

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## The Venice Biennale

WITH REGARD TO Katharine Kuh's article, "Enter Government, Exit Art," on the subject of the American exhibition at the Venice Biennale [SR, Apr. 2] the more I hear about the whole delicate business of government and the arts, the more convinced I am that bureaucracy is the thing to fear the most. It becomes all too painfully difficult to find someone who can make an enlightened and conclusive decision, and then stick to it. I suspect that at the federal level this is even more of a problem than it is at the state level.

JOHN B. HIGHTOWER,  
Executive Director, New York  
State Council on the Arts.

New York, N.Y.

BRAVO, KATHARINE KUH, for bringing to light the ugly facts with clarity, forthrightness and, above all, courage!

SHIRLEY HARDIN and  
SALLY FAIRWEATHER,  
Fairweather-Hardin Gallery.

Chicago, Ill.

THE ARTICLE on the Venice Biennale came as no surprise to those of us who have followed American and world art for some time. Certainly I agree that a full list of contributors should be published.

As far as the United States Government sponsorship is concerned, the United States could sponsor a fantastic exhibit for about the same price as a twenty-one gun salute—which we so gleefully shoot off for almost anyone passing by these days. It occurs to me that a well selected group of works by accomplished American artists would create both a better and a more lasting impression in Venice, or elsewhere, than the roar of a cannon.

RUFUS FOSHEE.

New York, N.Y.

## Agee: To Be Savored

T. S. MATTHEWS' perceptive article on James Agee [SR, April 16] is further evidence of Agee's dedication to and respect for the craft of writing.

I never see an advertisement for a speed-reading course without thinking of Agee and one sentence of his in particular. It is from *A Death in the Family*: "Through the deep, clear veil her gray eyes watched her gray eyes watch her through the deep, clear veil."

Who else would have thought of describing the act of looking in a mirror with a sentence that was, in effect, a mirror-image of itself? Such thoughtful and inventive writing is not meant to be gulped down . . .

F. PHIL LINK.

Reidsville, N.C.

## "Each With All"

THANK YOU for N.C.'s editorial, "The Delegation of the Survival Instinct" [SR, Apr. 9]. His lucid analysis of this sobering problem caused me to reread a lecture by Edward



*"If it's all right with you, I'd like to be on the winning side in the war against poverty."*

Howard Griggs of Stanford University, which was very popular in the early part of this century. His subject was "The New Social Ideal," and it seems, on rereading it, to forecast the New Deal, New Frontier, and the Great Society. He called the twentieth century the time we would be forced to turn to social action, and he called this period the Age of Humanity. I quote:

"To carry every man and woman, not as dependents, but through free and cooperative society of each with all, on toward all the ends of life that are worth seeking, is inconceivably and appallingly difficult."

JOE L. McMILLIN.

Memphis, Tenn.

## Puritanism and Romanticism

AS ONE who regards himself as a passionate anti-Marxist, I must make a Marxist criticism of Rollo May's views on sex and love in his article, "Antidotes for the New Puritanism," [SR, Mar. 26]. By and large his value prescriptions are dominated by middle-class romantic ideals, which are not related to the actual concerns of most human relationships in our mass society. The only one who could even strive for May's sex ideals is a suburban housewife with a framed M.A. hanging in her study, and a \$15,000 a year husband on the side.

The same general criticism made of Freud, i.e., his mistaking a specialized class neurosis for a neurosis of all groups and all societies, could be made of May. For most humans the love and sex aims envisioned by May lie in the metaphysical.

ROBERT PRIMACK,  
Assistant Professor,  
Newark State College.

Union, N.J.

## Movies and Morality

DAVID S. HUDSON's letter in this column on March 19 in which he questioned the action of the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures in casting itself as a judge of "artistic merit" in films was a masterpiece of illogic. He apparently feels that persons may not have authoritative knowledge in any field except that in which they make their living. This would seem to indicate that since he is a public relations coordinator he could not possibly know what the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, or churchmen, should do.

(The Rev.) R. D. SAUNDERS,  
Chicago Lawn Presbyterian Church.

Chicago, Ill.

## Finance Lesson

I DON'T LIKE TO SNITCH on a fellow traveler, but if your Mr. Knight really found the exchange rate on Argentina's peso to be twenty to the U.S. dollar—see next-to-last line of his "Geography Lesson" [SR, April 2], in which he speaks of an Argentine outlay "of more than 3,000,000 pesos (\$150,000)"—he is guilty of 1) having been had by sharp local traders, 2) newer-than-new math, or 3) dishonoring the most cherished honor system of our craft.

The official rate is around 190 to the dollar, and the current free rate somewhere near 250. In other words, the festival's promoters spent either the equivalent of about \$15,000, or roughly 30,000,000 pesos, depending on which, if either, of Mr. Knight's figures is correct.

J. RICHARD ELLIOTT, JR.

New York, N.Y.



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### A Plot Against the Post Office

THREE years ago Thomas Pynchon published a long novel called *V.*, which, after a slow start, aroused considerable talk, some people regarding it as a stupid joke and others as a comic masterpiece. Much of the action took place in New York City in 1956, but there were scenes in South Africa, Alexandria, Paris, Florence, and Malta in such assorted years as 1942, 1899, 1913, 1922, and 1919. So far as the novel has a center, it is the effort of a man named Stencil to ascertain the truth about *V.*, a woman of his father's generation about whose life many legends, some completely fantastic, have grown up. Whether this is a sufficient unifying force can be argued, but at any rate the various scenes are full of vitality: the parties of the Whole Sick Crew in New York, Benny Profane's shooting of alligators in the city's sewers, the siege of Malta in 1942, Mondaugen's adventures in South Africa in 1922, and Godolphin's visions of the strange land of Vheissu. And I believe that in its own way the book does hold together: Pynchon is trying to represent the chaotic complexity of life; if there is a pattern, he seems to be saying, it is likely to be something as absurd as Stencil's pursuit of *V.*

Pynchon's second novel, *The Crying of Lot 49* (Lippincott, \$3.95), is no more than a tenth as long as *V.*, is considerably easier to follow, and is just as funny. The central idea is possibly more preposterous than the central idea of the earlier book, and the reader is amazed that anyone, even Thomas Pynchon, could have dreamt it up. Once more the reader is led to question the rationality of human existence.

The book begins: "One summer afternoon Mrs. Oedipa Maas came home from a Tupperware party whose hostess had put perhaps too much kirsch in the fondue to find that she, Oedipa, had been named executrix, or she supposed executrix, of the estate of one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars

in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary." This should suffice to catch the admirer of *V.*: the ridiculous, presumably meaningful, puzzling names; a bizarre detail such as the kirsch in the fondue; the suggestion of something remarkable to come.

Oedipa departs from her husband, a disk jockey with problems, to meet her co-executor in San Narciso—named for a saint not, I hope, in the calendar. She has adventures with a group of youthful singers called the Paranoids, with a can of hair spray that runs amok, and with the co-executor. But her real adventure begins when she encounters "a frail young man in a drip-dry suit," Mike Fallopian, who is proselytizing for the Peter Pinguid Society, named for the commanding officer of a Confederate man-of-war that exchanged shots in 1863 with a Russian vessel. Members of the society are opposed to the United States Post Office, not on the ground that it does a wretched job, which would be understandable, but on principle because it is a government monopoly and therefore socialistic.

From now on Oedipa finds clues everywhere—at an experimental production of an Elizabethan play, at a stockholders' meeting of a mammoth corporation, in an old-timer's story of an Indian massacre, in the reflections of a member of Inamorati Anonymous, in the street games of children. All evidence points to the existence of an ancient and widespread conspiracy to oppose and



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evade the distribution of mail by the government. So impressive is the evidence that the reader must either accept the reality of the conspiracy or assume that Oedipa is suffering from hallucinations, or decide that, like the poor young man in John Fowles's *The Magus*, she is the victim of a ridiculously elaborate hoax. I shall not reveal the nature of Pynchon's ingenious conclusion.

As in *V.*, much of the charm of the book lies in the ingenuity with which Pynchon elaborates even minor points. Oedipa's husband, for example, before he became a disk jockey, was a salesman of used cars, a form of employment that, we are told, bore heavily on his conscience: "The sight of sawdust, even pencil shavings, made him wince, his own kind being known to use it for hushing sick transmissions, and though he dieted he could still not as Oedipa did use honey to sweeten his coffee for like all things viscous it distressed him, recalling too poignantly what is often