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The Political-Literary Complex

Carol Iannone

AT ONE POINT during their week of deliberations and festivities, the writers who had assembled in New York last January for the 48th International PEN Congress were counseled by one of their number to "go back to your ivory towers." But in truth many of the 700 or so delegates to the conference from some 40 countries did not seem ivory-tower types to begin with. Theirs had been a week of petitions and statements and strategy meetings, of walkouts and protests and confrontations. Scarcely could a discussion of literature proceed for more than a quarter of an hour, it seemed, without turning sharply and divisively political. Certainly few could continue to maintain after this conference what the current president of the American chapter of PEN, Norman Mailer, had confidently pronounced before it, that "writers speak across national boundaries more gracefully, more instinctively, than governments."

Of course the conference theme—"The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State"—was itself an open invitation to consider literature in the political context and politics in the context of the aesthetic imagination. On the other hand, on the face of it there seemed no reason why such issues could not be discussed in a reasonably detached and intellectually responsible manner. The topic, over which (we are told) Mailer in his first official act as American PEN president had "cluck[ed] in approval," had been formulated by the

novelist Donald Barthelme and the poet and translator Richard Howard. "The writer possesses or is possessed by imagination, and life is generated by this imagination," these two postulated. "In the final years of the 20th century, the State possesses an imagination of its own; and *something* is generated thereby. . . . We suggest that these two imaginations are in radical conflict all over the world, and that such conflict is the most important issue facing the writer in the 1980's." In his keynote address at the opening assembly Mailer elaborated: "Nations otherwise at raw odds" seem nevertheless gathered in "some unseen species of cooperation to flatten our spirit . . . to leech out the culture of the world."

This casual dismissal of the differences among states, particularly those between totalitarian and democratic states—differences especially crucial to writers—was to be proffered at the Congress as evidence of a glorious high-mindedness, an ability to transcend crudity, jingoism, and what the West German writer Peter Schneider called "platitudes." Although there was a certain ritual disdain for the notion of "moral equivalence," this did not dissolve the prevailing perception of the two superpowers as equally threatening to the forces of literary sweetness and light—much to the amazement of the East Europeans at the conference, who admitted to finding the United States a "pastoral" and "moderately utopian" land and wondered if anyone who had not lived under totalitarianism could ever understand what it means. (Part of what it means is that no Soviet writers attended the conference; having no PEN chapter, they "refused" to come even as guests on account of

the presence of émigrés and other "propagators of hatred.")

Perhaps it was to writers possessed of just such imaginations as these, refined to a point beyond petty distinctions between totalitarian and democratic states, that the appearance of Secretary of State George Shultz at the opening assembly seemed comparable to a propaganda briefing by Joseph Goebbels. Greeted with hissing, booing, and heckling, as well as by a letter of objection signed by 65 delegates and the National Writers' Union, the Secretary of State became the focus of a protest that occupied the first several days of the conference.

The Shultz agitation, aside from displaying an open contempt for free speech and a selfish willingness to undermine a conference many had come from afar to enjoy, revealed a deliberate confusion of the differing claims of politics and literature. The letter of protest, and the article explaining it that was written by the U.S. novelist E.L. Doctorow and that appeared on the op-ed page of the *New York Times*, were marked less by any genuine appeal to artistic independence than by a use of the rhetoric of independence in order to pour public venom on "the most ideologically right-wing administration this country has yet seen." "What has [he] written? What is his connection to the world of letters?" Doctorow demanded to know of Shultz—who happens to be the author of seven books, as if in any case that were really the issue.

ALTHOUGH tainted by the political colorations of the moment, the idea indirectly embedded in this year's conference theme—the idea, that is, of "an alternative state" (in Tolstoy's phrase), a "nation of writers" that transcends the differences among governments—does at least derive from the heart of PEN traditions.

Founded in 1921 by John Galsworthy and Mrs. C.A. Dawson

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Scott, a Cornish novelist and poet, PEN shared in the idealism of an age that reposed so much hope in an institution like the League of Nations; its rather romantic logo shows a quill pen breaking apart a sword, and its official history cites the inspiration of Walt Whitman: "My dearest dream is for an internationality of poems and poets, binding the lands of the earth closer than all treaties and diplomacy."

As the 30's advanced, however, according to Marchette Chute, author of the official history, "PEN was finding itself with less and less space in a world that was hardening into an increasing respect for the absolute power of the totalitarian state." At the 1933 Congress held in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, the delegation of German writers (whose leader had written a campaign biography of Hitler), tried to prevent Ernst Toller, a German Jew living in exile, from speaking. Some of the delegations feared the Germans too much to oppose them." Miss Chute reports, "and a member from one of the oldest and bravest governments in Europe sneaked: 'The future is Germany's. You must yield.'" Congress President H.G. Wells put the matter to a vote. The majority voted to allow Toller to speak while the German delegation walked out. Nevertheless, Henry Seidel Canby, the only American delegate at the Congress, remained uneasy; all he could see was "visible fear [of the Germans] rising like a cold fire."

At a Congress held in New York City in 1939, International PEN President Jules Romains challenged the idea of the writer's neutrality by declaring: "We are no longer able to act as if tyranny did not exist. Therefore, we must act that it shall not exist." Thomas Mann, according to Miss Chute, "ended his own speech almost with a sense of gratitude that the lines were now clearly drawn." "This is a time of great simplification," Mann said, "a time when we humbly acknowledge the difference between good and evil. . . ." And PEN's International Secretary, Hermon Ould, who had spent eighteen months in prison as a conscientious objector to World War I, came to acknowledge (again in Miss Chute's words)

that "everything he valued would cease to exist unless Hitler could be stopped. Ould no longer trusted in what he now called 'the fallacy of absolutes in morals. . . . One had to choose the less harmful, according to one's lights.'"

Thus it would appear that an enlightened if somewhat fuzzily conceived literary internationalism need not conflict with a grasp of political reality. Of course, many writers did not arrive at even this much grasp of the reality of fascism—or did so only after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Furthermore, many of the same writers who grasped the reality of fascist tyranny were unable to grasp the reality of Communist tyranny; Jules Romains himself was an example. The same cross-eyed view persists to this day among the literati, who, now that Nazism no longer exists, seem to feel a perpetual need to reinvent it, and to locate it in one or another Western or Western-allied country while studiously ignoring the present reality of Communist tyranny right before their eyes. This syndrome was certainly in evidence at the New York Congress of 1986.

WE CANNOT escape history, Abraham Lincoln once asserted, but many writers seem to have made careers of doing just that. It took Amos Oz of Israel, Czeslaw Milosz of Poland and the U.S., Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, and Saul Bellow of the U.S. to remind the audience of what should have been obvious: that there are better and worse states, and that democracies, to say the least, are among the better; that the state is at least a necessary evil; that many writers in our time have disgraced themselves with their political beliefs; and, perhaps most crucially, that there are limits to what the writer can accomplish *as an artist*. But the overriding assumption of the conference ran otherwise: that "the imagination of the state" is uniformly onerous if not malevolent, while the imagination of the writer is always beneficent and redemptive, especially when enriched by a properly enlightened view of capitalism, imperialism, racism, patriarchy, and nuclear arms.

The air thus became thick with the odor of sanctity—so thick that cooler heads finally began to seek an explanation for it. The explanation that one heard at the conference was that when it comes to politics, authors are just off their native turf; losing momentarily the refinements of the aesthetic sensibility, they yield to the "language of the pressure groups" and "anchorman's jargon and the jargon of 60 or 70 years of radical militancy," in Saul Bellow's characterization. "Like many artists, many writers are terribly naive about the way the world wags," ventured Robertson Davies of Canada. Amos Oz professed himself "again and again . . . amazed by the gulf between what writers see when we write our poems, stories, plays—and what we do when we formulate or sign our petitions, manifestoes, titles for panel discussions. It is as if we were using two contradictory pairs of eyes. . . ."

Actually, however, what the New York PEN Congress exposed was not that a writer can succumb to political naiveté when he slips the moorings of his aesthetic sensibility, but rather that much of the contemporary aesthetic imagination is by now so extensively politicized that it can naturally find expression in even the crudest propaganda. Many writers, in other words, are operating not with "two contradictory pairs of eyes" but with a single lens.

Saul Bellow's contribution served to bring some of this to light. Sitting on a panel predictably entitled "Alienation and the State," Bellow recalled his "own beginnings in life," growing up in a French Canadian town. "My parents spoke Russian to each other, the children spoke Yiddish to them, the children spoke English to each other and they spoke French and English on the street. In addition we went to a Hebrew school and to top it all the landlord was Sicilian," he related to light laughter. But to Bellow, "this seemed not at all strange. I accepted it as my natural milieu," and felt no sense of "alienation." "This was my first time on this earth," he went on, and "I was extremely enthusiastic about every-

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thing that happened." Later, Bellow recorded, when he came to Chicago to become a writer, he was indeed challenged by traditionalists who felt his sense of language was not pure enough for literary expression. But he "said the hell with that. The reason being that language is the spiritual mansion in which you live and nobody has the right to evict you from it. Your possession of it is guaranteed by your devotion to it."

BELLOW's remarks fell like gold coins into a plate of counterfeit. What was this audience to do with such quaint Victorian notions, an audience consisting of many writers for whom the very definition of "identity," including literary identity, had come to mean understanding the ways in which they were "oppressed" or "alienated," who had heard the Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie tick off the various species of marginality to which he could righteously lay claim, and the black American novelist Toni Morrison declare she had never felt herself an American? Implicit in Bellow's words were the hopelessly *outré* ideas that one can make choices about one's life; that one can transcend circumstances; that one can find richness even in "marginal" experience; that one can join the human race as an equal, and not remain a perennially aggrieved outsider. More: that for a writer, such accomplishments are not something that is granted by the "dominant group" but claimed through courage, integrity, and the power of art.

Bellow's words somewhat circuitously and inferentially brought to mind the controversy over black writing that took place some two decades ago between the leftist critic Irving Howe and the black novelist Ralph Ellison, a controversy that similarly concerned the options of the "marginal" writer. In answer to Howe's suggestion that black writers would find their strongest avenue of expression in the literature of "plight and protest," Ellison insisted on "affirming the broad possibility of personal realization which I see as a saving aspect of American life,"

and on recognizing "those aspects of my role as writer which do not depend primarily upon my racial identity." He invoked, in short, "the basic unity of human experience that assures us of some possibility of emphatic and symbolic identification with those of other backgrounds," and thereby championed the classical Keatsian idea of negative capability, long since abandoned in our literary life in favor of special pleading. "The diversity of American life is often painful," Ellison asserted, "frequently burdensome and always a source of conflict, but in it lies our fate and our hope."

At the PEN conference, it was ruefully clear that "plight and protest" still saturate the imagination of many writers today, and have seeped not only into one after another "marginal" voice ("Black English, Red English, Brown English, and Yellow English," was the not quite metaphorical description offered by the black American novelist Ishmael Reed), but into the "mainstream" as well, leaving one to wonder just who is still an "insider." On one panel, Susan Sontag of the U.S. noted with some relief that none of the panel's native English speakers was Anglo-Saxon, at any rate.

WHILE Bellow's opening brief for the ideal of aesthetic integration apparently struck no answering chords, his speech itself, arguing that democracy provides freedom and prosperity but no special sense of cultural or spiritual elevation, evoked a distorted response. The West German novelist Guenter Grass ostentatiously reminded Bellow that America's "prosperity" is undercut by the poverty of the South Bronx, and the South African poet Breyten Breytenbach rose to proclaim that "the freedom and prosperity of the USA is built on the unfreedom and poverty and exploitation of very large parts of the world." The American poet Allen Ginsberg asked if the American habit of exploiting other nations was "not a reflection on our spiritual nature." When Bellow protested against this "stampeding of people into political boxes," the South African novelist Nadine

Gordimer wondered aloud why he insisted on divorcing the spiritual from the political and social.

The Polish émigré poet Adam Zagajewski attempted to clarify Bellow's point. There are at least two types of dangers in the world today, Zagajewski explained, addressing Nadine Gordimer. "One is the social danger which you like so much to speak about. But there is another danger that the spiritual life may vanish here on earth not because of atom bombs, but because of stupidity. We are here in our capacity as writers, not as social workers." To this Salman Rushdie responded by demanding to know why American writers had "abdicated" the "task" of treating the "subject which for the rest of us is the paramount subject about America, which is how America treats the rest of the world." Bellow countered that "we don't have any 'tasks,' we just have inspirations." But shortly thereafter Guenter Grass made a pitch for, precisely, the task of helping "our colleagues from Nicaragua," represented at the conference by Omar Cabezas, guerrilla memoirist and the Sandinistas' Deputy Minister of the Interior (who was soon to defend his government's use of a "a little censorship"), and by Rosario Murillo, purported poet, common-law wife of President Daniel Ortega, and head of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers ("in charge," according to a U.S. official, "of who gets pens and paintbrushes"). One hundred forty-nine of the conference delegates then set themselves to Grass's proposed task by drawing up a petition condemning U.S. policies in Nicaragua and attributing all human-rights abuses there to American intervention.

BUT perhaps nothing brought home more vividly the extent to which political had displaced literary considerations at the conference than the action of the feminists on the last day in protesting the "underrepresentation" of women on the panels and in demanding greater statistical representation at future PEN Congresses. Their vehemence on this score was undeterred by the emergence of a number of facts prejudicial to

their case: that women head six of PEN's eight permanent committees, the membership of which is about half female; that three of the American group's six vice presidents are women; that some of the more prominent feminist agitators were themselves on PEN's executive councils; and that most of the feminist agitators had done nothing to help plan for the conference by finding women writers who could serve as suitable panelists. Obviously it did not suffice that women have plenty of power in PEN, since they had failed to use it according to the feminists' definition of their interests (or, if they were themselves feminists, to bother using it at all).

To his credit Norman Mailer publicly attacked the idea of constructing panels for sexual balance, and indeed the entire concept of affirmative action in literature (although he promptly undercut this display of good sense, and incidentally revealed his own class bias, in allowing that affirmative action does apply to blacks in construction work, only not to activities like his own where "the center . . . is obligatory excellence"). Mailer also reported that some two dozen prominent women writers had refused invitations to the Congress, and noted for good measure that in many countries "there are no good women writers"—for reasons feminists themselves are fond of emphasizing. Susan Sontag similarly insisted that "literature is not an equal-opportunity employer," and Nadine Gordimer cautioned against making sex (or color, as the feminists had also suggested) a criterion among writers. In a short written statement, Cynthia Ozick of the U.S. argued that if literary standards are to be kept primary, women should neither be

excluded nor included on the basis of sex.

So empty did the feminist case seem from every angle that, as the elaborate show of grievance and the stubborn demand for greater "visibility" proceeded, one began to wonder if it were not informed by some hidden agenda. In Henry James's *The Bostonians*, a catty woman character remarks of the feminist Verena Tarrant that "the only right . . . she wanted was to climb up on top of something, where the men could look at her." Catty or not, the point about feminist narcissism seemed quite appropriate at the PEN Congress. It was as if feminism existed not to encourage specific women's contributions to literature but to enforce a blind propulsion toward some fixed ideal of Equality, to be measured solely by the presence of female forms on the dais. In its own way, moreover, the protest was an affront to individual women writers, several of whom indicated privately that they would be insulted if they sensed they were being valued in any way for their gender.

Thus, notwithstanding the opposition they encountered, the feminists succeeded in making their point, and at interminable length. It remains to be seen how PEN will deal with this kind of group pressure in years to come. The organization has already formed an ad-hoc Women's Committee, headed by Grace Paley of the U.S., in response to the feminists, and the general feeling, the *New York Times* reported ominously, was "that the protest had far-reaching implications for future PEN Congresses."

It is said that ours is not a great age of literature; a visit to the

PEN Congress helped explain why. The American novelist William Gass insisted during the conference that the politicized imagination is the enemy of literature, but for many it seems to have become its foundation. Indeed, this may account for the scabrous intensity and emotional violence of the clashes at the PEN Congress. These were not writers who happened to have a few political ideas, but writers for whom the aesthetic had been politicized and the political aestheticized, writers whose ideological commitments had become, in Bellow's phrase, their "intellectual stock in trade."

Perhaps this also helps to explain the absurdly grandiose claims made at the Congress for the power of the writer, claims beneath which one began to sense, to the contrary, a kind of literary burn-out. Kofi Awoonor of Ghana declared that the artistic imagination is so stunned by poverty in the Third World that it cannot transcend it. Guenter Grass asserted that "the imagination of the state," especially as manifested in nuclear weapons, had surpassed that of the writer, who can respond only with "hellish laughter." The black South African Sipho Sepamla vouchsafed that in his country, the battle may be better fought on the streets.

So much, then, for the pen, once considered mightier than the sword, and not only by writers. "[I]t is the duty of the artist to guard the spirit in its freedom, so that mankind shall not be prey to ignorance, to malice and to fear," reads a PEN resolution from 1933. In this sense there certainly is such a thing as a "nation of writers"; but as the New York Congress showed, it is a nation under subversive attack from within.