

## WHY PEN?

If required to briefly expound on the 'raison d'être' of PEN, I would be tempted to say that PEN wished to create a space free from nationalism for writers where they could meet and discuss issues of literature; journalists to scrutinize the causes and effects of nationalism in accordance with the legacy of Émile Zola; historians to take apart national myths; and translators to make the inner message of writers and poet available in any language.

Nothing of this comes automatically. History points to the opposite. PEN originated eighty years ago when, following the Great War, nationalism was still rife. In the following decades the ideology of PEN became clearer and more articulated. And when tyrants started to burn books, the PEN community decided it could not stand apart from reacting against regimes of intolerance.

This was uphill work, in the thirties as well as in the black and white world of the Cold War. Even now, when national borders seem to mean less and less in our part of the world, nationalism haunts us. 'Raison d'état' is the usual cliché used to bring the unorthodox to heel. Sometimes with threat and repression, at times even prison.

Now nationalism is a word that calls for distinctions. I hear for example the Scots carefully remind us of that there is a difference between the nationalism of a present-day Scotland as compared to certain Balkan states of the nineties. What they and other modern states are talking about is the comfort of cultural heritage, the love of the countryside where you were born, in the stories and the language of one's childhood. In short, about the pride and necessity of Identity. This serves the free creativity of writers. Tolerance, generosity and reciprocity are its hallmarks. The other kind is fettered in mythology. An overdose of that kind of nationalism brings nothing but intellectual poverty and easily becomes the political tool of other more sinister interests.

In this respect, PEN carries on a tradition, which is the essence of 'modernity'. It is a heritage of the Age of Enlightenment and John Stuart Mill, much more than being a daughter of the French Revolution. The insight is that free critical thought, however much it may trouble authority, is in the long run to the benefit of society. It becomes the backbone of democratic society and self-reliant citizens.

The ethics of PEN are also in the Charter. The freedom of speech we have as an ideal is not total, not uninhibited. It acknowledges self-imposed restraint. Members must refrain from knowingly untrue statements, never advocate violence in solving conflicts, and play their part in promoting the ideas of a culture of peace in society.

Certainly PEN strives to promote quality in the literary discourse we encourage. PEN takes pride in excellence. But we are guided by an open-ended definition of quality. PEN has the implied task of enabling any young writer of today to become the classic of tomorrow. Furthermore, talent must be allowed to develop, and talent seldom develops in prison. Writers under repression or in prison must also be our concern. And PEN is an association for those who realise that personal satisfaction arises not only from a job well done, but also from a conviction that the best is only possible in a society free, tolerant and concerned.

International PEN is built of free, autonomous PEN Centres. Members invite others from across borders to participate in seminars for an exchange of ideas and a discussion of matters of mutual concern, and where hospitality both brings together and broadens horizons. Thus we are all enriched. Thus solidarity is enhanced. Thus we build the future of a Europe that we hope never again shall be torn apart by nationalism – but rather held together by mutual respect, allowing all to flourish.

This is why International PEN is an organisation with a future. Promoting literature, defending freedom to write.

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May 2005