

4. Ideology and Art

By SAMUEL SILLEN

THROUGHOUT his article on "What Shall We Ask Of Writers?" Albert Maltz emphasizes that there is no necessary connection between a writer's thinking ("qua citizen") and his literary work ("qua artist"). This

separation of the thinker and artist, like the separation of art and politics, is repeated in many different forms. Maltz insists that the contradiction between ideology and art is "basic to all understanding," that it is "critical for an understanding of art and artists."

Maltz declares that "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 the ends he despises."

He adds that "An artist can be a great artist without being an integrated or a logical or a progressive thinker on all matters."

It is true, of course, that many great artists have held confused views on many questions. If we should examine all the writers of the capitalist epoch from the point of view of whether they were Marx-

ists, we should have to repudiate virtually every great artist of the past.

But does it follow from this that there was no relationship between the worldview of Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy and their art?

For guidance on this point we may turn to a number of essays written by Lenin on Leo Tolstoy. Lenin, of course, recognized that Tolstoy was a great artist; he also recognized the backward and contradictory elements in his thinking.

But he did not resolve this problem by destroying the connection between Tolstoy's ideology and his art. He notes that "This rapid, sharp, violent crumbling of the old 'foundations' of old Russia was reflected in the works of Tolstoy the artist, and in the views of Tolstoy the thinker." Elsewhere he notes that Tolstoy reflected with remarkable precision the epoch to which he belonged "both in his masterful works of art and in his doctrine."

Lenin examines both the strength and weakness of Tolstoy historically and from a class point of view, just as Engels and Marx had examined the work of Balzac. "The contradictions in Tolstoy's views," writes Lenin, "are not mere contradictions in his own purely personal ideas; rather they are a reflection of the highly complex, contradictory social conditions and historical conditions which determined the psychology of the different classes and the

different strata of Russian society in the epoch FOLLOWING the reforms but PRECEDING the revolution (of 1905)."

"Consequently," he adds, "a true evaluation of Tolstoy is possible only from the viewpoint of that class which by its political role and its struggle during the revolution—the first denouement of these contradictions—proved itself destined to be the leader in the struggle for the freedom of the people and the emancipation of the masses. . . . Such an evaluation is possible only from the viewpoint of the social-democratic proletariat."

Thus, Lenin insisted, a full understanding of Tolstoy requires a working class approach to the man, his art and his epoch, not as separate items but as part of a unified whole that contained contradictions within it.

Lenin, like Marx and Engels, approached questions of art in terms of a specific, historical setting.

Today we do not live in the epoch of Balzac and Tolstoy. We live in the epoch of imperialism; socialism has been firmly established in one-sixth of the world. The period in which we live cannot mechanically be compared to any past period.

From the point of view of the modern working class, and the working class alone, the writer is required to achieve as much integration as possible between a scientific

(Continued on Page 9)

4. Ideology and Art

(Continued from Page 6)

ideology and a realistic art. Rather than encouraging such integration, the Maltz article takes the line that writers can be confused, unintegrated, "even stupid and reactionary" in their thinking and at the same time be great artists.

What a different view Engels took, when in the same letter on Balzac, he cautions a novelist:

"Realism, to my mind, implies besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of the principle that the emancipation of the working class ought to be the cause of the working class itself. The revolutionary reaction of the working class against the oppression that surrounds them, their convulsive attempts—half conscious or conscious—to attain their rights as human beings, belongs to history and may therefore lay claim to a place in the domain of realism."

This was in 1888. In 1946 we are told that a Trotzkyite who breathes nothing but contempt for the working class and hostility to its struggle, may be examined from the point of view of pure art.

True, different writers have dif-

ferent degrees of perception; and their obligation as artists is always to be faithful to their perceptions. You cannot lump mechanically people like Hemingway, Lewis, Steinbeck, etc. Each has to be studied in terms of his own work and development. And nobody would dream of rejecting them in toto just because there are gaps between their perceptions and reality.

But we call upon these artists to understand their world with the greatest clarity; we have the obligation to show that this can be achieved only through identification with the working class in its struggles and world outlook. And we say that in our time, in which politics permeates every phase of human existence, a "confused, stupid, reactionary" thinker will in the course of his development betray his art and mankind as well. We call for a conscious rejection of capitalist values. In telling our writers what to do, we must above all stress the unity of theory and practice, the unity of thought and art.

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