Over six hundred writers from some forty countries gathered in New York this past January for the 48th International PEN Congress. PEN was founded in London in 1921 by Mrs. C. A. Dawson Scott, a Cornish novelist and poet, and John Galsworthy. It is now a worldwide organization of writers—“poets, playwrights, essayists, editors, novelists,” as its letterhead explains—which currently maintains eighty-odd centers in some fifty countries. American PEN, founded in 1922, is a branch—by far the largest branch—of the international organization, with a membership of about two thousand writers. This was the fourth International Congress that American PEN had hosted, the last taking place twenty years ago, in 1966.

American PEN sponsors various prizes and awards, operates a fund to provide emergency assistance to writers in straitened circumstances, and helps to introduce foreign writers to the American audience. But, like the organization as a whole, American PEN fancies itself a “dynamic moral force on a global level.” Its raison d’être is to monitor censorship and what it regards as other curbs on freedom of expression, and to organize protests against governmental harassment of writers around the world. The main instrument of these good works is the PEN Freedom to Write programs; and PEN is justly proud that its appeals on behalf of imprisoned writers have in some cases helped win their release.

Such essentially political concerns will naturally play a part in all PEN activities; but its International Congresses are also intended to be literary affairs, to provide forums for writers to come together and discuss their work and matters of literary concern. Indeed, a press release cheerfully speculated that the present Congress promised to be “one of the greatest literary events of all time.” As it turned out, however, the focus of interest was not on the few truly literary sessions at the Congress; still less was it on the ten or so poetry and fiction readings that were scheduled throughout the week. On the contrary, the real focus of interest for the participants was on the series of highly publicized panel discussions that explored the general theme of the Congress. According to a press announcement,
each International PEN Congress is “organized around a theme which addresses a pressing moral and artistic issue.” The “pressing moral and artistic issue” to be addressed at the 1986 Congress was “The Writer’s Imagination and the Imagination of the State.” A statement of the theme was composed jointly by the novelist and short-story writer Donald Barthelme and the poet and translator Richard Howard. “The writer possesses or is possessed by imagination,” their portentous statement reads, in part, “and life is generated by this imagination. In the final years of the Twentieth Century, the State possesses an imagination of its own; and something is generated thereby .... We suggest that these two imaginations are in radical conflict all over the world, and that such conflict is the most important issue facing the writer in the 1980s.”

To what extent this statement can be construed as identifying “the most important issue facing writers in the 1980s” is a question worth pondering; one might be forgiven for thinking that the most important issue facing writers, considered as writers, would have something to do with writing. And it is also worth pausing over the suggestion that the writer’s imagination is in “radical conflict” with the imagination of the state “all over the world.” Is this supposed conflict as “radical” in New York or Paris as it is, say, in Warsaw or Prague or Moscow? The generalization expressed in Messrs. Barthelme and Howard’s statement assumes as much, implying as it does a kind of moral equivalence among states “all over the world.” But Norman Mailer, president of American PEN and chief fundraiser for the Congress, heartily endorsed the theme in his pre-Congress statements and interviews; and his fellow PEN officers approved enough of the theme to devote the General Literary Sessions of the Congress to topics like “How Does the State Imagine?” “Alienation and the State,” “Problems of National Identity,” and “The Statesman’s View of the Imagination of the State.” At the 48th International PEN Congress, it seemed clear, the term “literary” was to be understood with a certain poetic license: what it really meant was something much closer to what we usually mean by the word “political.”

The over three hundred foreign delegates and fifty or so guests of honor (whose expenses were paid by PEN) began registering at the Congress headquarters at the St. Moritz hotel on Central Park South on Saturday, January n. The “Special Literary Sessions,” which included panels on translation, problems of the theater, literary criticism, and censorship in the United States, all took place in the St. Moritz; the more popular General Literary Sessions took place down the block in a ballroom at the Essex House hotel. I had planned to skip the opening ceremony, held Sunday evening at the New York Public Library, and begin my tour of the Congress on Monday the 13th, when the regular sessions were scheduled to begin. But an angry Op-Ed piece by the novelist E.L. Doctorow that appeared in The New York Times on Saturday changed my mind.

Mr. Doctorow was upset that Secretary of State George P. Shultz had been invited to speak at the opening ceremony. Mr. Doctorow was grieved at the State Department’s use of the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 to deny visas to certain writers wishing to enter the
United States and at the Reagan administration’s policies concerning Nicaragua and South Africa. More generally, he felt that a politician had no place at a writers’ congress, especially in the United States. In his view, by inviting Secretary Shultz to make some opening remarks, American PEN “put itself in the position of a bunch of writers’ union hacks in Eastern Europe who have gathered for a pat on the head by the minister of culture.”

Mr. Doctorow may have had certain reservations about the theme of the Congress as expressed by Messrs. Barthelme and Howard. But what we see in his invocation of Eastern European writers' unions here is the assumption of precisely the kind of moral equivalence between East and West that stands behind the organizing theme of the Congress. Some such assumption, in fact, was so prevalent at the Congress that most participants simply took it for granted as a self-evident truth. But given Mr. Doctorow’s insistence that writers should remain aloof from government influences, it is perhaps worth reminding the reader that the Congress was funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts—a governmental intrusion that, it need hardly be said, drew forth no outraged protests from the virtue-minded writers who deplored the appearance of Secretary Shultz.

As it happens, Norman Mailer had taken it upon himself to invite Secretary Shultz without consulting the board of American PEN (among whose members, incidentally, is Mr. Doctorow, though, as he noted in his article, he chose not to attend its meetings last year). Several board members shared Mr. Doctorow’s chagrin at the prospect of being addressed by Secretary Shultz; but Mr. Mailer pointed out that the board had met well in advance of the Congress, had deliberated about the invitation, and had decided not to rescind it. In any case, according to Karen Kennedy, executive director of American PEN, it is a PEN tradition to have someone from the host government welcome the writers to the Congress. Moreover, the force of Mr. Doctorow’s polemic against the Reagan administration’s assault on freedom of speech seemed somehow diminished by another article in that Saturday’s Times, which informed us that the eight writers from the Soviet Union who had been invited to the Congress would not be allowed to attend. Their absence was regretted but not especially remarked at the Congress. And as I had no doubt that the sentiments expressed in Mr. Doctorow’s article crystalized the sentiments of many of his fellow PEN members, I went after all to the opening ceremony of this week-long celebration of writers and freedom of speech.

**Sunday, January 12**

Though the opening ceremony wasn’t scheduled to begin until 5:00 p.m., the steps outside the Forty-second Street entrance to the New York Public Library were already crowded with writers and members of the press when I arrived at around 4:30. There were several handbills being passed out, including petitions against U.S. intervention in Central America and an open letter addressed to Secretary Shultz protesting the McCarran-Walter Act and lamenting that his appearance at the Library that evening compromised “the writer’s independence from the state.” The letter was signed
by some sixty writers, including Susan Sontag (Vice-president of American PEN), the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer (Vice-president of International PEN), Richard Howard, the American writer Grace Paley, Elizabeth Hardwick, and, of course, E. L. Doctorow. Mr. Doctorow, in fact, was something of a ubiquitous presence in the opening days of the Congress: another one of the handbills distributed was the original, slightly expanded, version of his *Times* editorial, which was to appear in *The Nation* the following week.

Once inside the Library, I knew that whatever intellectual or artistic interest the PEN Congress was going to hold, it was at least certain to be a media event. There were well over one hundred press people bustling about: reporters and photographers from newspapers large and small, foreign and domestic, television camera men, journalists from all manner of magazines and periodicals. Literary celebrities, including Mr. Doctorow himself, were eagerly interviewed by the television networks. By the time the evening got underway, about an hour late, there were some seven or eight hundred people crammed into the Library’s South Reading Room.

The atmosphere inside the Library bristled with a mixture of excitement and hostility. There were forgettable opening remarks by John Kenneth Galbraith, president of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Dr. Vartan Gregorian, head of the New York Public Library, and others. In his keynote address, Norman Mailer boosted the theme of the Congress. He suggested that we might obtain some “purchase on the intellectual confusions of our times” by taking a “venture into the absurd” and considering the state as an individual organism equipped with thought and imagination. He also cautioned against the dangers of narcissism, warned that the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Soviet Russia now have the power to “end history,” and enjoined writers to “return to the war and the play of words that will yet show our battered wife of a world some glimpse of starlight in the aesthetic heavens.”

In themselves, Secretary Shultz’s remarks were not nearly so dramatic as Mr. Mailer’s; there were no battered wives or other fiery rhetoric; but his presence was the catalyst for whatever real drama the evening possessed. As he began to read his address, a woman rose, shouted “I protest your presence!” and left the room, followed by one or two other valiant souls. The rest of his address was received in a more or less sullen silence, punctuated occasionally by boos and hisses. At one point, Mr. Mailer attempted to clear the air. He chastised the audience for their “puritanical leftism,” reminded them that it was “important to let everyone speak,” and declared that he was “prepared to apologize personally” to Secretary Shultz for their unbecoming display. Grace Paley popped up several times over the course of the proceedings, wanting desperately to have the floor, but Mr. Mailer refused to recognize her. Indeed, on the issue of Secretary Shultz’s reception, at least, Mr. Mailer conducted himself with uncharacteristic good manners. His own political position, as he was required to note frequently in the days that followed, is far to the left of the PEN membership generally; and he is certainly no supporter of the policies of the Reagan administration, either with
regard to the McCarran-Walter Act or anything else. But he had, after all, invited Secretary Shultz to address them, and the board had voted to let the invitation stand; in his view, it was only seemly to receive the man with respect.

Given the outcry against Secretary Shultz, one might well wonder what sort of atrocities he uttered. Among other things, he described writers as “the conscience of a society.” “Their freedom to criticize the state,” he insisted, “is the true measure of their independence.” And one gathers that he would agree with Mr. Mailer that viewing the state as a living organism endowed with imagination is “absurd”; but for him, this did not recommend the idea. Instead, he cautioned us about “the intellectual and moral hazards of personifying ‘the state,’ of divorcing ‘the state’ from its historical and social particulars.” He pointed out that such personification can only encourage one to elide the real distinctions among states, distinctions that can mean the difference between genuine political freedom and tyranny. “It would be ironic,” he reflected, “if intellectual freedom were appreciated only in countries where it didn’t exist, and taken for granted—or even deprecated—in the countries where it thrives.” He must have suspected that the distinguished writers assembled before him were specialists in irony.

The opening session ended with a press conference in which Messrs. Galbraith and Mailer fielded questions from reporters. Not surprisingly, most of the questions had to do with Secretary Shultz: Why did Mr. Mailer invite him? Why had he not consulted the board? Why did he not read the letter of protest to the audience as he had been asked? Why had he not recognized Grace Paley? The Congress proper had yet to begin, but it seemed as though it had already gone on forever.

Monday, January 13

There is something serene about Central Park South on a winter morning: the brown expanses of grass and leafless trees have a haunting, melancholy beauty, especially viewed from the noisy jumble of Central Park South and Seventh Avenue. Viewed from inside the Essex House at 9:05 a.m., as some four hundred and fifty people scrambled into the Casino on the Park ballroom, that bleak beauty was almost unbearably attractive. The General Literary Sessions that first day of the Congress were given over to the question, “How Does the State Imagine?”
Part one of “How Does the State Imagine?” got underway sometime after 9:00 a.m. The Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa chaired a panel that included Nadine Gordimer, the French novelist and Nobel laureate Claude Simon, the Japanese novelist and playwright Kôbô Abe, the West German novelist Günter Grass, and the American novelist William Gaddis. The format for this, as for all the General Literary Sessions, was a round-table discussion: Vargas Llosa made some introductory remarks, each of the panelists presented a ten- to fifteen-minute address, and then the panelists briefly mooted the topic among themselves before opening the discussion up to questions from the audience.

This first session was generally uneventful. Several panelists, including Kôbô Abe and Nadine Gordimer, took issue with the premise of the entire Congress: “The State has no imagination,” Miss Gordimer stated bluntly at the beginning of her address, sounding a reservation that would recur often in the days that followed. Vargas Llosa’s remarks were perhaps the most cogent and to the point. Reflecting on the place of art and literature in society, he put forward a view much akin to the view Freud offered in Civilization and its Discontents. In order to live harmoniously in society, he suggested, man has had to “mutilate” himself: to repress his most formidable but asocial desires and extravagant fantasies. The state is the political expression of that repression and, as such, is a “necessary evil”: it protects us from ourselves. Literature provides a compensation for these repressed feelings. It is an arena where man’s fantasies can safely unfold themselves uncensored by the demands of social life. In this sense, literature can be said to have a subversive function: by articulating desires that are at odds with the prevailing social order, it challenges the dominance of that order. But in many societies, especially in democratic ones, this subversive function seems to have lost its edge. Increasingly, literature has become little more than a form of entertainment. This is less the case, Vargas Llosa observed, in repressive regimes, where by definition free artistic expression constitutes a challenge to the prevailing social order. Yet while he lamented what he saw as the slippage of literature into mere entertainment, he made it absolutely clear that his sympathies lie with democratic regimes. In his view, the task is to preserve the challenging, compensatory dimension of literature without sacrificing the freedom and openness of democracy.
For his part, Günter Grass, looking grim and superlatively rumpled, informed us that both “state communism” and capitalism were exhausted as political systems. He had a few critical comments to make about the former. But no one familiar with Grass’s political sentiments will be surprised to learn that, as usual, the focus of his animus was directed toward the United States. “Whoever still believes ‘the American way of life’ is a viable path to take,” he told us, “has to be enough of a hypocrite to be able to ignore the slums on the periphery and the worldwide hunger.” Slums, as it turned out, were often on his mind that week. He concluded by adverting to the danger of “global self-destruction” through nuclear war and— in a phrase that particularly caught Norman Mailer’s fancy—characterized the contemporary literary imagination as caught in “hellish laughter.”

The chief topic of conversation that morning, however, was not literature or the imagination or even the state; it was Secretary Shultz. As a New York Times headline put it, “Shultz Issue Dominates PEN Congress Sessions.” Norman Mailer defended his decision to invite Secretary Shultz and even confessed that he’d found his views surprisingly liberal. Several members of the audience nevertheless voiced their disgust at Secretary Shultz’s presence the previous evening. Miss Gordimer noted that she and her fellow South Africans had boycotted the address in protest over the Reagan administration’s policy of “constructive engagement” as a way of addressing the problem of apartheid in her country. Günter Grass began his presentation by announcing that he was “shocked by the events of yesterday,” meaning of course that he and his fellow writers had been subjected to an address by the Secretary of State. And as for Norman Mailer’s call for good manners, Grass insisted that “we have to learn to be anarchists again,” a prescription that won enthusiastic applause from the audience.

It seemed to bother Grass especially that no questions had been permitted after Secretary Shultz’s address—though why there should have been any is a little unclear. There were no questions after the other presentations, either. But for Günter Grass this failure of Secretary Shultz to entertain questions was clearly an ominous thing. “Mr. Shultz is the only subject alive at this conference,” Vargas Llosa exclaimed at one point with a mixture of bewilderment and quiet exasperation; unfortunately, he was only too correct. Yet it must be said that while PEN members may have been unhappy that Mr. Mailer had invited Secretary Shultz to address them, a better publicity ploy can hardly be imagined. In large part because of the controversy sparked by Secretary Shultz, the Congress became big news. By the end of the week, the Times alone had run some twenty-five pieces on the Congress.

Nor is Mr. Mailer the only officer of American PEN who is adept at garnering publicity, often while seeming to shun it. Writing in a front-page article in The New York Times Book Review a week before the Congress opened, Susan Sontag applauded the PEN policy of holding closed sessions. “One reason for cherishing the writers’ congress,” she explained, “is that it may be one of the last places in our current cultural life where the closed session still has some viability.... To have a context for one’s
remarks, so that they can be addressed to some and not others (not to 'everyone'), has become an endangered privilege!’ In fact, the sessions at the Congress were open to the press as well as to PEN members. But, as Miss Sontag, vice-president of American PEN, well knows, the best way to assure that the Congress would have the requisite sheen of culture is to speak about “closed sessions” in *The New York Times*. And one also notes in this connection that PEN engaged the prestigious public relations firm of Lynn Goldberg Communications to handle publicity for the Congress and prepare elaborate information packets for the press who were invited to cover the event—hardly the best way to preserve privacy.

Part two of “How Does the State Imagine?” convened after lunch. Chaired by E. L. Doctorow, the panel included John Updike, the Israeli writer Amos Oz, Robert Hughes, the art critic for *Time* magazine, and the German writer Hans-Magnus Enzensberger. Like most of the General Literary Sessions, it, too, drew a full house of some four hundred and fifty people. Mr. Doctorow inaugurated the festivities by reading aloud the letter of protest against Secretary Shultz’s appearance that had been circulated the night before. Mr. Enzensberger began by whole-heartedly subscribing to the sentiments expressed in the letter of protest and then proceeded to inform us in his presentation that the imagination of the state in the twentieth century was out to destroy humanity.

One of the most sober and eloquent papers of the session, indeed, of the entire Congress, was delivered that afternoon by Amos Oz. Mr. Oz noted his amazement at the “gulf” between the subtlety and sophistication that writers bring to their work and the opinions they express in petitions, manifestos, and “titles for panel discussions.” Like Vargas Llosa, Mr. Oz viewed the state as a “necessary evil simply because many individuals are capable of being very deadly. Moreover,” continued Mr. Oz, with a balance and wisdom in scant evidence at the Congress,

some states are almost fair, some are bad, some are lethal. And since writers are, or at least ought to be, in the subtleties department and in the precision department, it is our job to differentiate. Whoever ignores the existence of varying degrees of evil is bound to become a servant of evil….

The tragedy of history is not the perpetual hopeless clash between saintly individuals and diabolical establishments but rather the perpetual clash between the relatively decent societies and the bloody ones. To be more precise: the perpetual cowardice of relatively decent societies whenever they confront the ruthlessness of the oppressive ones.

To my mind, Mr. Oz’s presentation marked one of the three or four intellectual highlights of the conference. His observation that “Whoever ignores the existence of varying degrees of evil is bound to become a servant of evil” is a lesson that many members of PEN could ponder with profit.

John Updike offered a charming and witty reflection on the modern American writer’s intimate relationship to the postal system, especially as epitomized by the mailbox: how amazing that he
should drop things into it, he said, and sometimes receive praise and money in return. Mr. Doctorow responded that he shared Mr. Updike’s love of mailboxes, but was worried that around the corner from the neighborhood mailbox he would find a missile silo. Now, I daresay I am no fonder of nuclear weapons than Mr. Doctorow is; but they happen to have been a political fact of life for forty years now, and moralizing about them from the platform of a writers’ Congress is as easy as it is irrelevant.

I was at first astonished at the number of allusions there were at the Congress not only to nuclear weapons but also to the possibility of a worldwide nuclear holocaust; at least every other speaker felt called upon to pay obeisance to the fetish of nuclear annihilation. Listening to Mr. Doctorow, however, it finally dawned on me what a boon to these writers nuclear weapons have been: what easier way can there be of accumulating moral capital? Simply allude in low, serious tones to the prospect of nuclear disaster and one has enlisted oneself in the rolls of the socially virtuous and concerned. Suggest, on the other hand, that nuclear weapons have become a reality of modern life—an unfortunate, frightening reality, to be sure, but a reality nonetheless—well, suggest this and it is concluded that one is somehow “in favor” of nuclear war.

A similar logic was evident in the pious moralizing about what turned out to be the two main subjects of interest at the Congress: United States involvement in Central America, especially Nicaragua, and the Reagan administration’s “constructive engagement” policy toward South Africa. The solution to these enormously complex social and political problems was self-evident to most of the assembled writers: simply pursue a course of action opposite to that of the current administration. And it was further assumed that questioning their criticism of United States policy in these areas was tantamount to sanctioning repression in Nicaragua or apartheid in South Africa, as if hesitating before their liberal pieties meant that at bottom one were really an imperialist or a racist; such are the awesome certainties of moral self-righteousness.

One of the most revealing exchanges of the day occurred that afternoon during the question-and-answer period. Rosario Murillo, a poet and also the wife of Daniel Ortega Saavedra, president of Nicaragua, stood up to call upon writers to help prevent genocide in Nicaragua. That won scattered applause. But really: genocide in Nicaragua? Whatever one thinks of the policies of the United States with regard to Nicaragua, it is difficult indeed to describe the military activity there as constituting genocide. As Robert Hughes (who is certainly no friend of the current U.S. policy in Central America) responded, it is “only by the greatest perversion of language that what is happening in Nicaragua can be classified as genocide.” “If what is going on in Nicaragua is what you can call ‘genocide,’” he asked, “what then can you describe what happened to the Jews in the Thirties and Forties?” Rosario Murillo had no answer, of course. Mr. Hughes distinguished himself yet again that afternoon. At a press conference following the session (there were almost as many press conferences as there were sessions, by the way), there was some question about the role of intellectuals in modern society.
Flippantly, but perhaps not inaccurately, Mr. Hughes answered that “the role of the intellectual in modern culture is to attend conferences.”

That more or less concluded part two of “How Does the State Imagine?” My only other duty was to attend a reception for the foreign delegates at Gracie Mansion that evening. Perhaps the most memorable encounter I witnessed was between Mayor Koch, who maneuvered for fifteen or twenty minutes through the party shaking hands and greeting people, and Commander Omar Cabezas, one of the all-expenses-paid guests of honor. Commander Cabezas is the author of *Fire From the Mountain*, an account of his life as a guerrilla leader. He is also the Commandant of the Nicaragua Armed Forces and Chief of Political Direction at the Ministry of the Interior for the Sandinista Government. Mayor Koch chatted for a few minutes with Commander Cabezas and then asked him if he knew why Ortega, the president of Nicaragua, and his wife Rosario had spent over three thousand dollars on eyeglass frames the last time they were in New York. There was a moment of confusion as Commander Cabezas consulted with members of his entourage. “Well, things are very expensive in New York,” one of his party replied. Indeed they are.

*Tuesday, January 14*

Tuesday’s General Literary Sessions were “Alienation and the State,” parts one and two. Susan Sontag chaired the morning panel, which included the Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, and the American novelist Toni Morrison—well, I had thought that Toni Morrison was an American. But in her reflections on alienation she confided that “at no moment” of her life did she feel like an American. The audience sat in hushed attention as she delivered a passionate *J’accuse* against American society for the crimes it had committed against her “gender and race.” We learned that “every law” in America has been enacted to disenfranchise her and members of her race and that the real function of the state was to create “humans,” not “patriots,” an abomination that American society was said to produce in great numbers.

This first installment of “Alienation and the State” was instructive in other ways, too. From Mr. Walcott, for example, we learned that “truly visionary writers” are not capable of prejudice. Dante, he said, was capable of hatred but not prejudice; it was a relief to discover that Dante, the embittered exile from Florence, was unburdened by anything so unsavory as prejudice. And Mr. Walcott also assured us that there is more “psychic power” in writers’ voices than in “all the armaments of the world.” In fact, this last sentiment, a kind of variation on Shelley’s declaration that “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” was one of the leitmotifs of the Congress. The feeling—or perhaps I should say the ambition—was abroad in various forms, but was perhaps best epitomized in the question posed in the official precis for one of the General Literary Sessions: “Can the writer attempt to insert himself into the place of the state, become its competitor, replace the state as the essential purveyor of values?” Fortunately, the answer to this question is “no”; the true
“unacknowledged legislators” of the world, as W. H. Auden once pointed out in an essay, are not poets but the secret police.

The most illuminating moments in part two of “Alienation and the State” came in the exchange occasioned by some remarks of Saul Bellow’s about the relation between culture and a traditional liberal democracy. Noting that the term “alienation” has become “part of the contemporary psychobabble,” Mr. Bellow went on to observe that the statesmen and philosophers who provided the foundations for our democratic order did not make any particular provisions for government support of culture or the arts; that was to be left to individual discretion and initiative. The role of government, as Mr. Bellow outlined it, was to provide a structure that allowed for economic prosperity and fulfillment of the “common sense” necessities of life such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care; in this respect, in Mr. Bellow’s view, American democracy had been largely successful.

These of course were fighting words, and one was not surprised to see Günter Grass come to the microphone during the question-and-answer period. Mr. Bellow had spoken of freedom, but Günter Grass had visited the South Bronx when he was in New York three years ago—where, he wanted to know, could that vaunted freedom be found in the South Bronx? Mr. Bellow’s reply is worth quoting at length: “I was talking about the majority situation in this country,” he said,

I was not trying to include every exception one could think of. Of course there are exceptions. I was simply saying that the philosophers of freedom of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provided a structure which created a society by and large free, by and large an example of prosperity. I did not say there are no pockets of poverty. I did not say this is a land of full justice. I didn’t try to justify America as a superpower. I was simply saying there was no particular concern in the foundation of the country with the higher life of the country.

But in order to appreciate the force of Günter Grass’s comments, it is necessary to understand that they stem from a deeply ingrained anti-Americanism that has its source in the view that at bottom American capitalism is not much different from, and certainly not much better than, Communism. Thus on the first day of the Congress, objecting to the appearance of Secretary Shultz, Grass blithely likened the situation in New York to Cuba or Bulgaria. And at a question-and-answer period at a later session, he asked rhetorically whether capitalism were any better than “Gulag Communism”: “I don’t think so” came his quick reply, though he subsequently denied, in private, that he’d meant that. Indeed, Günter Grass resented being accused of anti-Americanism, protesting that he was as anti-Communist as anyone, only he was also critical of some aspects of American policy. In fact, though, what one was witnessing in Grass’s wafflings and contradictions was once again the assumption of a moral equivalence between East and West that is endemic to the Left these days. In his recent history of the modern world, the English historian Paul Johnson observed that “it is of the essence of geopolitics to be able to distinguish between different degrees of evil.” And it is just this sort of
distinction that the Left seems unwilling or unable to make. It is no longer possible to pretend that Soviet Russia is the fount of all virtue, as many writers and artists did in the Thirties, and so one must in some sense be anti-Communist; but it is still terribly important to be able to identify oneself as being “on the Left,” and so one must continue to maintain an attitude of uncompromising disaffection, generally informed by some version of Marxism, toward the West and toward capitalism.

One result of this assumption of moral equivalence is a great deal of hedging. Günter Grass, by the simple device of contradicting himself, probably provided the most spectacular example of the strategy; and Allen Ginsberg offered a classic performance when he stood up to announce his animus against the Soviet “bureaucracy” in one sentence and then went on to speak of the “so-called ‘Free World’” in the next. The crucial thing is that the Free World must never be referred to without those knowing quotation marks.

The Left’s willful embrace of this principle of moral equivalence made for some rather unexpected recriminations. Thus William Phillips, a founder of the Partisan Review, was described in The Village Voice as a “conservative zealot” because he had thanked Mr. Bellow for introducing a “note of sobriety” into the proceedings and denounced the view, implicit in Günter Grass’s remarks, that American capitalism was itself an agent of repression not essentially different from Communism. “Conservative zealot”—how that epithet must have stung an old-time leftist like Mr. Phillips! Susan Sontag, herself an expert hedger, insisted in reply to Mr. Phillips that “no one would entertain the preposterous idea that the United States is at fault for all the difficulties and oppressions and tyrannies in the world. That’s not even a notion worth discussing.” One might agree. But one wonders how far from such a view she herself was in works like “Trip to Hanoi” (1968), in which she confessed her “moral dilemma at being a citizen of the American empire,” and suggested that North Vietnam was “a place which, in many respects, deserves to be idealized;” And one notes that, notwithstanding her noble rejoinder to Mr. Phillips, Miss Sontag has neither withdrawn “Trip to Hanoi” from publication nor has she chosen to repudiate the violently anti-American sentiments she expressed there. Perhaps she has forgotten about such works, or hopes that her readers have—though in this context one cannot help wondering what place Miss Sontag would allot to memory and truthfulness in the workshop of the writer’s imagination.

The current of anti-Americanism running throughout the Congress was perhaps most apparent in the reaction against the appearance of Secretary of State Shultz. Of course, the point is not that one must like Secretary Shultz or the policies of the administration that he represents; but the protest against him in effect set the tone for the entire Congress. And it is also remarkable that where an appearance by Secretary Shultz occasioned apoplexy in everyone from E. L. Doctorow to Günter Grass, an appearance Tuesday afternoon by Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow of Senegal, director general of UNESCO, passed without a murmur from these champions of free expression. Mr. M’Bow, one recalls, has advocated a “world information order” that would require journalists to “register” with
governments— hardly a tactic calculated to encourage independent, critical reporting. The United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1984 because, as *The New York Times* reported, it discerned an “endemic hostility toward the institutions of a free society” in UNESCO's behavior under Mr. M'Bow. Britain, too, has withdrawn from the organization and several other European nations are reevaluating their association. In this instance, at least, it would appear that the imagination of the state has proven to be more sensitive to the moral issues involved in free speech than the imagination of the organizers of the PEN Congress.

**Wednesday, January 15**

Wednesday's roster of sessions included “Problems of National Identity,” parts one and two, and “Censorship in the U.S.A.” Arthur Danto, Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and art critic for *The Nation*, chaired part one of the panel on “Problems of National Identity.” It featured some very amusing reflections by the novelist John Barth on the relation between high culture, which is in some sense cosmopolitan and “trans-national,” folk culture, which is often seen as the expression of a national identity, and what he called pop or media culture, which also tends toward nationality but is exportable as a consumer item. The Canadian novelist Robertson Davies, in inimitably grand oratorial fashion, urged writers to “forget about politics and politicians as much as possible” and get “back to your ivory towers.” Mr. Davies was one of several writers who expressed disgruntlement with the near absolute exclusion of matters of literary concern from the General Literary Sessions; even Susan Son-tag was heard to voice her desire that more attention be paid to literature in the sessions. Such appeals went unheeded. Instead, one heard numberless addresses like the one in this session by the German writer Peter Schneider, who spoke in large part about the threat of nuclear war and its impact on writers' imaginations.

In the afternoon I looked in briefly on the panel on “Censorship in the U.S.A.” which was chaired by Robert Bernstein, president of Random House, and included the Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, Gay Talese, and the well-known First Amendment lawyer Charles Rembar. Since, as Mr. Rembar observed, there is essentially no censorship of books in the United States, the discussion (or the parts that I heard) focused on issues of pornography, publication of politically sensitive material, and so on. But back at “Problems of National Identity,” part two, censorship was something of an issue. The celebrity on that panel was Commander Omar Cabezas, who read us a brief address about the struggles of the Sandinistas for freedom. In response to a question from the floor, the Commandant of the Nicaragua Armed Forces and Chief of Political Direction at the Ministry of the Interior (in charge of the prison system) admitted that there was a “little” press censorship in Nicaragua, but only out of necessity: “Right now we have press censorship to protect life,” Mr. Cabezas told us, but insisted that censorship would end “ten minutes” after the United States stops funding the Contras. Commander Cabezas's admission occasioned scattered protest and some probing questions, but he was obviously counting on an audience of writers to be practiced at
suspended disbelief.

Thursday, January 16

“In Opposition,” the General Literary Session for Thursday morning, was chaired by the poet Ishmael Reed and included Grace Paley and the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende. By now there was a certain regularity and predictably about the events. Thus one was not surprised to hear Mr. Reed rehearse the evils of “cultural imperialism” and what he called the “literary industrial complex.” In his view, oppression no longer comes so much from the “political state” as from the “cultural state,” which is said to impose a narrow, ethnocentric view of standards on the writer. Striving to overcome the “mono-ethnic canon” of works and standards, Mr. Reed championed what he described as the “multi-ethnic” revival of the arts that took place in the wake of the civil-rights movement. Thus he celebrated “Black English,” “Yellow English,” “Brown English,” “Red English,” and so on. The only English he left out, I think, was standard English, though perhaps that was deliberate.

For sheer entertainment value, the highlight of the Congress was undoubtedly the impromptu feminist meeting that erupted in the Essex House ballroom after “In Opposition.” There had already been several outbursts by women who were unhappy with what they regarded as their underrepresentation on the panels. The figures one heard varied a bit, but one could safely say that out of some one hundred and forty panelists there were only about twenty women. And yet women made up at least half the PEN membership: Inequity! Drafting a petition demanding redress was a sensitive business, apparently, for it was decided that the proceedings must be closed to men and all members of the press—just as well, really, as it was lunch time and one still had “The Utopian Imagination” to cope with later in the afternoon.

But on my return, I discovered that the feminist meeting was still going full speed—indeed, it had gained momentum, no doubt in part from the appearance of the venerable feminist Betty Friedan, who had assumed a kind of unofficial leadership of the group. The press was let in now, too, even the male press, and I ensconced myself safely toward the back of the room to witness the creation of their document. The Village Voice found it a moving experience: “In a process beautiful to watch, a committee of 100 or 125—stars and nonstars willingly equalized in response to oppression—wrote.” Well, one of them wrote. The rest shouted. Someone named Meredith Tax had the floor a good deal, unfortunately, and she was especially fond of screaming her “demands” into the microphone. “We’ve been ‘outraged’ in the second sentence,” noted the woman who was taking things down when the word was proposed again. “Is the imagination of the state male?” someone else asked, hoping to get the question incorporated into the petition. “Do you want to move into abstractions?” came the reply from someone who obviously didn’t. “How many people want ‘hierarchy’ in?” Even I could have told her that an elitist word like “hierarchy” would never get by. Sure enough, a chorus of voices and down came the verdict: “No hierarchy.” The whole thing was quite a spectacle, not without an edge.
of hysteria, and reminded one eerily of those “sit-ins” and kindred demonstrations that proliferated on American campuses in the Sixties.

What exactly did the women want? For one thing, they wanted “a humble apology by Norman Mailer to the women of the world,” though I think that was later emended to something like “women writers of the world.” More practically, they also wanted more representation on the panels at PEN as well as a committee of inquiry to investigate how the inequity they’d suffered at the 1986 Congress could ever have been allowed to happen. Nor would they be satisfied to have a meeting of their own: they wanted time at the final plenary session scheduled the next day to make their grievances public or they would disrupt the session. Grace Paley and Cynthia Macdonald were elected to bring their demands before Norman Mailer, and Margaret Atwood was also drafted, as a foreign woman, over the objection that, being of Canadian nationality, she might not be “foreign enough.”

After all this, even a panel on “The Utopian Imagination” was bound to seem dull, but the women finally got their demands hammered out and disbanded until the next day. “The Utopian Imagination” was chaired by the American writer Arthur A. Cohen and included Susan Sontag, William Gass, the 1980 Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz, and Tomas Venclova, a Lithuanian writer now living in exile. Miss Sontag expressed doubts about the Utopian imagination as it had shown itself in the revolutionary tradition but still held out hope for a “utopia of writers,” a “community of consciousness.” The most illuminating remarks of the afternoon, however, came from Messrs. Milosz and Venclova, both of whom took an extremely dim view of the pursuit of utopia. Mr. Venclova, who as a Lithuanian laid claim to having been born and brought up in utopia, reminded us that etymologically the word means “no place.” And Mr. Milosz, taking issue with Miss Sontag’s fuzzy aesthetic idealism, noted that Utopians don’t think of themselves as Utopians. Too often, he said, even writers with the best intentions have provided a “smoke screen for inhumanity,” through their pursuit of essentially Utopian goals.

*Friday, January 17*

The last day of the 48th International PEN Conference had finally arrived. For the feminists, no doubt, the highpoint of the entire Congress occurred that morning when a photograph of Betty Friedan appeared emblazoned on the front page of *The New York Times*. The morning’s topic was “The Statesman’s View of the Imagination of the State.” The panel of politicians and writers, chaired by Arthur Schlesinger, included the former Prime Minister of Canada Pierre Elliott Trudeau, former Chancellor of Austria Bruno Kreisky, and George McGovern representing the politicians, and the writers Mario Vargas Llosa, Kurt Vonnegut, and Frances Fitzgerald. Vargas Llosa’s presentation was again by far the most cogent. Repeating several of the observations that he had made on Monday about the relation between art and culture, he noted that writers have no “monopoly on lucidity,” especially in political matters: the contrast between the wise and humanitarian writer and oafish
politician or bureaucrat—a contrast implicit in much of the discourse at the PEN Congress—just doesn’t hold water. Indeed, Vargas Llosa reflected, he finds many, perhaps the majority, of writers in Latin America “very irresponsible” in political matters, even if they are great writers—think only of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whom Vargas Llosa correctly identified as a “courtesan” of Castro. It just may be, he said, that a majority of writers in Latin America would prefer totalitarianism to democracy.

Unfortunately, the politicians with whom Vargas Llosa shared the podium were not necessarily the best counter-examples. Bruno Kreisky, for instance, has made no secret of his support of both PLO chief Yasir Arafat and Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi. His speech was one of the longest of the Congress, a tedious reflection on politics and terrorism that brimmed with knowing invocations of Marx and Lenin, without bothering to pay even lip service to addressing a literary theme. Mr. Kreisky’s performance, which was in large part an effort to offer excuses for Arab terrorism, provided the Congress with one of its most stunning examples of the practice of moral equivalence. During the question-and-answer period, the novelist Cynthia Ozick, among others, attempted to make some critical remarks about Mr. Kreisky’s position, but she was rudely dismissed by Mr. Schlesinger. Günter Grass, as might have been predicted, strode to the microphone to defend Mr. Kreisky against Miss Ozick’s allegations.

Mr. McGovern, who was described by the chair as “the authentic voice of decency and purpose for the underdog” here and abroad, gave a rambling talk in which, among other things, he lamented that Norman Mailer hadn’t been elected mayor of New York City when he ran in 1969. Mr. McGovern also applauded Messrs. Kreisky and Trudeau as fine statesmen and opined that sometimes the “collective unconscious” of voters is not equal to the challenge of the election—apparently 1972 wasn’t as long ago as one might think. For his part, Mr. Trudeau sensibly suggested that the really interesting question at the Congress did not so much concern the imagination of the state but how the writers at PEN had come to imagine that the state possessed an imagination. Why would PEN imagine the state as an organism, he wondered, alluding to and seconding Mr. Milosz’s insistence the previous day that there is “no necessary estrangement of the writer from the state.”

The final plenary session began with Norman Mailer summing up the Congress. Its notable success, in his view, was its statement protesting United States intervention in Nicaragua. Mr. Mailer took time to read aloud to the audience not only the statement itself but also each and every appended signature. He also made note of a letter to Secretary Shultz protesting that Margaret Randall, an American writer who had given up her United States citizenship in 1967, had been denied permanent resident status. But Cynthia Ozick’s request that her petition about Bruno Kreisky be read or at least publicly acknowledged was simply ignored.

The real fun at the final meeting, however, was provided by Mr. Mailer’s histrionic encounter with the contingent of feminists who had come to present their demands. In one particularly wonderful
display, a teacher from the audience came forward to express his hopes for a world in which the “politics of gender” were obsolete; he was, he told us, ashamed of the “white male prejudice” that literature is a “male function.” He also felt called upon to mention the “obscenity” of inviting Secretary Shultz along with representatives of Nicaragua. The conjunction—the “politics of gender” and Nicaragua—was delicious.

Mr. Mailer was not especially accommodating to the moralizing prattle of the feminists, in part because he felt that the criterion for an invitation to be a panelist at the PEN Congress should be literary accomplishment, not gender. Besides, he noted, there were nearly as many women as men on the committees that proposed the candidates to be panelists for the Congress. He then recited a list of twenty-four women, including Iris Murdoch, Mary McCarthy, and Barbara Tuchman, who had turned down the honor of serving as a PEN panelist.

But the crux of his impatience was perhaps better expressed in a statement appearing in The New York Times that morning. After the women had made their demands known, Mr. Mailer had been quoted as claiming that “there are not that many women, like Susan Sontag, who are intellectuals first, poets and novelists second. More men are intellectuals first, so there was a certain natural tendency to pick more men than women.” This of course only further enraged the women. But the real issue is not whether Mr. Mailer’s assertion is true; the real issue concerns his insistence that the only appropriate panelists at the Congress were writers who were also “intellectuals.” Normally, of course, we do not think that it is necessary to be an intellectual to be a writer; often, indeed, there is the opposite presumption: that being an intellectual is a liability to creative writing. But as used by Mr. Mailer, “intellectual” was primarily a euphemism for writers who—indeed, like Susan Sontag— are most at home discussing politics. And it was politics, politics, politics that formed the chief object of interest for most of the panelists at a congress devoted to “The Writer’s Imagination and the Imagination of the State.” Perhaps it was the dearth of suitable “intellectuals” that led Mr. Mailer to conclude after the Congress was over that the theme had been a “great mistake."

The 48th International PEN Congress inspired many feelings and images. I found the image of a circus, for example, recurring with some regularity. But the image that sticks with me and seems most telling is that of a swamp: a lot of mushy terrain in which it was all too easy to sink. Not, of course, that there weren’t patches of high ground; the contributions of Mario Vargas Llosa, of Saul Bellow, of Amos Oz, among others, exhibited a measure of reasonableness, integrity, and insight that distinguished them from the general lot of addresses and commentaries at the Congress. But mostly one witnessed what Walter Goodman, writing in The New York Times, referred to as a “community of indignation.” Nicaragua was the chief focus of indignation, with the situation in South Africa coming in a close second. The feminist eruption counted as a kind of sideshow. The one thing that did not inspire much interest was literature.
In his exchange with the audience about alienation, Saul Bellow warned against “megalomaniacal” notions of the writer’s influence on politics. The most graphic example of such megalomaniacal notions in recent memory is of course the Thirties—a great era for writers’ congresses, most of which were sponsored in one way or another by the Communist party. At that time, writers everywhere were falling over themselves to express their support of Stalin, hoping to transform bourgeois society along some revolutionary blueprint. Mr. Bellow was quite right when he observed that those writers were “made to look like idiots.” His comment brought to mind Roger Shattuck’s essay “Having Congress,” an account of the First International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, which took place in Paris in 1935. The list of writers who participated in that Congress—many of whom were “intellectuals first,” to use Mr. Mailer’s phrase—made the roster of the 1986 PEN Congress look thin indeed: among many others were André Gide, André Malraux, André Breton, E. M. Forster, Louis Aragon, and Tristan Tzara. That Congress, too, was something of a circus, though given the times, the antics of the writers cannot but seem at once more ominous and more impotent. “If the literary heroes of 1935 could not band together effectively against totalitarianism in Germany—to say nothing of Soviet Russia,” asks Mr. Shattuck at the end of his essay, “what can we hope for next time?” The answer to his melancholy question is perhaps best adumbrated by Karl Marx, the one writer who seems to preside as it were ex officio at writers’ congresses. “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice,” Marx writes in a famous passage at the beginning of The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. “He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.”