

3. Art as a Weapon

By SAMUEL SILLEN

It is inaccurate to say, as Albert Maltz does in his *New Masses* article, that "art as a weapon" is "the theory of art which lies behind left-wing thinking." The phrase "art is a weapon" is merely one of the sloganized forms in which the general theory is expressed. The theory of art which lies, or should lie, behind "left-wing thinking" is Marxism.

Marxists recognize that in a class-divided society, the exploiting class maintains a monopoly not only of the productive forces but of culture. Ask yourself: What class owns the movie, theater, radio, university, press and book industries in capitalist America? Are the dominant ideas expressed through these cultural media the ideas of the working class or of the economic rulers of our society?

The artist cannot live in this society and yet be free of it; he aligns himself, whether consciously or not, either with the class that fights to hold its power to exploit or with the class that fights to liberate itself. In one form or another, the artist's work expresses a definite attitude toward this struggle. And since the

artist reaches people and has an impact on their ideas, emotions and behavior, his work is a "weapon" in the struggle of classes.

This is not a question of whether art "should be" a weapon. It inevitably is. If the term "weapon" seems crude, remember that the struggle is grim.

The ruling class tries to conceal the fact that art is a weapon. It pretends to be interested in "pure art" and "pure entertainment," though this purity includes attacks on Negroes, Jews, the working class, Communists, etc. It makes a great show of supporting art museums, though it condemns the mass of artists to unpublicized starvation.

And the cultural spokesmen of the bourgeoisie serve the purpose of camouflage. Defenders of "pure art," they indignantly attack writers hostile to the capitalist values as "propagandists." They condemn them as "vulgarizers" and as "Artists in Uniform."

As Lenin noted as far back as 1905: "The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress is nothing but a self-deceptive (or hypocritically deceiving) dependence upon the money-bags, upon bribery, upon patronage. And we Socialists expose this hypocrisy, we tear away this false front—not in order to attain a classless art and literature (that will be possible only in a Socialist, classless society), but in order to oppose a literature

hypocritically free, and in reality allied with the bourgeoisie, a literature truly free, OPENLY allied with the proletariat."

When a writer like Albert Maltz discovers that the "accepted understanding" of art as a weapon is a "straitjacket," that "in order to write at all" he has had to "repudiate it and abandon it," we must begin to reexamine some fundamental issues.

The real weakness of the literary left in the past several years is not that it insisted too much upon "art as a weapon." On the contrary, we not only abandoned the phrase but began to abandon the theory which it expressed. For Browderism had an especially damaging effect on the thinking of the cultural movement.

Our primary task today is to understand one of those basic social laws we had begun to "repeal." This is the fact that only the working class desires, and can profit by, a completely true, realistic art; such an art is feared by the exploiting class, which can exist only by fraud.

Intellectuals who militantly identify themselves with the workers will find an inexhaustible source of creative vitality, genuine emotion, confidence in a free future. Those who align themselves with the enemies of the workers will be the purveyors of intellectual decay, however brilliantly phrased. That way lies reaction

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and fascism, whose lessons for the artist must again and again be recalled.

Art is, of course, a certain kind of weapon. It is not a meat-cleaver. The writers are "engineers of the soul," as Stalin has told us, and this implies both an understanding of the soul and a mastery of craft.

It is a false imputation that the "left wing" wants the artist to write "leaflets" instead of rich, profound art dealing with the many-sided complexities of human relations.

To support this, Maltz cites the treatment of Lillian Hellman's *Watch On the Rhine* in a *New Masses* review. The reviewer, writing before the war, took a negative attitude toward the play; another reviewer, writing during the war, took a positive attitude toward the picture. In other words, "the left wing" tends to view art as a leaflet.

But, as Maltz knows very well, there was the profoundest disagreement at the time of the original review, which, as it happened, was mistaken both as dramatic and as political criticism.

There was no "official" left attitude to the play, any more than there was toward *Native Son*, *Jake Home*, *Deep Are the Roots*, *The Cross and the Arrow*, and

any number of controversial works.

Indeed, as everybody will recall, no bourgeois paper or institution in the country can point to the kind of earnest, open, protracted discussion that developed over these works in our press.

In girding ourselves as writers for this stormy period, we insist first of all on writing truthfully. This does not call for "editorial" schematism. It does not call for "conversion" solutions, nor for "idealised" portraits. It does not mean stripping human personality of depth or complexity.

But the Marxists emphasize that all this richness should be expressed in terms of the real relations of living people in our society. They call upon the writer to reveal in human terms the conflict between dying and creative forces.

Fully to achieve our objective we shall of course have to refine continually our weapons of both literary creation and criticism.

But we shall be yielding to a savage enemy and abandoning our art if we forget for a moment that it is indeed weapons for life or death that we wield.

Any tendency to withdraw from struggle must be challenged head-on.

(In tomorrow's *Daily Worker*, Samuel Sillen will discuss "The Path Before Us.")