

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RAGE AS THERAPY

YOU KNOW what John Ciardi is? He's the Lenny Bruce of essayists. Like Bruce, he stirs up controversy at the drop of a preposition, angers and shakes people into thinking beyond their own limited views, and often makes a great deal of sense. Eventually some irate reader who stubs his mind once too often on Mr. Ciardi's words will label him "sick," also. I find his mental prodding healthy and stimulating, even when I disagree violently with him.

J. R. LINDEN.

Detroit, Mich.

A PAX ON TOYNBEE

BOTH SR and Arthur Larson are to be commended for initiating the series of articles, "Toward a Warless World" [SR, May 12], albeit the selection of Arnold Toynbee for the lead article is a dubious choice. It seems ironic to read "... it is impossible for a government to freeze human life ..." when the author is a notoriously vocal champion of the Arab League. The latter actively seeks to perpetuate the feudal *status quo* of the fellahin or peasants in the various Arab states.

However, one must be fair to you and to Professor Toynbee as an historian. You no doubt have "reverence for the sweep of his vision." Along with Maurice Samuel, I cannot. Nor can such eminent authorities as Professors Pieter Geyl, Herbert J. Muller, and Pitirim Sorokin. Surely the proposed symposium is intended to be more than an oversimplified, procrustean restatement of *Pax Romana*, *Pax Ecclesiae*, *Pax Britannica*, with the rise and fall of the Third Reich, i.e., *Pax Germana*, ignored (each the peace of empire, imposed by the armed might of a monolithic culture). I wish the symposium every success despite its inauspicious beginning.

NATHAN MINKOFF.

Pacific Palisades, Calif.

DYNAMIC NEUTRALISM?

IN THE LIGHT of Arnold Toynbee's plea for peaceful change, isn't it about time that Americans reconsidered their rather pained tolerance for the nonalignment of the Asian and African countries?

Since isolation is a pipedream in today's shrunken world, passive neutrality makes little sense. But if the unaligned would take on the job of promoting peaceful change by offering conciliation and mediation in every major dispute, they could earn their way in the race against nuclear suicide. Should they not be encouraged in this active role?

Washington itself has been doing some intensive mediation between the Netherlands and Indonesia, between Pakistan and India, and some months ago offered good offices in the dispute between Pakistan and Afghanistan. But in 1958 Washington spurned (and apparently persuaded the



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"And you can tell Andy Jackson not to come running to me when his new postmaster falls on his face."

press to ignore) Cambodia's offer to mediate between Mainland China and the U.S. on the troubled question of Matsu and Quemoy. Washington also ignored Brazil's offer of conciliation with Havana made on Feb. 4, 1960 (before Castro's shift toward the Communist bloc).

When it comes to peaceful change, Washington is apparently glad to act as mediator itself, but not so willing to accept conciliation or mediation offered by others. Otherwise stated, we seem willing to "dish it out," but not to "take it." Yet how can we have peace without peacemakers?

WILLIAM BROSS LLOYD, JR.

Winnetka, Ill.

SIDE EFFECTS

HERBERT RATNER's article "Are Americans Overmedicated?" [SR, May 26] was not only an exceptionally good article on the subject, but included along the way a number of good collateral ideas, as for example, some on the nature and needs of appropriate medical education, and the forgotten idea that medicine is an art.

S. HOWARD BARTLEY,
Professor of Psychology,
Michigan State University.

East Lansing, Mich.

THE ARTICLE by Herbert Ratner is one of the most fatuous articles I have seen in your publication, especially in view of the author's listed position as a professor in a

medical school. So many of his comments are merely personal opinions, one does not know if the article was an attempt at a factual presentation or merely the homespun philosophy of another professor. A few debatable points: If tranquilizers are being used to solve problems in place of the "virtues," may it not be from a failure of the "virtues" to guide us at this time? Is it the "true and chief function" of the medical school to turn out physicians who are artists and not scientists? And does his inference that scientists look at people as guinea pigs rather than human beings hold? Is it possible to give courses on how to communicate with patients? I agree that this would be very desirable but do not feel anyone has demonstrated how to accomplish it. What exactly is a course on the "philosophy of medicine" wherein the nature (that word again) of medicine is analyzed in terms of its "elements, causes, and principles"? Finally, the most debatable and sectarian viewpoint of all is introduced when a conclusion is offered that medical ethics is based on "natural law" and every medical school should teach this as part of the curriculum. Perhaps the impoverished millions can only hope that Professor Ratner's natural law will allow us to spread some of the scientific knowledge we now have, such as birth control information.

J. P. DONLON, M.D.

New York, N.Y.

(Continued on page 38)

Hammer Locks in Wedlock

By GRANVILLE HICKS

RARELY has a first book of any kind been more warmly received than Philip Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus," a novella and five short stories. My paperback copy carries glowing words from Alfred Kazin, Saul Bellow, and Irving Howe. "He is acidulous, unsparing, tender," Kazin said. "At twenty-six," said Bellow, "he is skilful, witty, and energetic and performs like a virtuoso." Howe wrote: "What many writers spend a lifetime searching for—a unique voice, a secure rhythm, a distinctive subject—seem to have come to Philip Roth totally and immediately." The book won Roth the National Book Award for 1960, a Guggenheim fellowship, and a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters. During the next academic year he will be writer-in-residence at Princeton University.

When a first book has had a success of this sort, it is certain that the author's second book will be given a going over. The critics who lavishly praised the first book are likely to feel that they have overextended themselves and to use the second book as an occasion for retrenchment, while the critics who didn't review it or reviewed it unfavorably are happy to have the chance to say, "Yah, yah, yah!" But it fairly often happens that the second book is not so good as the first, and even the reviewer who would like to be kind has to report the falling off. I didn't review "Goodbye, Columbus," but I read it and liked it. "Letting Go" (Random House, \$5.95) leaves me quite unhappy.

"Letting Go" is a long novel about a group of young people in the later Fifties. The central figure is Gabe Wallach, an English instructor, first at Iowa and then at Chicago, bright, well-to-do, attractive to women. At the outset a girl named Marge Howells, a rebel against Kenosha, Wisconsin, hops into his bed, and he has a difficult time pushing her out. Later there is a more serious affair with Martha Reganhard, a divorcee who has two children, and this also ends badly. Meanwhile he is deeply involved with his recently widowed father, who tries to possess him and, failing, makes a poor sort of second marriage. And then there are the Herzes, Libby and Paul.

The Herzes are almost as important in the novel as Gabe. We are told about their courtship; about their marriage, which cut them off from their families, his Jewish, hers Catholic; about the abortion; about her invalidism, about his obstinacy. It is a chronicle of disaster piled upon disaster, and there is Gabe looking on, sexually attracted by Libby but more deeply moved by pity for the unhappy pair of them.

Gabe is a privileged young man and therefore, being of the modern age, given over to feelings of guilt. He is always trying to help people and then, overcome by a realization of his inadequacies, pulling away from them. Although he is dubious about his motives, he tries to befriend the Herzes at Iowa and he gets Paul his job in Chicago. And finally he takes decisive, though by no means sensible, action on their behalf—an experience, it is intimated, that contributes to his maturity.

All this Roth reports in unrelenting detail. Each domestic squabble—and there are dozens of them—is set down as fully as if it were the Battle of the Bulge, with page after page after page of dialogue. That Roth is a careful observer and has a good ear is known to every reader of "Goodbye, Columbus," but these are gifts that can be abused, and in the novel Roth has abused them. Line by line the writing is fine, but that does not save long stretches from being unpardonably dull and quite superfluous.

In an essay, "Writing American Fiction," that appeared in *Commentary* for March 1961, Philip Roth discussed the problems of the contemporary writer, which he found to be staggering. After commenting, not always graciously, on such novelists as Mailer, Salinger, Malamud, Bellow, Gold, and Styron, he put himself on record as favoring a fearless realism. Much modern fiction, it seems to me, demonstrates the rich possibilities of methods that are not strictly realistic, but Roth has a right to his opinion. What I quarrel with is

his practice. Realism can be, must be, selective, and Roth is simply not selective enough; he goes on and on long after the reader knows all that he could conceivably need to know.

And after one has worked one's way through this mass of detail, one wonders what Roth thinks he has accomplished. In his essay he argues that contemporary reality is horrible beyond belief: "It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination." He objects to the styles of certain writers on the ground that they are an expression of pleasure. "If," he asks, "the world is as crooked and unreal as I think it is becoming, day by day; if one feels less and less power in the face of this unreality, day by day; if the inevitable end is destruction, if not of all life, then of much that is valuable and civilized in life—then why in God's name is the writer pleased?"

IF this is his vision of life, it is what he must try to set down, but I cannot feel that he has set it down convincingly in "Letting Go." Many of his characters, to be sure, are miserable a good deal of the time, but I find in their miseries few reflections of those contemporary horrors of which Roth speaks. These are fairly ordinary young people, with a capacity for getting into trouble that is not much above normal. None of them has found a satisfying way of life, but there is nothing here that stupefies or sickens or infuriates. What the book seems to demonstrate is not that contemporary civilization is a disaster but that many people manage to mess up their lives—which isn't news.

Roth has not made the characters strikingly significant on any ground. Gabe Wallach is an amiable blunderer: "He is better, he believes, than anything he has done in life has shown him to be." Paul Herz is stronger, but he uses his strength against himself, while Libby pursues her own wretched course. Martha Reganhard seeks boldly for happiness until she is chastened into compromise. None of the characters achieves a spectacular triumph—Roth thinks writers in these days have no business being affirmative—but, on the other hand, none could possibly be regarded as tragic. They go their dull ways, and we are dragged along with them.

Let me make it clear that Roth is still a figure to be reckoned with. This is the kind of bad book that only a good writer could have written. But, after "Goodbye, Columbus," with its vitality and sureness of touch, "Letting Go" is a disappointment.

