

# Involved Writers in the World



Daniel Defoe in a London pillory

By STEFAN HEYM

EAST BERLIN— I have recently had to do research on Daniel Defoe, whose "Robinson Crusoe" and "Moll Flanders" are perennials. A number of years before he published these best sellers, Defoe stood in a London pillory three times on successive days — one day in Cornhill by the Exchange, the next in Cheapside near the Conduit and the third in Fleet Street by Temple Bar—with a paper above his head that read, "Daniel Defoe, for writing and publishing a seditious libel entitled 'The Shortest Way With the Dissenters'."

That was in 1703, long ago. Perhaps it isn't quite as bad as that, today.

In Moscow, at the foot of the monument erected to the poet Mayakovsky, young poets declaim to the youth of the city. Soviet books are printed in huge editions and sell at low prices; the collected works of the classics are oversubscribed; every village has its public library; museums are crowded; lectures and discussions popularize literary works; the state subsidizes cultural activities.

Yet Mayakovsky ended a suicide. Not many years afterward, writers died in penal camps.

What was it that marred the hopes for happy harmony between the writer and a society run by and for the common man?

Perhaps you recall that line in the

## *The Oldest Story: Conscience Colliding With the State*

old Internationale: "'Tis the final struggle . . ."

Rightly or wrongly, that line contains a pledge: once this is won, it's over; men will be brothers. That is pure idealism; but along with Marxist analysis and Leninist tactics, ideals are needed to fight, and win, a revolution.

The revolution victorious eliminated one very basic contradiction—that between the exploiters who owned the means of production and those other classes who owned little more than their bare hands and were being exploited. But then new contradictions arose whose manifestations are noticeable from the China coast to the shores of the Elbe River.

The new contradictions add excitement to the socialist writer's life. Wherever he looks: new conflicts, new situations, new characters—and new difficulties. That bureaucrats may take bureaucratic measures against his work and sometimes against his person is the least of these.

His main difficulty is the conflict in his own heart. To the writer, the gulf between the imperfections of

socialism and the promise it holds poses a question of ethics: does he do more harm than good by a full reflection in his work of the new and often cruel and crude contradictions?

The writer's conflict of conscience is the more painful because of the new responsibilities which the new society places upon him. He is called upon to help in the construction of the new order.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if a Zola had risen in socialism and thundered his *J'accuse* against the trials of the Stalin period, compared to which the trial of Captain Dreyfus was a harmless diversion. Would his voice have been choked? Or would others have joined his protest, and prevailed?

Frederick Engels once defined freedom as insight into necessity. But people do not ordinarily see freedom in Engels's terms. They want to be free of something, mostly of hunger and oppression, and also, within the accepted set of morals, free to speak out and to act as they please.

That's the freedom for which men have made revolutions. But in its absolute application, this freedom means also freedom to those who want to destroy the revolution and, along with it, freedom itself. The revolution, made for freedom, therefore must limit it in order to maintain itself. This immediately raises the question of who is to limit freedom, and how far to limit it?

History, in coming up with a Bonaparte or a Stalin, has not always answered that question in a satisfactory manner.

But whatever happened to Daniel Defoe, standing in the London pillory and waiting for the rotten fish and the brickbats to come flying?

Tell them, *The men that placed him*

Three times, on successive days, the same thing happened. People came pouring from their shops and from the inns, because it was noontime, and they toasted the writer with tankards of beer, also with wine, and cheered him; women, some of unsavory reputation, garlanded the pillory with flowers, and instead of brickbats, nosebags were thrown; and at the foot of the pillory printer's apprentices and newsboys hawked copies of a new poem he had written in jail and in which he concluded:

*here,  
Are scandals to the times!  
Are at a loss to find his guilt,  
And can't commit his crimes!*

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