

# The Pen And Politics

OTTO FRIEDRICH

ENGAGED IN WRITING: TWO NOVELS, by Stephen Spender. *Farrar, Straus and Cudahy*. \$3.75.

Twenty years ago Stephen Spender attended a Writers' Congress in embattled Madrid and noted that it resembled a spoiled children's party. In his autobiography, *World Within World*, he recalled that "this circus of intellectuals, treated like princes or ministers . . . riding in Rolls Royces, banqueted, feted . . . had something grotesque about it." Yet he went on attending the circuses. There were times when one got the impression that every manifesto against apartheid or the banning of pornography bore the names of Jean-Paul Sartre, James T. Farrell, and Stephen Spender. Or if it wasn't a manifesto, it was the roster of a UNESCO-sponsored conference to raise funds for the League of Indian Illiterates or to foster "international understanding."

NOW, AT LAST, we have Mr. Spender's authoritative and venomous denunciation of just such a conference. ". . . The philosophy of EUROPLUME," says Dr. Bonvolio in his interminable opening address, "is that whoever meets within the terms of EUROPLUME does, precisely, agree to meet. . . . Everyone here accepts the Concept of the Dialogue." Every delegate, Mr. Spender implies, also accepts the concept of tedium, pomposity, and utter pointlessness.

It is the time of "the thaw" a couple of years ago, and a dreary English LITUNO (UNESCO) official named Olim Asphalt arrives at the meeting in Venice with hopes that the delegates will take up where Khrushchev left off in his attack on Stalin. If writers are supposed to be "engaged," what have they been engaged in for all these years? But at the conference, he finds the fish-faced French philosopher Sarret (try anagrams) counting fairies on the head of a pin, criticizing ev-

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honest in its conviction that man is a simple, if noble, figure in a complex cosmos. . . . Not since Tolstoy has so passionate a faith been preached, Schweitzerian in tolerance, Pascalian in knowledge of the world."—Harrison Salisbury, SATURDAY REVIEW

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everyone else with "the secret . . . understanding that whatever polemical attack he made on his friends was really intended as condemnation of himself." Then there is Sarret's friend Marteau (Camus?) arguing with Sarret as though "Venice was only the extension of a Parisian café."

A little more humor would have helped, but Mr. Spender's portraits are gloomily authentic—the Silone-like Italian who embarrasses everyone by treating Stalinism as a crime rather than a mistake, the has-been Hungarian poet who dreads the revolt that will come, the blinkered Russian hacks who show "a mild dazed interest" in Sarret's defense of their "position" and then mouth banalities about "exchanging points of view frankly."

Yet in both his title story and in the rather slight romance that fills out the book, Mr. Spender shows that he is a poet and not a novelist. He cares less for developing plot and characters than for stating one idea and ornamenting his statement with neatly turned phrases. The idea is summed up in that traditional scene where the hero finally quits his vile job. The failure of all such meetings, Asphalt tells the delegates, "is that in order to meet, we have to put the idea of meeting before that of saying anything . . ." The writer's real function is not to spend his time talking at cross-purposes but to be "engaged in writing."

MR. SPENDER proves his point all too easily, especially since it is fashionable after the excesses of the 1930's and 1940's to frown on writers' getting mixed up in politics. Let poets stick to poetry and preachers to preaching and dogcatchers to dogcatching. But is it logical to damn the concept of "engagement" just because of the absurdities of U.N. bureaucrats and professional "conferees"? Or are such follies rather a convenient excuse for writers to shirk their more immediate political obligations? Perhaps the real problem is that the more politically minded writers understand their political role only in terms of the grandiose—the settlement of the cold war through big-name conferences, with all expenses paid. And there, pre-eminently, is where their voices have little or no effect.

## *She Dropped a Book On Prince Charming's Head*

NORA MAGID

THE DUD AVOCADO, by Elaine Dundy. Dutton. \$3.50.

In *I Am a Camera*, Christopher Isherwood asks Sally Bowles, "Why do you paint your finger nails green?" "I think it's pretty, don't you?" "Suppose you thought it pretty to paint dirty pictures on them, would you do that, too?" "Yes, you know, that's rather a good idea. Not dirty pictures, exactly, but sort of *stimulating* ones. I must get someone to do it for me."

Sally Bowles, that outrageous voluntary expatriate from the gentility that is England who went to Berlin to be an actress and found herself up to the ears in trouble with too many men, has just acquired an American cousin. She is Sally Jay Gorce, "the dud avocado" of Elaine Dundy's first novel, and her one aim has always been her freedom, defined roughly as "I want to stay out late as I like and eat whatever I like any time I want to." As a reward for surviving college her conveniently rich uncle gives her two years abroad. She can be sleazy on a subsidy, and like that earlier Sally, she yearns to be on the stage.

With her hair dyed pink—"a marvellous shade of pale red so popular with Parisian tarts that season"—dressed in evening gowns in the morning because her laundry never comes back, held together precariously with safety pins, she does a splendid job of pitting her Yankee callowness against sophistication. Talking in italics, in reprehensible schoolgirl slang, she gets the best of a Machiavellian monster from Italy, who has been juggling her along with a wife and a mistress. This dapper roué ends up slapping *her* face when *his* code is violated. She has to flee from a terrible Midwestern cousin, an earnest delegate to the Agricultural Commission for European Aid, Soil Erosion Division.

Her past recedes altogether too rapidly for comfort when she be-

comes embroiled with a fellow countryman of dubious connections. Instinct has warned her that when she meets another American she should "shamble back into the bushes like a startled rhino," but this time she doesn't. Her passport is stolen, and the U.S. embassy insists that she has sold it. Her pink hair turns greenish-yellow.

After a series of incredibly complicated escapades, she decides, when a streak of native common sense asserts itself, to meet what she considers her fate more than halfway. Forfeiting the frenetic and aimless gaiety of Paris, she goes home and gets a job as page in the New York Public Library.

Being Cinderella, she finds this employment entirely to her advantage. The prince comes to her. From the top of a ladder, she manages to drop some books directly onto the head of a desirable European—an illegitimate Hungarian dressed in pool-table cloth to which popcorn adheres, and furthermore the best photographer in the world. Since Sally Jay is, after all, a red-blooded American girl, what her exotic suitor has to offer after a whirlwind courtship is marriage, bona fide and legit.

MISS DUNDY, an American now married to Kenneth Tynan, a British drama critic, has written an entertaining and amusing book. (This is nobody's protest novel.) Withal, it is an instructive fable. The dud avocado, when watered with pure love, blooms after all.

Where Sally Bowles, product of an older, sadder civilization, knows that she will keep on playing, a little more gallantly, a little more hollowly, as she gets seedier and sadder, Sally Jay Gorce kicks up her heels only for just as long as it is appropriate. Then she snaps to, pulls up her socks, and proceeds to reap her harvest—romantic love, legalized. The American dream dies hard.