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 is to be saved to be saved. The human 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, nonetheless, 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, perverses, 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 (inadvertent, 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 the two restrictions of instinct. To counterbalance his joys of enjoying this happiness from any aggressive... it was very sedent. 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 that 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. Singer portrays the resilience 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 accurately aware of the limits that an ordered structured religious community with its complex and intricate halachic norms places upon man’s instinctual demands, limits that run against some of man’s deepest desires, limits which man even subconsciously resists, even stifling. Sabbatianism, then, instead 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 trademark, apart from its literal effectiveness (I am tempted to believe that 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 psychologized in nature but are “Christian,” that the human community is perfectly situated in a world of hostility and demonizing forces. The “delicate, tawdry fabric of civilization is always in danger of being torn apart. Since Singer sees man’s erotic libido 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, and societal norms, a drive which is ultimately self-defeating since it is life, reality, 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 network into uncontrollable orgiastic activities, and his accomplice, the local town whose life, turn out to be none other than Satan and Lilith themselves.

In one of his recent stories, Blood, Singer (again like Freud) links sexuality with aggressivity. At the story’s outset, he states that the tale should be viewed as an illustration of a Kabbalistic concept: 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 sensually manages to live within the halachic律the “man of the inner temptation to break out.” Piety is a constant effort, a constant struggle. In the end of The Magician of Lublin: Yasha Manzur, 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 leper and cut himself off from the world. Yet even as a mildly recluse, Yasha is tormented by doubts. Was it necessary to take such a radical step? Perhaps his very re-discovered religious faith is sought but delusional Memories, fantasies of his former loves and of his former international fame return to haunt him. Singer merely presents the dilemma. He 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 submission the opposite danger is present as well. Singer is unhappily unaware 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 theomorphic counterpart. In Singer’s “giant frightening and horrifying stories, Black Wedlock, the demonic possession that seizes the Hasidic heroes” bears all the features of a chronic, sexual hysteria that could only result from a total repression of the body and a glacial withdrawal from life, that in Singer’s “giant frightened and vibrant Hasidic heroes” come to an end.

In his most touching stories, The Spinner 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 his “declining days” he carries an ignorant but very open and down-to-earth shoemaker.

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 consummation 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 Story, he captures the intensity and urgency of his style, its rich and pungent character which captures every physical and emotional detail of the literary setting impresses upon us with great force the meaningfulness, beauty, and highly charged character of these human relationships. It is this sense of intensity and urgency that we feel, this full-bodied and highly charged atmosphere that we are left with the meaning and beauty of these relationships.

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Letters

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 must not make too much ado about it. I feel that at times Malamed, Roth, and I are bracketed together like Hart, Schaffner & Marx. And sometimes we are accused of hostile opinion of having set up shop together to produce Jewish books.

Nothing could be farther from the truth, and I dislike the imitation of schmearing and collusion noticeable in recent articles on the subject of the "Jewish Writer." The Jewish public is understandably put off by our appearance. It hopes, however, to be "well represented." Sometimes it seems to expect us to prove good public relations, for the American Jewish community. Such expectations often have the contrary result. Writers are a bally lot. In general I do not believe that anyone is trying to find 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 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 label of "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 been sufficiently marked in it earlier years. In my own case I had to write several books before I found myself writing (and with a pass not yet realized) in (my Deed of a Jewish-Israeli millenium). Perhaps others have found their experiments similar, assimilated Jews in a world they never made, they had to swim about and familiarize themselves completely with the non-Jewish waters and air 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 Mayer Levin, who found their element quickly.

Fried, the establishment of Israel, the tune and temper of the Israelis, a growing 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 best Jewish writers writing now have from Jewish writers writing on Jewish, or involving Jewish, themes. The problem is not whether we find ourselves engaged by a writing that increasingly echoes itself; and also, not to find ourselves engaged in a kind of Jewish communal 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 Jews of the old generation.

If you find anything in these random observations of any use to you, you are welcome to them. Good luck on your project.

Sincerely, My Generation of Jews

Uris

To the Editor:

In answer to your query, in my opinion, most of the literature emanating from Jewish writers paid for a plunge from one continent to another, and into the industrial age.

American Jewish writing now reflects a great deal of mental and social currents from year to year, in an almost journalistic way. It is nervously 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 become authentic and lasting. But what is done now is a serious blow to the general respect of intellectuals, here and abroad. As a community achievement, it must be called brilliant.

Sincerely, My Generation of Jews

Contemporary-American-Jewish Literature

By Noah Bear

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 marshall whatever one has and try to inductively create something different — 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 others or sometimes? Does it include only those who write in English of also those who write in Yiddish? Must an American-Jewish author-deal with the American experience or can be deal with the Jewish 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 encounter that we respond.

It should be possible to use this denominator to divide our writers into 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 yea feel the need to exume 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 expressed and developed in his comic essays 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 failings and triumphs, Judaism no longer but represents. It becomes a vehicle for transmitting the authors' views on "reality." Bruce Rovitz discusses Elie Wiesel's role of casting Judaism in the theatre of the absurd. Lawrence Kaplan discusses I.B. Singer's casting of Judaism into the theatre of the middle.

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 Whitecup.

The final type of American-Jewish literature being 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 seller, 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. Three were received. The next stage of this project is 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. Weilbarger for his assistance.

The Commentary

Gary Schiff, Editor-in-Chief

Literary Magazine

Edited by Noah Bear

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

Noah Bear '69 majors in philosophy.

Steven Sadowsky is a YC junior in mathematics.

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

Marris Whitecup '69 is with the sociology department.

Joseph Telushkin is a sophomore history major.
By Edwin Endoway

"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 his moments till the next meal at that chef's restaurant. The author will utilize themes, plots, and stereotypes characters—lightweight salads and substantial vegetables—to titrate our appetites, slowly preparing us for the pièce de résistance: the main dish consisting of the characters and environment 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 lies not upon writing about people, but in 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 excels in describing a class of people—the Immigrant, the Refugee, the Suffering Jew—he utterly fails in letting us know what people are and what are their motivations and driving forces.

But success is almost achieved in The Assistant, by the immensity of his best work to date. Here lies the final chapter of America's apprenticeship to outside forces: poverty, hate, self-hate, and greed. Until his emergence, the latter, especially, had been the Boreb Grocery store—a store of life for Frank, but a tomb for everyone else. We can easily identify with this journeyman's story, as he evolves from a Hora-judge, symbolically being crucified and resurrected. We see our souls in deep torment as if we had raped Helen Beolz as fast as we could, then had robbed the Boreb Grocery store, and forgot our souls on this one occasion. As a result, we are left with an intense feeling of satisfaction for having read a charming story, but later find this satisfaction turns into indifference, for we have not encountered any human character to dissect or to analyze.

A perfect example of this is "The Mortuaries," a spectacular and haunting tale of a man, Kasher, who is completely blind in one eye. The end of the story, Kasher is the object of his own mourning. This one-hour-filmed motion picture is a triumph. In contrast, the character of "The Assistant," Malamud's earliest short story, "The First Seven Years," summarizes Malamud's aversion to revealing the individualistic portraiture of his characters when he said, "He has no soul. He only interested in things."

But these things are not to be scoffed at, they are lofty topics teaching us of the truths and nobility of man. On accepting the National Book Award for The Magic Barrel, Malamud said, "I am quite tired of the colossal deceits and delusions of man in this day... Whatever the reason, his fall from grace is his own eyes is betrayed by the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now, fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, existence-provoking. The delusion 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 fading of one's real identity. These three themes underlie all of Malamud's works and are all found together in The First, 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, a top salesman, takes a trip to Italy in order to free himself from the shackles of an uneventful past life, which somehow equates with his being Jewish. Changing his name to Henry R., he becomes a "Yankee" and, in his opinion, "tarnished his real identity."

Perhaps Miriam Pindel in one of Malamud's earlier short stories, "The First Seven Years," summarizes Malamud's view of the poets and historians of old...did not confine themselves to soothing and tickling the rather than to depicting hard truths. But the cooks and confectioners of our time...are always building up the outward senses with some new color, shape, scent, or flavor. They are not interested in utterly descriptive...the most important part of us, the mind.

Philosophically, Bernard Malamud

spent several years in a Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. Isabella, Malamud's spokesman, tells 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 Manichesthe, a modern-day Job, through every believable kind of torture in order to incite him to suffering. When his son is killed; his daughter marries a leper; his tailor's shop burns down; his wife, Fanny, becomes seriously ill; he gets terrible headaches. A visit from a fellow refugee, Alexander Levine, introduces himself to Manichevus, claiming that he is an angel sent by Gd to alleviate Manicheus's problems. It is not until he accepts his suffering, in fact, that it begins to lessen—his headaches become unbearable, and Fanny is lying on her deathbed—but that his faith in Levine, Manicheus, is betrayed and crushed. This in turn means that his wife indicates the drop of humanity he now possesses: "A wonderful thing, Fanny...There are Jews everywhere."

The concept of The Assistant—the archetypal fictional character—in search of his true identity—vocally the third part of his formula to discover the innate quality of people. Frankie Alpine is a thief, a misfit, and has a particular kind of a knowledge of literature and bad. When it implies a man's originality.

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

Inn Ezra
Malamad...

(Continued from page three)

lives an universal love of mankind is their duty.

Combining all three basic themes — redemption, dictating the different categories of 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 Ficer. But neither the Pulitzer 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 inscrutable amount of suffering, we come to only one concrete conclusion: about him he is a Jew.

However, the scope and the characterisation of The Ficer 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 Ficer seems to be a work of non-fiction. This is Malamud’s accomplishment — the blood lied 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 “TP” and “You.” Malamud places us all under the careful scrutiny of that moment of history, 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 Ficer’s greatness.

Hence, in the realm of the captivating story, the delightful tale, Malamud is the master. Also, he is a craftsman in utilizing his craft, a master of the art. 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 soup are eaten, but we are left with a very substantial literary diet.

By Bruce Herzelts

— When misfortune threatened his people, it was the custom of the Basi Shem To to pass on to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a candle, say a special prayer and thereby avert the tragedy.

The generation passed and the Magid of Mishech, a disciple of the Basi Shem To, found it necessary to intercede on behalf of his people. He went to the same place, placed the same special fortress of the universe [Listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but | am able to say the prayer]. The miracle would then take place.

The generations passed and the need for the prayer continued. But with each repetition, an element of the prayer was forgotten until the lessons one might derive from that time. “The Gates of the Forest” correspond in part to the prayers, fires and stories offered by the rabbis to G-d in their attempts to bring the oppression to an end. Yet Wiesel’s tale is directed more towards man than G-d, more towards tragedy than the negation of it.

The Gates of the Forest lived within the forest, there, ensnared in superstition and mysticism, with silent but defiant faith in the coming of the Messiah. Even the weak, among the stubborn or the weak, even during the war, waited patiently. The plaser world they had erected as protection was shattered. It became a torch for millions.

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

The fictitious character of Gregor becomes Wiesel’s vehicle of hope. A life filled with the dim light of the forest, the blindness of his people; a man who in some quasi-objective sense reduced the war to its elemental significance.

Throughout his mind we may perceive the perception and conception of the struggle to survive in the midst of a civilization that did not wish to live without the bulbous of its terrors. Its struggle for life, a heartbreakingly vivid face to face with the world, as it is, was at once laughable and terrifying.

The qualities are mysteriously manifested in the character of Gavrilo, a teller of tales, a dead man who returns to deliver a message, a “key to the door.” Why the story tells, is of his death, why he died and what might be understood if one were seeking comprehension.

Gavrilo lived in a village typical of the many in Europe which maintained weighty matters of Jewish life. The world around them was complicated and often theirs would in like manner. Yet life continued with little 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?

Gavrilo questioned, challenged, debated 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. Gavrilo died in thunder with the realization he passed on to Gregor. Gregor, the Messiah..? Wherever the Messiah comes, he is too long to wait, too distant for one to rely upon, too inconsistent with the immediate need, the groundless desire for the Messiah.

Hence, Wiesel challenges the acceptance of tragedy that distinguished Jobs. Compliance of acceptance cost the world and the Jewish people six million souls. Unwitting followers a savour 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 obnoxiousness of man’s inhumanity, and with it, the attitudes which may incline him to the belief that there is no God. The world of the G-d of the Messiah is too much, incalculable, and the story is told in a cyclonic historia Hesiplan spiral inverted to arrive at a typical disdain for war and its effects. Wiesel is sensitive to the dichotomy of war. While the effects and signification are substantial in rigid human terms, war as an incident in time and space remains unimportant as a 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 the depths of a soul which has made the ascent from the base of human experience to the summit of creativity.

Wiesel’s involvement with WWII ultimately becomes a vehicle of expression rather than meaning. It is in fact the very essence of meaning that project itself concludes with a classic existential reply to the process of life. His conception of the historical dialectic, was, and is, upon the blind, the unawake unaware of the suffering and pleasures that transpire within its structure. While history and nature proceed linearly without beginning or end, it means to itself that condition in which the absurd will cut and the reasonable will not.

Gregor like Gavrilo suite his hope, his message with the extra, this is a life of millions of people, who might think themselves a new world, not on the ruins of the old, but upon a foundation that can not be shaken by the flash in man that destroyed, so many other ill-bred cultures.

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

He stripped himself of the illusions upon who he数据分析 his friends retaining still the essential character of belief. “Whether or not the Messiah comes, we will manage without him. Wiesel concludes with the Gregor Gavrilo, everywhere 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 have gone before, the suffering of Gavrilo, and the dead will be remembered not so much for its sorrows as for the secret it cries, the gate it opens, the forest it reveals.
Uris’ Abusive Attempt
To Capture Jewish Essence

By Morris Whiteman

There is an apocryphal story told about an Israeli scientist’s attempt to cross the road with a rabbit. Unfortunately, his efforts were to no avail and the cross rabbit turned out to be “a bitch and a hag.” So it is with the Jewish consciousness of Leon Uris, for his image of what constitutes the essence of Judaism and what epitomizes the paragons of Jewishness is both ambiguous and self-contradictory. This is patent in his book *Exodus*.

In *Exodus* Uris depicts the assimilationist tendencies that existed among the Jewish intellectuals and upper middle class in Poland prior to World War II. Andrei Androfslci, the hero of the novel, denounces Prok Bronski, who had married Andrei’s sister Deborah for the fact that there were no Sabbath candles on his sister’s table. Androfslci remembers that when they lived in the shuls on Stasiak Street—“G-d was poor. But we were Jews. And when we moved to the fancy neighborhood on Slubia Street and Mama died, I had a sister who was the head of a Jewish house.” According to Androfslci, 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 Androfslci, the only Jewish officer in the Ulan (cavalry) regiment. But every man knows who I am and what I am.”

Yet contrary to his own assertions, Androfslci almost performed the penultimate act in the process of assimilation, the 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 in the act of intermarriage. Andrei’s sister Deborah, who had heretofore been representative of the kind and resolute Jewish mother, also trended on the heels of performing this act for the fall in love with an Italian newspaper reporter named Christopher De Monte. This phenomenon of denouncing one’s Jewishness by way of the bed is not limited to *Exodus*. For *Exodus* too is the hero of the novel, Ari Ben Camaan; falls in love with a non-Jewish American woman, Marianna. If* Exodus* goes to the extreme of having one of his minor characters in *Exodus*, Foster J. MacWilliams, marry a Sabra. We leave to Fineprint, the Cleveland Bookshop’s* Commentator’s sections of events, but in any case it shows the self-contradiction in Uris’ conception of Jewishness.

Besides this ambiguous image of what Jewishness is, Uris also shows a complete lack of understanding of Orthodoxy 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 muzzle his prayers and will hope that his deplorable behavior and failure to be the road toward salvation. Uris, however, fails to realize that it is not Orthodoxy which has inculturated this notion in the minds of his audience but instead the tragic life that the Jews have been forced to lead in exile. Uris does not remember, or perhaps does not know, that Samuel Hagn is not only a Jewish scholar and a poet, but also a valiant general or that the man who defended Massada—who committed suicide rather than accept the yoke of the Romans—was the hero of the Jewish nation. The survival of the Jewish nation kept not only the Jewish holidays but also the laws of *talmud and masoret* and the laws of *hakdama汕头*. Furthermore, Leon Uris shows in the latter of the above-mentioned books, a lack of comprehension of the Jewish holidays. For *Exodus* Andrei turns a kibbutz into a “H-H Club” show where all the animals and produce are paraded. “The livestock was passed in review before the kibbutzniks; a turkey in a pen, a chicken on a rabbit with a chicken.” The sheep and goats were headed past the tables where the celebration of Passover became a holiday when “all dirt had to be chased.”

But even though Uris fails in understanding 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 Norman Glimmer dies, Uris puts into the mouth of Ari Ben Camaan the suffering of centuries which finds expression in the woeful cry, “Why must we fight for the right to live, and over and over, each time the sun rises… G41 G41 Why don’t they let us alone! Why don’t they let us live!”

Comment On Commentary

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 are reserved for either the dead (Elliott Cohen, *Commentary’s* former editor, and Robert Warshow) 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 Moneybox mentions the fact “that he was ever anything but abrasive, impatient and soulful 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 has always been regarded through his ability to criticize, not to praise. His entrance into the literary establishment or as he would call it the “family” was arduous. Podhoretz’s propensity to uncleared praise he has always recognized, Bellow’s widely acclaimed *The Adventures of Augie March* Bellow was a member of the “family” and it appears that his reaction to the initial, undiluted praise he has been receiving, and were looking for him to get put down. Enter Norman Podhoretz. That Bellow was almost a victim of fact he was quite happy. And so he emerged into the limelight, having discovered that being critical would enhance his family. 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 believes it is an handicap. Upon assuming editorship of *Commentary* he severely cut down on its Jewish content (eliminating some regular sections entirely) for he believed that quality to be lower than that of the secular articles, and if Jewish articles wished to remain in *Commentary*, they would have to do the line. Yet, it is still astounding and somewhat distressing that the author has so little to say about Judaism (*Commentary* has only three articles regarding it) and for a publication which claims to be a “cultural, educational, civic and religious, social, or sociological sense.” It would appear that Podhoretz’s attachment to *Commentary*, denotes either a lack of interest and the articles have, and has nothing to do with a desire on his part to be a constructive crick of the Jewish establishment from within.

Norman Podhoretz

Dorothy & George

*Exodus*
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 Bae**

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 whatever 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 opposition.

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 Judaism 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 killed, 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?

A. I am curious as to what is characterized when we find Danny Saunders rejecting his rabbinical inheritance to shave off his yaffot 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 am interested in doing is exploring what happens when that core encounters the core that constituted 20th century secularism. What has been explored until now in literature has been an encounter around the periphery as during the Holocaust 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 Judaism type of 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.**

Ahad 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 messages?

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

Q. Why was the view of the two main characters of your book, the one who majored in psychology who 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 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 taken 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 be moved through he took philosophy. Remember what I said. 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 semara lechina, 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 contradictions was not a valid response.

A. For me it's very important to know what a riddle does with any text. Variations 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 Haggadah and Haggadot and you'll realise what I'm talking about.

Q. I found a little stylized the Reuven Malter of the book which you found more resilient to the twentieth century. Do you think that the lack of the present of the problems in that tradition makes in any way that he does in the book too much?

A. No. This is where we get into the problem of focus. I wasn't focusing on that. I was trying to present the various problems and their relationships. If I had gone into that, it would have been an altogether different kind of story. Also, there was no question that the boy was able to cope with these problems in any intelligent way. The hope is that you survive teenagery and can cope with the world in a meaningful way.

That's what the essential focus of the novel is, the head-on, explosive confrontation between Malter's kind of Judaism and its own view. But, the point of the point of this book. It was Reuven Malter's understanding of a kind of Judaism that he never knew and didn't know how he could help someone come out of that Judaism without being destroyed as a result of the breach.

Q. What was 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 Satmar extended their friendship to me, and the people in the Boston yeshiva. On the other hand, there was a mesolit in my neighborhood where, I understand, the children were in my book. Because not another Jew came out less a Jew at the end than he was at the beginning.

**I. B. Singer ...**

(Continued from page one)

**Interactions 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 easily maintained. The core tension which pulls man in opposite directions is not easily and only momentarily overcome. The dangers of repression on the one side and the destruction of limits and restraint on the other are ever-present, ever-threatening. And we return full-cyclic to the tragic vision of Freud and to the question of what 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 two 'Heavenly Powers'—eternal Ezra will make an effort to assist himself in the struggle with equally immortal adversary—death. But what can be done in this situation, and with what success, is what I do not know. 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.