

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DOES NEATNESS REALLY COUNT?

N.C.'s EXCELLENT EDITORIAL "Why Johnny Can't Write" [SR, June 8] should be circulated among all teachers of writing. The simple but necessary conditions he recommends are too often ignored, not because circumstances prevent, but because too many teachers are impatient with the creative process. To achieve order and elegance in writing, it is often necessary to proceed somewhat inelegantly. With the modern fetish for public neatness, teachers like to keep up the appearance of order and efficiency. This can be disastrous in the teaching of writing, art, and the truly intellectual aspects of science.

JOHN WALTON,
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Baltimore, Md.

It is MY HOPE that N.C.'s editorial will have the influence on composition instruction it should have. He has bluntly and pointedly stated the case for the difficult art of writing.

However, lest he think there are no teachers who share his beliefs, I would like to call attention to the following paragraph from the January 1963 issue of *Elementary English*, a publication of the National Council of Teachers of English:

It is true there may be professionals who do not need the careful editing a book receives before being printed. But the writer who can dash off a superior sketch on first flush of inspiration is a rarity among students. We teachers should mandate such re-readings and revisions as will make a repellent mess of each writing if necessary. Only then might we urge such perfection of appearance as each teacher finds appropriately satisfactory.

Let us hope your editorial will be taken to heart in every classroom in the nation, despite the bugaboo of examinations.

ISADORE LEVINE.

Long Island City, N.Y.

THE EDITORIAL "Why Johnny Can't Write" brought back the recollection of a struggle to express myself about issues that were important to teachers but not to me.

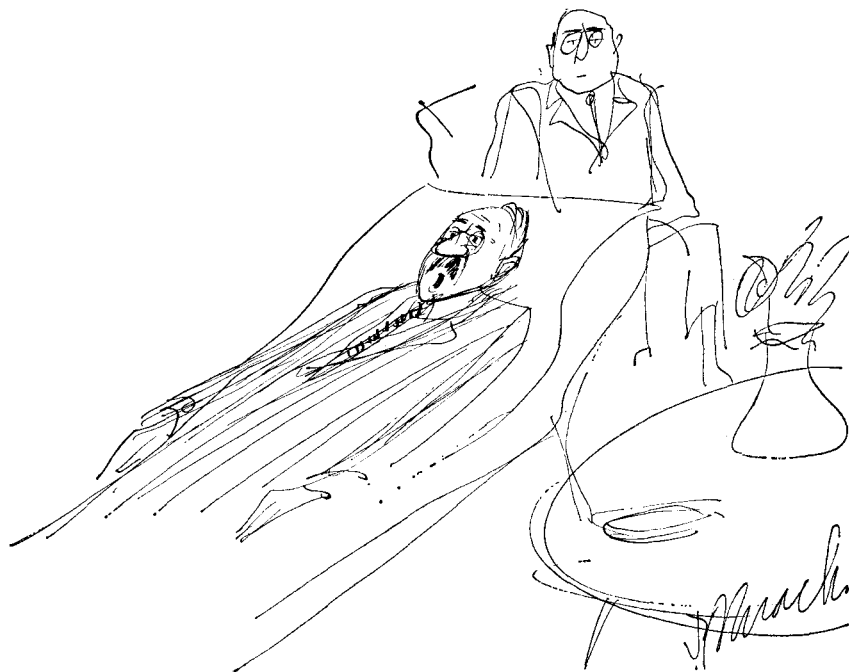
I think it would be interesting to survey numerous people who received C's and D's in college English and then went beyond school to use language as a means of oral and written communication effectively and creatively.

It would merely emphasize the hiatus that exists between the effort to teach writing and its actual practice. . . .

(Rabbi) MURRAY GRAUER.

White Plains, N.Y.

THE EDITORIAL "Why Johnny Can't Write" disappointed me very much. I think you



"I do practice positive thinking, but then I get to wondering if that's the answer."

present an unrealistic picture of a valuable technique in the teaching of English. Writing within a time limit is an exercise. Through practice in expression, the student acquires a greater facility in the language and the ability to put down his ideas with exactness.

This exercise is by no means a substitute for longer assignments. On the contrary, the experience gained should be applied to essays and themes. I am certain that the intent of educators is to assist slow and careful writing, not to replace it. . . .

LORAN THOMPSON,
Student, George School.

George School, Pa.

N.C. FORGETS that pressure is a necessary part of education, not to mention of life itself, especially in the twentieth century. If he has an alternative for the pressure of a deadline—to push every student to his limit, to see what he or she can do when it really counts—let him suggest it.

ROBERT RICHARD.

Grosse Pointe Woods, Mich.

IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE that if SR heeded its own strictures against writing "based on speed rather than respect for the creative process," it would appear once a year rather than once a week.

JEAN B. TRAPNELL,
Los Angeles Valley College.

Los Angeles, Calif.

N.C. HAS TOUCHED on an important matter, namely misconceived methodology in teaching writing. Of course, as he points out, educators are not solely responsible for students' faulty writing habits, but it is certainly true that the skills of writing

are often neglected for sheer productivity. Especially in the higher grades, failure to integrate grammar and composition in English courses belies the educational tenet that we learn by doing. But we learn by doing only when we understand what we are doing, or when we discover why we are doing a thing wrong. That seldom comes without the freedom to struggle.

MARY L. MCCALL.

St. Petersburg, Fla.

WHAT SIMPLE LIFE?

THE TITLE of Joseph Wood Krutch's article, "Wilderness as a Tonic" [SR, June 8], sums up all that is wrong with most of what has been published about man's relation to nature. Mr. Krutch criticizes "planning" and suggests faith in "the ultimate wisdom of nature." He adds that we'd better simplify our lives or the bomb will simplify them for us.

Surely there is a contradiction here. If we mean to simplify our lives, then we must do it rationally—by planning. One cannot escape to harmony or wisdom, nor can one immerse oneself briefly in "wilderness" and scamper home a wiser man. Thoreau said that he had to have at least an hour's walk in the woods every day to remain sane. I would have to drive for three days before I came to a place where I could walk on grass for an hour without crossing a backyard or climbing a fence.

Rather than faith in nature, we need faith in man, in our ability to plan a simpler, more harmonious environment. We can't reduce our population or reorganize our cities by believing in nature.

HERBERT W. KNAPP.

Kansas City, Mo.



HAVING explored his immediate environment and its moral climate with stunning brilliance in *La Dolce Vita*, Federico Fellini has now turned inward and explored in his new film, 8½, an individual much like himself. The subject this time is an Italian motion picture director, artistic, capable, and not uncommercial. The man, if not nervously exhausted, has reached a point of needing a rest cure. Thermal baths are prescribed. He has bad dreams, of being caught in a traffic jam in a tunnel, for instance. His producer will not wait for him to take his own good time about working out his next film project, and is already building sets, while the director searches for the film he may or may not have in him.

The setting is one of those bath resorts, with a turn-of-the-century hotel in the grand style, grounds with benches for the guest-patients, cavernous steam rooms, and massage parlors. Fellini makes marvelous use of the place, with characteristic strongly defined images, faces that emerge from halos of steam, from patterns of sunshine and shade, to face the camera eye—or the eyes of Guido Anselmi, the film director. This man, who wears a floppy hat indoors and out, who sometimes forgets to shave, who wonders if he is all or only part fraud, who searches for the sources of his previous strength, is played by Marcello Mastroianni, a film actor of sensitivity, subtlety, and precision.

The film is a mingling of reality, dream, and fantasy. The reality is that the director has come to the resort to recuperate. Following him like pack rats are his producer, production manager, a cynical writing collaborator, and people hoping to play parts in his film. They set up a production office at the hotel, they build a monstrous set on the nearby beach, they take over a local theatre and show screen tests, begging the director to make up his mind and choose.

His dreams take the form of curious recollections. Overwhelmingly poignant is one of his dead mother and father greeting him gently in their village cemetery. A haunting sequence in itself is that involving Saraghina, a fat, gross prostitute, who rolls her hips on a forlorn stretch of beach for the enjoyment and edification of schoolboys.

His mistress joins Guido at the resort and attempts to revive his passion for her. His wife arrives, and with her some of his other relatives. Their seeming tolerance of his frailties plunges

The Testament of Federico Fellini

him into self-critical brooding, and he escapes into another fantasy, this time of a harem in which he is lord and master, and in which his wife gladly cooks and scrubs for his handmaidens.

But the film's demands must be met, the inevitable press-conference must be held, and escaping from it all by a symbolic suicide, the director is at last free to see the truth. The people he has been attempting to fit into a form are real, and the artist (he now knows he is one) must express the reality he feels and sees. Dream and reality merge in one love-filled final scene. The people

of his life become his performers, the performers become his people, and he joins them. The director, the artist, has made his peace with himself, and he may proceed.

Fellini has taken a personal and most difficult subject, treated it with all the imagination he is capable of, and fashioned a film of the highest distinction. He has been unafraid to confess weaknesses and reveal his privacy. His actors quiver with feeling and provide his testament with a living, breathing quality. Again, as in *La Dolce Vita*, it is hard to pick the best, because they are all so amazingly good: Anouk Aimee as the wife, Guido Alberti as the producer, Sandro Milo as the mistress, Edra Gale as Saraghina. But there are many more. Fellini is blessed with more than a touch of genius. So is his new film.

—HOLLIS ALPERT.

POLITICAL SEDUCTRESS: In *Cleopatra* writer-director Joseph L. Mankiewicz spends four hours and three minutes developing a thesis that the fabled Egyptian queen was less a bedmate for famous Roman generals than a master politician who employed her charms discriminately as instruments of power politics. Knowing Caesar wanted a son, she rendered one unto Caesar, and he, knowing that Cleopatra wished to be the consort of the supreme ruler of the world, attempted to achieve a kingdom for her. In "friezes" that dissolve to vast Todd-AO scenes in mellow color, the ambitions and anguishes of Cleopatra are chronicled with reasonable fidelity to the original Roman sources.

There was talk that Mankiewicz would have preferred to show this epic of monstrous length as two separate films, and the two parts are, indeed, entities of a sort. Part 1 gives us Caesar and Cleopatra, with Rex Harrison eloquent, commanding, and assured. Part 2 concerns Antony and Cleopatra, with Richard Burton eloquent but less assured.

Mankiewicz, the director, seems uneasy and uncertain in the spectacle medium. Individual scenes play far too slowly, even though the language was written to be spoken by good actors. Both Burton and Harrison give it the respect it sometimes deserves. Elizabeth Taylor, on the other hand, is unequal to the demands made on her by Mankiewicz. He has asked for a many-faceted regal portrayal of a powerful woman with a mind of brilliance, a beautiful face, and a demanding body. Elizabeth Taylor has the face, but as a creature of passion she is unconvincing, as a woman of mentality a joke.

Mankiewicz, then, was hamstrung from the very beginning by an inadequate performer who, at the same time, provided the *raison d'être* for the gigantic undertaking. Obviously he continued to strive mightily to make a spectacle of intelligence and dignity, but does anyone really want to listen to Elizabeth Taylor discuss politics and military matters? His seriousness soon becomes ponderous, and as the production department heaps gilt and glitter, the eye becomes glazed.

Oddly, two or three scenes of spectacle have a weird impressiveness. One is Cleopatra's flamboyant entrance into Rome; another is the arrival of her sumptuous barge at Tarsus. Since spectacle is, practically by definition, entertainment, perhaps it is more entertaining spectacle that we should have had. But all the ornateness is not spectacle; it is background, and it obtrudes here far too often.

The movie suffers, too, when Mankiewicz develops what appears to be extraordinary tenderness in Cleopatra for Antony, after he has shown the warrior to be a sodden and essentially weak figure. The explanation, it would seem, is that Cleopatra suddenly realizes it is more important to be a woman than a politician. The transition is hardly made believable by Miss Taylor. Nevertheless, the film has its impressive moments, and it is not a disaster. Nor is it any kind of triumph.

—H.A.