ARTICLES.

UNITED STATES

The State of Mind Of the Union

It is appropriate to begin our exploration of the world consciousness of America with an expression of America's consciousness of itself. E.L. Doctorow's excursions into the shadow land where American myth and reality intersect superbly qualify him for this task. From Ragtime, *in which he probed the fictional truth of American history, to his latest book,* World's Fair, *in which the futuristic dreams of New York's 1939 exhibition intersect with a boy's dreams of the adult world, Doctorow has let his imagination play over the American social skyline.*

E.L. DOCTOROW

Those who talk to them and teach and publish them say that many of our young writers don't want to write so much as they want to be rich and famous. Literature is seen as an entry to the good life. This might be an amusing irony of passing interest except that if we go through SoHo and the East Village, we find the same attitude among young artists. They don't seem particularly dedicated to painting. Their passion is to make a big art-world splash and to do it as quickly as possible without working through to some kind of earned truth. Truth is phantom; reality is paint on canvas and dollar bills.

I'm not sure this spirit is unprecedented in Western civilization, but I think it is in America. And because I'm a writer I tend to regard my profession, in fact all arts and their practitioners, as our country's eye of light. It sees and can be seen into.

Where did this new attitude come from? Of course every writer I have ever known has been interested in money. They've talked about it, hustled for it, dreamed of it, stolen it and occasionally made it. But until now the best have let the world come to them, in patience or in hope or in bitterness, and whatever mad or cunning beings they've been, the doing of it has been the thing. They've written because they were helpless not to; they've written even at the price of their own destruction and the destruction of everyone around them.

The new attitude borrows something of the accelerated sense of life of the 1920s, when precocity and a daring irreverence caught up young people as the stock market had their fathers. But there is something unrecognizable here: it is not a spirit of selling out because it lacks that moral reference entirely; it is a kind of mutantcy, I think, a structural flaw of mind that suggests evolution in a social context.

What is that context?

The PEN American Center's recent hospitality to the writers of the world at the 48th International PEN Congress was lavish in the extreme. Under its president, Norman Mailer, some $800,000 was raised to feed and house and convene the visiting writers and to show them the city, from the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to the temple of Saul Steinberg on Park Avenue. A large part of the money was raised by a series of readings on Broadway: wealthy people paid $1,000 a seat for eight evenings of readings by older and celebrated American authors, including Mailer himself, Kurt Vonnegut, William F. Buckley Jr. and Woody Allen. Then, with the money in hand, Mailer invited Secretary of State George Shultz to address the opening session of the congress at the New York Public Library.

The dispute that invitation occasioned has been well publicized and needn't be reprised here. Mailer offered his critics two rationales for his action. The first was his hope, from some collegiality with power, to persuade the Reagan Administration to rescind the McCarran-Walter Act, which PEN views as a detestable and ludicrous impingement on the free movement of foreign authors and scholars across our borders. The second reason was expressed in the heat of the controversy before Shultz made his speech. He would have thought it obvious, Mailer said, that he had invited the Secretary because of the dignity his presence would lend to the proceedings.

That Norman Mailer wanted a touch of the scepter interests me. One would suppose that an international gathering of many of the best writers in the world needed nothing more for its dignity. For a writer, for an artist of any kind, the work confers its own dignity. Political endorsement should make a writer wary—as it did Robert Lowell, who in the 1960s turned down an invitation to the White House.

Nevertheless, PEN's congress lit the attention of the government, the media and the kind of people who almost nightly combine charitable impulses with having a good time. PEN has entry now to the glamour-charity circuit and can have more financing for its good works than it has ever had before. And so a poor, feisty writers' club gravitates to money and power.

Why is it I see in my mind at this moment the presiding smile of Ronald Reagan? We have watched Reagan reallocate the economic resources of this country, in an exponential leap, to military goods; we have watched him attend to the dismantling of legislation worked out historically from the moral logic of the Constitution and designed to make a more equitable society—the antitrust laws, the labor protection laws, the civil rights laws. We have watched him rouse from dormancy a new generation of know-nothings to affirm his covert racism and anti-Semitism, to raise hell with the books in school libraries and texts in grade schools and to support the ideological simplism of his foreign policy; we have seen his contempt for poor people on welfare and for environmental law, as if he thought, perhaps, that only poor

people on welfare breathe air or drink water. But what will a historian of his Administration say of its peculiar effect on the intellectual and literary and academic life of this country, the specialized cells of the body politic that compose its spirit?

At the same PEN congress—an event of many illuminations—Günter Grass remarked during an exchange in which he referred to the condition of the South Bronx: "Why is it I cannot say anything these days in criticism of America without first giving assurances that I am not a communist?" *The New York Times* reported this fairly but then, in a grisly confirmation of Grass's sense of where we are now, went on to mention that Grass is not known to have publicly criticized a Communist government in the past eighteen years.

The debasement of intellectual life in this country is perhaps more apparent to visitors than to natives because we see it only in its daily minutiae. We may even have become inured to the neoconservatives' standard reaction to dissent, which is to point a warning finger in the direction of the Soviet Union so we don't forget how free we are in our ingratitude. In their Manichaean view, to criticize American foreign policy vis-à-vis Nicaragua, for example, or South Africa, is to give de facto support to the Soviet Union. The corollary to this proposition is that we best preserve our freedom of speech by refusing to exercise it. As a bit of pure and simple Babbittry, this perception of self-criticism as a kind of betrayal or treason is beneath contempt; these days, though, it is not George F. Babbitt, the Midwestern salesman, expressing it but a significant branch of the intellectual community. That is a kind of news, is it not?

For some of our literary critics a political novel written by an American is likely to be "adversarial" and therefore esthetically flawed. One academic wrote a year or two ago that some of our well-known novelists (Mailer and Doctorow were two I remember in his citation) have as their raison d'être the undermining of the very society that has so well rewarded them. "Love it or leave it" was a hard-hat phrase in the 1960s. In the 1980s it is the taunt of the effete intellectuals coming from the heart of the academy.

The truth is that the Republic may have more to fear from the loss of overreaching ambition on the part of its young writers than from the errant ingratitude, if it is that, of the older ones. The loss of a social dimension in much of the otherwise impressive fiction being written today has been widely noted. Horizons have diminished. Today's novelists are technically superior to those of thirty and forty years ago, but they are less inclined to take on the big stories. Many of a season's novels will be harmonious with one another, as if everyone is sewing a great patchwork quilt. Salman Rushdie was one of the many speakers at the PEN congress who noted that Americans seem unaware of the effect of the United States on the rest of the world. Others were less circumspect than Rushdie. They called our writing insular, naïve and provincial. The estimable John Updike defended us by reformulating in literary terms George Washington's conviction that this country should beware of foreign entanglements: he characterized his experience of the American state as a pastoral. The German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger dryly commented that there seemed to be no recognition in Updike's Arcadia that the United States had the capacity, at its own discretion, to blow up the planet. Thus, positions were staked out in what is of course an ancient argument, which can never be resolved—the degree of political engagement necessary or desirable in an artist's work. Neither side of the argument will guarantee a good book. A great work usually reflects the entirety of the argument as it has oscillated in the mind of the writer. But that the argument should surface now, with each insufficient side of it divided fairly neatly between America and the rest of the world, suggests the possibility that we are suffering some state of mind not apparent to ourselves.

How could this national state of mind be characterized? If at its best the individual writer's mind is a democracy, where conflicting points of view are in constant struggle, and every truth has an answering truth, and every idea is subject to transformation; so at its worst the writer's mind can be the tyranny of one argument. I take the writer as the micro-nation. When, for whatever reason, a nation's myths —the prevailing beliefs of its ruling powers—go unargued and unexamined, the society's state of mind can be said to be tyrannical.

I have no empirical means of proving that such a state of mind exists in this country today. I am not a sociologist. I am not given to surveys; I don't take stock in polls or in journalistic overviews of the newsmagazine variety. My writer's mind thinks in images and makes connections in metaphor. So I will introduce here a fanciful notion, the possibility that our President is a resolved phantom of cold war, a kind of golem sprung from national premises and fears that have not been seriously examined in almost half a century. We have made him to protect ourselves from our enemies, but he has laid on us the burden of his inert spirituality. Even as he calls for reverence for life, even as he holds hands with ministers at prayer breakfasts, the dead weight of our times presses down on us. And the failure of the American artistic and intellectual community to separate itself, lift itself, from this phenomenon testifies to its unnatural power.

Everywhere in our culture these days the idea of progress is bashed and social action is scorned, from the Tory ideaplays that come from London to Broadway for critical raves and long runs, to the sophistries of racism in our sociological journals. The assemblage of brilliant Eastern European and Russian poets and writers and scholars who have emigrated here in the past ten years or so to write and teach has had great influence on our thinking. They are concerned lest we not learn from their experience. They warn us against the utopian impulse; they tell us that the desire for perfection is the source of all social woe. They have paid dearly for this knowledge but it is not American knowledge, it is European knowledge, with the terrible legacy of monarchal European history behind it. They look at us as innocents. They think our idealism breeds revolution. They see a legislative measure that presumes the responsibility of government to act equitably toward its

citizens as incipient communism. They condemn as naïve and dangerously liberal a protest that our government is doing something immoral or cruel to another government. They misapply what they know. They forget or can't believe that insofar as revolutions go, ours is 200 years further along than the one they come from. The rest of us should be as wary of this particular foreign entanglement as we are of the more generalized foreign insistence that we become *engagé*, but we are not. Some of us join the shrill cry, others bury themselves in domesticity, while our golem stalks.

And what of our hottest school of literary criticism, which takes the concept of ambiguity to new heights, or depths? A book is a text or artifact whose meanings are to be disentangled and put alongside one another for examination. This is a professional discipline worthy of a play by Molière. Its conclusion—that the author of the piece is finally of no consequence and that the illuminations of the piece are simply a matter of supracritical excitations—can be interpreted as meaning that the compositions of words have no or very little value. This is not too far from the conviction of illiterate teenagers who roam the streets and subways of New York with their ghetto blasters booming. At least they know they live in a postnuclear world.

Everything I've noted here, from the young writers impatient of a long creative life to the deconstruction of our critics; every variety of intellectual retreat, of conformism; every small loss of moral acuity, I see collectively as the secret story of American life under the bomb. We have had the bomb on our minds since 1945. It was first our weaponry and then our diplomacy, and now it's our economy. How can we suppose that something so monstrously powerful would not, after forty years, compose our identity? The great golem we have made against our enemies is our culture, our bomb culture—its logic, its faith, its vision.

That is my inflamed notion. Perhaps it can be tested in debate. That would be good. Now that it is out in the open, we might do well to move transversely in our search for meaningful reference, to leave Prague for Heidelberg, to put aside the golem and consider the story of Faust. Is it possible that the bomb, in its inventions and reinventions, is not primarily deterrence, or even a weapon at all, but an overwrought ambition, an impiety? After all, two of its progenitors, as students in Germany, were inspired one sunny day to think of getting something going in the laboratory approximating the nuclear reactions of the sun. And since men in high places now arrogate to themselves the right to begin a nuclear war, we should perhaps recognize that we have on earth a spiritual disaster of unprecedented magnitude. I look to the Catholic sensibility when I think of Faust and Mephistopheles: perhaps this sense of spiritual disaster is what the American Catholic bishops had in mind when they declared, in their pastoral letter, their opposition on moral grounds to any use of nuclear weapons. No emperor or fiend from the past—not Caesar, not Alexander the Great, not Attila the Hun—ever claimed the sovereign right to determine the life and future of the entire universe. Yet that power is now

claimed by every graduate engineer who steps into a nuclear weapons laboratory. The original Faust had twenty-four years before the devil collected him. Mephistopheles is no more generous now than he was at the University of Heidelberg in 1509: our twenty-four years were up in 1969. It is fair to assume that he has been sweeping up his souls for some time now.

To wake up to the character of our culture is to struggle, with all heightened self-interest, to reassert our primacy in it. I appeal to the traditional values of self-aggrandizement for which we artists and intellectuals are supposed to be famous. The current state of mind of the union is intolerable if only because its discourse is not its own. It is the body's discourse. That fact alone should ignite our pride. We may then consider in our debate to come the idea that art in America has to find a postnuclear politics of transcendent diction.

Otherwise we might find ourselves, if we live, in the position the Hungarian writer George Konrád described to me at dinner one recent night. He was explaining why writers are so dangerous to the states of the Eastern bloc. There is no more Poland, he said. There is no more Romania or Czechoslovakia. They no longer exist. All that's left of each is a language and the stories and poems that carry it and the culture it recalls. The writers are the memory of the nations that once were, and therefore a threat to the states that pretend they still are. □

CANADA

Through the One-Way Mirror

Does propinquity breed familiarity or fear? Who knows better than the Canadians? The novelist Margaret Atwood, who lives in Toronto, is a close watcher of trends south of the border. Her latest novel, The Handmaid's Tale, *is set in a future United States dominated by the forces of the religious right. Her other books include* Surfacing, Dancing Girls *and* Murder in the Dark.

MARGARET ATWOOD

The noses of a great many Canadians resemble Porky Pig's. This comes from spending so much time pressing them against the longest undefended one-way mirror in the world. The Canadians looking through this mirror behave the way people on the hidden side of such mirrors usually do: they observe, analyze, ponder, snoop and wonder what all the activity on the other side means in decipherable human terms.

The Americans, bless their innocent little hearts, are rarely aware that they are even being watched, much less by the Canadians. They just go on doing body language, playing in the sandbox of the world, bashing one another on the head and planning how to blow things up, same as always. If they think about Canada at all, it's only when things get a bit snowy or the water goes off or the Canadians start fussing over some piddly detail, such as fish. Then they regard them as unpatriotic; for Americans don't really see Canadians as foreigners, not like the Mexicans, unless they do something weird like speak French or beat the New York Yankees at baseball. Really, think the Americans, the Canadians are just like us, or would be if they could.

Or we could switch metaphors and call the border the longest undefended backyard fence in the world. The Canadians are the folks in the neat little bungalow, with the tidy little garden and the duck pond. The Americans are the other folks, the ones in the sprawly mansion with the bad-taste statues on the lawn. There's a perpetual party, or something, going on there—loud music, raucous laughter, smoke billowing from the barbecue. Beer bottles and Coke cans land among the peonies. The Canadians have their own beer bottles and barbecue smoke, but they tend to overlook it. Your own mess is always more forgivable than the mess someone else makes on your patio.

The Canadians can't exactly call the police—they suspect that the Americans are the police—and part of their distress, which seems permanent, comes from their uncertainty as to whether or not they've been invited. Sometimes they do drop by next door, and find it exciting but scary. Sometimes the Americans drop by their house and find it clean. This worries the Canadians. They worry a lot. Maybe those Americans want to buy up their duck pond, with all the money they seem to have, and turn it into a cesspool or a water-skiing emporium.

It also worries them that the Americans don't seem to know who the Canadians are, or even where, exactly, they are. Sometimes the Americans call Canada their backyard, sometimes their front yard, both of which imply ownership. Sometimes they say they are the Mounties and the Canadians are Rose Marie. (All these things have, in fact, been said by American politicians.) Then they accuse the Canadians of being paranoid and having an identity crisis. Heck, there is no call for the Canadians to fret about their identity, because everyone knows they're Americans, really. If the Canadians disagree with that, they're told not to be so insecure.

One of the problems is that Canadians and Americans are educated backward from one another. The Canadians—except for the Québécois, one keeps saying—are taught about the rest of the world first and Canada second. The Americans are taught about the United States first, and maybe later about other places, if they're of strategic importance. The Vietnam War draft dodgers got more culture shock in Canada than they did in Sweden. It's not the clothing that is different, it's those mental noises.

Of course, none of this holds true when you get close enough, where concepts like "Americans" and "Canadians" dissolve and people are just people, or anyway some of them are, the ones you happen to approve of. I, for instance, have never met any Americans I didn't like, but I only get to meet the nice ones. That's what the businessmen think too, though they have other individuals in mind. But big-scale