

6. Creativity and Commitment

By EDWARD ALBEE, author of the play *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"*

THE ALTERNATIVES available to a group posing subjects for discussion by a gathering of writers such as the forthcoming International P.E.N. Congress are simply put: keep the subjects general enough for each writer to find a spot for his personal pre-occupations; keep them specific enough to give a sense of order to the inevitable generalized oratory.

Alternative nightmares are available, of course, should the writers do the unthinkable and hew to either project set them and, to a man, deliver themselves exclusively of either generalities or particulars—hot air or nitpicking.

But writers—good ones, at any rate—are both philosopher and scientist, and it was wise of the P.E.N. planning board to include a little bit of everything.

I doubt there will be much argument over the propriety of the over-all theme of the conference—"The Writer as Independent Spirit"—unless, of course, our friends from mainland China show up. Oh, one might quarrel some over the word "independent," did not the sub-themes anchor it enough to permit as much argument over the aptness of the particulars as over the definition of the general topic.

During a trip to the Soviet Union and Poland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary a couple of years ago, I found that conversations with writers and painters and other "intellectuals"—a term, by the way, used without much embarrassment in Europe—would, quite automatically, and without direction, turn, at one point or another, to the matter of the position of the creative artist in his community—his independence, his responsibilities, the function of the artist, the nature of free expression. A young man in one of those countries, one of the many people I met outside of my planned itinerary, put the fundamental matter of our concern quite casually at the end of an informal evening: "Look," he said, "none of it will matter any more, the freedoms, the purposes, once, in a world-wide sense, the general semantics breaks down, once communication on concepts is lost."

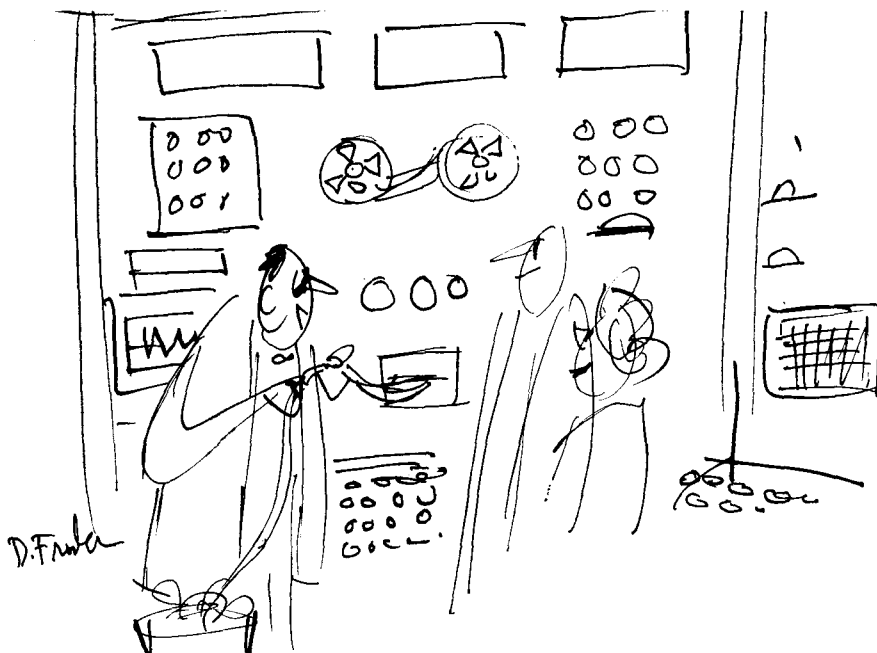
This item, naturally, should be the subject for discussion at any international gathering of writers, and doubtless it will be the concern this June, but implicitly, alas, for it is an area, one of the far too many, controlled ultimately by the finger on the button and not on the typewriter key.

What can we say, in general, of the function of the writer, his position within and outside his society, his nature?

Well, perhaps we had better examine the differences between good and bad writers. Good writers define reality; bad ones merely restate it. A good writer turns fact into truth; a bad writer will, more often than not, accomplish the opposite. A good writer writes what he believes to be true; a bad writer puts down what he believes his readers believe to be true. The good writer believes the intellectual and moral responsibility of his audience to be equal to his own; the bad writer considers the opposite posture proper. The popularity of a piece of writing will always tell you more about the state of critical letters and public taste than it will about the excellence of the work.

THESE conditions are stable, of course, have been for centuries, and no one expects them to be changed for the better. A holding action is possible, though, against public intellectual sloth, and less possible, though still conceivable, against governmental dictatorship, be it either consciously imposed as a national or international program of long-term and grandiose goal, or as a temporary expedient. But what of the various challenges to the writer as independent spirit suggested by the sub-themes to be discussed at the P.E.N. conference about to begin? Does the writer as politically committed animal do damage to "his true creative impulse"? God knows, a look to American writing of the Thirties would lead us to think it damn well can, but, at the same time, no writing, save carefully controlled escapism, can avoid such a commitment, however implicit or filtered it may be. Are creative writers making society rather than man himself their subject, leaning too heavily on the social sciences and psychology? Can we make use of facts—the ingredients of truth—without becoming their servants? Will Marshall McLuhan explain the new "theory of communication" and "the writer in the electronic age" so that I (at least) will finally be able to sense the subject through all the electrical discharge?

And, most interestingly of all, will the discussion of these subjects and the larger and smaller matters they relate to interest anyone other than writers? While it is true that the good writer creates his audience, and the bad writer creates himself out of the whole cloth of his view of himself as perpetrator of the intellectual status quo, creativity cannot breathe in a total vacuum. If the matters we are to discuss are of no interest to those about whom we write—for whom we take the trouble, if you will permit—then we'd better have another conference right quick, to find out whether or not our spirit has become independent of everything.



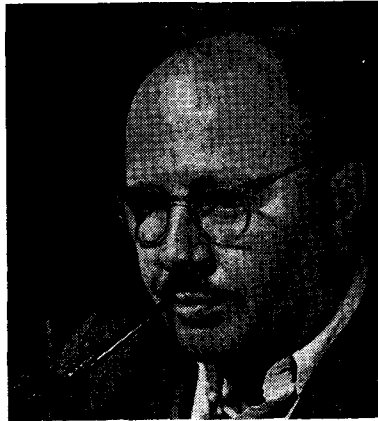
"The 'Singing Lady' was Irene Wicker . . . Little Orphan Annie's announcer was Pierre André . . . Jack Benny's first sponsor was Canada Dry . . ."

U. S. Authors at P. E. N. Conference



—Pix.

John Steinbeck



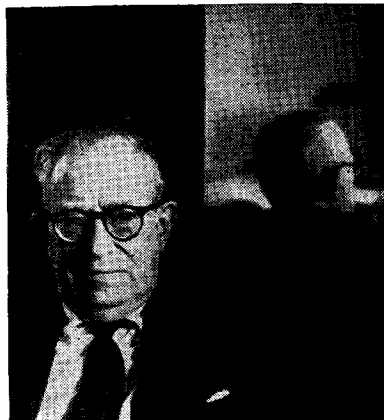
—Karger (Pix).

William Shirer



—Martin Schiman (Pix).

Arthur Miller



—Stefan Congrat-Butlar.

John Farrar



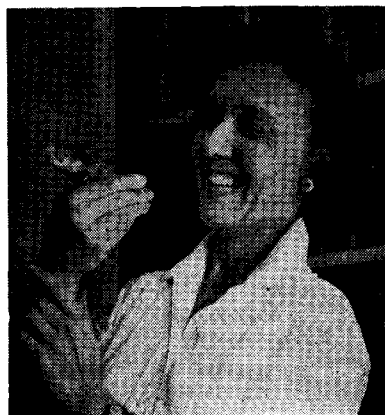
—Truman Moore (Pix).

Saul Bellow

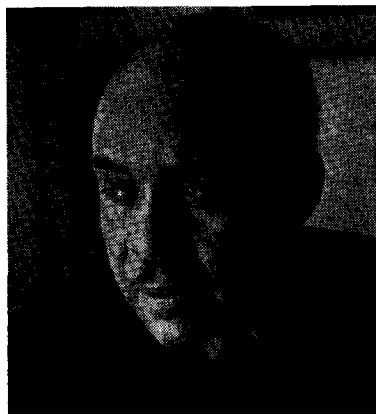


—Camera Press (Pix).

Norman Mailer



Joy Chute



Ralph Ellison



—Blackstone.

Barbara Tuchman

7. Events Leading up to the Banquet

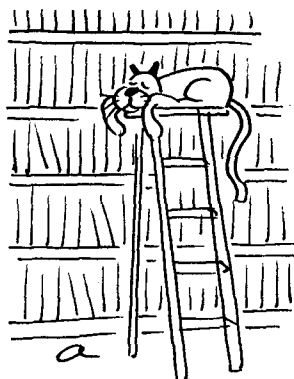
By DAVID DEMPSEY

ON FRIDAY, June 17, some 350 writers from more than forty foreign countries will sit down with about half that many American authors at the closing banquet of the Thirty-fourth International P.E.N. Congress. The banquet will culminate five days of working sessions at New York University.

Organizing the Congress is an achievement in logistics for the P.E.N. American Center as well as a vote of confidence from the numerous sources financing the Congress. Drafting a program, housing and planning the entertainment of the delegates—to say nothing of raising the necessary \$200,000 for these purposes—began last summer when the American Center president, Lewis Galantière, was given a budget, a small staff, and, thanks to the generosity of the Institute of International Education, expert and clerical assistance along with an office that fittingly overlooks United Nations Plaza. The week of almost uninterrupted activity will wind up with an “unforgettable” banquet at the Plaza Hotel for, altogether, 600 guests. The site of the Congress will be the magnificently equipped Loeb Student Center of New York University on Washington Square, and most foreign delegates will be housed in two NYU residence halls.

The American membership is picking up the \$12,000 tab for the banquet. More than fifty publishers, headed by Harcourt, Brace & World, *The Read-*

er's Digest, McGraw-Hill, E. P. Dutton, Book-of-the-Month Club, Time-Life Books, and Harper & Row, have contributed from \$2,000 down to \$25 each towards the general hospitality program. The Xerox Corp., with \$4,000, made the largest contribution received from industry. A score of family foundations and a good number of public-spirited citizens added their thousands to the kitty. The big money came from the Ford Foundation (\$75,000), Rockefeller Brothers Fund (\$25,000), the JDR 3rd Fund (\$20,000)—and, very satisfactorily, the National Council on the Arts (\$40,000). The Congress brochure and official



program were designed gratis by the Book-of-the-Month Club's Oscar Ogg, and the printing was a “contribution in kind” offered by the H. Wolff Book Manufacturing Co. The cup runneth over.

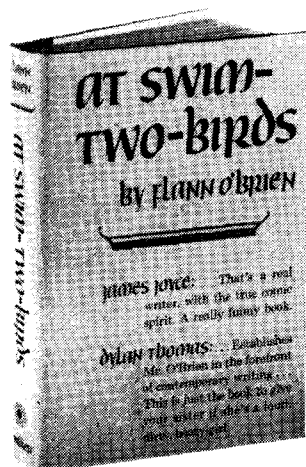
How did it come about that a writers' association with no resources beyond its annual dues—less than \$9,000 from up-

wards of 800 members—undertook so formidable a task? Out of plain embarrassment, the American P.E.N. directors say. In 1924 American P.E.N. was host at a modest “international writers' convention” with guests from fifteen foreign lands. For more than forty years thereafter the Americans were the guests at thirty congresses and thirty interim seminars in London, Paris, Vienna, Venice, Zurich, Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Oslo, Dubrovnik, Stockholm, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, Avignon. . . . It was scandalous, they thought, that this rich nation, this important center of letters and the arts, should always be on the receiving end. Taking courage in their hands, and without a penny in the till, they invited seventy-six Centers in fifty-six countries to send delegations to New York. That was in June 1964. Now, two years later, their gamble has paid off.

As the president of American P.E.N. remarked, “P.E.N. is unique. Every country has its authors' league, its writers' union, its society of men and women of letters. Those national organizations are, quite properly, a species of trade union, chiefly concerned with the protection of the writer as worker, with royalties, copyright, subsidiary rights, though of course with censorship, too, and with the promotion of public interest in reading and general cultivation of the mind. But they have no reciprocal relations. They are not banded together in a global organization able to speak for what Voltaire called the Republic of Letters. P.E.N. (incidentally, an affiliate of UNESCO) alone fills that role.

“P.E.N.'s centers,” Mr. Galantière noted, “have no official character; their delegates do not represent their countries, but rather their literary communities. For instance, there are two in Belgium, one of ‘French expression’ the other of ‘Flemish expression,’ each with its P.E.N. Center. There are four Centers in multilingual Yugoslavia and Switzerland. There is one universal center, the Yiddish Center; another international center, composed of East-Central Europeans, is the Writers-in-Exile Center. This purely literary, nonpolitical and non-ideological character explains the presence of centers in eight Communist states, seven in Europe and the eighth in Cuba.”

Like their counterparts from Western Europe, writers from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Rumania are not coming over solely to talk about literary matters. A good many will make the trip because (a) they have never been to New York, (b) they will have a chance to visit their American publishers, (c) a charter flight from Paris and London is an extraordinary bargain, (d) writers are just as gregarious as other people, and (e) in some cases the Justice Department has decided to let them in, as pro-



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