRIME AND PUNISHMENT, Anatole France's PENGUIN ISLAND, and Thomas Hardy's TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES were all written with more than entertainment as a motive. There are also works of fiction by Thomas Mann, Malraux, Hemingway, and Dos Passos which could be cited as belonging in this category.

So far nothing has been said of photography. Here the case is not so easy to establish, photography being the

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youngest art; but the work of photographers like Evans, Lange and Rothstein deserves mention because of its occasional sensitiveness and beauty as well as its social consciousness.

Shall we dismiss as corrupt and contemptable the art of these men who, acting within the framework of the highest morality of their times, felt compelled to use their special gifts to advance particular social or political doctrines? In one sentence, by subscribing to this point of view, Mr. McKay rejects great chunks of our cultural background and denies the validity of the struggle for freedom of thought and expression, which has been joined by a long and venerable succession of artists, poets and writers from centuries past.

Yours very sincerely,

Eliot F. Porter