Bad Manners & Bad Faith

MARIA MARGARONIS AND ELIZABETH POCHODA

Political protests are by nature ephemeral, but they can sometimes expose the mechanisms of power and set the mechanisms of resistance into motion. If there is a reason to recount what Salman Rushdie called the matter of "the politician whose name begins with Sh" at the 48th International PEN Congress, it is that the episode cut straight to the heart of the congress's baffling theme, "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State." For in the mist of that lofty topic lies a painfully concrete question: What is a writer's—or anyone's—proper relation to power, to its seductions, to the accommodations it demands, to the responsibilities it carries? At the risk of boring those who would rather read about the bons mots of the famous, not to mention the risk of further nourishing Norman Mailer's celebrated nercissism, we offer, in the spirit of a parable, an account of l'affaire Sh and all that came after.

This story of bad manners and bad faith. The former, still in need of definition, are hardly unexpected at a gathering as heated as last week's congress. As to the latter, it would seem to be something writers live to resist, and yet, as we shall see, they do not always do so. The story's beginning lies at some undisclosed date in the past when John Kenneth Galbraith and Norman Mailer agreed to invite Secretary of State George Shultz to address the opening session of the PEN congress at the New York Public Library. This Mailer did in his capacity as American PEN's president, without consulting its executive board. The general membership, which receives regular mailings from PEN, was not informed of the invitation, or of other matters which were to prove equally controversial. Most foreign participants learned that they would be addressed by the Secretary of State only upon arriving in New York for the meetings. There was, to put it mildly, dissatisfaction in the air.

The main objections to Shultz's presence as a keynote speaker were these: First, he is a representative and architect of abhorrent policies, with which many of the guests have had direct experience. Second, many PEN members felt deep unease that their organization had ceded its place of honor to any representative of the state. Mailer's decision seemed to commit them willy-nilly to an acceptance of, even deference to, the state's authority. For as Gunter Grass later pointed out when Gay Talese charged him with a foolish reluctance to know the enemy, Shultz's appearance offered no such opportunity, since the form of the ceremony allowed neither questions nor answers. Rushdie completed this argument at another point when he observed that to hear a politician is not to know him—he politicians are revealed not through their words but by their deeds.

Several writers and editors expressed their opposition in the mildest possible way: they signed a hastily composed letter to Shultz (see box), which was to be presented and read aloud before or after his speech. But despite the efforts of three past presidents of American PEN, Richard Gilman, Richard Howard and Galway Kinnell, who sent the letter to Mailer while he was closeted with Shultz, the statement was not read aloud. In his opening remarks, Mailer referred prettily to a "division d'opinion" among those present and went on to placate the disgruntled by assuring them that the Secretary of State's enlightened views on the McCarran-Walter Act would surprise them (as if that was the only issue at hand). The speeches rolled on, delivered through a loud and echoing public address system and punctuated by demands from the floor that the letter be read. The once unruly Mailer stuck like a schoolboy to formal procedure, studiously ignoring protests from his constituents.

Mailer's overbearing and authoritarian manner (now more Oxonian than in the days of his Southern sheriff impersonations) was consistent with the general tenor of the proceedings, both inside and outside the library. For all but a privileged few, admission to the congress through the library's 42nd Street entrance had been an exercise in humiliation. Instead of being welcomed by their hosts at PEN, guests were met by bullying guards who blocked the doors and admitted a trickle of journalists and whomever "guests of honor" could push their way to the front. The frail, the patient and the miscellaneous jostled one another precariously on the steep library steps. As the light faded and the speeches began, several guests—both distinguished and not, to use PEN's designations—were still out in the cold. In the words of one battered supplicant, "This is what happens when you invite the state."

In the hushed interior of the reading room, the guards' lack of politesse gave way to the rigors of politeness. Like children in their scratchy Sunday best, the writers were out of place in their own home, masking their customary fractiousness to put on a show for an important visitor. From his elevated position on the podium, Mailer managed to corrupt the notion of bad manners and present himself as the embodiment of decorum. Grace Paley stood up in an interval between speeches and called out: "Norman, we would like to have our letter read. Norman, please read the letter." Other voices joined hers. But Mailer acknowledged no one save his new peers on the platform, and then apologized to Shultz for the "silly bad manners" of the "puritanical leftists" in the audience.

Let us pause for a moment to consider these bad manners, if that is what they were. In a decorous and austere setting like this one, bad manners take the kind of courage Mailer used to have—the courage to misbehave in public rather than manipulate in private. It doesn't take courage to shut out your opposition from a podium with the aid of a microphone. What takes courage is to speak truth to power when no one will listen, to shout if necessary, even at the risk of seeming lunatic and rude. It can be, as they say, a radicalizing experience, but it's not a lot of fun. In complimenting Paley on her efforts, someone later remarked that she must be inured by now to the embarrassment of making scenes. "No," she replied, "it's terrible. It feels terrible every time." By contrast, hiding behind politeness is a luxury of power. It was Mailer who betrayed a fat and fateful rudeness by preferring to please the august while turning his back on those he had offended.

Mailer has since shown a little ambiv-
The Nation.

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Alence about his behavior that evening, but at the press conference immediately following, his adrenaline was still running high. He said he was "baffled by the disturbance," and that he didn't hear the protests from the floor. But if he didn't hear the protests, why did he also say he was sorry he didn't realize it was Grace Paley who was asking to be heard? (Future PEN congresses will be left to debate the meaty question of why one should only regret ignoring the famous.) He even managed a sentimental reminiscence about holding hands with Grace at the march on Washington in 1968 (cf. Armies of the Night, Mailer's finer hour). As a parting shot from the old crowd-pleaser, misogynist phase, Mailer remarked that he might not have read the letter anyway because he "didn't invite Secretary Shultz here in order to be insulted, to be, uh, pussywhipped." Now there's something he'd never have said in front of the secretary. Which brings us to the question of bad faith.

Once he had handcuffed himself to Shultz, Mailer was obliged to equivocate, for he had either to silence the writers to whom he was responsible or betray the state occasion he had arranged. He was thus bound to his bad faith, whose first manifestation was a panicky and predictable effort to hijack the idea of free speech. The protest he characterized as an attack on open debate was mild to the point of finkiness; the letter did not call for a boycott of Shultz's talk (it was too late for that in any case) or ask that the invitation be rescinded (it was also too late for that). The signatories simply demanded a hearing for their view that the Secretary of State should not wave his scepter over the opening rites of the PEN conference. So it was sly and manipulative of Mailer to appropriate the banner of free speech for the purpose of saving face. In this he revealed an uncanny resemblance to Shultz, whose descant on freedom ended as a thirty-second jingle for the Reagan Administration.

It is unsettling to think that Mailer was willing to silence writers so that they could bask in the reflected power of the state. But then that is the nature of constructive engagement, which always involves bad faith. Two more examples: While Mailer offered up the Secretary's presence to the congress as an honor pure and simple, he later said that he was delighted at Shultz's acceptance because it "would give our organization credibility with the media." And backed into a corner later that week, he stuck in his thumb and pulled out this plum: Shultz's "astonishingly liberal" speech, he said, "gave us some interesting sentiments that PEN can use for the next ten or twenty years."

That may not be as absurd as it sounds, for Shultz's appointment as the conference's figurehead was not the only symptom of enchantment with the state—particularly the American state. The atmosphere of celebrity, the chandeliers, the cameras, the microphones, the tape recorders lapping up every word—what was all this if not a flirtation with pomp and circumstance, White House-style? Perhaps that is why you had to be famous to be heard; why the panels and readings were overloaded with white male stars; why market value determined literary value and pushed novelists forward at poets' expense; and why the political and cultural discussions were dominated by American concerns. Even the appointed theme seemed to encourage sanctimony and self-congratulation: invoking the idea of the Secretary of State George Shultz

Dear Sir,

As you are probably aware, a number of writers and editors here feel that it is inappropriate for you to open the 48th International PEN Congress. The Administration you represent has done nothing to further freedom of expression, either at home or abroad. As E.L. Doctorow has pointed out in The New York Times and in The Nation, your Administration supports governments that silence, imprison, even torture their citizens for their beliefs. Under your leadership, the State Department has, in the past, excluded many writers from the United States using the McCarran-Walter Act.

PEN has traditionally protected the writer's independence from the state. For this reason, it is particularly distressing that a congress whose theme is "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State" should begin by compromising that independence.

Susan Sontag
(vice president, PEN)

Nadine Gordimer
(vice president, International PEN)

Galway Kinnell
(past president, PEN)

Richard Howard
(past president, PEN)

Richard Gilman
(past president, PEN)

Anne Bernays
(PEN New England)

Justin Kaplan
(PEN New England)

Grace Paley

Russell Banks

E.L. Doctorow

C.K. Williams

Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Eric Bentley

Ted Solotaroff

Grace Shulman

Pete Hamill

Amy Clampitt

Richard Sennett

Elizabeth Hardwick

Jean Strouse

William Matthews

John Irving

Sharon Olds

Elisabeth Sifton

Nora Ephron

Alfred Corn

Nat Hentoff

Norman Rush

Katha Pollitt

Judith Rossner

Maxine Kumin

Aaron Asher

Nicholas Christopher

Judith Thurman

Ben Sonnenberg

Victor Navasky

J.D. McClatchy

Gail Sheehy

Mary Gordon

Mary Morris

Gregory Rabassa

Quincy Troupe

Robert Coover

Elizabeth Pochoda

Jamaica Kincaid

Stanley Kauffmann

Anthony Heilbut

Harvey Shapiro

Edward Said

National Writers' Union

Maureen Quilligan

André Schiffrin

Luisa Valenzuela

Philip Pochoda

Margo Jefferson

Louise Meriwether

Kenneth Koch

Charles Simic

Michael Malone

Maria Margaronis

Elizabeth Swados

Andrew Kopkind

Margo Howard

Erika Munk

Michael Stephens

D.D. Guttenplan

These signatures were collected in a period of twenty-four hours before the congress began. The names of those who signed the letter on the library steps and afterward are far too numerous to include here.
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state gives writers a dark background against which to shine.

Not everyone was insensitive to the contradictions, and it took a certain courage for those uncomfortable with the melodrama of the artist’s higher calling to press on anyway. Throughout the conference a number of writers addressed the twin dangers of splendid isolation and cozying up to power. Resisting the seductions of disengagement, George Konrád said, “I have not become alienated from the state—we were never one in body and soul,” and Grass challenged the literary imagination to come up with a deeper response than “hellish laughter.” Nadine Gordimer began by asking, How do the writer and the state get on? and answered with a modest reminder:

Where the state says it welcomes and encourages assaults by the imagination on the state’s projection, it invites the poet to dine at the state house and at the same time shores up, if not the law, then something invoked as the traditional morality of the nation.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger spoke of the dangerous effect of empire on the imagination:

If we identify too much with the glory and the power of our own time, the price we pay is high. It is particularly high if we happen to be writers and if our time happens to be imperial.

In the end, though, all the eloquence of the world’s most famous writers could not have broken the spell of hierarchical formality that bound the congress. For that, the rules had to be violated. And on the penultimate day of a week that had begun with a spark of trouble, good bad manners finally drove out bad good ones. Outraged by the fact that only about seventeen of the 120 panelists were female, a group of women occupied the main conference room and, with participatory enthusiasm and a lot of noise, drafted a statement challenging the congress’s clubbiness and sexism. Once bitten, twice shy. A PEN spokeswoman readily agreed to give the women twenty minutes at the closing session to express their grievance and demand an explanation.

When power is challenged, it often finds unexpected ways of reasserting itself—in this case, the subtle savageries of charm, naughtiness and going by the book. Mailer tried out each of these on the following day and then, like a dowager who’s afraid she’s given a crummy party, turned sour and imperious. Bad
faith made a new appearance as he tried to turn the issue of sexism into a question of excellence: the rallying cry on the platform was "Literature is not an equal opportunity employer," as if anyone had argued for mediocrity. Perhaps because Mailer's foolishness was apparent even to him (or because this time he had no back-up group from the State Department), he began to insult, to sneer, to invite ridicule—to become, in short, a caricature of his old self. But all was not psychodrama, and as Mailer lost control the meeting briefly broke up into a satisfying plurality of voices. Several speakers from the floor salvaged the spirit of protest and spoke eloquently on behalf of the kind of imagination that is not imperial, magisterial or plain bloody-minded. Here was a tiny glimpse of what the conference might have been like if it had, from the start, imagined itself democratic.

This story is not a simple allegory of the pure and the impure; instead of a moral, it has a meaning. At the 48th International PEN Congress, writers heard the siren call of the American state and (mostly) resisted its seduction. When the trade winds blew from Reagan's Washington, they were answered by gusts of opposition. Perhaps, in the future, it will be that much harder for the Administration to invade new tracts of the moral terrain. And perhaps some writers, at least, will be encouraged to accept Salman Rushdie's definition of alienation: a sense of identity different from the state's that makes possible new collective groupings—oppositional communities of the imagination.

A Hole in History

JOHN STEVENSON


World War II's immediate aftermath is virtually terra incognita in American consciousness. Our histories pass quickly over the years 1945-50, and move abruptly from the hot war to the cold. The Janus face of postwar expectations, as well as the emergence of the grim countenance of cold war America, remain obscure. Perhaps nothing better illuminates this missing link of history than the atomic bomb, which ended the hot war and came to dominate the cold. Certainly it seems to be so on the evidence presented here, in lively and accessible form, by Paul Boyer.

When Time named Truman its 1945 Man of the Year, its cover was dominated not by the President but by the Bomb. In the same year Life pictured a "36-hour war," with nuclear missiles from an unnamed enemy devastating thirteen major U.S. cities. Early in 1946 Ladies' Home Journal told readers that preventing atomic war was "the thought you should wake up to, go to sleep with and carry with you all day." Among the best sellers of this period were One World or None, an anthology put out by the Federation of American (formerly Atomic) Scientists, and Norman Cousins's Modern Man is Obsolete; both books advocated world government as an answer to the atomic threat. In June 1947, though, a New Jersey high school principal prevented the valedictorian from giving a speech on the international control of atomic energy because he found the topic too controversial, and within a couple of years the wartime head of national scientific research, Vannevar Bush, was "assess[ing] the bomb more objectively," pooh-poohing atomic fears. David Lilienthal (former head of the Tennessee Valley Authority and now chair of the Atomic Energy Commission) had begun encouraging positive thinking about "this new critter, the Atom," while General Electric (a major contractor for nuclear power development) distributed the comic Dagwood Splits the Atom and the Federal government sponsored a manual advising citizens on How to Survive an Atomic Bomb.

These are the sorts of examples Boyer uses to good effect. He also includes some remarkable photographs (my favorite shows one Vice Admiral Blandy and his wife celebrating the 1946 atomic tests at Bikini by cutting a large cake shaped to represent a nuclear explosion). But, lest the impression be given that this is a
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