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THE INTERNATIONAL P.E.N. CONGRESS AND THE LITERARY VOCATION TODAY

*Society and
the writer*

By Paul Goodman

(CIA)

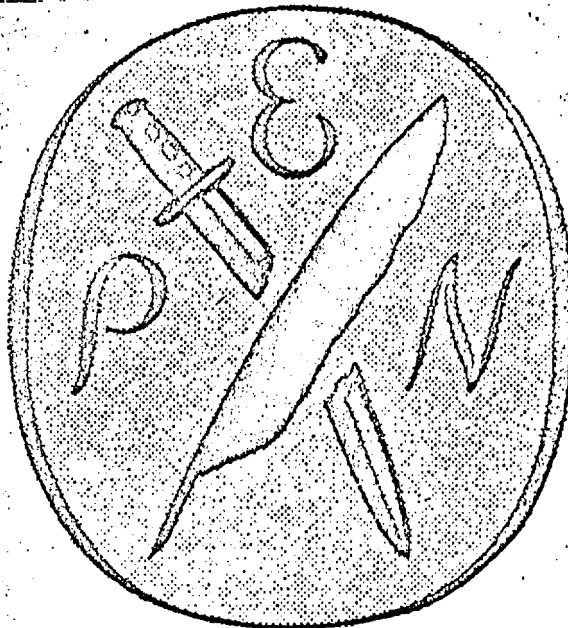
P.E.N. is concerned with the threat to literature by new technological and social conditions. Are there essential changes in the function of writing, in the subjects written, in the audience and a writer's relation to the audience?

Let me say right off that, as a writer, I have never felt myself different from the worthies of the past in Europe, Asia, or America. I think I know what they were up to, and I have felt them to be my present colleagues and confidants, though alas mostly dead. Long ago Longinus advised us to "write it for Homer, for Demosthenes," and, even when I am writing a kind of journalism, I still write it for Sophocles, Seami, Milton or Goethe, or Lao-tze and Kant. (They tend to say, "Not bad for a kid in a tough period.")

Is this perverse, gripped in the dead hand of a literary tradition? I have no doubt that such a literary attitude developed in particular ancient historical conditions; but I think that its persistence and development indicate that it has been the invention-and-discovery of something permanently human, just as disinterested science, political freedom, Hippocratic ethics, bearing witness, and romantic love have all arisen in particular historical conditions but are now our human glory and burden.

Speaking—as infants pick it up and remarkably intuit the syntax (we don't know how)—is a special way of being in the world. It is certainly more than an "instrument for communication and expression," as many contemporary anthropologists and linguists call it. As a structure of symbols, speech opens options and a field for reflection and play. It defines and actualizes the self rather than merely expressing it. It does not merely communicate but creates community and acts in it by its very act. Its vocabulary and syntax constitute world-views that prejudge reality.

The process of making literature magnifies and consolidates speaking as a mode of existing. It has tradition and draws on personal memory: it channels observation by continual formulation. It makes a reconstructed world whose causes are autonomous devices of metaphor, dramatic plot, chains of verbal reasoning. It maintains itself consistently through long works by a literary beginning, middle, and end. Yet this peculiar process has always been thought to give a unique kind of evidence about reality, and philosophers and historians quote the sayings and style of the ancients with an authority to a mysterious



*I*N recent years the annual International P.E.N. Congress has grown in interest and significance as a forum for writers from all parts of our rapidly contracting world. Because the XXXIVth Congress, which begins today in New York, promises to be particularly valuable, Book Week has asked two prominent writers—one American, the other Irish—to discuss the major topics that will focus the general theme of the congress: "The Writer as Independent Spirit." Paul Goodman, one of our leading social critics and an independent humanist of many years' standing, addresses himself mainly to the three topics that inquire into the impact of the social sciences, the mass society, and the "electronic age," respectively, upon the images of man that literature has traditionally expressed and upon the literary vocation itself. Conor Cruise O'Brien, who was the United Nations representative in Katanga and vice-chancellor of the University of Ghana before becoming professor of humanities at New York University last year, was asked to write on the fourth topic: "The Writer as Public Figure." Noting the prevalence today among writers of "public commitment . . . both to simple humanitarianism and to rigorous ideology," the framers of the topic ask whether "the donning by the writer of a public persona tempts him to live up to that role in disregard of his true creative impulse. A collateral question is: Do we read the classics because their authors took a stand in a contemporary conflict, or rather because they illuminated the spirit of man?" In expanded form, Mr. O'Brien's essay was recently given as the Homer Watt Lecture at N.Y.U.