

Literature Lost

By Cynthia Ozick

I like writers more than any other human class. All my best friends are writers. Taken three or four at a time, writers tend not to withhold the free surge of words, however quarrelsome, controversial, skeptical, passionate, ironic, nasty, jokey or dreamy. Writers have an urge — like living grass growing up through concrete — to tell what they see and feel and notice and believe, even when they are, by someone's fiat, not allowed to.

At last week's PEN congress, unorthodoxy was, by and large, uncharacteristically dormant.

This assertion may shock. After all, PEN's political-philosophical theme — "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State" — was chosen precisely to expose the thousand overt or insidious ways in which extrinsic influences may work to silence writers, or to make their pens conform to what their hearts gainsay. A free convention of world writers, thinking and imagining aloud in their own tongues — what might come of it? Attention to books, surely — real texts; hot tangled literary illuminations; spontaneity, the enemy of rhetoric; unity — a psalmlike family blessing that art can confer.

Instead, what came of it was mainly something else. The congress turned into a fully clawed political organism. Meeting rooms grew prickly with manifestos, moral accusations and the display of approved credentials. Some 600 foreign and domestic writers were crammed into a narrow tower of political babble. Except for an occasional corner set aside for poems and tales (and how out-of-the-way these corners seemed, compared to the furious political sessions), the congress was transmogrified into a booming ritual monolith where you felt you had to watch your step. Issues very quickly began to show their popular and unpopular sides. Disagreement got edited out. An unpopular view might earn you sneers.

What was an unpopular view? A statement against terrorism, for instance, relating to former Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky's appearance on a panel. A protest regarding Mr. Kreisky's official Government embrace of terrorist leader Yasir Arafat and terrorist trainer Muammar el-Qaddafi drew a reprimand from the moderator and hisses from the audience. This same protest, when circulated for signatures, remained a semi-secret. By contrast, a petition in support of Nicaraguan positions was openly encouraged from the podium by PEN president Norman Mailer, who meticulously

read aloud every word and every signature.

Reviling Secretary of State George P. Shultz was popular; reviling Unesco's Amadou Mahtar M'Bow was not. Mr. Shultz, the subject of a protest prompted by a newspaper piece and hundreds of handbills, stood up to declare that "the writer is at the heart of freedom." Mr. M'Bow, a vocal advocate of world censorship, was not worth a single handbill. In one room, local libraries in a number of American communities were suitably condemned for book suppression. In another room, at the identical hour, the author from Nicaragua (currently its Deputy Minister of the Interior, in charge of prisons) was lustily applauded, having just conceded that his Government censors writers.

Applause is an anonymous act. Dissent never is. When Israeli writer Amos Oz criticized the "cowardice of the relatively decent societies" in failing to differentiate themselves from the "bloody ones," when Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa spoke in brilliant praise of uncensored freedom and unequivocal democracy, the applause for these unmuddled convictions ascended, released and relieved. But what of the restraint of these same masses of clappers (here was a mystery) when the going was harder, when objection or dissent was requisite and seemly?

How easy, given that restraint, to shout down the anti-Arafat comments of a small-fry writer. How difficult, given that restraint, to raise one's voice against, say, Günter Grass's repeated denigrations of American freedoms. A distinguished editor who undertook to do so ended up compelled to recite his old-radical credentials as a sort of loyalty oath to the popular mood. Saul Bellow, meditating on the history, culture and unspiritual nature of the middle class, discovered that the very words "middle class" rendered him disloyal.

"My mind to me a kingdom is," said Edward Dyer, a 16th century English poet. And the truth was, if you were just sitting there privately drumming your different thoughts, you found yourself crouching down a little inside the nervous kingdom of your mind, saintly and strangely scared to say out loud into a microphone, or through any dissenting or doubting noise not covered by anonymity, what you might be really thinking and feeling. At a conference of supposedly free writers, it needed acts of bravery — a psychological storm of recklessness — to take up, in public, the other side of the popular and the prevalent.

Is this what free writers en masse, with all their glorious gifts, mean to stitch out of the diminishing remnant of this bad century? One more intellectual uniform? □

Cynthia Ozick is a novelist and essayist.