

A Man's Conscience

Sholem Asch's "A Passage in the Night" (Translated by Maurice Samuel. G. P. Putnam's Sons. 367 pp. \$3.75) tells of the search by a self-made man for a poor Pole he bilked in the days of his youth.

By Nathan Rothman

LIKE all of Sholem Asch's major works, his latest novel, "A Passage in the Night," is a parable. That is to say, the mass of physical data which he wields so easily to create a recognizable world—in this instance the world of Isaac Grossman, a powerful real-estate and industrial tycoon—is actually employed upon a higher level of symbolic significance. It is as though the facts of Grossman's life past and present, solid enough to make the substance of any novel, were themselves the shadows of the reality of his life, shadows of the essential spiritual drama that links the history of Grossman with the history of man, and illumines both.

I should say that this faculty of reaching through the transient physical curtain of life to touch the spiritual essence, is a definition of Asch's greatness. There are other writers who can tell as well as Asch the tale of the Jew in Europe, the Jew in America, with all of the bitter humor, the melancholy dedication, the raffish, the sentimental, the poetic, the salty detail. But Asch has this other dimension to add, and at once the scene is enhanced and exalted; it bristles with planes of meaning.

The problem is presented obliquely through the experience of Isaac Grossman as he sits amidst his empire of wealth in Florida. He has come up by the familiar passage of poverty and hunger, from New York's East Side. Asch traces this for us in a series of reminiscent flashbacks with his usual rich panoply of detail: the pushcarts, the crowds, the shops of New York streets, the interplay of three genera-

tions of Jews, the shifting weights of religious doctrine and worldly sophistry, all peopled profligately with the lifelike figures: the Grossmans, the lawyers, the rabbis, the merchants, Jews, Catholics, Quakers.

It is upon this level alone an impressive narrative. But the real problem is behind and above and beyond, for Grossman is wounded where no doctor can search—in conscience; and he lies in the midst of his self-made world as alone as though he were indeed upon the other side of the horizon.

Once, at a crucial time of his youth, he needed a small sum of money to get the one job, the one chance, that could put him on the road to his present power. And he did get it, by taking advantage of a poor Pole, and stealing twenty-seven dollars from him. Now he can think only of the Pole, Kovalsky. Where is Kovalsky? How can he make up to Kovalsky for the crime? All of his wealth is soured, his life shadowed, by his need to rectify the crime. The search for Kovalsky is a search for penance, and spiritual peace.

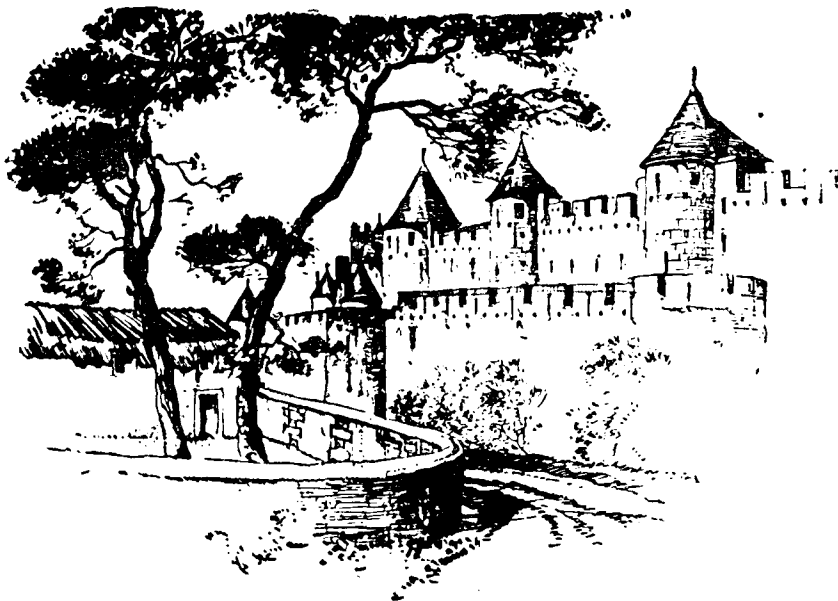
It is a search that raises up its own obstacles. First, the unscrupulous people who try to use Grossman's evident need for information and help, to bilk and blackmail him. They produce bogus Kovalskys, befoul the search. Then, his family, who think him to be the victim of fatigue and hallucination. Kovalsky? There was no such Kovalsky. Actually they bring the weight of their psychoanalysts to bear against him, and force him into a sanatorium. And finally his own depression and despair, as he finds that his one new instinct for self-purification has brought him to this pass, where all his crass power-cravings had brought only success and glorification.

IN failure he is a judgment upon his world. In final success he is a symbol of renaissance. His pilgrimage is indeed a parable of the hunger for integrity, true beyond the actuality of the small incident at its core—for what if there were or were not a real Kovalsky? "Who cares if it's an obsession or a fact," cries out one friend of Grossman. "He needed it for the sake of his conscience. Does it matter what led him to undertake this project if the result would be good for him, and the world too?" There are byways here for the reader to pursue, and elsewhere too in this eloquent and probing book of a haunting conscience.

I should like to cavil, if I may, at Asch's easy and superficial treatment of the psychiatrists in his book. In probing Grossman's sickness of soul to find the hard nugget of irritation there, Asch himself was doing a fine piece of literary and spiritual psychoanalysis. Why, then, has he allowed himself to cast the psychiatrists as straw villains who misunderstand Grossman and push him into a sanatorium, contrasting them with the good and inspired rabbi who sees the truth and helps Grossman to exorcise his ghost, Kovalsky? The contest is fixed. A good psychiatrist would have known what the rabbi knew, and done the job as well, if less dramatically. I feel this book indicates at least that Asch knows more about psychiatry than he has allowed his fictitious psychiatrists to practice, thus adding, I fear, to the general public suspicion of the newest medical science.



Sholem Asch—"a religious doctrine and worldly sophistry."



—By Samuel Chamberlain, for "Bouquet de France."

Frenchmen from the Pyrenees

"The Catalans," by Patrick O'Brian (Harcourt, Brace. 250 pp. \$3.50) describes the crisis created in a prosperous French Catalan family by a threatened *mésalliance*.

By Oliver La Farge

PATRICK O'BRIAN'S first novel, "Testimonies," dealt with passion in a small Welsh community by a method offering interesting possibilities of narration by accumulation, which did not quite come off. His second, "The Catalans," more direct in treatment and freer in style, is by far the better of the two. It tells of a crisis brought on by an impending, highly unsuitable marriage in a tightly knit, hard-bitten, prosperous, emotional French Catalan family. At first it appears a story primarily concerned with folkways and interrelationships in an interesting minority group, but it becomes progressively richer and deeper, charged with potential tragedy.

The threatened *mésalliance* is dissected from an unexpected number of points of view, until the reader is presented with what seems an absolute dilemma of emotions, from which he can see no way out except through some act of violence, an expectation encouraged by the setting of the moment. The author has a better solution, and a credible one. He can, however, be accused of maintaining his pitch of suspense by withholding information concerning what is

happening inside his main character, although he does offer clues.

At first the reader fears that he is in for one of those tales narrated through the mind of a detached yet intimate observer—the method exploited so well by Joseph Conrad and done to death by William McFee. The reader is pleasantly disappointed. Alan Roig, the observer, the kinsman returned from another world, becomes much more. The story is told through him with only minor exceptions, but his part in it is what in present-day anthropological jargon would be called "action research," and finally much more than that.

Judging by these two novels, Mr. O'Brian is addicted to one odd device. He indicates the approach of internal climax in a main character by causing him to undertake a task beyond his strength, which he accomplishes only by driving his body through horrors of exhaustion. The two descriptions of this situation are in effect identical, so that the second is almost self-plagiarism. The device does not work, and in the present instance casts incredibility over several following pages.

That trick aside, "The Catalans" is excellently written. The rich local color is well exploited but never gets out of hand. The style is good, and the writer is not afraid to vary it upon appropriate occasion. The opening casts the storyteller's spell, and soon enough the story marches. The end result is a fine novel of conflict of character.

Rival to Orwell

"One," by David Karp (Vanguard Press. 311 pp. \$3.50), is a story of a Welfare State of the future where the spirit and mind of all individuals have been obliterated.

By Harrison Smith

IN THIS moment of world tension fear of what may happen to our country and to ourselves may be an exhilarating and a shocking emotion if a novelist places his story far enough in the future. There is no doubt that "Nineteen Eighty-Four," George Orwell's satire on the totalitarian state, has left its mark on everyone who has read it attentively. It was terrifying since it was both imaginative and logical, and it left in one's mind the gnawing suspicion that it might happen, though even the weak-minded could not translate into "it is inevitable that it will happen." Orwell's great book has had no rival until the recent publication of a first novel by a young American.

David Karp's "One" is perhaps even more terrifying. It lacks the satirical note, the wide canvas, and the grim humor which its predecessor gave to his account of what might happen to Great Britain in a few years of Communist domination. It is concentrated on the attempt of a welfare state to destroy the mind and spirit of a single insignificant individual. The date in which the gruesome events happen, presumably on this continent, is mercifully left to another century than ours. Mr. Karp has allowed his story not an ounce of humor, unless the failure of the all-powerful Department of Internal Examination to force one of its insignificant but faithful spies to confess that he was a deviationist by removing his ego might be considered a cosmic joke on his tormentors. The novel is essentially a struggle between three elements that exist in human nature—the passion to remain an individual, the desire to force others to obey an established set of rules and doctrines, and the instinct to conceal one's heresies and lack of faith in the established order.

After a century or more of complete control the heads of the welfare state were certain, like that almost forgotten dictator Hitler that it would endure a thousand years. The possibility of world wars had ended, ambition for wealth or progress was stifled, the State Church as a weapon for softening men's minds was winning converts everywhere. The least deviation from the normal