

LITERARY HORIZONS

Guessing Game for Everyman

T THE beginning of *The Field of Vision* Wright Morris quoted from a letter of D.H. Lawrence's: "You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character." The stable ego-anything that might be regarded as *the* personality, *the* character—has vanished from a good deal of contemporary fiction. The one thing to be counted on in the novels of John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, and John Hawkes, for example, is that people are not what they seem. What they are is a puzzle the answer to which can only be guessed.

With her first novel, *The Benefactor* (SR, Sept. 3, 1963), Susan Sontag enrolled herself in this company. She had been influenced by French exponents of the new novel—Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, *et al.*—but she was striking out on her own. *The Benefactor* is the story of a man who finds his dream life more interesting than his waking life, and the line between the two becomes increasingly hard for the reader to draw.

Miss Sontag's new novel, Death Kit (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$5.75), bears a general resemblance to The Benefactor, though in detail it is quite different. Unlike its predecessor it has a definite story, which can almost be reduced to a fable: the hero, going on a journey, kills a man and makes love to a woman, and these two actions affect the remainder of his life. The hero, named Dalton Harron but usually called Diddy, is, I suppose, a kind of Everyman, an ordinary enough fellow, with a job in a firm that makes microscopes, with an ex-wife to whom he pays alimony, and with a large stock of fears and anxieties. The man he murders-but does he really murder him?-is a workman in a tunnel in which Diddy's train is stalled. After returning to his compartment Diddy has sexual intercourse in the toilet with a blind girl named Hester.

In telling this story and describing the events that follow, the author employs a number of strange devices. For instance, Miss Sontag never uses the word "now"—and she uses it two or three times on every page—without putting it in parentheses: "(Now) a rather handsome man of thirty-three." The purpose, I surmise, is to suggest that there is something arbitrary in separating the present moment from the flux of time. Now is what we are concerned with, but if we don't watch out it will get away from us. Perhaps it is for the same reason that she sometimes shifts from present tense to past and back again in the same sentence.

Another distracting mannerism is the occasional use of the first person plural— "Whose tickets? Our tickets." Often the reader can assume that the "we" is intended to bring him into the story, but sometimes the problem is more difficult. For example, at a certain point several characters, all named, have been preparing for a television program; then, "We left the television studio." Who and where is the "I" who can make the "we" legitimate?

Every now and then there are indented passages, which may sometimes be illustrations of a statement that has been made and sometimes are simply long lists. Finally, there are the epithets used to describe the various roles the hero plays: "Diddy the Bold," "Diddy the Jealous," "Diddy the Dilatory," "Diddy the Damaged." Sometimes I think I see the purpose of these devices, and sometimes I can only guess wildly. At any rate, taken together they grow tiresome, and I was occasionally tempted to say, as Queen Gertrude said to Polonius, "More matter, with less art."

To dismiss the book because of these tricks would, however, be foolish, for in the novel as a whole there is matter enough. Of all the symbols of isolation and estrangement Miss Sontag introduces, the most telling is Hester's blindness. Hester is in general rather inarticulate, but just after she and Diddy have made love on the train she says to him: "When you're blind, people are changing all the time. The same person is never the same person. He's new every time he speaks or moves or touches me. The reader is never given access to Hester's consciousness, is never allowedif the paradox is permissible-to see



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things through her eves. What we learn about her world is only what Diddy believes to be true. For him, Hester's blindness has great value. If he resolves to devote himself wholly to taking care of her, it is because he relishes her dependence on him: "Goody Did aware of the selfish gratifications in all this. Attached to his pledge of absolute devotion and care, there's only one stipulation. Hester is to depend on him, and on no one else. To see the world through him only, not through the eyes of any other." He will receive another benefit: "That benefit consisting in the fact that, when he will be charged with narrating the visible world to Hester and negotiating for her all her transactions with palpable things, he'll have a chance to see the whole world with fresh eyes.'

I OR a time Diddy does find the relationship with Hester rewarding, but eventually there is not much left for either of them except the pleasure they both take in sex. In a long-delayed confrontation Hester tells him: "You have a powerful desire to destroy yourself. I'm afraid that if I really held out my hand

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to you, you'd pull me under, too." Diddy's desire to destroy himself has been clear to the reader from the first; indeed, the action begins not long after he has made an abortive attempt at suicide. Moreover, as Hester realizes, he subconsciously wants her to destroy him. After their confrontation, he disintegrates more and more rapidly, becoming obsessed with the memory of the (perhaps) murder in the tunnel. With Hester he returns to the scene of his crime, reenacts it, and then wanders into a vast Hall of the Dead.

The reader has many questions to ask himself when he has finished the book: what does this mean? what does that? A speculative mind can find answers to most of the questions, can usually find several conceivable answers to any one question. I am sure that Miss Sontag desired this ambiguity, that her method is based on the intimation of multiple meanings. The reader sometimes has an exasperated feeling that Miss Sontag isn't being quite fair in this game of hideand-seek into which she has inveigled him, but he goes on playing.

What is now clear is that Miss Sontag is a writer of great talent, so gifted that one is compelled to struggle with her obscurities and ambiguities and to tolerate those perhaps unnecessary devices of which I have spoken. She has earned the right to be taken for what she is, or, rather, she has earned the right to demand of the reader to find out what she is. She has her particular feeling for life and especially death, and she has created her own ways of expressing it.

-GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG LITERARY CRYPT No. 1255

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1255 will be found in the next issue.

VDS VUVME MAQSPBS UX DIFUH

XHUF VDS AOAES OQ UPS UX

VDS FUQV QOPCIEMH VDOPCQ

OP MEE EOVSHMVIHS.

-MEXHSN PUHVD RDOVSDSMN

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1254 There are no amateurs, but only those who paint bad pictures. —EDOUARD MANET.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Intent: One Scientific System

IN SR July 15, Sir Herbert Read reviewed the first volume of my book, Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling. Unfortunately, he treated the second of its six parts (three are in the published volume) as the only important part, and consequently the whole work as concerned with esthetics, although the chapters which interest him have only an orienting function; but as a passing bow to the real intent of the book, he makes at the outset a statement which so seriously misrepresents my intent that I cannot but protest against it. He says, " . . . her final purpose . . . is metaphysical: she has the ambition to present a new philosophical system." Nothing could be further from my ambition, which is only to construct a conceptual framework for biological thinking that will connect its several departments, from biochemistry to neuropsychology, in one scientific system. Such work is philosophical, but does not commit one to any philosophical system, new or old; and it is certainly not metaphysical. Any metaphysical statement must apply to the world as a whole, not only to mind or even life. I have no such statement to offer.

SUSANNE K. LANGER. New London, Conn.

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No Knight

YOUR CORRESPONDENT William Voigt, Jr., of Harrisburg, Pa. [SR, Aug. 5], refers to the author of *The Compleat Angler* as Sir Isaak Walton. *The British Dictionary of National Biography* gives no indication that Isaak was ever knighted. Perhaps Mr. Voigt was thinking of Isaak's junior contemporary Isaac Newton, who was certainly Sir Isaac.

PETER HENNIKER-HEATON. Boston, Mass.

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History on Agenda

J. H. PLUMB'S REVIEW of the American Institute of Planners' Part I Conference proceedings, Environment for Man-The Next Fifty Years [SR, July 29] fails to note that this is just the first book for this two-year consultation on the future environment of a democracy. It is the aim of the consultation to begin a nationwide discussion on what we know and ought to know about the environment (past year's conference); what our values are as a society, what the foreseeable changes appear to be, and what policies and programs we propose for action (this year's conference); what further detailed, specific recommendations can be made (next year's eight to ten regional conferences)

In total, five books are being published from this consultation-two having to do with the historic aspect Mr. Plumb was looking for in his review of our first book.

The question for last year's conference was "If we had the technology and the energy, what kind of an environment would we choose to build?" We weren't attempting to deal with politics or history. The answers at the Conference recorded the ignorance not only of science but of our awareness as a society of our values.

This year's Conference, Oct. 1-6 in Washington, and the regional conferences in 1968 get down to Mr. Plumb's complaint. It just won't all go in one book, or in one conference.

We hope to prove, through this consultation marking the professional city planners' fiftieth year, that it is as pragmatic to understand and implement according to basic values as it is to "pragmatically" go from moment to moment implementing short term projects.

Isn't that at the root of the failure of our cities?

WILLIAM R. EWALD, JR. Washington, D. C.

"Of" in the Arabic

RE YOUR APPEAL in SR July 15, Phillip K. Hitti in his *History of the Arabs* gives the title of Maimonides's work as *Dalalat al-Ha'irin*.

Al-Ha'irin is in the genitive plural. Hitti correctly translates the name of the work as "The Guide of the Perplexed." JOHN MUTZIGER.

Riverdale, Md.

Sickening

SINCE HENRI PERRE finally decided that "to dust" Mme. Leduc's book, *Thérèse and Isabelle* [SR, July 15], "might well return," and "at fifty-nine, she might have refrained from publishing . . .," I can only ask in anger and disgust why M. Peyre did not refrain from reviewing and quoting such obscene writing and, even more important, why did you think your readers would wish to read such vile, sickening stuff?

SYBIL RAMSING.

Clinton, Conn.

TO ANSWER D. C. GRANT'S INVIDIOUS QUEStion [Letters to Book Review Editor, SR, Aug. 5], Henri Peyre reviewed Violette Leduc's *Thérèse and Isabelle* with "literary freedom," not for "pornographic license." In his responsible review, Peyre attacks the crudity of the lesbian episodes mercilessly.

Mme. Leduc is a gifted writer with a flair for rhetoric. *La Bâtarde* stands as a masterly composition. Her frankness is not necessarily a vice.

Hanover, N.H.

IRVING E. BENDER.

Toward Understanding

WHAT IS THIS IDEA being preached about that to dissect a work of art is to ruin it [Letters to Book Review Editor, SR, Aug. 5]? To dissect is to try to understand the art that went into its creation. JOSEPH EASTER.

New York, N.Y.