

The Pain of Discontent

JOHAN STEINBECK has some things to say about discontent in his new book, "Sweet Thursday." "Where does discontent start?" he asks. "You are warm enough, but you shiver. You are fed, yet hunger gnaws you. You have been loved, but your yearning wanders in new fields. And to prod all these there's time, the Bastard Time. The end of life is now not so terribly far away—you can see it the way you see the finish line when you come into the stretch—and your mind says, 'Have I worked enough? Have I eaten enough? Have I loved enough?' All of these, of course, are the foundations of man's greatest curse, and perhaps his greatest glory. 'What has my life meant so far, and what can it mean in the time left to me?' And now we're coming to the wicked, poisoned dart: 'What have I contributed to the Great Ledger? What am I worth?' And this isn't vanity or ambition. Men seem to be born with a debt they can never pay no matter how hard they try. It piles up ahead of them. Man owes something to man. If he ignores the debt it poisons him, and if he tries to make part payments the debt only increases, and the quality of his debt is the measure of the man."

It is the writer's job to deal with discontent. If happiness and plenty were everyone's portion the novelist would probably go out of business. A novel, to amount to anything, must deal with challenge, and the most personal of these perhaps is discontent. A novel must excite the imagination by making human problems real and by building strands which tie these problems to the actual or potential experience of the individual reader. A novel need not resolve the eternal question of discontent, but at least it

can try to dispose of the human situation that grows out of it.

Discontent, to be sure, takes many forms. It can be born of injustice or suffering, ambition or aspiration, avarice or desire, proper or improper human relationships, or sickness of mind or body. The emphasis of the novelist on the various forms of discontent has necessarily varied from time to time. Today's writer, like John Steinbeck, is becoming increasingly concerned with the effort of the individual to relieve the discontent caused by his inability to come to terms with himself. It is difficult to think of a time when so many people were probing and searching for new insights into human behavior; in particular, their own. The books and plays in most demand are the ones that dramatize the struggle for individual bearings in an age of drift. Even when the product is elusive or murky, as in the case of T. S. Eliot's two recent plays, there is an eagerness to pursue or speculate upon the intended message. And where the approach is both explicit and constructive, as in the case of the books by Bonaro and Harry A. Overstreet, there is a public demand and response as indicative as it is heartening.

ON THE clinical level the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts have never been busier. No one knows what the pressure on the professional practitioner would be if his services were within the reach of all those who need them.

The general situation is itself deserving of a serious book. The average American today lives better than ever before. His appetite is larger and his capacity to satisfy it correspondingly so. Nowhere else in the world are

there so many educational facilities for so many people. There are both leisure time and the means to make the most of it. People are healthier and they live longer than previous generations. In no other major nation is a citizen so little hampered by the lack of station or success of his parents. Yet all this has not produced happiness in the proportionate amounts. Why? What is the great lack? Is it possible, as Tolstoy once suggested, that happiness and material well-being should be considered independently of each other? Was Tolstoy right when he said that discontent is not the result of man's needs but of his abundance?

In this sense it is ironical that the American experience should furnish such dramatic refutation of the primary aims of Communism, based as they are on sheer materialism. It is equally ironical that the Soviet, having failed to produce the economic miracle as advertised and promised for its masses, should be decrying the material success of the individual American it claimed was possible only under Communism. To make the paradox complete, each system is now calling attention to the lack of spiritual values and inspired purpose in the other. The social philosopher and the historian have seldom been offered richer stuff for comparative study.

To say that man does not live by bread alone does not meet the larger question: What is it that he does live by? Whatever the full and rounded equation will show, it is possible that one of the factors has to do with vital purpose. Can the pain of discontent be relieved without some idea of what man's goals are or ought to be? It is not what we have or do not have but where we want to go that represents the test of sanity. The measure of greatness, for the individual or the nation, is not acquisition but disposition. —N. C.

Unknown

By Marcia McGhee

BENEATH bubbling lava
On limitless peaks
Lies Unknown—
Unknown lurks everywhere
It waits far out in soundless space.
It crouches in stony caves.
Like a hunted animal it waits—
Ready to be conquered,
Ready to defend.
And—in a giant swarm men look—
Spreading, seeking, finding,
Pushing Unknown into darkest
corners and deepest pits
Discovering, learning, closer, closer—
Until all the Universe will be Known.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NOEL COWARD AND BERNARD SHAW

I REALLY MUST PROTEST against Joseph Wood Krutch's misleading suggestion, in his review of my book "The Art of Noel Coward" [SR July 17], that I consider Noel Coward a dramatist on the Bernard Shaw level. I do not, of course; and, if I were to express such a view, Mr. Coward himself would probably be the first to tell me (as Cockneys say to puncture pretentiousness) to "come off it." Incidentally, Mr. Coward has told me of his great admiration for Bernard Shaw, both as a man and writer, and of Shaw's helpfulness to him on more than one occasion.

ROBERT GREACEN.

London, England.

POSTHUMOUS ADDITIONS

IN YOUR "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR" [SR July 10] John G. Moore of Pasadena, California, inquires whether any of your readers know if a poem by Walt Whitman, "A Kiss to the Bride," which he wrote at the marriage of Nelly Grant in 1874, is included in any of his collected works. Mr. Moore expressed doubt that an old clipping of this poem which he found has ever been printed in any of Whitman's works.

You may inform your readers that this poem was published in a collection of Walt Whitman's works and can be found in "The Writings of Walt Whitman," published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in the Collectors Camden Edition of 1902 in Volume Three, Page 32 (a publication limited to 300 copies). I can understand Mr. Moore's difficulty as this poem appears in the volume which is incorrectly titled "Leaves of Grass." The poem is contained in a group of poems which Whitman included under the heading "Old Age Echoes." Mr. Whitman's executor left a diary note in 1891 in which he reported conversation with Whitman in which the poet expressed desire to publish this group of poems immediately following "Leaves of Grass."

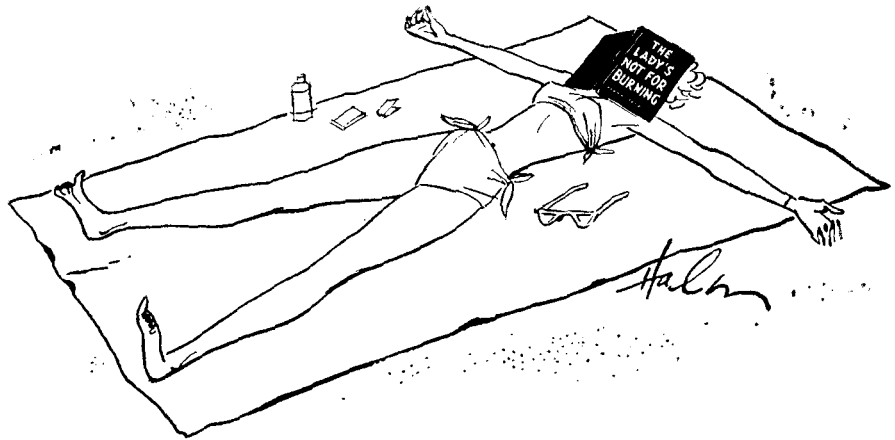
ERWIN FELDMAN.

New York, N.Y.

GRAMMATICAL CONFUSION

USAGE IS ADMITTEDLY a powerful force in English grammar and syntax. It is usage, for example, which has sanctioned the grammatical confusion of first-person should and would, shall and will. Again, usage is responsible for such syntactical shifts as that of the adverb in sentences of the type "I only have a dollar." Grammarians recognize the force of usage and are abiding by its dicta.

There are, however, certain grammatical confusions which I doubt that even usage permits or defends. One of these is the confusion of the preterit tense of certain verbs with their past participle. Joseph Wood Krutch in his review of the books



by and about Noel Coward [SR July 17] says Coward's autobiography "... mentions ... the songs he composed and sung." Again, in H. C. Robbins Landon's, "Music in Vienna" [ibid], Mr. Landon informs us that "Blanche Thebom sung Krenek's 'Medea' ..."

If these are not slips of the proof-readers; if I am in error and usage does sanction this sort of verbal juggling, then my apologies to both Mr. Krutch and Mr. Landon for having wrote this letter.

WARREN MEINHARDT.

Stanford, Calif.

LITERARY ERRORS

NOTE TWO SERIOUS ERRORS in "Your Literary I.Q." [SR July 17]: #3) Rapunzel was not shut up in the tower by her family but by a wicked witch and, #4) Roxane did not learn the truth about Cyrano by seeing his duel with death but by hearing him repeat the words of the farewell love letter he wrote for Christian.

I have been longing to get back at these memory-teasing questionnaires for many a long day.

T. R. DALE.

De Kalb, Ill.

"WE WENT THATAWAY"

BEING A FAN of H. Allen Smith and living in the Midwest, I enjoyed his book "We Went Thataway," so please note that Robin W. Winks in his LETTER TO THE EDITOR [SR July 24] changed the title to "He Went Thataway."

LARRY PRATT.

Hays, Kan.

ON VIRGINIA WOOLF

IT IS NOT EASY to be quite candid in writing about eminent or famous authors. One is afraid of exposing his own limitations. But having just put down "The Moment and Other Essays," by Virginia Woolf—whom I have long admired and often only half-understood—I am tempted

to ask whether the subscribers and faithful readers of *The Saturday Review* have experienced the same difficulty in her case as I have—that of not having a clear idea of the critical points she has made, or tried to make, in discussing certain great novels or volumes of short stories by first-rank storytellers.

That she was a remarkable writer; that she had subtlety, insight, and depth is of course undeniable. But, as Bertrand Russell said of Santayana, to enjoy him, feel the beauty and art of his style, is not necessarily to know just what he has said in the admired pages. It is, it seems, equally fatal to pause in reading Woolf and seek to formulate with precision her observations and criticisms.

Did she take too much for granted; did she expect her readers to develop her hints or suggestions? Or was she naturally vague in her thinking, and her involved style the reflection of her intellectual processes?

A journal of literary and artistic opinion is, I venture to believe, the proper forum for the sober discussion of the assets and faults of writers of the scope and stature of Virginia Woolf. Will some readers sit down at the typewriter and confess?

VICTOR S. YARROS.

La Jolla, Calif.

ALAIN LOCKE'S LETTERS AND MATERIAL

THE WORKS OF ALAIN LEROY LOCKE, recently deceased professor emeritus of philosophy at Howard University, Washington, D.C., and of the New School of Social Research, are being edited for publication and this committee would like to include such letters as significantly express his personality, philosophy, and interpersonal relations. We are particularly interested in his comments on social philosophy and interracial relations. The material requested, if sent, will be copied and returned, if so desired.

ALAIN LOCKE MEMORIAL COMMITTEE.

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