

POETS

VIETNAM

NEW YORK

The Barbizon Plaza, on Fifty-Eighth Street, a block from Central Park. A smallish theatre, nowhere near full. An odd crowd: long hair, some of it grey, freaky clothes, some very straight white shirts and ties, undergraduates. A poetry reading, a benefit reading for Resist. Poets against the war: we will try whether the pen is mightier than napalm, the antipersonnel bomb, 2,4,5-T. The conception is almost ludicrous: poets hurling images against the most massive and inexorable war machine the world has ever seen.

Resist itself seems almost pathetic, an organization largely of intellectuals and academics formed in 1967 to "raise funds to organize draft resistance unions, to supply legal defense and

bail, to support families and otherwise aid resistance to the war in whatever ways may seem appropriate". The poetry position is hard and forthright. Resist believes "that every free man has a legal right and a moral duty to exert every effort to end this war, to avoid collusion with it, and to encourage others to do the same." The Steering Committee boasts, among others, Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag.

So the reading is for Resist, the tickets are five dollars each, the audience is small, and the atmosphere is like a family reunion. The Canadian visitor begins to feel some sense of the warmth of what his American brothers call, simply, "the Movement". The Modern Language Association is meeting at the New York Hilton: the MLA, the 30,000 member monster which serves as the professional association in English and modern foreign languages. A gouty old organization which has for years indifferently digested papers on arcane philological topics and gives awards to papers with titles like "Our New Poet: Archetypal Criticism and The Faerie Queene", the MLA was invaded in 1968 by the New University Conference, the chief grouping of U.S. academic radicals, and the incoming president is M.I.T.'s Louis Kampf, as feisty and gentle a radical scholar as one could hope for.

Consequently the MLA is now of interest to the academic left, and a benefit poetry reading during its annual deliberations is worth staging—though only just, if one judges from the size of the crowd. Later it will occur to me that the audience was almost all NUC, which ought to disgrace the MLA, for the reading was well advertised, and there are 10,000 scholars in town who claim to be interested in literature. The poets are good ones and, within the United States, well-known—aside from Muriel Rukeyser and Denise Levertov, who are well-known everywhere. But the MLA meeting, I recognize,

has nothing to do with literature; it is a place to present papers, carve notches on one's bibliography, make useful contacts and get job offers. In no serious way does it differ from a convention of automobile muffler manufacturers. The NUC is something else, the poets are something else, and it is good to be here with them and away from the production managers of Harvard and Berkeley.

The poets, in fact, are both sorrowful and angry. Robert Bly is in charge of the evening a quiet-looking man in his early forties whose manner is somewhat reminiscent of Fred Cogswell. One difference is a handsome woven brown-and-white serape, which swirls about him as he reads. And how he reads! Unlike the others, he has the poems by memory, both his and other poets', and the lines crack and slash from his mouth; he strides about the stage, arms writhing, fingers splayed, clasp his hands, whirling on the audience with images of burning children, indifferent bombers, orgasms of death. I suddenly realize that he projects a sense of shame in his nationality which is painful to observe; he probably does not know he does so; by now it is part of the case of his mind. I find I am sensitive to that emotion, which I have felt since October 16; a dozen weeks earlier I would not have gone to New York, assuming that the repressive atmosphere would be unbearable. Now the border simply separates one repression from another, and makes less difference that it ever has in my lifetime.

Galway Kinnell. Long brown hair like the early Beatles, a classically handsome face saved from Hollywood styles by deeply graven lines: a more experienced face than Hollywood could find comfortable. His poem is as cool and lucid as his style of reading, beside and slightly behind the lectern, launching his graceful lines out to the audience with the perfect competence of a boy who knows exactly how to make a paper airplane soar. And for all this, the poem, a long one which is ostensibly at least about killing a chicken, moves us deeply. One poem begins "Yes, we were looking at each other," and as its creation of a woman's encounter with a man drives forward, each line begins with that resounding "Yes!" Her eyes, half-closed, seem to fill with tears; she shakes with emotion. As the poem surges to its resolution, the words punch out a resounding affirmation which subsides into the last line. "And yes we were looking at each other." Later I see her embracing a friend in the lobby: she is crying with pleasure. Her body, aging and plain, is lying about her. I have an impulse to go to her and take her hand, or embrace her myself, but I have inherited the stolidity of my culture and I don't.

A break: Paul Lauter, from the University of Maryland, Resist's National Director, gets up to talk about Resist and to pass a literal hat. Resist provides organizing kits, funds draft resistance unions, helps resisters' families, buys a mimeograph machine for this group and underwrites a conference for that one: more than 300 projects funded in three years.

Lauter has longish grey hair, bright eyes, a quick tight smile: in the MLA Business Meeting he spoke on several topics with an almost palpable intelligence. He is married to Florence Howe, who will be MLA President two years hence, having just been overwhelmingly voted 2nd Vice-President as a result of her work on

the MLA's Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession. Their two sons are with them—longhaired, large-eyed beautiful kids, about nine and eleven, who take their turns at the literature tables, pass the hat, and carry messages in big meetings. Despite his relaxed stance, leaning back against the stage, Lauter seems intense; at the same time he radiates the same warm fellow-feeling that seems to characterize this audience. I like him, his family, the crowd, and the three things together. I have little cash, and put most of it in the hat.

More poets. Denise Levertov doesn't appear, younger and newer poets take over: a black girl from Sarah Lawrence; a gentle pair of blue jeans surmounted by a lumberjack shirt topped chiefly by hair; a loping young fellow from Harvard. At the end Kinnell reads again, and Bly finishes the evening with a long chant he learned from the Dakota Indians: each time he comes to the end of a chorus, carefully dropping his voice, the audience begins to clap—whereupon Bly drives out another chorus, amid laughter and applause.

And we're outside in the canyon streets, with a cutting wind rattling newspapers over the hard, dirty ice, and the MLA going on down the street, the subway clattering underfoot, the irritated horns blaring, the cabbies who tell us they've been mugged five times this year, it's winter, and that's Rockefeller Centre (with the Time-Life Building, the Esso Building, the Standard Oil Building, aloof, towering, black as the ice) and we are in the heart, the heart, of the whole monstrous empire, and it's cold, cold, cold.

Poetry? Resist?

We have been through a ceremony of fellowship, we have heard men and women crying out from their soft vulnerability, opposing with warm images these tall chilly buildings. Nous faisons, said the man in Hemingway, notre petite possible. It seems desperately important. Someday it may even be enough.

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