



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Thanks for the Sunset

MORE than a decade ago Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., published his first novel, *Player Piano*, an unhappy book about the future, somewhat in the vein of Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984* but a bit closer to contemporary reality. The world it describes is a world in which automation has taken over, dispossessing not only the manual laborers but the white-collar workers as well. The only persons who have anything to do are the engineers; the masses of the people can only choose between different forms of boondoggling. There is a revolt by the miserable, frustrated masses, led by a defecting member of the engineering aristocracy, but it comes to nothing.

Although Vonnegut was serious enough in his warning against automation, he found time for considerable comedy along the way, and the same blend of seriousness and comedy is found in his subsequent work. In *Cat's Cradle* (1963) his theme is the irresponsibility of those scientists who are unconcerned with the consequences of their discoveries. His villain, already in his grave when the book opens, was one of the major contributors to the development of the atom bomb. The novel presents his character through the testimony of his three children, while at the same time it shows the cataclysmic results of one of his postwar researches. In spite of the somber note on which it ends, the book is in large part a hilariously wacky comedy.

God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater, or Pearls Before Swine (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$4.95) is even wackier. Its chief target is inherited wealth, but, as in his earlier books, Vonnegut takes pot shots at many varieties of folly. He begins with the Rosewater fortune, "the fourteenth largest family fortune in America," which in 1947 "was stashed into a foundation in order that tax-collectors and other predators not named Rosewater might be prevented from

getting their hands on it." The presidency of the foundation is hereditary, and the president has complete charge of the spending of the income. The capital, however, is under the control of the Rosewater Corporation, which takes good care of it.

Eliot Rosewater, the first president of the foundation and the son of its founder, Senator Lister Ames Rosewater, tries giving away money to various individuals and causes without much satisfaction. Finally he settles down in the town of Rosewater, Indiana, where the family fortune originated, and devotes himself to helping anyone who wants help. On the windows of his office, a squalid and cluttered room on the main street, is a sign that says, "The Rosewater Foundation: How Can We Help You?" He soon has a large if not altogether savory clientele. Senator Rosewater, who is as conservative as Senator Goldwater and rather more consistent, speaks of Eliot's having "the sniveling camaraderie of whores, malingerers, pimps, and thieves." Vonnegut goes on: "It was the Senator's conceit that Eliot trafficked with criminals. He was mistaken. Most of Eliot's clients weren't brave enough or clever enough for lives of crime. But Eliot, particularly when he argued with his father or his bankers or his lawyers, was almost equally mistaken about who his clients were. He would argue that the people he was trying to help were the same sorts of people who, in generations past, had cleared the forests, drained the swamps, built the bridges, people whose sons formed the backbone of the infantry in times of war—and so on. The people who leaned on Eliot regularly were a lot weaker than that—and dumber, too." Yet Eliot for once feels that he is being useful and is happy.

Attention now shifts to another Rosewater, Fred by name, an insurance salesman in a Rhode Island town, who is a distant cousin of Eliot's. Fred's wife's closest friend is Amanita (*sic*) Buntline,

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and the introduction of the Buntlines gives Vonnegut another opportunity to gibe at the idle rich. One of Mrs. Buntline's maids writes a friend: "What gets me most about these people isn't how ignorant they are, or how much they drink. It's the way they have of thinking that everything nice in the world is a gift to the poor people from them or their ancestors. The first afternoon I was here, Mrs. Buntline made me come out on the back porch and look at the sunset. So I did, and I said I liked it very much, but she kept waiting for me to say something else. I couldn't think of what else I was supposed to say, so I said what seemed like a dumb thing. 'Thank you very much,' I said. That was exactly what she was waiting for. 'You're entirely welcome,' she said."

An ambitious and unprincipled young lawyer has learned that, if Eliot is declared insane, his position as president of the foundation goes to his nearest Rosewater relative—who is, of course, poor Fred the insurance agent. Litiga-

tion begins, and the Senator calls in a science fiction writer named Trout, whom Eliot admires. "What you did in Rosewater County," Trout tells Eliot, "was far from insane. It was quite possibly the most important social experiment of our time, for it dealt on a very small scale with a problem whose queasy horrors will eventually be made worldwide by the sophistication of machines. The problem is this: How to love people who have no use." Later he says to Senator Rosewater, "It seems to me that the main lesson Eliot learned is that people can use all the uncritical love they can get."

Thus Vonnegut comes back to the problem that bothered him in *Player Piano*, the problem of a world that has been relieved from the curse of Adam, so that people no longer have to earn their bread in the sweat of their faces. One thing one may say is that the situation may be worse than he envisages, for, in the society of the near future, the persons who are expendable as producers will be essential as consumers. But of course Vonnegut is not an economist or a sociologist; he is a moralist and a humorist and a man of imagination.

Vonnegut belongs with the desperate humorists, of whom Joseph Heller, author of *Catch-22*, is the best known. Donald Barthelme, Bruce J. Friedman, and Richard Stern are of that company. John Hawkes can also be funny in the same way, though he has other virtues that are more important. Vonnegut's particular asset is the wildness of his imagination: there is nothing so ridiculous that he cannot make use of it. And, though one doesn't have to regard him as an infallible prophet, he has put his finger on an essential problem of our times.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRAZER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1130

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1130 will be found in the next issue.

XY ZQ NZPQ XY ZQ ANDESX DV

MOXY XSQ FYWPR YT XSYDESX

—XSNX MB QRDANXQR.

QRMXS SNGMPXYO

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1129

Great riches have sold more men than they have bought. —BACON.

The Thinking Man's Waste Land

By SAUL BELLOW

THE FACT that there are so many weak, poor, and boring stories and novels written and published in America has been ascribed by our rebels to the horrible squareness of our institutions, the idiocy of power, the debasement of sexual instincts, and the failure of writers to be alienated enough. The poems and novels of these same rebellious spirits, and their theoretical statements, are grimy and gritty and very boring too, besides being nonsensical, and it is evident now that polymorphous sexuality and vehement declarations of alienation are not going to produce great works of art either.

There is nothing left for us novelists to do but think. For unless we think, unless we make a clearer estimate of our condition, we will continue to write kid stuff, to fail in our function; we will lack serious interests and become truly irrelevant. Here the critics must share the blame. They too have failed to describe the situation. Literature has for generations been its own source, its own province, has lived upon its own traditions, and accepted a romantic separation or estrangement from the common world. This estrangement, though it produced some masterpieces, has by now enfeebled literature.

The separatism of writers is accompanied by the more or less conscious acceptance of a theory of modern civilization. This theory says in effect that modern mass society is frightful, brutal, hostile to whatever is pure in the human spirit, a waste land and a horror. To its ugliness, its bureaucratic regiments, its thefts, its lies, its wars, and its cruelties, the artist can never be reconciled.

This is one of the traditions on which literature has lived uncritically. But it is the task of artists and critics in every generation to look with their own eyes. Perhaps they will see even worse evils, but they will at least be seeing for themselves. They will not, they cannot permit themselves, generation after generation, to hold views they have not examined for themselves. By such willful blindness we lose the right to call ourselves artists; we have accepted what we ourselves condemn—narrow specialization, professionalism, and snobbery, and the formation of a caste.

And, unfortunately, the postures of this caste, postures of liberation and in-

This essay has been adapted from Saul Bellow's speech accepting the National Book Award for his novel *Herzog*.



—Jeff Lowenthal.

Saul Bellow: "Can we do no more than complain?"

dependence and creativity, are attractive to poor souls dreaming everywhere of a fuller, freer life. The writer is admired, the writer is envied. But what has he to say for himself? Why, he says, just as writers have said for more than a century, that he is cut off from the life of his own society, despised by its overlords who are cynical and have nothing but contempt for the artist, without a true public, estranged. He dreams of ages when the poet or the painter expressed a perfect unity of time and place, had real acceptance, and enjoyed a vital harmony with his surroundings—he dreams of a golden age. In fact, without the golden age, there is no Waste Land.

Well, this is no age of gold. It is only what it is. Can we do no more than complain about it? We writers have better choices. We can either shut up because the times are too bad, or continue because we have an instinct to make books, a talent to enjoy, which even these disfigured times cannot obliterate. Isolated professionalism is death. Without the common world the novelist is nothing but a curiosity and will find himself in a glass case along some dull museum corridor of the future.

We live in a technological age which seems insurmountably hostile to the artist. He must fight for his life, for his freedom, along with everyone else—for justice and equality, threatened by mechanization and bureaucracy. This is not to advise the novelist to rush immediately into the political sphere. But in the first stage he must begin to exert his intelligence, long unused. If he is to reject politics, he must understand what he is rejecting. He must begin to think, and to think not merely of his own narrower interests and needs.