

Letter from Edinburgh

By Stephen Spender

WHEN IT BECAME clear that the French and Russian writers who were supposed to attend the Writers' Conference at Edinburgh were not going to come, it looked as if the whole enterprise would collapse. At a hastily convened Directing Committee meeting the subject of the first discussion was significantly changed from "Differences of Approach" to "Where the Novel is Now."

The absence of the French and Russians did indeed entirely change the character of the conference. For one thing, it enabled Malcolm Muggeridge, the chairman of the first discussion, to limit speeches to five minutes. Impossible to imagine a conference in which Sartre or Robbe-Grillet or Ehrenberg (or, for that matter, Alberto Moravia, who also failed to appear) spoke for five minutes only. The spectral conference which shadowed the actual meetings was one in which the other writers would have been a Greek chorus, commenting on French, analyses of the Situation, the Novelist, the Writer, the Object, the Left, the Right, Existence, etc., and on such fragments of post-Stalinist liberal thought, spiced with references to space ships, as might have fallen from Ilya Ehrenberg.

As it was there was an atmosphere of cats-away-the-mice will-play about these part-hilarious part-sombre proceedings. Not that the formidable American team of Mary McCarthy, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, William Burroughs, and Nicola Tucci, are in any sense mice. But they were participants more than analysts and self-explicators, they guyed themselves, and switched from serious gaiety to tragic irony.

The conference achieved a very marked success with the public. The vast, hideous, barrel-like, many-tiered McEwan Hall, was half empty only on one day—that devoted to the discussion of *Scottish Writing Today*. This was a very curious occasion, and demonstrated the mixture of a few grains of salt with a fearful mess of haggis which makes the wisdom of holding writers' public debates so questionable. Douglas Young made the claim that the early lyrical poems of MacDiarmid were "equal to the world's best lyrics," and that the best poetry written in Scotland within the past thirty years was in Gaelic, by Somhairlie Maclean. Young's address justified the meeting. Apart from this, there was horse-play—Alexander Trocchi characterising the rhetoric of the Scottish nationalists as "turgid, petty, provincial, stale, cold-porridge, Bible-clasping nonsense," and adding, "of what is interesting in the last ten years or so in Scottish writing, I myself have written it all."

The Scottish writers had a carafe at their table

which was filled—the journalists revealed afterwards—with neat whiskey. The geni of this Aladdin's lamp gradually took over, making the English members of the audience feel—as they were supposed no doubt to do—that it was all the fault of their persecution, their lack of understanding, their refusal to learn Gaelic or to spell out Lallans, that had diluted the lyric crystals of Hugh MacDiarmid with so much rhetorical spirits.

Obviously, the Writers' Conference was something of a *succès de scandale*. Perhaps the contrast between the spirit of John Knox—transubstantiated into Edinburgh's very ladder-like architecture which has the appearance of smoke-grained ascetic stone scaling an ever down-pouring heaven—and the scandalous statements of Henry Miller, Norman Mailer, William Burroughs and Van Het Reve made this inevitable. It provided a setting of fixed drama, like the Western Front, for the week-long session.

Mary McCarthy remarked that one of the difficulties of the novelist today was making not the future, but the present convincing. "For example," she said, "if I were to describe in a novel the conference which we have been attending, I would have to tone it down considerably to make it sound credible." As a matter of fact some of the speeches made were remarkably like those of more eccentric characters in an Angus Wilson novel. Perhaps it was he who wrote the scenario.

The press undoubtedly contributed to the success of the proceedings by reporting such spicy items as Van Het Reve's confession that he was a homosexual, and Norman Mailer's casual aside to the effect that Alexander Trocchi took heroin; though I should add that the confusion of the Scottish nationalist debate was such that when, on the same day, Mr. Van Het Reve made his announcement, it was received with sympathetic applause from the audience, and without astonishment, as though he were speaking as one other representative of an oppressed minority (perhaps from some remote separatist Hebridean isle). He had to make his confession again the next day to provoke any reaction from the audience, any report from the press. In the long run it acted as a Time Bomb which may yet blow up any future Edinburgh Writers' Conference.

On the day of the censorship debate the atmosphere of scandal was heightened by a long, hypocritical, unctuous speech by Maurice Girodias, publisher of the Olympia Press, in Paris, followed by a speech from an anonymous, bearded all-out-for-pornography, literature-be-damned, ex-publisher

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