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The *Nation* and its Writers

RICHARD BROOKHISER

The American Writers Congress, which met at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City a few months ago, was a bit of a bust, to judge from the coverage. The list of writers who did not show was glittering, and included Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer, America's entire Nobel Prize contingent. The size of the crowd that gathered—3,000—wrinkled some noses. "It seems reasonable to assume," conceded *Newsweek*, "that the majority of what this congress calls delegates have yet to publish a book." The Congress's agenda was inchoate. Here, a "Workshop on Contracts, Taxes and Insurance." There, a panel, "How Can Gay and Lesbian Writers Get Taken Seriously?" Finally, there was the outright flakiness: Gloria Steinem being accused, by a member of the audience, of working for the CIA.

The chief instigator and cheerleader of the Congress was the *Nation*, which devoted an entire issue to the affair ("The Writer's State" was the rather ominous title on the cover). The *Nation* is one of the oldest magazines in America; it certainly has a remarkable list of past contributors, though it has functioned, for many decades now, chiefly as an entrepôt on the borders of the sun-scorched deserts and dengue-ridden swamps of political radicalism, stocking the wares of First Amendment worshippers, Second Amendment haters, Gloria Steinem fans oblivious of her CIA potential, anti-anti-Communists, and occasionally just plain Communists. The socialist Michael Manley, for instance, contributed a whitewash of his friend Fidel Castro to a recent issue. It is a proudly gritty publication. But what it lacks in glitter, it makes up in sheer aggressive persistence.

What, according to the *Nation*, do writers want? First, advice on the technological and legal ramifications of their craft, and so "The Writer's State" offers a (non-partisan) catalogue of data banks, videotext, and other gadgets of the future, along with (very partisan) analysis of local

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censorship, access to government information, and prior restraint. Joel Gora, author of the latter piece, takes what may be called the absolutist position: once it's in print, it's sacred. He is exercised by government moves against Philip Agee, the renegade CIA agent who now lives mostly in West Germany, with occasional side-trips to Havana and Moscow, and whose publications have blown the covers of numerous agents, in one case with fatal results. Though spooks-turned-authors were prominently featured at the Congress, Agee prudently declined to appear in person, phoning in his greetings.

Writers also want more money from Washington. A curious desire, given the suspicion with which Washington's activities are generally viewed by *Nation* contributors. Ronald Sukenick tries to get out of the dilemma by insisting that "the last thing we want public funding to do is impose literary standards." What the government should do instead "is provide the opportunity for writers, editors and critics to argue out those criteria in a context that will allow some practical consequence." Sukenick does not specify that public checks should go only to "writers, editors and critics" he likes, but in the very next article Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers provide a disapproving survey of the kinds of writers to whom private checks are now going. These writers turn out to be capitalist types, abominations like Irving Kristol or Yale economics professor Paul MacAvoy. No one plots the vectors, but together the two pieces seem to suggest that as public spending pre-empts private spending, Kristols will (and, in the *Nation's* opinion, should) give way to Sukenicks.

There is an opposition in the writer's state, or at least minority factions. William McPherson, a former editor of the *Washington Post* Book World, cousels everyone to ease off on the politicking.

> *Talk is pleasant, but the real work is done in that lonely place where the mind directs the words to the page, and where the mysterious, inscrutable imagination still lives.*

McPherson begins his piece with the announcement that "writers are a notoriously whiny bunch"—a bold man indeed. Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, even more boldly, attacks liars and ideologues, including former "peaceniks" who refused to sign petitions criticizing the conduct of the victorious North Vietnamese, though she does retrieve herself a bit at the end by administering a few kidney punches to "neoconservatives." And Allen Ginsberg contributes a poem which, being incoherent, is at least inoffensive.

The most startling retrieval, however, comes at the end of the issue, in the article, "Solidarity—Ever?", whose authors, Margot Cohen and David Lindorff, hold up as a model for writers' organizations the American Writers Congresses of the thirties. These, of course, were Communist fronts. Cohen and Lindorff do not deny it: "The importance of

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the Communist Party in the organizing drives among writers in this period can scarcely be overstated." They do fudge the Party's role in a later get-together, the infamous 1949 Waldorf conference. Here is the *Nation's* account: "In 1949, a group called the National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, to which many writers belonged, sponsored a three-day conference on world peace at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City." In fact, the Waldorf conference drew a substantial crowd of writers—including, for instance, Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.—to a protest at Freedom House to oppose the conference itself, a Soviet-run dog and pony show presided over by the wretched Shostakovich. Cohen and Lindorff slap the Party's wrist—"the Party manipulated writers' organizing efforts for its own ends, often in ways that were harmful to individual writers"—but on balance, they give it backhanded praise, the way kindergarten teachers award E's for Effort: "it is not accurate to write off the Party's role as totally negative."

I do not know what is most savory in their long article, though my personal favorite is the passage about "individual writers"—as though the literary mafia of the thirties only occasionally trod on someone's toes, and did not encourage wholesale intellectual and aesthetic suicide. The backstabbing, the party-lining, the sheer *prostitution*—it is all forgotten. No mention, in the *Nation*, of Granville Hicks dismissing the reactionary Proust: "I feel within myself a definite resistance, a counter-emotion, so to speak, that makes a unified aesthetic experience impossible." Of Donald Morrow, stuffing Shakespeare into the corset of the dialectic: "When all is said of Shakespeare, the fact remains that in expressing [his] class he belonged with the movement forward." Of Michael Gold, editor of the *New Masses*, telling the first Writers Congress in 1935 that writers should think of themselves as "artists in uniform." Sure enough, David Lindorff is a member of the Organizing Committee for a National Writers Union—a resolution in support of which was passed on the last day at the Roosevelt.

I will be grateful to anyone who refrains from accusing me of McCarthyism. "The Writer's State"—and the writer's state it envisions—is by no means a Communist operation. The appeal of the Soviet Union, for one thing, is quite gone, at least on the surface—with only an occasional Agee here and there. The *Nation* is simply as left as it is possible to be and still look yourself in the mirror. This does not enjoin it from using tactics the Communists once used, especially if, from a Machiavellian perspective, the tactics are good.

Writers will always be a prime target for such manipulation. Writing is unusual work, and the market for it is capricious. This is an eternal problem, as insoluble as "Why do husbands watch Bowl Games?" or "Why does God let puppies die?" There are, in addition, enough transient problems—data banks? videotexts? libel laws?—to make a Writers Union seem like a plausible and useful entity. A year from now, the freak show at the Roosevelt will have been forgotten, and only a noxious organization with an innocuous name will remain. In this sense, the Congress may not have been a complete failure.

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