

## Singer And Freud, Sexuality And Judaism

By Lawrence Kaplan

In an interview I had with the noted Yiddish writer, I. B. Singer several years ago, he compared himself to the Biblical prophets in adhering to a pessimistic view of life, in his belief that the evil residing both in the world and in man outweighs the good. He went on to say that such an outlook characterizes Judaism as a whole, in contrast to Christianity:

Judaism is more pessimistic than Christianity. All one has to do to be saved is to believe. In Judaism belief is not enough. One has to obey the law.

While it is misleading and dangerous to reduce any writer's works to a single theme nevertheless, Singer's pessimistic, tragic view of life that sees man and the world at large as prey to demonic forces, and regards the law both as a terrible burden and a terrible necessity

With pen of scribe the great man shall attain ends that the warrior's sword can never gain.  
Ibn Ezra

that, *contra* Christianity, can not be dispensed with, pervades, colors and binds together a major portion of his literary output.

Perhaps it would be helpful if we could view this aspect of Singer's world as constituting a literary commentary (inadvertant, of course) on Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. For Freud civilization is a tragic necessity:

Civilization imposes . . . great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity. . . . It is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact primitive man was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct. To counterbalance this, his prospects of enjoying this happiness for any length of time were very slender. Civilized man has exchanged a portion of his possibilities of happiness for a portion of security. The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. . . . The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it and justice demands that no one shall escape these restrictions. What makes itself felt in a human

community as a desire for freedom . . . may spring from the remains of their original personality which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilization. The urge for freedom, therefore, is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether.

One of Singer's novels and several of his short stories portray traditional Jewish society in a state of full rebellion against the restrictions that Rabbinic Judaism imposes upon full unbridled indulgence of man's instinctual demands. In his novel *Satan in Goray* he depicts a typical Polish-Jewish town—caught up in the frenzy of the Sabbatian heresy, the major revolt in medieval times against halachic Judaism. What gives his novel its great force is the very delicately and sensitively balanced dialectic at work in Singer's artistic vision. Singer conveys to us in a very direct manner the inherent attractiveness of Sabbatianism. He is acutely aware of the limits that an ordered structured religious community with its complex and intricate *halachic* norm must impose upon its adherents instinctual demands, limits that run against some of man's deepest desires, limits which man can experience as being constricting, even stifling. Sabbatianism, then, insofar as it affirms a full life of the senses, can, in a certain sense, be seen as life-enhancing. Nevertheless, at the same time, Singer, in vivid and graphic images, makes us aware of the frightening consequences of such an instinctual revolt, of how the chaos and anarchy which result from the dissolution of a religiously and ethically structured society is ultimately not life-enhancing but life-negating.

For Singer, once man's instinctual drives break all bounds and limits and demand total satisfaction, they become demonic in nature. This demonic imagery, which has become a Singer trade-mark, apart from its literary effectiveness (I am tempted to believe Singer is an intimate acquaintance of the demons he so vividly brings to life) reflects the oft-stated belief that these anarchic destructive forces are not merely psychological in nature but cosmic as well. The human community is perilously situated in a world of hostile and dangerous forces. The delicate, tenuous fabric of civilization is always in danger of being torn apart. Since Singer sees man's erotic libidinal drives as the most powerful of his instinctual drives he tends to identify demonic figures and demonic activity with an unbridled, uncontrolled

drive for total sexual gratification, a drive which must inevitably be at the expense of all ethical, religious, societal norms, a drive which is ultimately self-defeating since it is life, reality, itself and not merely society and its laws which impose limits on the total gratification of man's instinctual needs. In the story *The Gentleman from Cracow*, the wealthy "gentleman" who leads the pious townsfolk into uncontrollable orgiastic activities, and his accomplice, the local town whore, turn out to be none other than Satan and Lilith themselves.

In one of his recent stories, *Blood*, Singer (again like Freud) links sexuality

does not presume to judge. At the novel's end all that we can be sure of is that Yasha will never be rid of his doubts and temptations.

If civilization is always in danger of breaking down as a result of man's illusion that he can transcend the path of sublimination the opposite danger is present as well. Singer is unhappily aware of how man's controlling his instinctual drives in conformity with the requirements of a cultural or religious order may turn into total repression. Such repression also has demonic consequences. In one of Singer's most frightening and horrifying stories, *Black Wedding*, the demonic possession that seizes the Hassidic "heroine" bears all the features of a chronic sexual hysteria that could only result from a total repression of the body and a gloomy withdrawal from life, that in Singer's view characterizes some Hassidic courts in their decline. In a similar vein, in one



I. B. Singer

Congrat-Butler

with aggressivity. At the story's outset, he states that the tale should be viewed as an illustration of a Kabbalistic comment that the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" follows immediately upon the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" since the lust for blood and the lust for flesh are intimately linked. In this tale, a once pious Jewish matron after having sought total gratification of these lusts (an attempt which proves fruitless) turns into a werewolf.

Even the pious Jew who succeeds in controlling his instinctual desires and successfully manages to live within the *halachic* discipline can never be rid of the inner temptation to "break-out." Piety is a constant effort, a constant struggle. In the end of *The Magician of Lublin*, Yasha Mazur, a free-thinking, free-living magician who has undergone a spiritual crisis at the drastic decision that in order to be able once again to lead an ethical religious life, he must become a hermit and cut himself off from the world. Yet even as a saintly recluse, Yasha is tortured by doubts. Was it necessary to take such a radical step? Perhaps his very re-discovered religious faith is nought but delusion! Memories, fantasies of his former loves and of his former international fame return to haunt him. Singer merely presents the dilemma. He

of his most touching stories, *The Spinosa of Market Street*, a philosopher who in the interests of the intellectual life has cut himself off from all significant human contact is able to rid himself of the physical ailments and emotional gloom which plague him only when in his "declining days" he marries an ignorant but very open and down-to-earth shopkeeper.

Despite his basic pessimism, Singer would appear to believe that a narrow road can be walked between the claims that man finds on either side. At times he has been criticized for his negative "demonic" portrayal of Jewish communal and individual life. Nevertheless some of his most powerful work is positive in nature. When Singer describes the relationship between Jacob and Wanda in the first part of *The Slave* or that of the elderly couple in *Short Stories*, the very intensity and urgency of his style, its rich and full-bodied character which captures every physical and emotional detail of the literary setting impress upon us with great force the meaningfulness, beauty, and highly charged character of these human relationships. It is in this sense of intensity and urgency that we feel, this full-bodied and highly charged atmosphere that we apprehend that allow the meaning and beauty of these relationships

(Continued on page six)

The whole world is Israel's sepulchre! And his books? The epitaph of his funeral monuments.

Gordon



# Letters



Saul Bellow

Jeff Lowenthal

To the Editor:

I don't object to being a "Jewish writer" because, after all, I am a Jew and I am a writer. Yet I am not greatly satisfied with the category of Jewish writer. It seems to me to be the invention of critics and journalists. It is probably significant that my generation of Jews has produced so many Jewish writers, but we make a rather odd assortment. I feel at times that Malamud, Roth, and I are bracketed together like Hart, Schaffner & Marx. And sometimes we are accused by hostile opinion of having set up shop together to

produce Jewish books.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, and I dislike the intimation of scheming and collusion noticeable in recent articles on the subject of the "Jewish Writer." The Jewish public is understandably pleased by our appearance. It hopes, however, to be "well represented." Sometimes it seems to expect us to provide good public relations for the American Jewish community. Such expectations often have the contrary result. Writers are a balky lot. In general I do not enjoy being told what I am. I am trying rather hard to find out what I

am. The Hart, Schaffner, & Marx bit has not helped me much in that respect.

Sincerely,  
Saul Bellow

## Frank

To the Editor:

As you surely know, you have posed a formidable question, and I really don't know how one can answer it short of an almost endless discussion. But it does seem to me that never before have we had so much, and so well written—and indeed, so revealing—writing that can come under the heading "American Jewish literature." The writers seem to be divided into two groups, A: Jewish writers who write of Jewish subjects; and B: Jewish writers who write of general subjects which may include those of specific Jewish interest.

The first group is larger than it has ever been, and approaches an honest and genuine desire to probe to the roots that have not altogether marked it in earlier years. In my own case I had to write several books before I found myself writing (and with a passion I had not realized existed in me) in *The Dead* of a Jewish-Israeli milieu. Perhaps others have found their experiences similar: assimilated Jews in a world they never made, they had to swim about and familiarize themselves completely with the non-Jewish waters and airs about them; then, having achieved some kind of peace in that world, they were able, less self-consciously,

to enter into the heritage for which they yearned, not always aware of their yearning. Then there are other writers, such as Meyer Levin, who found their element quickly.

Freud, the establishment of Israel, the tune and temper of the Israelis, a growing honesty, a mounting disenchantment with what was once sacred in middle-class America, the arrival of second, third and fourth generation Jewish Americans (to use a wretched term)—all these have played an important role in bringing about the kind of excellent writing we now have from Jewish writers writing on Jewish, or involving Jewish, themes. The problem is, I think, not to find ourselves engulfed by a writing that increasingly echoes itself; and also, not to find ourselves lying in a kind of Jewish professional of self-hatred and such self-awareness that it becomes, as we know, all too familiar.

Time will work it out.

But I feel that much of our Jewish writing—our most sensitive and revealing—comes from the pens of Jewish writers.

If you find anything in these random observations of any use to you, you are welcome to them.

Good luck on your project.  
Sincerely,  
Gerold Frank

## Uris

To the Editor:

In answer to your query, in my opinion, most of the literature emanating from Jewish writers

outside of Israel is too filled with self-depreciation, self-pity and with ghetto mentality. I hope that the rebirth of the State of Israel, and particularly the recent Six-Day War, will make future generations of Jewish authors respect themselves and their rights to life.

Sincerely,  
Leon Uris

## Wouk

To the Editor:

Imaginative and critical writing by Jewish Americans just now is varied, copious, and fashionable. To judge it as literature is hard. Certainly this outpouring lacks Jewish specific gravity. It does not compare in this respect even to the "free" writings of 19th century Yiddishists. This reflects de-culturation; the price we



Herman Wouk

Alex Gotfryd

# Contemporary American-Jewish Literature

By Noah Baer

The first act of anyone setting out to create order out of chaos is to gain a broad view of the situation and take inventory. One of two steps can then be taken. Either one can try to squeeze all the little pieces into a predetermined order—the Procrustean bed technique—or one can marshal whatever one has and try to inductively create something or other—the eclectic method.

The topic of this supplement is "Contemporary American-Jewish Literature." Somebody must know what that means. I once thought I did; I'm not sure any longer. Does the class of American-Jewish writers contain those who are Jewish and write on non-Jewish topics or those who are Jewish and write only on Jewish topics—or often—or sometimes? Does it include only those who write in English or also those who write in Yiddish? Must an American-Jewish author deal with the American experience or can he deal with the Israeli and European? Does an American-Jewish writer have to be born in America? Is everybody an American-Jewish writer? Or is nobody?

If we attempt to find the lowest common denominator among these writers called American-Jewish, we find a background which in some loose term can be called Jewish. Without receding into determinism, we can safely say that this background has to a greater or lesser extent colored the writings of these authors. Whether the writer is trying to liberate himself from his upbringing, discuss the essence of reality or make some sense out of the Jewish experience, his initial encounter with Judaism intrudes itself. It is to this *mashehu* that we respond.

It should be possible to use this denominator to divide our writers into subgroups on their responses to their backgrounds. However, since everyone views through different eyes, we must stress the subjective note presented by Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

Perhaps the most interesting grouping contains those writers known as the "new intellectuals"—those most alienated from things Jewish yet claiming to know them best.

Here we see writers who claim to have overcome their Jewishness yet feel the need to exhume the corpse and "go one more round" to prove their freedom ("The lady doth protest too much methinks"). Norman Podhoretz, editor of *Commentary*, is one such writer. His attitude to Judaism, as presented in his recent book *Making It*, is discussed by Joe Telushkin. Bernard Malamud is a writer of this type and his hang-ups are presented by Steve Sadowsky.

Another interesting group contains those authors who present dramas on the meaning of life, played out against a Jewish backdrop. Here we find Judaism representing man with all his frailties and triumphs. Judaism no longer is but represents. It becomes a vehicle for transmitting the authors' views on "reality." Bruce Horwitz discusses Elie Wiesel's role-casting of Judaism in the theatre of the absurd. Lawrence Kaplan discusses I.B. Singer's casting of Judaism into the superego.

Novels presenting Jewish people working out their fate against a Jewish setting can be considered a fourth subclass. The best known books of this type come from the pen of Leon Uris. His relation to Judaism and his apprehension of its spirit is the topic of an analysis by Morris Whitcup.

The final type of American-Jewish writing explored by this supplement is the confrontation literature. What happens when a traditional Jew has his "mind blown" by modern secularism? For an analysis of this question, we turn to Chaim Potok who discusses the scope and meaning of his best-selling novel, *The Chosen*.

When planning this supplement, we approached several authors to obtain their opinions on the topic. We asked them—"What do you consider to be the aims and goals of contemporary American-Jewish literature?" (Maybe they knew what was meant by the topic!) Twelve letters were sent out and nine responses were received. Only four authors had time to answer the query. (Actually, three spoke on the topic and one spoke on our question.) These four responses are presented in this supplement.

In concluding, I would like to thank the authors for their time and effort, Gary Schiff for his patience and guidance, and Dr. Wohlgeleit for his assistance.

paid for a plunge from one continent to another, and into the industrial age.

American Jewish writing now sensitively reflects general mental and social currents from year to year, in an almost journalistic way. It is nervously smart and alert. If American Jewry revives its folk culture, perhaps through their growing ties with Israel and the intensifying life there, the next stage of its literature may prove authentic and lasting. But what it is doing now in letters has evoked the general respect of intellectuals, here and abroad. As a community achievement, it must be called brilliant.

Sincerely,  
Herman Wouk

## The Commentator

Gary Schiff, Editor-in-Chief  
Literary Magazine  
Edited by Noah Baer

Lawrence Kaplan, YC '65,  
obtained his M.A. in history  
from Harvard.

Noah Baer '69 majors in  
philosophy.

Steven Sadowsky is a YC  
junior in mathematics.

Bruce Horwitz, a philo-  
major, is in his third year at YC.

Morris Whitcup '69 is with  
the sociology department.

Joseph Telushkin is a sopho-  
more history major.



By Steven Sadovsky

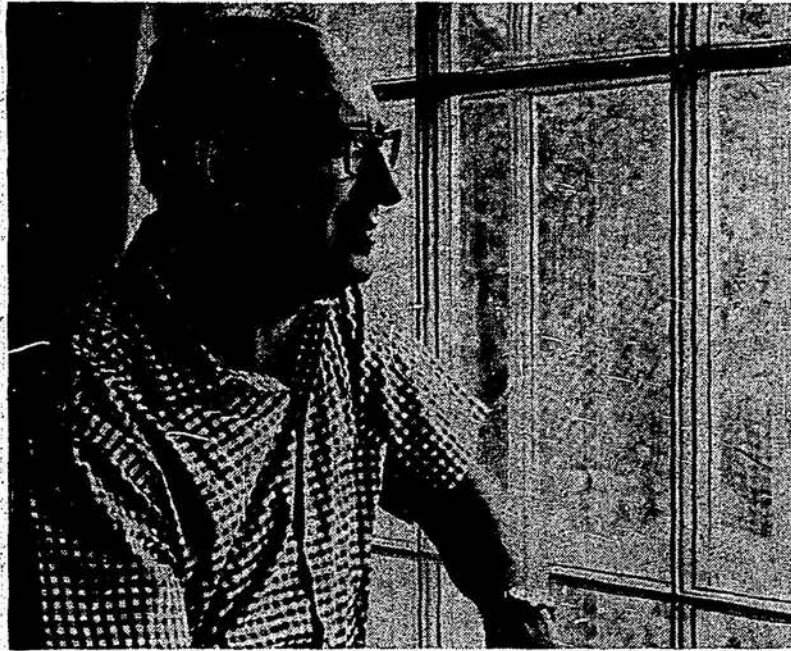
"A good author may be likened to a master chef attempting to create a gourmet's delight—a dish that will not only satisfy one's immediate hunger, but which will also keep one counting the moments till the next meal at that chef's restaurant. The author will utilize themes, plots, and stereotyped characters—lightweight salads and substantial vegetables—to whet our appetite, slowly preparing us for the *piece de resistance*: the main meat dish consisting of the character development of real people. Bernard Malamud is not such a writer: he is chiefly a salad and vegetable man.

Ever since reading Chaucer's Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, I have been convinced that the peculiar greatness of any author intent upon writing about people is his ability to combine the depiction of specific personalities with the portrayal of the characters as representatives of the whole; the synthesis of the microcosm with the macrocosm. While Malamud succeeds in describing a class of people—the Immigrant, the Refugee, or the Suffering Jew—he utterly fails in letting us know who the people are and what are their motivations and driving forces.

But success is almost achieved in *The Assistant*, by far Malamud's best work to date. Here, we read of Frankie Alpine's apprenticeship to outside forces: poverty, hate, self-interest, and greed—until his emergence as a master of his own fate in Morris Bober's grocery store—a source of life for Frankie, but a tomb for everyone else. We can easily identify with this journey-man; his pain becomes ours when he evolves into a Jesus-figure, symbolically being crucified and resurrected. We find our souls in deep torment as if we had raped Helen Bober or as if we had robbed the Bober grocery store and cannot feel any sense of relief until Frank has discovered the formula, that Sydney Richman described in his book, *Bernard Malamud*, that enables him to rise out of Morris' grave and to escape the death grips of the grocery store: "... that man is better than he is; that there is a zone of goodness, a conscience, bequeathed from the human traditions of the past which can be proof against the present."

Unfortunately this deep characterization is offset by the superficial and shallow development of Morris Bober's personality. Morris is the typical *schlemihl*, the Jew who puts complete faith in humanity; and because of this trust, he must suffer for all of mankind. And even after an infinite amount of suffering, after a complete mental and physical purgation, Bober is a dismal failure, achieving only poverty and death. Consequently, while we get an adequate picture of the *schlemihl*, we know little of Morris Bober; though we have a sense of sympathy for the poor Jew of the lower East Side, we do not empathize at all with Morris Bober, grocery store owner. This is Malamud's inability to combine the typical with the general: his failure as a writer of people.

Similarly, we put the lid back on *The*



Clemens Kallischer

Bernard Malamud

spent several years in a Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. Isabella becomes Malamud's spokesman, telling us that an individual must have a meaningful reconciliation with his heritage before he can think about future aspirations: "I can't marry you. We are Jews. My past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for."

In a magnificent short story, "Angel Levine," Malamud—in using the theme of redemptive suffering—puts Manishevitz, a modern day Job, through every believable kind of torture in order to humanize him. Manishevitz suffers: his son is killed; his daughter marries a lout; his tailor shop burns down; his wife, Fanny, becomes seriously ill; he gets terrible backaches. A big Negro, Alexander Levine, introduces himself to Manishevitz, claiming that he is an angel sent by G-d to alleviate Manishevitz's problems. It is not until his suffering is taken to its limit—his backaches become unbearable and Fanny is lying on her deathbed—that he puts faith in Levine. Manishevitz is saved. His final statement to his wife indicates the drop of humanity he now possesses: "A wonderful thing, Fanny... There are Jews everywhere."

Malamud uses Frankie Alpine in *The Assistant*—the archetypal fictional character in search of his true identity—to voice the third part of his formula to discover man's innate quality of goodness. Frankie Alpine is a thief... specializing

When is the knowledge of literature bad? When it impairs a man's originality.

Ibn Ezra

in stealing ways of life from different people. We view him following the life of crime of Ward Minogue, living the life of poverty of St. Francis, and dreaming the life of Napoleon. Ultimately, Frankie reveals his past histories: he has lived the life of a nomadic bum; he has robbed the Bober grocery store; he has raped Helen Bober—the confession of these crimes enables Alpine to transcend the identity of a thief and to assume his real personality, a philanthropic personality interested in the welfare of other people. His benevolence toward Helen Bober is made obvious by his self-inflicted penance: "All he asked for himself was the privilege of giving her something she wouldn't give back." This new awareness of his own being and purpose is symbolized by his conversion to Judaism.

It is this sort of conversion to Judaism, which in some form takes place in most of Malamud's novels and stories, that people mistakenly classify as Malamud's Jewishness. Malamud does not write about Judaism, at least as we know it in our Orthodox context. He—perhaps reflecting a personal philosophy—is not concerned with a system of laws dictating a way of life, but rather with a set of moral principles, defined by vague personal concepts of justice and kindness. This "Malamudian Judaism," finds its chief prophet in Morris Bober! for though Morris eats ham and keeps his store open on the Sabbath, he is a "religious" Jew because he is honest and puts complete trust in mankind. Frankie Alpine and Manishevitz both go through an act of conversion, but they convert to a religion of love, not of

(Continued on page four.)

## Malamud's Superficiality: The Lack of Characterization

*Magic Barrel*, a collection of short stories, sensing Malamud's ill success as a writer of the short story. Because of its length, a short story cannot stress the development of a complicated plot, but must concern itself with the concise revelation of the personalities of the main characters. And, it is this unfolding of human characteristics that adds a lasting quality to a short story. Malamud, unfortunately, is constantly over-emphasizing the story line, never dwelling very long on one personage. As a result, we are left with an immediate feeling of satisfaction for having read a charming story, but seconds later this satisfaction turns to indifference, for we have not encountered any human characters to dissect or to analyze.

A perfect example of this is "The Mourners"; a spectacular and haunting tale of a man, Kessler, who is completely alienated from friends and family. At the end of the story, Kessler mourns for past misdeeds to his wife and children. Gruber, the landlord, views the same situation as if he were the object of his mourning. This one horror-filled moment forces Gruber to plunge out of the role of landlord back into the oceans of Jewish history: he begins to mourn. Unfortunately, we know so little of the characters that we can only guess at why they act as they do, and we do not appreciate the epiphany taking place; we are forced to evaluate the story as being only a cute, supernatural fantasy.

Perhaps Miriam Feld in one of Malamud's earlier short stories, "The First Seven Years," summarizes Malamud's

aversion to revealing the individualistic portraiture of his characters when she said, "He has no soul. He's only interested in things."

But those things are not to be scoffed at: they are lofty themes teaching us of the worth and nobility of man. On accepting the National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel*, Malamud said, "I am quite tired of the colossally deceitful devaluation of man in this day... Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed by the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now: fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational... The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest." Malamud implies that man must struggle for roots within himself to survive the fall from grace and to come to the realization that he is good, for man at his source, his inherent nature, is good.

To aid us in our search for roots, Malamud uses three basic plots, a threefold formula for the discovery of man's basic nobility: the recognition of one's past, an individual's redemptive suffering, and the finding of one's real identity. These three themes underlie all of Malamud's works and are all found together in *The Fixer*, Malamud's Pulitzer Prize winning novel.

One of these plots, the synthesis of man's history with his present life, is found in the short story, "The Lady of the Lake." Henry Levin takes a trip to Italy in order to free himself from the shackles of an uneventful past life, which he somehow equates with his being Jewish. Changing his name to Henry R. Freeman, he symbolically becomes a "free man," throwing off the bonds of Judaism that have prevented him from attaining the goals he "still hoped for... to wit, love, adventure, freedom." But Malamud is trying to tell us that one cannot automatically meet his fate by severing his ties with the past; in fact, Freeman sounds just as Jewish as Levin does.

Freeman falls in love with the aristocratic Isabella del Dongo and quickly calculates that with her money and with his break with the past, he will be able to achieve success in a new life. Several times, in response to her questions, Freeman tells Isabella that he is not Jewish, thinking to himself, "With ancient history, why bother?" But Isabella del Dongo turns out not to be a contessa, but rather a poor Jewish girl, Isabella del Seta, who

The poets and historians of old... did not confine themselves to soothing and tickling the ears with rhythmic sounds... But the cooks and confectioners of our time... are always building up the outward senses with some new color, shape, scent, or flavor, so as to utterly destroy the most important part of us, the mind.

Philo



# Malamud...

(Continued from page three)

laws: the universal love of mankind is their duty.

Combining all three basic themes—redemptive suffering, the reconciliation of a man's past and present, and the search for an individual's identity—Malamud describes the victory of Yakov Bok over the Russian government and anti-Semitism in *The Fixer*. But neither the Pul-

itzer Prize nor critical acclaim will make this book a better achievement than *The Assistant*, for the character study of Yakov Bok is too weak to support the novel's framework, made up of three weighty themes. After watching Bok go through an incalculable amount of suffering, we come to only one concrete conclusion about him: he is a Jew.

However, the scope and the character-

By Bruce Horwitz

When misfortune threatened his people, it was the custom of the Baal Shem Tov to journey to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a candle, say a special prayer and thereby avert the tragedy.

A generation passed and the *Magid* of Mizrach, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, found it necessary to intercede on behalf of his people. He went to the same place in the forest and said, "Master of the Universe! Listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am able to say the prayer." The miracle would then be accomplished.

Generations passed and the need for the prayer continued. But with each repetition, an element of the prayer was forgotten until all that remained was the story. When the Rabbi of Rishyn was confronted with the need for prayers, sitting in his armchair he spoke to G-d, "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. . . . G-d made man because he loves stories.

Thus Wiesel introduces his own story—that of the holocaust and more importantly, the lessons one might derive from that time. "The Gates of the Forest" corresponds in part to the prayers, fires and stories offered by the rabbis to G-d in their effort to avert impending tragedy. Yet Wiesel's tale is directed more towards man than G-d, more towards response to tragedy than the negation of it.

The ghettoed Jewry of Europe lived within the forest. There, enmeshed in superstition and mysticism, with silent but defiant faith in the coming of the Messiah, the Jews of pre-WWII and sadly, even during the war, waited patiently. The plaster world they had erected as protection was shattered. It became a tomb for millions.

Not all could succumb to the Nazi plot so easily. Of those who resisted, some lived, others perished with the submissive. No one, among the stubborn or the weak, understood. A lesson so deliberately staged, so tragically elucidated was not learned.

The fictional character of Gregor becomes Wiesel's vehicle of hope. A man alone who survives the war, the forest, the blindness of his people; a man who in some quasi-objective sense reduced the war to its elemental significance.

Through his mind we interpret the perception and conceptions of the struggle to survive in the midst of a civilization that did not wish to live without the bulwark of indifference to affairs extraneous to their narrowly defined path. There in the most intimate staging of Gregor's thought, the war becomes a theater of the absurd in which the players, all of them, are at once laughable and terrifying.

These qualities are mysteriously manifest in the character of Gavriel, a teller of tales, a dead man who returns to de-

liver a message, a "key to the door." The story he tells is of his death, why he died and what might be understood if one were seeking comprehension.

Gavriel lived in a village typical of the many in Europe which incorporated substantial numbers of Jews. The people were passive, self-centered and immobilized by fear, apathy or utter complacency. The world around them crumbled and soon theirs would in like manner. Yet life continued without alteration. Perhaps one prayed more than usual but what more could one do, anyway? The Messiah would come . . . maybe . . . and if not, who can question or challenge G-d's plan?

Gavriel questioned, challenged, goaded the Messiah. Europe is a bloodbath he cried, Why are You waiting? Must our pain be at its height? Must our enemy be his strongest? Why do You not come?

No answer came save the regular shots of the rifle that exterminated one villager after another. Gavriel died in his turn with the realization he passed on to Gregor. Whenever the Messiah might come, it is too long to wait, too distant for one to rely upon, too inconsistent with the immediate need, the groundless desire for life.

Hence, Wiesel challenges the acceptance of tragedy that distinguished Job. Compliance of acceptance cost the world and the Jewish people six million souls. Unerring faith in a saviour that gave no indication of coming incapacitated a civilization to the extent that they could no longer exercise that most basic and necessary drive—self-preservation.

Wiesel retells that story bringing to stage center the obscenity of man's inhumanity, and with it, the attitudes which enable inhumanity to be practiced over and over again in a cyclical history, a Hegelian spiral inverted to arrive at a

**Wars and victories...are but vain noise and tumult; but letters and learning look to eternity.**

Luzzato

maximum depth, a point at which history and its maker will dissolve as if by their own request.

Though "Gates" assumes a countenance not unlike the manifold books and movies concerned with WWII, its sphere of meaning embraces far more than archi-

zation of *The Fixer* are not important; rather, the emphasis should be shifted to Yakov's battle with anti-Semitism. Malamud reports this case of irrational prejudice in an icy, removed manner; at times, *The Fixer* seems to be a work of non-fiction. This is Malamud's accomplishment—the blood libel of Yakov Bok is true: it happened in the past—the book is based on the Beiliss Case of 1911, and may happen again tomorrow or next year. Furthermore, Yakov Bok is not a unique individual; he is "I" and "You." Malamud places us all under the careful scrutiny of the world of hate, so that we, too, must defend ourselves and ask ourselves the

same question Bok did: who are we; are we Jews; why do we suffer? This is *The Fixer's* greatness.

Hence, in the realm of the captivating story, the delightful tale, Malamud is the master. Also, he is a craftsman in utilizing noble and important themes. But somehow, our hungering for a literary masterpiece is never satisfied because of Malamud's weak character portrayal; while we feel that we have read something interesting, we never walk away from one of his books with an impression of having ingested something solid. Salads and vegetables do not provide us with a very substantial literary diet.

## Existentialism As A Jewish Art

typical disdain for war and its effects. Wiesel is sensitive to the dichotomy of war. While the effects and significance are substantial in rigid human terms, war as an incident in time and space remains as unimportant as the trace which follows. Such a concept is immeasurably difficult to accept as it is to comprehend, yet Wiesel asserts the idea with a newly acquired confidence that can come only from



Elie Wiesel Arthur W. Wang

the depths of a soul which has made the ascent from the base of human experience to the attitude of objectivity.

Wiesel's involvement with WWII ultimately becomes a vehicle of expression rather than meaning. It is in fact the very absence of meaning that prompts Wiesel to conclude with a classic existential reply to the process of life. His conception of the historical dialectic, appears to be mechanical, infinite and sublimely unaware of the suffering and pleasures that transpire within its structure. While history and nature proceed linearly without beginning or end, man subsists in search of meaning, in search of G-d. He is portrayed to be not so very different from the pre-historic man who blurted the first crude name of G-d when lightning kindled his forest and he was forced by fear and bewilderment to attribute that tragedy to some cause. Consistently, man from that time even to the present searches more for scapegoats than meaning. He justifies, he rationalizes, but both are meager substitutes for an understanding that escapes him.

Wiesel reduces the complexities of human psychology and experience to the elemental, fundamental necessity upon which an adequate if not superlative life is bas-

ed—existence. But it is an existence qualified by an understanding of the role one must assume in order to maximize the personal meaning one might derive from life. The understanding consists in a realization that man as Camus wrote is essentially alone in time and space. While the G-d of the Jews co-exists eternally with the man of faith, He does so on a plateau almost irretrievably removed from the immediacy of life. What man might make of G-d in his personal actions is not so much the work of G-d as it is of man himself. If one chooses to make the imminence of G-d his own it must be through an overt effort and a deliberate act of possession.

To survive and yet to make survival rewarding requires of man, whether at war or peace, that he shed the mysticism and superstitious characteristic of European civilization. In their stead, one must establish an almost ruthless nexus between his actions and his re-evaluation of life.

In effect Wiesel advocates the response of Gavriel to imminent torture and death at the hands of the aggressor—"overwhelming laughter." Is not laughter the opposite absurdity to tragedy of war? Is not war itself that condition in which the absurd will out and the reasonable will not?

Gregor like Gavriel fulfills Wiesel's hope for man. After the war, he like so many others failed to make sense of the nonsensical. Yet he succeeded in taking the one additional, critical step forward where he might turn to see the remnants of a people, where he might then construct a new world, not on the ruins of the old, but upon a foundation that can not be shaken by the flaw in man that destroyed so many other ill-based cultures.

Gregor finds his way into himself and from there, to the world in which he must live. "It's better to sleep on the ground, if the ground is real, than to chase mirages. It's up to us to see the earth itself is not mirage."

He strips himself of the reliance upon hope that paralyzed his friends retaining still the essential character of belief. "Whether or not the Messiah comes, we will manage without him. Wiesel concludes then with Gregor trembling, suddenly aware of the relationship between death and eternity, between eternity and the world."

The fires of WWII have died away; only the story remains. If it is told, the lesson will be understood, the tragedy comprehended. Then, unlike the tragedies that preceded it, the holocaust will be remembered not so much for its sorrows as for the secret it cries, the gate it opens, the forest it reveals.



# Uris' Abortive Attempt To Capture Jewish Essence

By Morris Whitcup

There is an apocryphal story told about an Israeli scientist's attempt to cross a rabbit with a chicken. Unfortunately his efforts were to no avail and the cross turned out to be "nicht a her und nicht a hin." So it is with the Jewish consciousness of Leon Uris, for his image of what constitutes the essence of Judaism and what epitomizes the paragon of Jewishness is both ambiguous and self-contradictory. This is patently shown in both *Mila 18* and *Exodus*.

In *Mila 18* Uris decries the assimilationist tendencies that existed among the Jewish intelligentsia and upper middle class in Poland prior to World War II. Andrei Androfski, the hero of the novel, denounces Paul Bronski, who had married Andrei's sister Deborah for the fact that there were no Sabbath candles on his sister's table. Androfski remembers that when they lived in the slums on Staioki Street—"G-d, we were poor. But we were Jews. And when we moved to the fancy neighborhood on Sliisha Street and Mama died, I had a sister who was the head of a Jewish house." According to Andrei, the loss of Jewish identity is wrong not only from a religious standpoint, but also from an egotistic nationalistic one. A man should never be ashamed of what he is or of what his origins are, and as for himself, "I am Andrei Androf-

ski, the only Jewish officer in the Ulyani (cavalry) regiment. But every man knows who I am and what I am."

Yet contrary to his own assertions, Androfski almost performed the penultimate act in the process of assimilation, an act that would have called for, according to tradition, the reciting of Mourner's *Kaddish* and the lighting of candles in memory of one who has departed, namely, the act of intermarriage. Andrei's sister Deborah, who had heretofore been representative of the kind and resolute Jewish mother, also treaded on the heels of performing this act for she fell in love with an Italian newspaper reporter named Christopher De Monti. This phenomenon of denouncing one's Jewishness by way of the bed is not limited to *Mila 18* for in *Exodus* too the "hero" of the novel, Ari Ben Canaan, falls in love with a non-Jewish American nurse named Kitty Fremont. Uris even goes to the extreme of having one of his minor characters in *Exodus*, Foster J. MacWilliams, marry a Sabra. We leave to Freudians the interpretations of these sequences of events, but in any case it shows the self-contradiction in Uris' conception of Jewishness.

Besides having an ambiguous idea of what Jewishness is, Uris also shows a complete lack of understanding of Orthodox Judaism. In both *Mila 18* and *Exodus* Uris adopts the hackneyed notion of

equating the so called "ghetto mentality" with Orthodoxy. According to Uris the fanatical Orthodox Jew is a man in prayer and not in action, a man who will mumble his prayers and will hope that his suffering in humility and faith will be the road toward salvation. Uris, however, fails to realize that it is not Orthodoxy which has inculcated this notion in the minds of its adherents, but the unnatural life that the Jews have been forced to lead in exile. Uris does not remember, or perhaps does not know, that Samuel Hanagid was not only a Jewish scholar and a poet, but also a valiant general or that the men who defended Massada and committed suicide rather than accept the yolk of Rome, even under the harsh conditions of the Judean desert kept not only the Jewish holidays but also the laws of *terumat* and *maasarot* and the laws of *taharat hamishpacha*.

Furthermore, Leon Uris shows in the latter of the above mentioned books, a lack of comprehension of the Jewish holidays. According to this, Pentecost on a kibbutz becomes a "4-H Club" show where all the animals and produce are paraded: "The livestock was passed in review, led by the cows, which were decked in ribbons and flowers, and the horses were shiny with manes and tails braided. The sheep and goats were headed past and then the pet dogs and cats." In addition Passover became a holiday when "all dirt had to be chased."

But even though Uris fails in under-



Harlan Krakowitz

standing these matters, his books have some redeeming value for they allow the reader to sympathize with the anguish of being a Jew in a hostile world; or to put it succinctly "empathy." In the end of *Exodus*, after Karen Clement dies, Uris puts into the mouth of Ari Ben Canaan the suffering of centuries which finds expression in the woeful cry "Why must we fight for the right to live, over and over, each time the sun rises? . . . G-d! G-d! Why don't they let us alone! Why don't they let us live!"

By Joseph Telushkin

While reading Norman Podhoretz's *Making It* one can't suppress the feeling that the author derives a perverse pleasure from being thought abrasive. The few kind words that the author is capable of seemed to be reserved for either the dead (Elliot Cohen, *Commentary's* former editor, and Robert Warshaw) or those who by no stretch of the imagination can be considered competitors (Sherry Abel, an editorial assistant at *Commentary* refers to her "determination to avoid too much responsibility"). This image of the callous Podhoretz is not mine alone. Granville Hicks, the noted critic, after recounting a favorable tale about Podhoretz told by Harpers editor Willie Morris mentions the fact "that he was ever anything but abrasive, impatient and scornful had not been revealed to me in his critical pieces, and I have to say that

I find few signs of more amiable qualities in *Making It*."

Perhaps Hicks has gone to the crux of the matter. Podhoretz is a critic, and one who established his reputation through his ability to criticize, not to praise. His entrance into the literary establishment or as he would call it the "family" was assumed when he sharply attacked Saul Bellow's widely acclaimed *The Adventures of Augie March*. Bellow was a member of the "family" and it appears that his "relatives" were getting sick of the undiluted praise he had been receiving, and were looking for him to get put down. Enter Norman Podhoretz. That Bellow was furious didn't bother him. In fact he was quite happy. And so he emerged into the limelight, having discovered that being critical would insure his fame.

The same highly intellectual, highly critical style seems to be the author's approach towards Judaism. It is not necessarily a question of his being alienated from Judaism. Rather he grants it no handicap. Upon assuming editorship of *Commentary* he severely cut down on its Jewish content (eliminating some regular sections entirely) for he believed their quality to be lower than that of the secular articles, and if Jewish articles wished to remain in *Commentary*, they would have to toe the line. Yet, it is still astounding and somewhat distressing that the author has so little to say about Judaism (*Commentary*, still is an AJC publication) in either a religious, social, or sociological sense. It would appear that Podhoretz's attachment to *Commentary*, derives entirely from its secular intellectual achievements, and has nothing to do with a desire on his part to be a constructive critic of the Jewish establishment from within.

## Comment On Commentary

(Considering his seeming attitude, he is to be commended for retaining men like Robert Alter and Milton Himmelfarb and for allowing almost an entire issue devoted to a symposium on "The State of Jewish Belief" though it was the August issue, a slow month a-yway.)

This might strike one as an anomaly for Podhoretz. As differentiated from the majority of the contemporary alienated Jewish intellectuals, he has a strong Jewish educational background. It would be instructive, however, to analyze his reactions to those Jewish institutions at which he studied. His sole motivation for attending Talmud Torah High School was the rabbi's daughter, not that he loved her, but that (in the same sense that Kipling wrote "when the minister's daughter drinks nothing but water, she's sure to end up in gin") she provided fertile sexual training grounds.

After such pleasant high school experiences, he studied for five years at the Jewish Theological Seminary, while simultaneously pursuing an arduous course of studies at Columbia. Critically he recalls "the strident notes of apologetics and defenses which entered into the least detail of almost every other aspect of the Seminary curriculum, the endless pep talks disguised as scholarship, the endless harping on the sufferings of the Jews; all this made my Columbia-trained sensibilities raw."

Podhoretz's memories of his fellow students are even worse. He differentiates two types of rabbinical students: "the bright ones who were going cynically into the rabbinate because it offered an easy way of life, and the dull ones who were going solemnly into the rabbinate because they were afraid to dare the outside world: What had I to do with such people?" Since these are the only categories of rab-

binical students that he indicates, one can only guess at Podhoretz's opinions of rabbis, a not inconsequential gauge of his overall attitude towards Judaism.

The truth of the matter is that Podhoretz has a seemingly minimum amount of interest in Judaism as seen by the minute percentage of this book devoted to observations regarding it. In any case, I doubt he would have many constructive things to say. That's his style. He recalls that a high official of the Kennedy administration called him in to talk about Harlem and present some suggestions. Podhoretz rambled on with observations until the official stopped him. "What should we do about it?" Podhoretz was stumped. "Do! I was not accustomed to thinking in such terms. I was accustomed to making critical analyses whose point was to understand a problem as fully as possible, not to affect or manipulate it."

The above statement is perhaps more indicative of Podhoretz than any other. He is a critic, an observer with an acute eye, not always impartial, but seldom willing to get involved to affect a problem. It is the desire to maintain the critic's pose that causes Podhoretz to sound abrasive, to appear to care about nothing and no one, to proudly boast of his early success, to knock down his contemporaries. It is this critical pose that is the cause of Podhoretz's refusal to grant Judaism any handicaps, to judge it by the same phenomenally high intellectual standards which are his criteria for evaluation (as if the tools of Western intellectual tradition are of necessity the proper tools for the evaluation of an entirely different tradition), and to forget that it was he who once stated "For the Truth is that neither Hebrew nor Yiddish literature is like any other."



Dorothy B. Gelatt

Norman Podhoretz



# Potok On The Chosen: Confrontation With Secularism

Chaim Potok was interviewed by THE COMMENTATOR and The Observer after his address to the Dean's Reception on February 18. The following is an excerpt from that interview.

By Noah Baer

Q. You have been lucky and have merged your interest for Judaism and Literature. How do you see the person struggling in another field? Can you see a total involvement in both? What do you say to the person who hasn't found the median between the two fields?

A. I have an answer which you aren't going to like very much but I'll give it to you anyway. My own experience has been that what I've found difficult hasn't been Judaism but what I regard as one translation of the mainstream of Judaism. The tradition is not monolithic. We have been through 4,000 years of history and are not the same as we were 4,000 years ago. The tradition has proved itself resilient.

Q. Do you have a methodology for bringing together two worlds?

A. What ever the answer is, it has to be used within the terms of the opposing disciplines.

Q. Have you really come to grips with the issues or have you just managed to describe them?

A. What does that mean?

Q. One of the functions of the novelist is description. Has your tension been resolved or just described?

A. If I hadn't in this novel, the story would have sounded phony.

Q. You stated in your address that literature tends to build up its own view of reality. I was wondering what your view of reality happens to be in *The Chosen*. What were you trying to reach in Juda-

ism that forced you to write this book?

A. I'll tell you where you can find it; I won't tell you what it is. You find the author's world view in why a character does this, in response to that. Why after Reuven discovers that the little boy is blind, does he do what he does to the spider and the fly? What does it tell you about how an author sees the world when he structures two different responses to the creation of the state of Israel?

Q. I am curious as to what is characterized when we find Danny Saunders rejecting his rabbinical inheritance to shave off his *payot* and major in psychology. Do you see this as the contemporary thrust of Jewish society?

A. My own feeling is, and I can only answer in terms of the specific person, that Danny Saunders given his personality, could creatively encounter the world only this way.

Q. Do you feel that the truly enlightened person would reject the narrow confines of his European background?

A. Yes.

Q. Is this in any way autobiographical?

A. Let me say one thing that is very crucial and in no way disparages Hassidim, which, to me, is crucial to Judaism. Hassidim and those people committed to that kind of life actually form the core of totality of things Jewish. What I'm interested in doing is exploring what happens when that core encounters the core that constitutes 20th century secularism. What has been explored until now in literature has been an encounter around the periphery as during the Hellenistic Age. What I am trying to explore is whether out of this encounter can come an activity from within the Jewish tradition.

Q. I think we find that there is something in your book that has appealed to

the American imagination. I was wondering what you think you have presented in *The Chosen* to warrant this response.

A. I tried to make this a universal story in the sense that all of us are concerned with how to raise our children and how to transmit ideas to our children. Also, *friendship* is a very universal type of theme.

Q. Do you feel you've presented a David-Jonathan type which people can respond to?

A. Well, David-Jonathan is the paradigm example of friendship. As a matter of fact, the girl in the book alludes to David and Jonathan.

**Jewish literature is literature written in our own language; it does not include books written by Jews in other languages.**

Abah HaAm

Q. Did you have any trouble at that time as to how much of the universality of the theme you could afford without losing the main idea of the religious message?

A. The focus was always on the particular. What I've tried to do is indicate both the humanity of these people, that what they share in common with all human beings, and their differences. These differences, I hope, were uniquely Jewish.

Q. Why, of the two main characters of your book, the one who majored in psychology had the crisis in identity while the one who majored in philosophy did not?

A. You get an answer if you look at the two kinds of Judaism in which the two were brought up. This is what I said before on the confrontation between two resilient traditions and one resilient tradition with a rigid one.

Q. Generally, it would have been expected that philosophy would have posed the problem, not psychology.

A. It wasn't only psychology that was shaking Danny Saunders. He was reading a lot more than just psychology.

Q. He seemed to be very uptaken with reading Sigmund Freud in its original.

A. That was his response to the situation. It was a result of all the tensions that had been created. He came to psychology in an attempt to understand himself and his world a little better. The attack had been accomplished long before; he had been reading in the library before he came to psychology. You are asking an interesting question—why one was able to bend though he took up philosophy? Remember what Reuven Malter's religion consists of; how he handles his tradition. Reuven Malter's handling of the sacred texts is crucial to an understanding of how he views tradition.

Q. Reuven does go outside the tradition when, during his *gemara bechina*, he resorts to a variant text as his answer. You seem to feel that this is a correct response whereas the hours that he spent

on conflicting commentaries was not a valid response.

A. For me it's very important to know what a *rishon* does with any text. Variant theories are, after all, just theories because you don't have the text before you. The notion of the pliability of the text is nothing invented by my criticism. Just look at the *Hagaot Hagrah* and you'll realize what I'm talking about.

Q. I found a little stylized the Reuven Malter type of Judaism which you found more resilient to the twentieth century. Do you think that the lack of the presenting of the problems in that tradition makes it less believable, or would it complicate the book too much?

A. No. This is where we get into the problem of focus. I wasn't focusing on that in the book but on four human beings and their relationships. If I had gone into that, it would have been an altogether different kind of story. Also, my feeling is that when you are a teenager you can't cope with these problems in any intelligent way. The hope is that you survive teenagehood and can cope with them in some meaningful way. That's what the essential focus of the novel is, the head-on, explosive confrontation between Malter's kind of Judaism and the secular world. But, that wasn't the point of this book. It was Reuven Malter's understanding of a kind of Judaism that he had really never known and through the use of his own Judaism helping someone come out of that Judaism without being destroyed as a result of the breach.

Q. What has been the reaction to your book among Hassidim?

A. The only thing I can tell you, since I don't talk to the Satmar, is that the Lubavitchers recommended it to their people in the Boston *yeshiva*. On the other hand, there's a *mesifta* in my neighborhood where, I understand, the book has been banned because the boy came out less a Jew at the end than he was at the beginning.

## I. B. Singer...

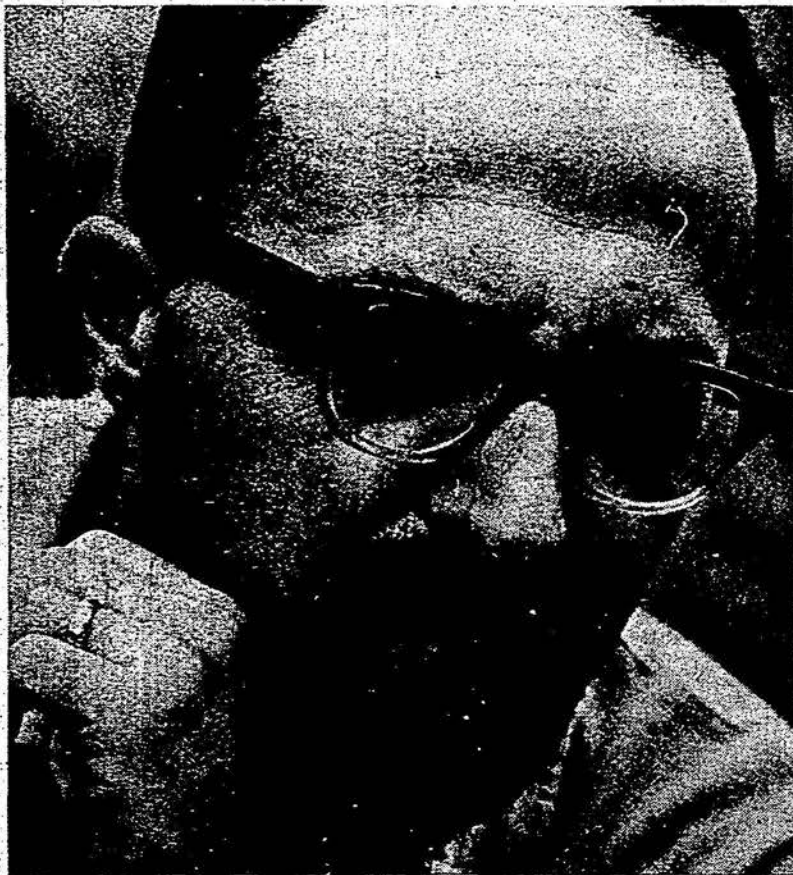
(Continued from page one)

tionships to come through free from any concomitant cloying or saccharine sentiments (though *Short Friday* is not entirely free from this fault).

It is true, though, that such stories are definitely in the minority of Singer's work. Such moments of completeness in man's life are rare indeed, neither easily attained nor maintained. The polar tension which pulls man in opposite directions is not easily and only momentarily overcome. The dangers of repression on the one side and of the destruction of limit and restraint on the other are ever-present, ever-threatening. And we return full-circle to the tragic vision of Freud and to the question which he poses and does not answer at the end of his book:

The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the instinct of self-destruction... It is to be hoped that the other of the two 'Heavenly Powers'—eternal Eros will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary—death. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?

Singer with his illusionless pessimism which nevertheless does not descend into a cheap cynicism also does not attempt to answer this question. But it is his outstanding achievement that he has made the struggle come so vividly, indeed disturbingly, alive.



Michael Frellich

Chaim Potok