

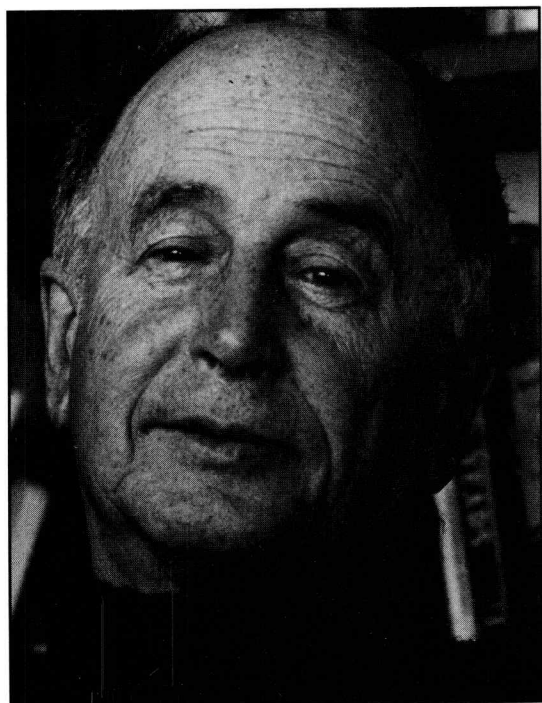
A FACE IN THE CLOUD

by Yossl Birstein

Translated from Hebrew by Margaret Birstein

A Face in the Cloud, Yossl Birstein, Siman Kriah/Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991. 214 pp.

Born in Poland in 1920, Yossl Birstein immigrated to Australia in 1937, and moved to Israel in 1950. He lives in Jerusalem, and writes in Yiddish and Hebrew. He has published two collections of short stories and novellas, and two novels.



WHEN we called at Hartiner's some time after this chance encounter, we ran into a commotion at the entrance to his house. His sister, who had moved in with him after the death of his wife, stood in the doorway dishevelled in a bright red dress, clapping her hands and singing in a cracked voice, "He comes to me in secret and kisses me limb by limb."

In front of her, with outstretched arms stood David Dobson shielding her against the blows of his pal Berele. Berele's mother and pregnant wife, standing at a short distance from the men, kept up, above their heads, a barrage of foul-mouthed abuse of Aleza.

"What's going on here?" Tirshbein asked turning to an old man in a crumpled black hat. In fact, everything about him had that crumpled look, from his slippers right up to the white skullcap peeking out from under his hat. One hand held a transparent plastic satchel with three eggs in it, the other was clenched into a fist aimed at Aleza.

"A meshiggene zoyneh! A crazy whore!" he shouted.

Behind Dobson's back Aleza's quavering voice was now tinged with a wailing undertone, "... and I spread my legs."

Tirshbein tried to catch Dobson's eye and the moment their eyes met, Berele shot his fist into Aleza's face. Dobson turned around, picked her up and carried her into the dark hallway towards the broken staircase, blood oozing from her mouth and nose. But she went on singing in a voice that grew ever louder, the wail in it more piercing, repeating over and over like a cracked record, "... and I spread my legs, spread my legs, spread my legs."

Her voice grew fainter and gradually faded away. Tirshbein was moved. David Dobson with the skullcap and pony tail had touched a sympathetic chord in him. Actually it had all begun the day Tirshbein and I met for the first time, after I had told him that Dobson thought he looked like a modern prophet. Tirshbein had made an entry of it in his diary, and another one a month later, in which he expressed a wish to befriend this young man, both as a neighbour and as a soul gone astray.

A small crowd still milled around the entrance and Tirshbein himself had not yet regained his composure. Only a month earlier we had witnessed a similar incident when Berele assaulted a young woman reporter of the *Ha'aretz* newspaper. We had passed by on our way to buy a certain kind of cookies available only in a bakery in Shiftei Yisrael Street. Similar cookies, Tirshbein told me, could also be gotten in bakeries nearby, but the owners of that bakery were extremely pious and never added to their dough any newfangled spices. When he dunked those cookies in milk, the

aroma of his mother's baking, especially before the holidays, rose in his nostrils and revived pleasant childhood memories.

That day we had run into Berele and the young woman reporter twice. The first time, in the advanced hours of the afternoon, after a rally on the Square of the Guardians of the Faith failed to take place, and a second time, a little later, while walking behind the young woman along the narrow sidewalk in Meah Shearim Street, her long, blond pony tail tossing back and forth had in front of our eyes. Berele, passing in a yellow cab, had stuck his head out of the window and shouted after her, "Hittite!"

Earlier, in the Square where we had been waiting for the rally to get under way, Berele had also called out to her something which the young woman must have taken for a compliment, because she fluttered a couple of fingers coquettishly towards him from where she stood in the slender shade of an electric pole. Berele on a make-shift stage was checking out the amplifiers installed on several roofs of the Batei Ungarn neighbourhood, his black hat setting off his long blond sidelocks, now a web of gold shot through by the late afternoon sun.

"Jebusite!" Berele's voice thundered back at her and us from the houses around the square.

In her long skirt and sleeveless blouse revealing something here and there, the young woman flicked her pony tail to the side of her face. She had come here, she had told us, to cover the rally for her newspaper, though hardly any one had turned up to protest against the long-buried bones recently excavated. The oppressive heat of the day had not let up even towards evening and the Square remained empty.

"Hersh Zalman! Where are the placards!" Berele bawled to a Hassid with a lopsided shoulder standing on the other side of the Square. Hersh Zalman, shrugging the lopsided shoulder, shouted back that he wasn't going to drag them along in that heat and hid behind one of the stalls of the equally empty market place. Several *heder* pupils hung about the stage and one of them asked Berele in a husky-voiced Yiddish, "M'ken shoin varfn shteyner?" (To start throwing stones?)

Stepping out of the shade of the electric pole, she sent Berele an unsure smile and tripped off on her high heels towards Meah Shearim Street. She had told Tirshbein that she wasn't leaving this neighborhood empty-handed but would hang around in search of something to report to her newspaper. We watched Berele angrily dismantling the microphone, swearing at Hersh Zalman for not having brought the placards and at those who hadn't turned up for the evening prayers, until he himself made for the nearest house and

vanished inside it.

A little later when Tirshbein and I were walking behind the young woman along the narrow sidewalk in Meah Shearim, Berele passed by in the yellow cab. He ordered the driver to slow up and barked in her direction, "Prisis!"

The young woman no longer responded. Only the pony tail swung in wider intervals across her back as she hurried along, disappearing for several moments from Berele's view behind a van parked on the pavement. When she re-emerged, the yellow cab pulled up alongside her and Berele, leaving the door behind him wide open, planted himself in her path in all his glory, the short prayer vest hugging his broad chest like a coat-of-mail.

"Whore!" he shouted.

"You pious prick!" she shouted back.

He grabbed her pony tail. She grabbed his sidelocks. As her body arched backward and the young man's hovered slightly over her, they seemed to be enacting a dance of love.

They were pulled apart by David Dobson who had suddenly appeared on the scene. His long hair was gathered in a ring, and the dark short-sleeved shirt he was wearing set off his tattooed arms. In the scuffle the young woman's sun-glasses had been knocked off revealing the terrified look in her eyes. Seeing herself surrounded by several Yeshiva students and a red-beard-in-black with a stick in his upraised hand, she backed towards the wall behind her, swept her long skirt right up to her neck, expecting them to turn and run.

"Beat it!" she shouted.

Neither Berele or the others did anything of that sort, but hailed blows down on her head, instead. Suddenly she ducked, kicked off her shoes and slipping through the legs of the men she vanished through the wide open door of the waiting cab. Tucking his sidelocks beneath his hat, Berele cast about him in search of the female, but failing to spot her anywhere, dived into the same cab and slammed the door shut behind him. The cab set off sounding a prolonged hoot with the fringes of Berele's prayer vest, caught in the door, looking as if floating alongside. The people moved on, and a passing bus crushed the sun-glasses lying on the road. David Dobson entered an adjacent prayer house, and we headed for the bakery in Shiftei Yisrael Street. The only reminder of the recent commotion was a pair of high-heeled shoes lying by the wall.

AFTER Dobson carried the deranged Aleza into Hartiner's apartment, we waited for a while longer downstairs till Tirshbein had calmed down. Berele's mother and his pregnant wife went back into their

grocery store, but Berele himself was gone. Only the old man in the crumpled clothes still stood there, his fist now an open hand held out to Tirshbein for alms. Dropping a coin into it, Tirshbein let him know that, although he could never remain indifferent to an extended hand, he thoroughly disapproved of the fist it had been a few minutes ago.

"Where will those clenched fists end up in the long run?" he asked the old man. Without waiting for a reply he launched into a lengthy speech about tolerance and kindness citing even Emmanuel Kant, sounding as he must have in his younger days propagating the teachings of this greatest of modern philosophers all over Poland. Sara Yurberg had fallen under his spell during his first visit to Brisk, as had Taibele Tzucker listening to his ideas about the Poet-Redeemer, the Saviour of his People. Here in Meah Shearim, for the first time in years, Tirshbein experienced the great power of the spirit over the body which was aroused by Berele's assault on Aleza. It made Dobson's remark about him being the modern incarnation of the Biblical prophet seem to come true. For he went on holding forth to the old man in the grey beard whose whiskers were yellow with tobacco stains around his mouth. It was wrong to resort to one's fists, Tirshbein said, unaware that he was clenching his own, and that throughout his life he'd been fighting for Peace on Earth. Carried away, he also told the old man something about himself, about being a writer, about the many women he had loved, and about the book he was in the process of writing telling of the great love for a young dancer long alienated from her People.

Dropping the coin into a pocket hidden within one of his two crumpled coats, the old man opened his mouth revealing just two crooked teeth, yellow as his whiskers. Waiting for a break in the flow of Tirshbein's speech, he asked, "And do you lay *tefillin* (phylacteries) every day, Mister?" then shuffled off in his battered slippers.

On our way up to see Hartiner, Tirshbein told me that he would continue voicing his ideas in order to raise Hartiner's low spirits. Under no circumstances would he permit him to revise his novella, both versions of which we had read through before coming here. In the first version the main character was a clever pickpocket. In the second version Hartiner transferred him from Warsaw to Jerusalem blowing the ram's horn at the Wailing Wall, risking an attack upon himself by Arabs or the British authorities, ready to sacrifice his life by stubbornly going on blowing the ram's horn at this holy site.

In the first version the main character was caught picking a string of pearls around the neck of his future mother-in-law standing beside him under the wedding

canopy. They made short shrift of him and booted him out of the hall amid the screams of the bride that she wasn't going to budge from under the canopy without the hallowed ring on her finger, and if they took this bridegroom from her they'd have to find her another to take his place beside her. For, according to the narrator, she is a spinster getting on in years who had been selling bagels seated on the stump of a tree by the roadside year in year out, summer and winter. Tirshbein was particularly taken with the description of how the stump she'd been sitting on for so long was hollowed out in the shape of her wide bottom.

ON our way up we could hear Aleza sobbing. Hartiner, hatless and beardless, opened the door for us. His formerly round face was now triangular and long-chinned, and his eyes were red around his rims. He gazed at us, or rather beyond us, with a glazed look as if the music in his eyes had forsaken them for good. Aleza in the adjacent chamber fell silent. Dobson let her into the room we had just entered, pressed her onto a low stool and began spoon-feeding her with rice porridge from a deep plastic bowl. Each time Aleza opened her mouth as if to swallow the entire bowl, Dobson inserted the long-handled spoon like the beak of a mother bird feeding her hungry chicks.

"It helps," Hartiner said and fell silent again. This was no longer the same Hartiner we had run into at the crossing of Jaffa and King George Streets several weeks ago, shamming blindness in his longing for the touch of a feminine hand. He looked as though that longing had deserted him as well. Dobson told us that being fed rice porridge in that way worked like a charm on Aleza. By the end of the meal she had relaxed altogether and Dobson let her back into the other room. Below her right eye was a blue swelling — the bruise left by Berele's fist.

Dobson returned and seated himself beside the slats of the closed shutters. It turned out that he regularly called in at the Hartiner's, and took Aleza to the mental home when she had her occasional crazy fits. He also saw to Hartiner's needs, fetched kerosene to heat his stove in the winter, and hauled up water for him from the well in the courtyard. When Hartiner, sitting on his bed, had rocked himself into a nap, Tirshbein joined Dobson at the window for a chat. Seeing Dobson at the Rebitzin's funeral had made a favourable impression on him. He was intrigued by the fact that this young man, born and bred in the States in an Anglo-Saxon culture, should have felt it his duty to attend the midnight burial of an old woman he had never known.

David Dobson had, however, not been the only young man to pay his last respects to the Rebitzin from Bnei

Brak. Berele had also been there, assisted by two other young men. He himself acted as honorary pallbearer whenever an important personage was being buried. A busload of other young Yeshiva students had also arrived and their rumbustiousness rent the midnight silence that had prevailed earlier in the narrow street near the Tzephania prayer house. They all wore open-necked white shirts despite the nippy late-summer night, skullcaps peeped out from under black hats and the sacred fringes of prayer vests dangled from their trouser belts. Tirshbein came to the funeral in a long dark overcoat, his black broad-brimmed hat and black shoes, so as not to stand out in the pious crowd. At his advice, I, too, came in dark clothes to avoid unnecessary questions. But as soon as Berele set eyes on us, he came up to ask what we were doing here. "I had a dream," Tirshbein whispered in his ear as though imparting a secret. But he kept his distance from Dobson at the funeral. He had mixed feelings about him and was still wary of his association with Issler, who might have sent him to worm particulars about Bitman's legacy out of him. It was a suspicion, he told me, that kept nagging him. But now, at Hartiner's, having witnessed Dobson shielding Aleza, and a month previously seen him intervening in Berele's murderous assault on the woman reporter, he felt a rush of sympathy for him, deepened, no less, by the initials of David Dobson's name. Sound asleep now, Hartiner stopped swaying to and fro. His head was tilted sideways with the pointy chin aslant on his chest. Beneath the scanty hairs on his head, his skull was blotched with red and brown spots. Seated on the low stool nearby, I listened to Dobson and Tirshbein chatting about the funeral.

Tirshbein and I had been walking along Tzephania Street which at that midnight hour lay sunken in deep silence. All the buildings were shrouded in darkness except for the brightly lit prayer house with the lights streaming from its wide open doors, its windows, and low latticed casements running all around the building. A pot-bellied Hassid stood in the doorway nervously looking along the street and, catching the sound of the approaching bus, ran down the steps to welcome the Yeshiva students pouring from it. At their arrival the hitherto silent street sprang to sudden life. Someone slapped a back, someone burst into laughter at a wisecrack made here or there amid a constant twirling of sidelocks around their fingers.

From where I was sitting I could hear Tirshbein telling Dobson what he had also said to me outside the prayer house in Tzephania Street concerning that jolly company.

"Reminds me of the Mall on Ben Yehuda Street."

Those young fellows had, indeed, brought with them

the lively din of the crowded Mall. From a top storey window a curtain was slightly moved aside revealing a female face behind the pane though it was hard to tell in the dark if it was old or young. Women did not attend funerals, neither at the assembly point nor at the cemetery.

The burial of the Rebitzin took place in the light of fluorescent lamps. It was a hurried affair, a rushing through the Kaddish and other prayers with Berele forcing the pace. A little while before the procession had gotten under way, he had run up the steps of the prayer house and, standing in the brightly lit entrance, had bawled into the building at the top of his voice: "Hersh Zalman! Hersh Zalman!" and turning towards the street barked orders to someone, clearly audible above the din of the Yeshiva students. He was cursing Hersh Zalman for always being late to funerals, swearing to break every bone in his body to teach him a lesson once and for all. Hersh Zalman turned up at the last moment. He was tall, bony, had a goatee for a beard, one lopsided shoulder was fixed, an equally lopsided smile on his lips. At the graveside his sing-song voice was heard now and then punctuating the Kaddish prayer with a drawn-out "a-amen!"

After the funeral, on the way back, it was very quiet in the bus. Several of the young men had fallen asleep, while others chatted in muted voices. Dobson, sitting beside Tirshbein with me opposite, talked softly in Hebrew with a smattering of English words thrown in now and again. He told us that with the Satmar community not only were women barred from attending funerals, but also the sons of deceased fathers. It all stemmed from a legend in the Kabbala, Dobson explained, according to which any semen wasted during the sex act was scooped up by Lilith, the female demon, always present at that time, who afterwards impregnated her body with it to give birth to little demons of her own. If the sons were permitted to stand beside the open grave of their late father, those demons begotten by his wasted semen, would come along as well, putting his soul in danger of being seized and carried off to hell by them. The only exception to this rule was if the deceased had been a great Tzaddik, one of the few righteous men, Dobson added. In such cases, the demons held no sway over his soul and his sons were allowed to attend their father's funeral and to recite the Kaddish over the open grave.

After we got off the bus on Tzephania Street and before we parted for the night, Tirshbein pointed at the still brightly lit prayer house and said, "They are lucky. They have the young."

THE day after the funeral, Tirshbein sent copies of an

Open Letter he had penned to newspapers in and outside Israel appealing to all those who still believed in the continued existence of Yiddish and its literature to have the young generation attend funerals.

"Nobody's going to print it anyway," he told me, as was the case with all the other articles he'd been sending them on the same topic. During his visits to the numerous Jewish communities all over the States, he said, he had never come across young people like those attending this funeral. The last time he had seen them coming to the cemetery in droves was long ago during the Passover holidays in 1925 at the consecration of the tombstone over the grave of J.L. Peretz. The Yeshiva students at the funeral of the Rebitzin from Bnei Brak reminded him of the enthusiastic youngsters at the Warsaw cemetery overrunning the adjacent graves and hanging from the branches of the trees in order to listen to the oration of the renowned Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch.

Tirshbein had also given a copy of his Open Letter to Issler at their recent appointment on the Mall, and another one to David Dobson while they were chatting beside the shuttered window at Hartiner's place. Hartiner himself woke up, smiled and said that he had hoped that Aleza's fits would disappear as she grew older and that she'd regain her sanity. But the symptoms recurred in the same way time and again: wearing a low-cut dress showing a black lace-trimmed bra above and black panty hose below, and her dancing in public to the tune of bawdy songs. Hartiner talked to us in a very soft voice. Not only had his face changed, but so had the room. His face for the worse, his room for the better. The elegy to his wife behind the glass frame was no longer hidden behind the white sheet. Beside it there now hung other photographs of literary prizes awarded him throughout the years — by the Jewish Agency, the Municipality of Safed, his Galician fellow-townsmen in Argentina and a hand-written letter in a gilded frame from Zalman Shazar, the third President of Israel. Beside it hung the youthful portrait of his wife Tzipora wearing large earrings, a ribbon encircling her forehead, a beaded necklace adorning her long neck, and an impish gleam in her slanted eyes. In the dim light Hartiner's old head, reflected in the glass, threw a shadow across Tzipora's young face.

He had sent Tirshbein a short story of his which he had revised, the original version having appeared in a collection of his works published years ago. In the past, Hartiner had been criticised for presenting Jews in a negative manner. A literary critic in the United States, a certain M. Shteeger, had called him a fraud and a Jew hater, dubbing him "a nobody." Since then, Hartiner had been engaged in reshaping the characters, casting

them in a more favourable light, although his late wife Tzipora had vehemently objected. But now that she was dead, and fearing a further besmirching of his name, he had sent the revised version of one of his stories to Tirshbein with a letter attached to it. This story, the letter and a chance meeting with Hartiner in the street, had induced Tirshbein to visit him once again to find a way of helping him out of his difficulties.

Hartiner got up, took from a drawer a large brown envelope containing another revised story and handed it to Tirshbein. A smaller white envelope was attached to the outside — a letter to the literary critic M. Shteeger. He would have posted the letter himself, he said, if he had known the address. He took out the letter and read what he had written. He informed M. Shteeger that he had rewritten his stories and was presenting his heroes to the Gentile world in a positive light from now on. That apart from the revised story in the brown envelope, he was enclosing the original version in which the chief character was a whore who still managed to serve a last client even on the day of her wedding. In the new version, the chief character had turned into a devoted socialist helping the town's poor and downtrodden. Hartiner pleaded with the literary critic to stop dubbing him "nobody," should word it reach the Israeli Government and they discontinue his monthly allowance. He had suffered enough at the hands of the Jewish Agency. They had fired him from the editorship of their weekly magazine and replaced him with someone as wicked as they and an ignoramus to boot who couldn't even write a grammatically correct sentence. His wife Tzipora, he told us, had often asked him if that was the land they'd been dreaming about; if that was the Zionist ideal meant to bring a new life to the People in their ancient homeland, though her own faith in those ideals had never diminished. She had remained a devoted idealist to her dying day. Hartiner pointed to the framed letter on the wall in which President Shazar expressed, in his own handwriting, his condolence at Tzipora's death.

"The literary critic M. Shteeger died a long time ago," Tirshbein said, rising. He had enjoyed his chat with David Dobson although the initial purpose of this visit had been to dissuade Hartiner from revising his stories and to offer him some financial assistance out of Bitman's legacy. But he'd been put off by Aleza's crazy antics. Once again we heard her singing in the next room in a hoarse and woeful voice,

"What does the rain signify?

Ah, woe is me!

What does it forebode?"

David Dobson went into her room. Tirshbein, taking both envelopes out of Hartiner's hand and, talking right

into his face, said that there was no need any longer for him to revise his stories, for M. Shteegeer was dead and would never again violate the honour of a genuine writer like him. Hartiner nodded, and leaned back on his bed once more, but as we were about to step outside, he called out to Tirshbein not to forget to mail the two letters to the literary critic in New York.

ON our way home, Tirshbein talked to me about Dobson. His father, it turned out, had been a psychiatrist and his mother a lawyer. He'd left home at fifteen, led the life of a hobo trekking all over the U.S. and ended up marrying a woman ten years his senior. But she left him before the first week was over, and he'd never seen her since. Years later he found out the reason for her desertion. She had a black lover, but her late father, the owner of a large chain-store concern, had decreed in his will that she, his sole heir, would come into all his wealth only after five years of marriage to a white man. Dobson hadn't even slept with her. Safely married to a white man, she returned to her black lover and eventually to her father's fortune. After his wife threw him over, Dobson found work as a street cleaner in Roanoke, a township in Virginia, and lived in an abandoned log cabin alongside a track winding through a dense forest. He lived there for three years far from human company without a phone, radio or T.V. The evenings he spent sitting out on the porch strumming away on his guitar and humming to himself songs picked up from blacks he'd teamed up with during his trek through the South. In his passport and I.D. card, Dobson told him, he was registered as a married man.

Earlier, seated on the low stool beside the dozing Hartiner, I had taken a good look at Dobson while he was chatting with Tirshbein by the window. His thin lips ended in delicate corners, and after I got used to the dim light in the room, my eyes were drawn to his tattooed arms. An anchor. A wheel of fortune. The Yeshiva he was studying in, I heard him tell Tirshbein, had not made him erase the tattoo on his arms or cut off the pony tail, both of which were tokens of his rebellion against his parents. His father had run off with his secretary but died of a stroke soon afterwards. His mother remarried. He'd attended neither his father's funeral nor his mother's marriage. His younger brother and sister saw to it that he received, punctually every month, his share of the trust fund left them by their father. They were glad to be rid of him, for his scandalous behaviour compromised the good name of the family.

"According to them I'm still leading the life of a bum," Dobson said. I heard Tirshbein wonder why he had to beg for alms in the Mall amid recitals from the

Prophet Isaiah if he had a monthly income of his own. He rose, hearkened to the sounds coming from Aleza's room and said with a smile lingering on his delicate lips, "It's fun."

After we left and were about to cross the small market, David Dobson caught up with us and handed back to Tirshbein his Open Letter about Jewish youth and funerals, saying that he didn't know Yiddish and feared that it might contain writings of a profane nature.

"That's how they see us," Tirshbein remarked, feeling sorry for this young man who, though a Repentant Jew and a gentle soul, was scared of several pages in Yiddish. It was another indication in Tirshbein's view of the doom of Yiddish literature. But he wasn't going to let it put him off. He'd go on raising the alarm and sound warnings even if none of the newspapers would publish them.

"Cynics!" he hissed through his teeth, mentioning Itzik Issler as being in the vanguard of those who scoffed at visionaries. On passing Moishe Schreiber's sacred articles store and turning into Meah Shearim Street, Tirshbein pushed his glasses up on his forehead and, following with his eyes an old man in battered slippers carrying a plastic satchel with three eggs in it, wondered where he had seen him before. Pushing his glasses down again, he said that the day would come when many cynics, and Issler among them, would recognize in him the true visionary.

Modern Hebrew Literature intended to present a comprehensive article by Menachem Peri surveying Yossel Birstein's work. Circumstances beyond our control have prevented publication of the article. Abraham Noverstern will discuss Yossel Birstein's prose in full in *Modern Hebrew Literature* No. 8.