

5. The Path Before Us

By SAMUEL SILLEN

INTELLECTUALS are being rapidly impelled toward various points of the political compass. They cannot stand still in the period now unfolding.

There are three main lines of movement. Some intellectuals will be impelled toward more active participation in the struggle against reaction and fascism. Others will more consciously align themselves with the anti-democratic forces. A third group will develop moods of withdrawal from struggle, moods that will assume many different and sometimes subtle forms.

The supreme mission of the literary left is to rally, unite and strengthen the most conscious progressive writers in America. The literary left, identifying itself with the working class, must serve as a stimulus and center of attraction for everything progressive in American cultural life.

This is only in part a matter of political organization. It is equally a problem of encouraging and guiding the creation of a rich, vigorous body of literary art and literary ideas.

There is certainly no room for complacency as we look back. In the 30's the literary left achieved a certain vigor which got drained off into a sectarian narrowness, a schematic approach to questions of art, a mechanical division of writers into sheep and goats.

In the early 40's we achieved a certain breadth, but we distorted our Marxism.

We have much to learn from both periods, but we have no reason to yearn for either. We are trying to move into the future, and we can do so only by establishing with utmost firmness and clarity a position which admits neither a smug sectarianism nor breadth without principle. We must, in short, struggle for Marxism.

This means, among other things:

1. A mastery of the Marxist-Leninist classics on the subject of literature and literary criticism. It is a misfortune, and we must say it in sharpest self-criticism, that more available writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Gorky and others have not been assembled and presented to American writers. A mastery of these writings would be the best corrective to many of the mechanical, rigid approaches to literature that have developed side by side with lax, bourgeois-liberal approaches.

2. On the basis of these writings we must proceed to develop in terms of American literature, past and present, a body of criticism that does not depend on subjective moods but is truly scientific in methodology.

3. We must emphasize and make crystal clear that for us there is no contradiction between "aesthetic criticism" and "social criticism," that criticism in its highest form combines both as aspects of the same science. We must reject both the tendency to judge art as "pure form" and the tendency to judge it as "politics pure and simple." We must as Marxists study the inseparable relation of form and content; we must illustrate our understanding in

everything we say about literature and art. This is not easy. It is nevertheless the goal we must set for ourselves.

4. We must impress upon the reviewers and critics of our press their grave responsibility. They do not speak "officially," but their views are regarded with utmost seriousness because the progressive movement looks to our press for informed and responsible judgments.

5. We should proceed to bring into being whatever literary journals are necessary to combat the Trotskyite, Social Democratic and the general literary press, which spreads reactionary poison under a "literary" guise and which offers a snare to certain honest writers looking for a medium of publication. Today there are too few organs of expression for genuinely progressive writers.

6. We must devote more of our thinking and energies to the young writers, the Negroes, the veterans. In our company they must find that enthusiasm for culture, that honesty and sympathy that they cannot find in the commercial literary world.

7. We must intensify and speed our efforts to build the cultural forms (labor theater, etc.) through which the workers, the "non-professionals," can express their ideas and experiences.

We have much work to do. We shall succeed only on the basis of fighting the hypocritical and corrupt values of capitalism, only by rejecting vigorously any moods or theories that conciliate enemies of the working class and democracy.

(In tomorrow's Daily Worker, Samuel Sillen will conclude this series.)