

never seems to think that anything can be done about anything in society: we are, thank God, off to the void. It is interesting that, although he has indistinct words of welcome for whatever contemporary fiction that may be a source of outrage, the only contemporary novel that "finally grates" on him is William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

There is no great mystery about the shift from "modern" to "post-modern" in the minds of literary historians and similar passive observers. No other class is so quick to praise historical despondency, "silence," and "exhaustion" though, the fact is, literature never really ends—there is always a *nouveau roman* to tell us that Camus or Proust or Joyce is old hat. But "modern literature," from the Romantics to the Second World War, was radical, secular, insurrectionary, finding no gods except those in the human brain. "Post-modern" expresses the world of our technology, the too-powerful and militarized state, to say nothing of a planet groaning with the misery of "superfluous" millions. We have indeed reached a crisis in our expectations, an end to many traditional hopes. Frank Kermode quotes Einstein in his brilliant essay in *Liberations*: "An epoch is the history of its instruments." And our epoch does seem more than most to be dominated by "instruments" which plainly have got out of our control.

These are realities that Mr. Hassan does not discuss when he welcomes Hemingway alone of American writers into the choice company of "post-

modern" writers because "Hemingway still betrays the hold of silence on each verb. He confronts the void with valor. . . . [Genet] reveals reality in the deathly language of mirrors. [Beckett] listens endlessly to a solipsistic drone. Words appear in either case on the page only to declare themselves invalid. We have crossed some invisible line; and stringless lyres now strum for a world without men. Post-modern literature moves, in nihilistic play or mystic transcendence, toward the vanishing point." If this is true, what is there for a humanist to rejoice in? If all is being driven to silence and exhaustion, why should professors alone be left to write?

Richard Poirier is chairman of the federated departments of English at Rutgers and an editor of *Partisan Review*, a magazine that used to publish independent authors on the Left from Orwell to Edmund Wilson, but now reads as if the middle-aged professors who edit it were running after a younger set that probably never reads it. Mr. Poirier's collection of essays, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*, dismays me by the ponderousness of style it brings to the preciousness of its ideas. It seems only too eager to show that literature is obsolete, but it is itself inevitably out of date in its heavy-handed praise of the Beatles and some vague social entity called the "young," and in its wistful desire that not only rock music but rock performance and rock festivals be recognized as works of art.

Unlike Mr. Hassan, who writes about

Kafka, Beckett, Genet as if they all issued from some never-never country called the "avant-garde," Mr. Poirier is rooted in the actualities of our time and place. He is so much a defender of Norman Mailer as the representative American genius of our day that he goes out of his way to attack Mailer's opposite number, Saul Bellow, on the basis of a letter from Bellow's publisher to reviewers apologizing for a grammatical error that Bellow had corrected in proof but that had been retained in the published book. This gives Mr. Poirier a chance to ridicule Bellow on the grounds that *Mailer* would not have worried his publishers on such a point. I could wish that Mr. Poirier were less adoring of Mailer for his "performance"—"the ego stylizing itself" is the theme and admiration of the book—and more emulous of Mailer the stylist, the rhetorician, and virtuoso. Although Mr. Poirier loves to pick away at other people's prose with a solemn heaviness not lightened by his studied efforts to sound easy ("So, what I'm saying is . . ."), his purpose in picking away is to show up inconsistent prejudices held against the "young," the new, the far-out.

But Mr. Poirier works too indirectly, as the academic analyst of other people's stylistic self-betrays, to come out cleanly for any one contemporary value over another. The really shocking example of this is the way he refuses to grant any responsibility for the disaster at the Rolling Stones' rock festival at Altamont. An article, "Let It Bleed," in the best-known magazine of rock, *Rolling Stone*, understandably (to anyone who has studied the film made at Altamont, *Gimme Shelter*) posited a connection between the murder of young Meredith Hunter and the frenzy whipped up by Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, to say nothing of the effect of their manager's having hired the Hell's Angels (and paid them in beer) to police a festival in which 300,000 young people were crammed together in an atmosphere of incessant hysteria.

Mr. Poirier dissects the accusing article, "Let It Bleed," in such a way as to make it clear that he himself is not willing to grant any connection between the deaths of more than one young person at Altamont and drugs, the Hell's Angels, Mick Jagger, and the Rolling Stones ("who are said to have dominated the festival.") But instead of denying any connection, he performs a most snuffy analysis on "Let It Bleed," on Professor Albert Goldman the rock expert (who is scorned anyway for teaching Greek and Roman classics at Columbia, and who indeed "synchronized the deterioration of

(Continued on page 48)

Your Literary I.Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

CHIRP! CHIRP!

These verses each lack a bird from the aviary at the right. Helen Pettigrew of Charleston, Arkansas, urges you to fill all the cages or fly to page 78.

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| 1. The () twittering from the straw-built shed. | A. albatross |
| 2. Then nightly sings the staring (). | B. bittern |
| 3. The ()s chirped as if they still were proud
Their race in Holy Writ should mentioned be. | C. chaffinch |
| 4. Your locks were like the (). | D. coot |
| 5. While the () sings on the orchard bough
In England—now! | E. cuckoo |
| 6. Her brow is like the snaw-drift,
Her throat is like the (). | F. owl |
| 7. I come from haunts of () and hern. | G. raven |
| 8. Instead of the cross, the ()
About my neck was hung. | H. sparrow |
| 9. The hollow-sounding () guards its nest. | I. swallow |
| 10. O ()! shall I call thee bird,
Or but a wandering Voice? | J. swan |



Enter Audrey (barefoot & w. apple?)

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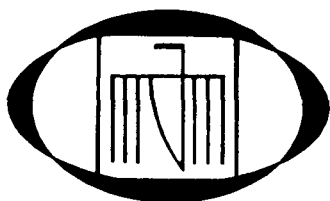
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Book Forum

Letters from Readers

Vonnegut's Philosophy

BENJAMIN DEMOTT HAS MANAGED, characteristically, to make an absolute muddle of Kurt Vonnegut's philosophy (?) [SR, May 1]. DeMott hardly even alludes to the scornful tone of Vonnegut's works, which delights in self-deception. Could it be that DeMott, weighted down by an albatross of pseudo-intellectual cliché, fails to see how Vonnegut's work reaffirms faith in life and in joy of living—in a skeptical manner, of course?

THOMAS JEFFERSON HURWITZ,
Worcester, Mass.

The UAW's C/H/A

IN HIS REVIEW titled "Peace, Health, and the Doctor" [SR, Apr. 17] John Lear discusses the problem of finding start-up money for the establishment of medical teams to provide comprehensive care on a prepaid basis to large segments of the population. He mentions philanthropic foundations and the possibility of government subsidy but ignores the labor unions,

some of which have been active in this area. For example, in 1957, under the aegis of the United Auto Workers, Walter Reuther founded the Community Health Association. C/H/A now serves a membership of approximately 70,000 people in the Metropolitan Detroit area through the staff and facilities of Metropolitan Hospital and its associated clinics. Benefits extend to such items as optometric services and outpatient psychotherapy. Importantly, membership is not restricted to members of the UAW and is generally available as an alternative to Blue Cross-Blue Shield for individuals and members of employee groups in the Detroit area.

WALLACE P. WELLS,
Detroit, Mich.

Dovish About a Republican War

WHERE DID PERRY WEED LEARN that Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley "urged President Johnson to change his Vietnam War policy" [SR, Apr. 24]? Daley's hawkishness was revealed by the rift that developed between him and the 1968 Democratic

Senatorial candidate William G. Clark, who took an antiwar stand and for so doing received only nominal support from The Boss in the campaign (and lost). Daley's council did pass a Vietnam withdrawal resolution—on May 14, 1969, after the war had become a Republican war.

MATT NEMTUSAK, JR.,
Oak Lawn, Ill.

No Isolated Morality

PERRY WEED SAYS:

Nevertheless, Royko is guilty of omission. He fails to consider the Chicago *Irish morality* that was engendered in Daley by his background. The mayor and his fellow Irish politicians [does the Kennedy clan qualify?] do not judge their actions by ethical standards, but by the test of practicality. To them politics is a source of power to be used for individuals rather than in the public interest. . . . (Emphasis added.)

Is it not this morality (?) that has beset our country since the infamous McCarthy era? Is it not this morality that has placed us in Vietnam and permitted us to subsidize the dictators in Latin America, Spain, Greece, Portugal, and wherever this brand of morality is propagated?

MRS. JAMES DENYER,
Salem, Ore.

Patriotism and Public Service

I SHOULD LIKE TO COMMEND Herbert Mitgang for his outspoken analysis of the two books dealing with the Nixon non-administration, *Decision*, by Richard Harris, and *Bring Us Together*, by Leon Panetta and Peter Gall [SR, May 1]. By bringing these books to the attention of even a small segment of the American public he has certainly performed a real service.

MARILYN R. BALLARD,
Tonkawa, Okla.

THE VITRIOLIC REVIEW by Herbert Mitgang of *Bring Us Together* and *Decision* is another first-class addition to the task of firing the flames of hatred in this country. It would seem about time that we all became intelligent and big-minded enough to be Americans first and party hacks secondly, and get down to the job of cooperating with a sincere and honest man in his manful efforts to end the war and bring the world to peace. Remember, it was the Democrats who started the mess—they can't bear to have anyone else finish it! Time they became full-fledged Americans, isn't it?

STACEY SIMPSON,
Watertown, N.Y.

GENUINE PATRIOTISM, ringingly declared for Mr. Harris's *Decision*, is the last thing that Mitgang can have in mind when he scurrilously attacks the Nixon administration with phrases like "look under the woodwork and pick up the slimiest rocks" and "narrative of villainy and cynicism."

ROBERT A. REYNOLDS,
Brawley, Calif.



"I'm between conventions."