

pects for effective, democratic governments are severely qualified at best.

The installation of elected civilian governments in Central America is cause for hope, but not necessarily for optimism. President Cerezo's administration offers the potential of a less brutal, more just society. But in his post-election press conference he admitted that his party couldn't offer the social and economic reforms it had advocated a decade earlier "because the political situation has deteriorated since then." "We are realists," he emphasized as he outlined his hopes for dealing with the economy, reviving the courts, and reorganizing the security forces. If the new governments of Guatemala and Honduras prove no more capable than their predecessors of producing a better life for their population, the hopes for a democratic Central America could be replaced by a new cycle of repression and civil conflict.

These governments will need help from the United States in rebuilding their economies, patience in their efforts to construct a more effective and democratic political

order, and greater freedom in seeking solutions to regional problems. The national preoccupation with the deficit and the impact of Gramm-Rudman will make it difficult to maintain current levels of assistance to the region, much less to fund any new programs. Many in the administration and in Congress, who are inclined to proclaim a victory for democracy in most of Central America and focus their attention on efforts to isolate and destabilize Nicaragua, ignore the effect such policies will have on the rest of the region. This approach will reduce still further whatever chances these governments have for success. In such a case, the elections, far from being a solution to the region's problems, could become only another element in the destruction of these societies.

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Political coups at the literary congress.

LEAD ME NOT INTO PEN STATION

BY EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

If the theme of the Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State proves as fertile as we hope, [we will] be able to free ourselves perhaps from a few of the stale perspectives of modern thought in this ninth decade of the technological century.

Norman Mailer, president of the 48th International PEN Congress, in the program book.

BY THE END of the International PEN Congress, which took place in mid-January at the Essex House in New York, Norman Mailer was angry. He was shouting at women who were walking out, regretting that he had not written a more substantial speech, and annoyed that so few of the speakers on the panels had devoted any time to thinking about the congress's theme. Mailer was taking it all quite personally. As president of the American PEN Center, he had spent months helping to organize this first congress in America in 20 years, one of the largest gatherings of literary celebrities in this century—all for this. Susan Sontag, a vice president of the American PEN Center, was calling the meeting a "travesty." And none of the major media reports were inclined to disagree.

Indeed, PEN Congress memorabilia would include little more than high-minded condemnations of tyranny near

and far, and self-righteous displays of compassion. Günter Grass, the German novelist, reminded the congress, again and again, of the starving people of the world. Toni Morrison, the commercially and critically acclaimed black American writer, solemnly declared that she could not consider herself American, because the state had always had plans to keep her a slave. Rosario Murillo, a sometime poet and wife of the Nicaraguan president, accused the United States of genocide in Nicaragua. George McGovern, the former presidential candidate, declared his defeat (and Stevenson's and Mondale's) to be signs of the lack of imagination of the American people. And Derek Walcott, the Caribbean-born poet, praised the assembled writers for their courage: "There is no one here who wouldn't endure torture for the sake of truth." The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, for one, wasn't sure he could keep up with all the indignation and pride: "Is a Canadian a fitting person to speak in such company? What can Canada say to you whose wounds are fresh and bleeding?" Or as Saul Bellow's Herzog might have said, "Lead me not into PEN station."

What could have brought such a distinguished literary gathering to such a level of platitude? How could the

Congress, run by an organization devoted to writers and their liberties, have yielded so few observations of lasting literary value and so many observations of rhetorical and political excess?

Some answers were to be found in the theme of the congress, which set the intellectual premises for the meeting. An exploration of "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State," the conference proposed an opposition between the two: "The writer possesses or is possessed by an imagination, and life is generated thereby. In the final years of the 20th century, the state possesses an imagination of its own and *something* is generated thereby. It has been widely noted that governments are in important ways impervious to their citizens' control. It is suggested that these two imaginations are in conflict all over the world, and that such conflict is the most important issue facing the writer in the 1980s."

The writer's gift of imagination is thus confronted by a generalized "state" that gives rise to an ominous "something" distinct from the will and control of its citizens. That "something" takes on human form and so may be all the more threatening to writers "all over the world." Mailer's keynote address attempted the first more specific description of that peculiar imagination: "Images of future activities are projected [by the state]; historical desires which require exceptional solutions—as for instance, sending a man to the moon—are undertaken. Mental concepts of the future are formed which are not actually present to the senses—another way of saying that every state has a budget." The imagination of the state, Mailer went on to explain, is not altogether as innocent as moon landings and financial plans. It interferes, it oppresses. Mailer pointed in particular to the "neurotic giants" of the USSR and U.S.—"drunken parents" spawning terrorists.

FACED with such a "something," of course the writer was on his guard, in session after session. "Alienation and the State" questioned whether writers were alienated from the state in new ways, and whether alienation is promoted by that state. "Problems of National Identity" asked whether a writer can compete with the state or even develop a relationship to the social order. "In Opposition" went so far as to ask: "What does it mean to be in opposition, not to this or that state policy or action, but in Kierkegaard's phrase, 'to the whole of existence'?" And crucial to the task of the writer was "The Utopian Imagination." These clichéd themes might seem relatively tame, but their almost invisible presumptions about the imagination of the writer and the nature of the "state" helped lay the ground for what the congress would become.

Problems arose the minute the abstraction of the "state" was made concrete. It was clear the Soviet Union would be of very little interest. It is hardly an interesting act of imagination to claim that this particular state is "impervious to its citizens' control," or that in its dominion writers are faced with certain problems. "Why do you want to speak platitudes?" said Peter Schneider, the West German novelist, when the subject arose. Moreover, the Soviet

Union has no PEN chapter, and refused to allow its invited writers to attend, referring to an "atmosphere of hostility." The truly interesting case would be the state where alienation and opposition presumably were more subtle, and villainy less clear.

As soon as the word was out that Secretary of State George Shultz was to deliver a welcoming speech to the congress, America's role as "state" was relatively settled. For Shultz's very presence was taken as an example of the congress's theme: the mandarin of the state meeting a polis of poets. Denounced as a representative of "the most ideologically right-wing administration this country has yet seen" by E. L. Doctorow, Shultz inspired all the opposition the program so abstractly described—including hissing, demonstrative departures from the hall, and cries of angry protest.

Susan Sontag later told me she thought it was the appearance of Shultz that led to the decline of the congress by beginning it as a political event—and reinforcing the PEN board's apparent intention to turn a sober professional meeting into a publicity occasion. But Shultz was just a diversion. In fact, the "something" in question was much bigger than the secretary. The problem was not, as some suggested, that a figurehead of the state should not have been invited to address a writers' meeting. The presidents of Venezuela and Brazil have addressed PEN Congresses, as had Jack Lang, France's culture czar; the director general of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, was also speaking that week at a PEN-sponsored press conference. There was even a panel scheduled with politicians in attendance.

Moreover, one of PEN's "guests of honor" was Omar Cabezas, whose position in the Ministry of the Interior in Nicaragua not only makes him a part of the state, but gives him authority over censorship and prisons. (See "A Guerrilla and His Pen," page 29.) Another was Wang Meng, a Chinese writer who is vice chairman of the Writer's Association in China, and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in China—an official representative of the state's view of literature. So the principle of PEN's "independence" from the state was not the issue. It was, instead, that Shultz represented a particular country and a particular set of policies.

THUS, the "something" began to take shape. William Gaddis, for example, attacked American foreign policy, American defense strategy, American religious beliefs. Günter Grass went on to say: "Whoever still believes 'the American way of life' is a viable path to take has to be enough of a hypocrite to be able to ignore the slums on the periphery and the worldwide hunger." From Salman Rushdie's assertion that the United States supports the drug trade in Pakistan, to Ishmael Reed's accusation that America represses "Red English, Brown English, and Yellow English," the congress developed its own ideological core. An entire panel on "Censorship in the USA" turned up what Robert Bernstein of Random House called a "staggering, staggering list" of books in the United States that have been removed from libraries in various commu-

nities. Grass asked once, perhaps more out of provocation than conviction: "Is capitalism better than gulag communism? I don't think so."

So when Saul Bellow gave an elegant Tocquevillian portrait of the writer's alienation in the United States, all he had to do was mention America's relative success in guaranteeing rights and material welfare to be set upon for his callousness. Grass, Breyten Breytenbach, Allen Ginsberg, Nadine Gordimer, and Rushdie reminded him of America's evils, its exploitations, its South Bronx tenements, and the martyrdom of Nicaraguans. "I started out giving a historical sketch," Bellow replied, "and you are unfortunately stampeding me into political positions." He spoke of the "abandonment of a language of art" in favor of "anchorman jargon and the jargon of 50 to 60 years of radical militancy." In 1948 George Orwell wrote, "To be anti-American nowadays is to shout with the mob." Here those voices could be heard.

BUT if this jargon (and its associated set of ideas) had identified a specific state as villain, it also needed a specific state as hero: on this occasion Nicaragua served the purpose. There the imagination of the (American) state could be seen nefariously at work, strangling a revolution and pushing it into despotism. Omar Cabezas, along with Rosario Murillo of Nicaragua's first family, held court at a table in Rumpelmayers at the St. Moritz between sessions. In his public talk Cabezas presented Nicaraguan writers' demands for "our right to love . . . and create." "We too," he said, "want to be the land of opportunity." Hans Christoph Buch, the chairman of a session on national identity, took the liberty of reading out loud a petition against U.S. policy in Nicaragua, footnoting it with his own vocal support. On the final day Norman Mailer read it again, intoning each of the 149 signers' names.

As for the suspension of civil liberties and the Sandinistas' long-standing notions of Marxist-Leninist revolution on the Cuban model, as for the steady stifling of dissent and suppression of those democratic forces that helped the Sandinistas overthrow Somoza, as for the curbs on unions and repression of the Church, the forced migrations and killings of the Miskito Indians—all such matters were glossed over. "Nicaragua is so beautiful," Cabezas proclaimed, its problems so callously caused by the United States.

PEN's proclaimed "nonpolitical" pose was belied not just by the writers themselves, but by the remarkable confluence of points of view in the statesmen invited to the final session—Pierre Trudeau, George McGovern, and Bruno Kreisky. Arthur Schlesinger, chairing the session, praised McGovern for fighting overseas during World War II while Reagan was in Hollywood, and proclaimed that Kreisky, the former chancellor of Austria, must be listened to if we want peace in the Middle East. Kreisky went so far as to call for accommodation to all terrorists' demands for recognition, and said of Qaddafi: "He is a revolutionary. I am evolutionary."

And so the presumptive political lines of the congress

were drawn, again and again marking out the boundaries of what might be called the international counterculture. The volume of assumption, the absence of genuine argument, the indifference to other positions, as though only these positions were appropriate for a nonpartisan, nonpolitical congress, were stunning. Would any speaker have dared to praise Reagan as Schlesinger and Gaddis and numerous others condemned him? Would any panel speaker have openly condemned the left as consistently as its positions were praised? The congress as a whole was not simply a literary congress, or a literary congress gone political. On display were the manners of contemporary literary culture. If the congress was a "travesty," it was because it simply displayed with full force its own hidden presumptions.

YET those presumptions didn't hold sway entirely unchallenged. There was a dissenting sensibility at the congress, which attacked the ideas found even in the phrasing of the questions. It became clear from the audience's enthusiastic response to these attacks that the underlying premise of the congress was wrong. It was not possible simply to assume that there was a link between literature and left-wing political views that cast the writer as crusader against the undifferentiated powers of the state.

Amos Oz, for example, challenged the very posing of the theme, with its reference to the "state." Calling for a particularity, rather than a grandeur, of vision, he made the simplest of proclamations—that there are degrees of evil, that the writer bears responsibility for making distinctions. (See "A Writer's Guide," page 28.) When he finished there was a sustained outburst of applause, enthusiasm, and relief. Similarly when Mario Vargas Llosa resisted idealizing the writer, took the need for the state seriously, called democracy a "mediocre" system but a necessary one, and attacked, passionately, antidemocratic sensibilities in fellow Latin American writers, the sustained ovation was an expression of a public voice freed from tactful silence.

But that silence was one of the largely unremarked provocations of the congress. Even the petition against United States policy in Nicaragua, the most circulated and publicized document at the congress, could get only 149 signatures out of the 700 or so in attendance. This was unrecognized dissent, the voice of writers choosing solitude and silence over public poses, whether they agreed or not.

In the echoes of the silence could be heard how little Grass and Hans-Magnus Enzensberger and Morrison and Rushdie and Schneider and Vonnegut and Doctorow and Paley were really saying and how unconvincing they were. What they were after was a kind of gesture, a demonstration of something far different from the mundane attention to detail and circumstance that ordinarily makes for politics—or literature.

The nuances of such dissent were neglected from the start by the organizers of the program, celebrated writers from the United States and their Western colleagues, who

may have felt not a little envy of those who had suffered under true tyrannies. After all, the organizers came from precisely those countries where the state is most open to transformation, and where the role of the writer is of least significance. Meanwhile, Eastern European writers, such as Czeslaw Milosz, or Soviet émigrés, such as Vasily Aksyonov, were from countries where such questions have life-and-death significance and where the role of the writer is of immense importance. As Philip Roth once put it, here "everything goes and nothing matters" while there "nothing goes and everything matters."

The writers of the Western democracies, feeling history passing them by, seemed to have based the entire congress on an attempt to claim for themselves the themes, urgency, moral stance, and significance that their colleagues from the East have no need to strain for. In his quest for seriousness, for example, Doctorow invoked *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catch-22* as novels that have saved lives by influencing the antiwar movement.

THE RESULT was not an active engagement with the social world and the powers within it, but a metaphysical claim on historical urgency. It is perhaps the manufactured sense of exclusion, of living "unheard" in democratic culture, that causes so many of these writers to demand almost religious salvation in politics, which becomes a quest for utopian solutions. The utopian temptation of course may well be there for every writer. Utopia, which means "no place," is bound to the world of fiction. An act of imagination is almost by definition utopian; it is only in the imagination that utopia can exist.

Yet writers aren't equally susceptible to the utopian temptation. It took a Central European, Milosz, to articulate the problem both critically and clearly. Grass got up at one point during the congress, dismayed that it was necessary in a discussion of failed utopias to repeatedly mention the Soviet Union, and asked why more attention wasn't paid to the failure of capitalist utopia. Milosz pointed out that it was simply incorrect to talk about the utopian vision of capitalism: "Capitalism was a natural growth of life . . . there is a *Natura devorans* and a *Natura decorata*: a Nature that devours and a Nature devoured. This is just the opposite of utopia." Whereas the utopianism of the totalitarian governments of the East seems to create writers who are adamantly anti-utopian, the non-utopian traditions of capitalism and democracy have produced writers almost painfully vulnerable to utopian fantasy about mankind as well as about states.

When such writers take to the moral and political soapbox, as so many did at PEN, the utopian imagination comes to the fore, freed from the demands of reality. Faced with the world of the Western democracies—which are non-utopian—these native dreamers become restless, distressed. Tocqueville describes the "heterogeneous stirring crowd" of the democratic state, a "motley multitude with intellectual wants to be supplied" but lacking in traditions and common habits. This atmosphere poses a problem to the writer. Henry James complained again and

again in *The American Scene* of the "thinness" of American life. The writer may feel alienated from the democratic scene; as Bellow argued in his talk, the presence of rights and riches do not guarantee a heritage of high culture that gives a home to the serious writer. The writer may well take his convictions elsewhere.

He may take them, more specifically, to the Third World, whose citizens, like bourgeois arrivistes in the 19th century, yearn for something more than their past. In the Third World, as in Eastern Europe, history is not trivial, but urgent. For what is found in such places as Nicaragua—for the writer in particular—is the illusion that history is literally being written, that a grand experiment of the imagination is taking place with the biggest themes and biggest subjects, beside which daily life in the capitals of the West seems trivial indeed. Here—as was once believed of Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and Cambodia—is Revolution. History, People, Destiny—a state coming to be born with its own fervent imagination, with many plans for what can be made of man and society. Right now such offerings are made almost exclusively by aspiring regimes of the so-called left, though earlier in this century the appeal of Fascism was tempting for the same reason.

Unfortunately, the flights of writers' fantasies have implications. As Vargas Llosa said: "Very great writers can be totally blind in political matters and put all their prestige and imagination at the service of something which one day may destroy what they do." We do not have to look too far in the past to stumble on the false wisdom of a Gide or a Celine. In fact, if the history of political judgments by writers should teach writers anything, it is humility.

THE CONGRESS demonstrated yet again how stupid our most talented writers can be about history and politics—and how unreliable that faculty of the imagination really is for intellectual comprehension. The imagination believes so strongly in its own utopian powers to remake and reconstruct that the hard material edges of experience seem to give way before it. The novel, by nature of its artfulness, allows the imagination literal reign. Art may be a noble lie or an ignoble one—but it grants its creator no authority on the truth.

We may be thankful after the PEN Congress that our writers are not the legislators, acknowledged or unacknowledged, of the world. But they do contribute to its debased political discourse—and they do, as Shelley noted, reflect the world, even if they understand it not. After hearing the proclamations of PEN, the solemn pieties and genuflection, the staged compassion, the broad-stroked imaginings of a way station to utopia, Shelley's words have heavily ironic implications: "It is impossible," he wrote, "to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit." Perhaps he didn't actually have to listen to them speak. □

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