

Israeli Writing:

## An Obsession With Time

by John Hersey

Reading the novels, stories, and poems of Israeli authors during two visits to Jerusalem last year, I was struck by the fact that time blazes and shimmers in those writings in ways that are fully as intense, dizzying, and mysterious as the famous light on the Judean Hills. The element of time works in them in certain ways that are not commonly found in European and American literature.

To begin with, a reader cannot help noticing on the surface of these writings—even in the sometimes uneven translations I used—a wealth of images of time, which is constantly objectified or personified. Time “gradually disintegrates in clocks” (Chaim Gury), “skips like a dolphin” but also “trudges upon heavy earth” (T. Carmi), “is like a police van patrolling the streets at night” (Amos Oz). “At times,” says Hannah Goren, the narrator of Oz’s *My Michael*, “my eyes are opened and I can see time . . . a tall, freezing, transparent presence . . . hostile to me, boding no good.”

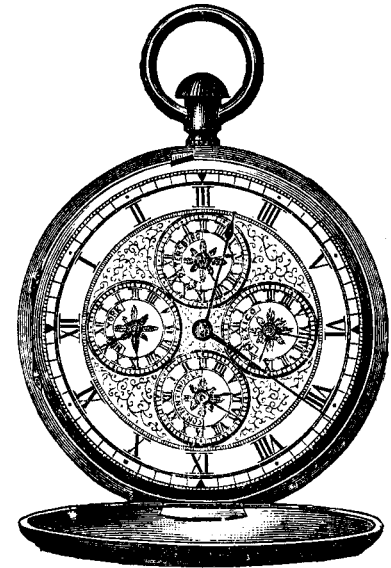
But this phenomenon goes deeper than simile and metaphor. Its seed, I suppose, was danger. In one of his stories, Aharon Megged, winner last year of the Bialik Prize for fiction, has a character write a letter to the Prime Minister:

. . . As long as I [Y. Tal, born in Nes-Ziona] can remember, we have been living in a continuous state of tension—of work, security, immigrant absorptions, etc. This tension has a grave effect on the character of this coun-

try’s citizens, making them prone to irritability, aggressiveness, impatience, imbalance. . . .

This tension evidently also does strange things to the citizens’—and the writers’—time sense. Time slips out of rhythm; it moves like a caterpillar, now drawing itself tight, then suddenly stretching out. A woman I met in Jerusalem spoke of the sensation, during and just after the Yom Kippur War, of the urgency and immediacy of each day’s every minute, while events from the period just before the war—when had they happened? how long, how long, how many ages ago? A. B. Yehoshua, one of the most gifted of the younger prose writers, mentions in a story the Jerusalemites’ “frenzied greed for mail, devouring of newspapers.” Israelis work a six-day week, remember a six-day war. A young mother in Tel Aviv told me of the speed with which a rigidly foreordained quarter of a century had flashed past her eyes: 6 years of childhood, 12 years of school, 2 years of army, 4 years of university, 1 year of marriage; and then, with the arrival of a baby, for some reason time stopped short. “I do nothing! Nothing!” she cried. How headlong life is in Dan Pagis’s “The Portrait”:

The child keeps fidgeting.  
it’s hard for me to get the line of his cheek.  
I draw one line  
and the wrinkles of his face increase.  
I draw another,  
and his lips grow crooked, his hair white,  
the bluish skin peels from his bones. He’s gone.  
The old man’s gone. And I—  
What shall I do now?



Yet the fleeting present moment has a context—the massive appeal of a long past and the threat of an endlessly uncertain future. A hero of the Warsaw ghetto uprising spoke to me, during my last visit, of the sense of stability in his parents’ home in Europe, where nobody had his own watch or alarm clock, but where the whole family told time by a huge, heavy wooden chime clock that had been passed from generation to generation—until a historic alarm rang and time broke off. “It’s an illusion,” he said, “to think that the Messiah will come in my lifetime—or in my children’s. A mistake people make is to believe that history turns on a single day, in a single hour. Everything is a process.”

This sense of time ceaselessly at work in history is caught in a passage from Amos Oz’s novel *My Michael*:

On a branch of a fig tree which sprouted in our garden a rusty bowl had hung suspended for years. Perhaps a long-dead neighbor had once thrown it from the window of the flat above, and it had caught in the branches. It was already hanging covered in rust outside our kitchen window when we first arrived. Four, five years. Even the fierce winds of winter had not brought it to the ground. On New Year’s Day, however, I stood at the kitchen sink and saw with my own eyes how the bowl dropped from the tree. No breeze stirred the air, no cat or bird moved the branches. But strong forces came to fruition at that moment. What I mean to say is this: All these years I had observed complete repose in an object in which a hidden process was taking place all these years.

THE FIRST GENERATION of Hebrew writers in Palestine, who came out of the settlements, the fighting underground, and

the War of Independence, and were caught up in the enthusiasm of shaping a new state, deliberately turned their backs on Europe and rejected—at least for a while—the example of the founders of modern Hebrew literature, who had written from and about the Diaspora. Two of



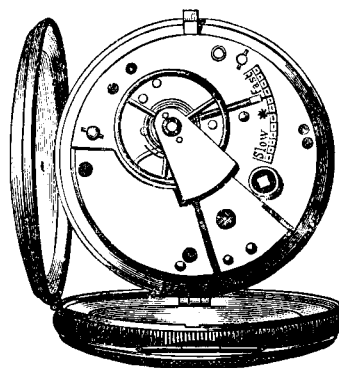
these predecessors, the poet Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) and the novelist S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970), still remain the giants of the literature—Bialik, with his prophetic, caustic, goading lyric voice, and Agnon, a Nobel Prize winner toward the end of his life, with his earthy, witty, ironic fictions about the ecstatic Hasidim. But those men wrote about a past the young immigrants did not have to confront, at least not from day to day. While the poets—Abraham Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman, and others—were influenced by European symbolists and imagists, much of their early work was concerned with the building of the homeland. The first wave of prose writings—by writers like Megged, S. Yizhar, Moshe Shamir, Hanoach Bartov—was mostly in a mode of idealistic social realism. For these writers, time was of the instant, and their most resonant memory of the past was of their return to Eretz Israel.

But before long the new writers in Hebrew evidently found their present time, busy as it was, shallow and repetitive. Little by little they began to explore a past—the distant past, which was so palpable in their new surroundings. They skipped over the past of the dispersion of the Jews and went all the way back, at first, to the Bible. The overt line to the biblical past was through historical fiction; the large, well-crafted, but heavy novels of Moshe Shamir, books like *The King of Flesh and Blood* and *David's Stranger*, are examples of that genre. But there were other, more interesting paths back into that past—and along

them we come to the distinctive relationships to time that are to be found in Israeli literature.

ONE PATH was over the landscape. In other literatures, landscape is used for various effects, one of which may be to create an emotional tie with a cultural past. What sets this effect apart in Israeli writing is partly a matter of breathtaking reach and partly a matter of historical density. The archeologist Pesah Bar-Adon, who has made several important discoveries in the Judean desert since the '67 war, most notably the so-called Cave of the Treasure, at Nahal Mishmar, writes that it is “as though Genesis was still continuing on this unfinished, inchoate landscape.” And, alluding to the teeming reminders of the Jewish past on and just under the surface of the land, he speaks of “a clasping of hands across centuries, from fathers to sons.”

In fictions like “Midnight Convoy” and *Days of Ziklag*, S. Yizhar ties together, with a strange and sometimes stunning effect, the shifting states of mind of his characters and the changing



lights on the “cinnamon soil,” “flocks of hills,” “scorched, dusted horizons,” to produce an eerie sense of the total liberation from conventional time of a generation of Jews caught in tension between their historic destiny in an ancient land and their direct experience of life from minute to minute. Time in his stories—and in much Israeli literature—is fused with old places, merged with the angle of light, blended with momentary risks, into what Yizhar calls “an infinite instant.”

THERE IS a yet more subtle tie to the past in Israeli literature—that of diction. In the hectic days of settlement and of the War of Independence, the young writers did not have time for a solid education in

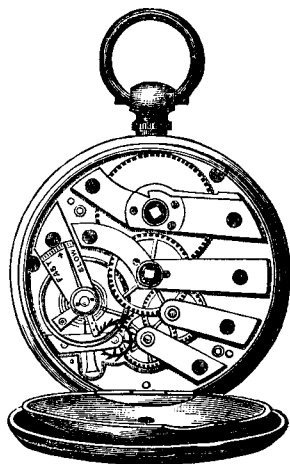
their “new” language, Hebrew. In one way, their pell-mell rush into the language enriched it. A gifted poet like Yehuda Amichai brought to his verse the freshness and pungency of daily speech—and also a “foreign” flavor, derived from the influence on him of poets he had read and admired in Europe, such as Rilke and Auden.

But gradually Israeli writers steeped themselves in the more-than-2,000-year-old oral and written Hebrew literary tradition, through the Bible, the Talmud and its legends, the commentaries of the Midrash, the Book of Prayer, the sayings and writings of sages and poets. Soon Israeli poets were able, by allusion and quotation, to inject deep time into present moments.

There are important differences between the way the literary past is sounded in Western writings and the way the past is called to witness in Hebrew writings. One difference is the sheer immensity of the echo chamber available to writers in Hebrew; another is that whereas Western writers freely cross frontiers of language and culture (Eliot quotes from five languages in the last 11 lines of *The Waste Land*), the Hebrew writers—even those younger novelists who have been much influenced by European and American models—mainly confine themselves to Hebrew sources. The sum of all the other differences is this great one: a vast difference in accessibility and, therefore, in impact. The reader in Hebrew, no matter what his attitude toward religion, feels the powerful emotional thrust of referents drawn from a tradition he considers his own, and one that he associates with his very survival. Stanley Burnshaw, in *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (which Burnshaw edited with T. Carmi and Ezra Spicheckler), has pointed out some of these differences, and he offers a telling, if extreme, example of the differences in intensity of responses called up by allusion: between those of a Western reader, to Eliot's insertion of Mallarmé's “*Donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*” as “To purify the dialect of the tribe” (in “Little Gidding”), and those of a Jewish reader, to Avraham Ben Yitzhak's line, “And upon the day of our leaving the earth we shall stand before the gates at closing time” (in “The Lonely Say”), with its echo of the prayer that concludes the service for the Day of Atonement.

ONE PERIOD OF TIME is so far missing—an amnesia. It was for the poets Abba

Kovner, Amir Gilboa, and, more recently, Dan Pagis, and some others, to “fill the empty space,” as Kovner expressed it to me—to try to give a literary voice to the millions of Jews lost in Europe. Kovner, who had commanded the United Partisan Organization of the



Vilna ghetto and, after its fall and the escape of small groups to the forests, the Jewish “Vengeance” battalion, arrived in Israel relatively late, in 1946, just in time to take up arms again in the War of Independence. In his long, dense-textured poems, packed with hints of the far past and strange leaps of his living memory, Kovner managed to weave that “missing” time of the Nazi holocaust into its place among all the other times.

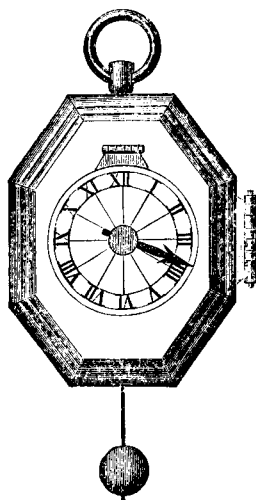
A problem for Kovner and the other poets who survived the Nazi period in Europe is one of discontinuities—a dislocation of the time sense. A survivor of, and a resister in, the Cracow ghetto, later an inmate of Theresienstadt, an escapee to Sweden, an immigrant in Israel, a post-doctoral student at Yale, and a psychiatrist in Jerusalem, where I met him, told me that remembering various segments of his past, he finds himself saying with bewilderment, “I was not the same man. That was not I, not the I that I am now.” Kovner put this to me, in literary terms, with a devastating concision: “A poet can’t learn two landscapes in one lifetime.”

Yet some Israeli poets—more successfully than novelists—have been able, thanks to this gift of theirs for dissolving time, to confront deep connections between the European and the Israeli experience, between wars here and there, between genocide and terrorism, Hitler and pharaoh, reality and myth, tradition and destiny.

Amir Gilboa’s poem “Isaac” seems on

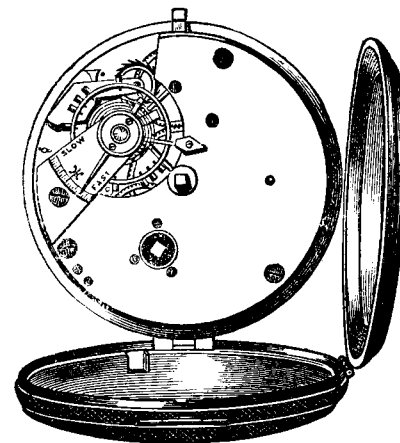
the surface to be a reworking of that most cruel and terrifying example of God’s willingness to test to the breaking point man’s belief in His power—the binding of Isaac to the sacrificial altar. But the poem radically recasts that story, and here it is seen not as a trial of faith but as a kind of dreamlike subliminal glimpse at the destruction of European Jewry. It is told in the voice of a little boy and starts as a forest idyll; he and his daddy (*aba*) and the sun go for a stroll in the woods. Then “like lightning a knife flamed between the trees.” The child, terrified by “blood on the leaves”—the Nazi massacres in the forests—cries out for help from his father, so they won’t miss lunch. But the father answers, “It is I who am being slaughtered, my son./ And my blood is already on the leaves.” Then the vision is suddenly transformed into a nightmare in the present time, for the “I” of the narrator dissolves into that of the poet himself, waking up, his right hand “bloodless,” as if paralyzed or dead.

IN THE LATE Fifties and Sixties, a generation of sabras began to chafe at the constant pressure on them of the collective conscience in Israel, and the wheel turned, and once again present time seemed important—a present in which an individual could savor, in isolation, for better or worse, his own existential predicament. These younger writers were obviously influenced by European and American authors, and their work opened outward in ways that made it seem more in the stream of Western literature than much of the Hebrew writing that had preceded it. Two prose writers



I have already mentioned were, and still are, preeminent—Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua.

The intensity of the obsession with time of these two writers is almost suffocating. In Yehoshua’s “Three Days and a Child” we see the inexorable playing-out, to utter exhaustion, of the span of time during which a city man has undertaken to care for the small son of a



Illustrations: Culver

former mistress; in “Early in the Summer of 1970,” a story of a father’s unbearable grief, Yehoshua achieves haunting echoes of ancient time by sounding the theme of the Gilboa poem, one all too easily recognized by Israelis, who after five wars have come to wonder how many sons a stern deity requires them to sacrifice. In Oz’s novella *The Crusade*, a historical fiction about the progress of the crusade of one Count Guillaume of Touron, the author reaches far beyond the usual double level of time in that form, where the past sheds direct light on the present, for something far more complex: an evocation of all the times, all the centuries, of the persecution of Jews. As an example of Oz’s subtle infusion of extra time levels into the story, take this passage, with its grasp of the incessant paranoia of anti-Semitism, yet also with its whispered but unmistakable evocation of Nazis surrounded by Jewish partisans in the forests of Eastern Europe:

A few times it happened that darkness fell while they were still in the depth of the forest. Then they would light a great fire in the middle and surround the camp with a close circle of small bonfires for fear of vampires, wolves, and demons.

If one looked upward one could see how the light of the fire was broken by the thick ceiling of leaves. Round about wolves howled, foxes’ eyes glinted, an evil bird screeched and shrieked. Or was it the wind? Or sinister imitations of the sound of fox, bird, and wind? Even the rustling of fallen leaves hinted perpetually at the certainty of



another, a hostile camp whispering round about, encircling.

IN THE COMMENTARIES there is a frequently expressed conviction that God gave the element of time to mankind through the Jews. In *Midrash Tanhuma Hayashan*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, commenting on God's command to Moses (in Exodus 12) henceforth to set the divisions of "your months," compares this to a king handing on a clock to his son who has reached maturity; God was saying that the children of Israel had come of age, and "until now I reckoned

the months and years; now I am handing them over to you."

To writers in the Hebrew language, this conviction must at times have seemed a heavy burden. In *The Living on the Dead*, Aharon Megged has the narrator tell of a walk out to some salt pans with the old revolutionary Davidov:

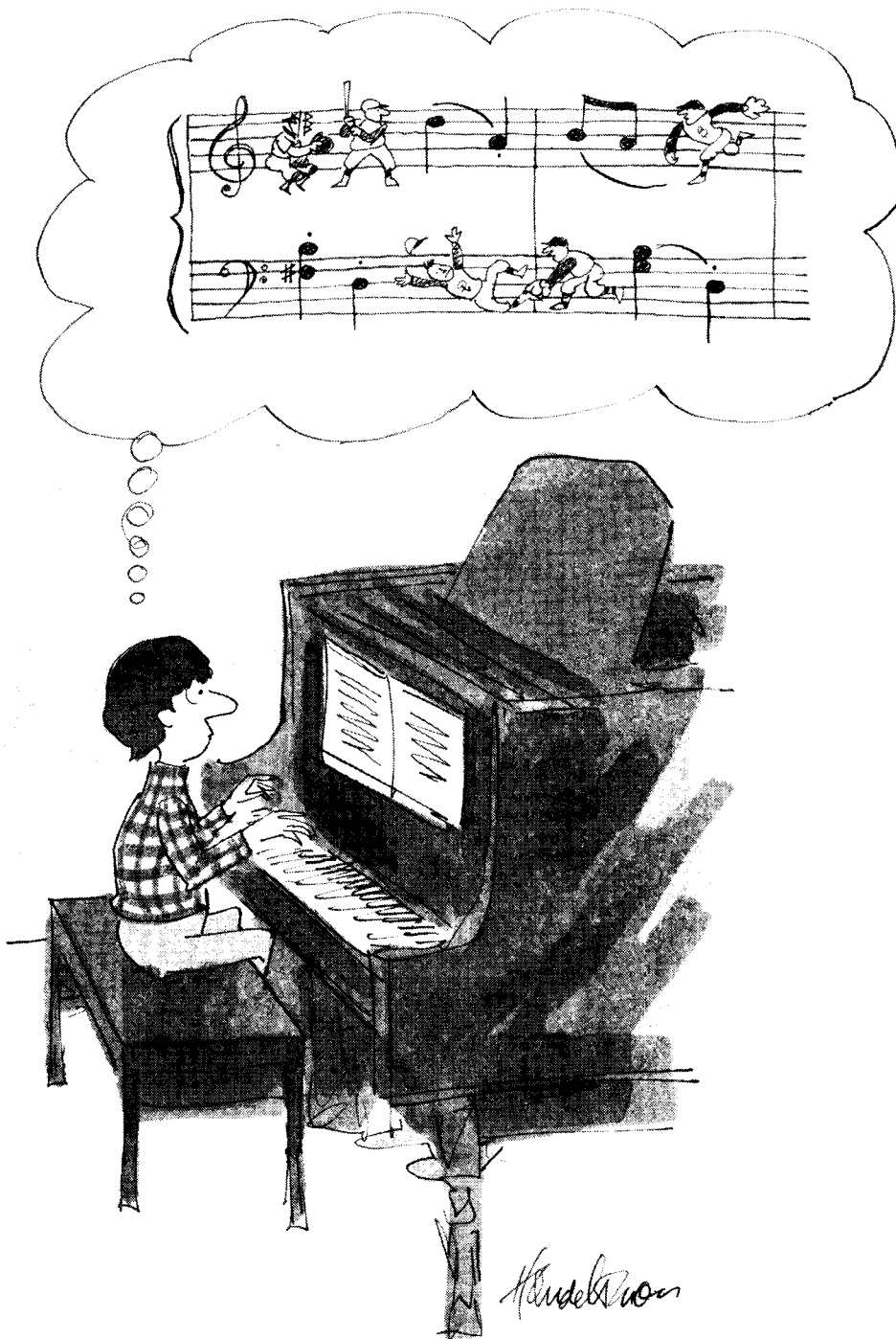
I remember how he halted suddenly, lifted up his face to the moon, and said something about a nation's history beginning in the heavens, but without a moon. . . . God, he said, took Abraham outside and told him to count the stars, but there was no moon. And that was the beginning of our history,

which already contained the future in embryo—very serious, shadowy, sublime, unromantic.

Megged asked himself, in an interview last year in the Israeli quarterly *Ariel*, "What debt do we owe to the history of the Jewish people, the history of this land, the memory of the Holocaust, the biblical past? All culture is memory. Why do I object to the ruin of Zikhron Ya'akov or the old section of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem? Because without all these memories, I am like a man without culture, deprived of roots." In the novel he speaks of "the obligation of the treetop to the roots."

Time, for writers in Hebrew, as indeed for all those who daily lift their eyes to the hills of Israel, reaches back very far, to Abraham, to Moses, to Adam, to the abyss before the lights were hung; that time is awesomely old, and its workings have been long, deep, and slow. But for the Jewish nation and its people, constantly in peril—and this surely is the key to the literary obsession—it is at the same time brutally precipitate. Chaim Gury writes of his first 35 years:

1.  
And I did not have time.  
Now I know  
That I did not have time  
Half of my life  
I can now stay silent.  
My shadow grows long  
With the passage of the sun.  
I am the man  
Who did not have time
2.  
And I did not have time  
To grow slowly like a tree  
Of thoughts.  
Like something more understood,  
Less casual and made up  
Of shouts,  
Of snacks eaten in standing.  
My life has passed midst newspapers,  
My breath has been cut off,  
A short distance run,  
For God's sake!
3.  
And I did not have time  
To be covered by moss  
Or rust  
And to experience  
Birth-burial-birth  
To belong to memories  
Or to grow yellow like  
Pages and pages of the heavy book.  
To be understood.  
Definite.  
Lost.  
Gaining a heritage.  
Between me and my father—the sea. □



# A Dialogue Between Olympians

## Roosevelt and Churchill: Their Secret Wartime Correspondence

Edited by Francis L. Loewenheim, Harold D. Langley, and Manfred Jonas  
Saturday Review Press/E. P. Dutton, 808 pp., \$17.50

Reviewed by Robert F. Byrnes

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill met briefly during World War I, but Churchill did not even remember the meeting. Neither of these men—the two heroes of the twentieth century in the Anglo-Saxon world—attempted to see the other or correspond until after World War II had begun. On September 11, 1939, Roosevelt initiated the correspondence—a correspondence that for the first eight months was highly improper in light of their respective political positions. Churchill, apparently, did not at first even inform Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, in whose Cabinet he was serving, of these fascinating letters. Over a period of five years and seven months, Roosevelt and Churchill exchanged more than 1,700 messages—almost one a day—that dealt candidly and most informally with many far-reaching military and political issues. This flow is extraordinary, particularly considering they met on 120 days during that period.

The editors of this collection, three youngish scholars with a special interest in American diplomatic history, have selected 548 of the letters. These secret messages have been available for some time, at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N.Y., and presumably Loewenheim, Langley, and Jonas have culled the most important and interesting items, though they never disclose their rationale. In a few cases passages have been eliminated without explanation.

They have divided the letters into four groups: up until the North Africa invasion, in October 1942; the remainder of 1942 and all of 1943; the months in 1944 before the Normandy landing, on June 6; and the period until Roosevelt's last letter, on April 11, 1945. They have also provided about 100 pages of introductory material: a general introduction, devoted to personal, military, political,

and diplomatic relationships; short introductions to each section; brief summaries of the conferences the two men participated in; and a 25-page chronology. In short, they have sought to make available to the general reader, as well as to the scholar, selected letters from this remarkable correspondence, along with most useful editorial assistance.

Scholars well versed in World War II history and the role these men played in it will find no new information here. Churchill has published most of his letters, and James MacGregor Burns and others have used the entire correspondence at Hyde Park. The general reader will increase his understanding of the issues involved, but he will not obtain a balanced or coherent picture. The letters published touch only lightly upon many of the critical issues, although they are remarkably candid on the disagreements Roosevelt and Churchill had over military strategy, the nature and permanence of the British Empire, policy toward the Soviet Union, the occupation of Germany, and the coordination of American and British economic and military programs. The critical conferences attended by these men

are of course not represented. Finally, while both men wrote with remarkable clarity—one feature of this correspondence—the messages lack the eloquence displayed elsewhere by both men. In short, these letters are interesting but not fascinating. Few will read them as avidly as the Roosevelt-Frankfurter correspondence or Churchill's *Marlborough: His Life and Times*, which FDR and many others found compelling.

Even so, no one interested in America's role in world affairs, or even in the future of the Republic, can read this collection without acquiring a great deal of insight into why we could contribute so much to winning the war and yet fail to gain the peace we sought. Reading of the great days of the Forties, Lend Lease, the "arsenal of democracy," the Atlantic Charter, the Grand Alliance, the incredible outpouring of American agricultural and industrial production, the successful military campaigns, the high spirit, and the extraordinary confidence these men radiated can only make one wonder what has happened, in only three decades, to the most powerful country in the world.

In spite of the military threat Hitler posed, these letters never breathe even the faintest doubt of complete triumph. Even though these letters are remark-



"The maid fired us."

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