

Books & Authors

The Moral Vacuum

■ *The Reckoning*. By Richard M. Elman. Charles Scribner's Sons. \$5.95.

Reviewed by

Michael T. Gilmore

IT WAS D. H. LAWRENCE WHO SAID that "the essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer." The observation may have seemed overblown when Lawrence made it in 1923; it is far less so today after a decade in Vietnam. And yet the American—in his collective being, as Lawrence wrote of him—is rarely comfortable with outright murder; he much prefers to dispatch his victims behind a screen of legalistic and self-righteous rhetoric. As Vietnam demonstrates again, however, the rhetoric has been too transparent to have fooled anyone who made an effort—who *tried*—to pierce it. To say flatly, therefore, that the American is a killer is to do him some injustice; rather he is too smug, selfish and indifferent to concern himself about the blood he sheds; he is a killer by default, because he simply doesn't care enough *not* to kill.

Newman Yagodah, protagonist of Richard M. Elman's new novel, *The Reckoning*, is a Hungarian Jew living on the edge of the Nazi holocaust; but he is also the American of the Sixties, the man who deplores a bomb throwing in a Saigon cafe but whose own government rains down a thousand tons of napalm daily on peasant villages. Elman himself has made this connection in the Afterward appended to *Lilo's Diary*, the second volume of the trilogy which began with *The 28th Day of Elul* and is completed with *The Reckoning*. There he wrote that his "contemporaries are the dead children of Europe past and Asia present." If not entirely clear at the time, Elman's meaning is now unmistakable, for in Yagodah he has fleshed out a character whose elaborate lies and grotesque theorizing only mask a callous soul—the soul of a murderer, his wife cries out at him a few short hours before they are carted off together to the concentration camp.

Elman is not, obviously enough,

making the hyperbolic equation which reduces Americans to the level of the Nazis. His accused murderer, after all, is a Jew and himself the victim of Nazi oppression. What Elman does suggest is that Yagodah's moral and physical inertia, born of his self-absorption, helped make Nazism possible—or rather made it inevitable. For it is already 1944 when *The Reckoning* begins, and the Jews of Clig in Hungary have been living on borrowed time. Newman Yagodah keeps a diary in which he records his domestic and financial history, a record whose present gloom is relieved only by the brief moments he steals with his Christian mistress Ileana. Too busy reckoning up his own accounts to confront realistically the larger "reckoning" being prepared by the Gestapo, he reveals his nature through a fantastic scheme to abolish poverty in which he calls for the "internment of poverty-incorrigibles in special training centers for 'rehabilitation.'" Poverty, in short, is to be abolished by eliminating the poor, the same solution Hitler devised for the "Jewish problem." The irony is too stark to be missed, yet Yagodah manages not to see it, exhibiting that moral vacuity which renders him finally powerless to save either his family or himself.

In the last fitful pages of his diary, written the night before deportation when his mind is reeling with fear, he appears to grope toward a measure of self-awareness; but he ends by turning his back on responsibility, pouring out the details of his business career as if to proclaim to posterity that he has been a respectable burgher—"ordinary and decent in the extreme," as he puts it to himself—and that the terrible fate in store for him is undeserved.

YET ELMAN'S judgment, like Lawrence's, is a stern one, bristling with an Old Testament severity which brooks neither exceptions nor excuses. In what is surely the central passage of *The Reckoning*, he has Yagodah protest: "I am wrongly, cruelly, misunderstood"—a plea which is discredited in the very next breath: "My motives have been reduced to my behavior." This, I take it, is Elman's theme, as relevant for today as it was in 1944: that a man, like a nation, is convicted or absolved by his actions and his failures to act, and that the rationalizations

by which he seeks to vindicate himself count for nothing in the scales of justice.

Newman Yagodah's chronicle does not make cheerful reading, nor is it meant to; but whatever the sordidness of its details, Elman is never guilty of committing what literary critics call "the fallacy of imitative form," whereby a disintegrating world is described in a book which is itself disorderly and chaotic. Tightly written, and almost geometric in its formal precision, *The Reckoning* does not parrot but rather damns the world it describes; it pronounces Yagodah's self-indulgence criminal by holding up a model of disciplined form against which to measure it. Perhaps the final irony is that the judgment of Elman's art may never be executed by history. For while Newman Yagodah has already gone to his reckoning, here in America we are still awaiting ours.

Renaissance Man

■ *Homeward Bound*. By Jacob Glatstein. Thomas Yoseloff. \$4.95.

Reviewed by

Isidore Haiblum

WHERE CAN ONE BEGIN ABOUT JACOB GLATSTEIN? There's too much to record in the space of a slender column, the achievements are too numerous, too imposing. Let's just start by calling him the Renaissance man of modern Yiddish letters.

Early in the game (he was 22 at the time) he almost chose a career in law. The Yiddish poet N. B. Minkov—a classmate at NYU Law School—persuaded him to devote his full attention to literature; the results since then have been somewhat phenomenal:

There are well over a hundred short stories, most written under the pseudonym Youngman. The critical essays and reviews (a two-volume selection has appeared in Yiddish) must number in the thousands and have put its author in the forefront of modern Yiddish criticism. There are four other volumes of essays, a play, three novels, the newspaper columns covering just about every topic under the sun and the editorial

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stints that have elevated Glatstein to the ranks of distinguished editors.

And, there's the poetry. First and foremost Jacob Glatstein is a poet. He writes in Yiddish, but his language is universal. There have been ten volumes so far, volumes that have enriched Yiddish in particular and world poetry in general. He's been translated into English, Russian, Hebrew, Spanish and French.

Homeward Bound (Ven Yosh Iz Geforen in the original), the first volume of Glatstein's prose trilogy, was written in 1938. Semi-autobiographical, it depicts the author's journey, by boat, from New York back to his native Lublin. A number of spy characters keep popping up: a proudly assimilated Jew from the Netherlands who is after all, afraid of Hitler; a homesick Bessarabian expatriate living in Bogota, Colombia where wives are scarce (whose speech, incidentally, is a veritable grab-bag of Yiddish idioms in verbatim translation); a party of Russians (Soviets all); a somewhat lecherous, grotesque doctor; a whole deck full of others. They all have something to say, usually self-revealing: some deliver a snappy monologue or two, others a snatch of dialogue, a few play out entire scenes. Interspersed—a series of flashbacks

that conjure up the Yiddish poet's childhood and youth; these sections are especially rich in character and incident, are suffused with humor, insight and nostalgia:

This Jewish God of mine looked just like the rabbi of Lublin, Avramele Eiger, a skinny, quiet-voiced Jew with long white beard, white stockings, and slippers—an individual who did not know what money looked like, who took no fees, who fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, and got along on nothing every day of the year. With quivering voice he was always lamenting Jewish tribulations. Such was the appearance of my persecuted, childish, Jewish God. What could one have against such a God, who wished for the millennium each hour of the day, but whose hands were too frail and weak to bring the Messiah?

Glatstein's portrayal of revolution in Lublin is highly intriguing: the Bundist dispensation of justice to a thief, the fate of Abele, the informer on whom "bullets seemed to have no immediate effect," and how in the end the revolution turned sour.

The problem—and there is one—lies with Abraham Zahaven's translation (or is it Goldstein's? The dust jacket gives one name, the title page another). Somewhere along the line it has gone a bit wrong. And while some pages capture the spirit of the

original's prose-poetry, others fall flat. The Russian critic Batuschkov has it that a translator should be able to think in the original language, but know the language he is translating into well enough to *use creatively*. It's not enough to *literally* translate word for word. And in those passages where Zahaven tries this method, both character and mood are often diluted. Where *figurative equivalents* are sought, care should be taken to make certain they do not violate the character's verbal style or psychology. Take the Yiddish word *oysgashlusen*, for example. In the translator's hand it becomes "taboo." Not bad. Only it jumps out at the reader, doesn't seem right for the character. Weinreich's *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary* defines *oysgashlusen* as "excluded, barred." Not good in Glatstein's context. But what about "out of the question" or even "that's out"?

Quibbles aside, however, this is still the only version we have in English; it's all about Jacob Glatstein, one of the great poets of our time, and he's well worth knowing.

Svetlana's Memoirs

■ *Only One Year*. By Svetlana Alliluyeva. Translated by Paul Chavchavadze. Harper & Row. \$7.95.

Reviewed by

Arnold Ages

THERE IS SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARILY ironic about Svetlana Alliluyeva's new book. It comes from the daughter of a man who abominated religion and who was paranoiac about Jews. Yet it is a book in which both religion and Jews are portrayed sympathetically. One wonders what would have been Stalin's reaction to Svetlana's lyrical appreciation of the Psalms as the perfect symbol of her own religious travail. "I looked for words that could express this sensation," she writes, "and found it in the Psalms of David. Since then I have known nothing better that expressed the Higher, Eternal Life, immense, filling the whole Universe, to

ARNOLD AGES, on sabbatical leave from the University of Waterloo in Ontario, is working on a book entitled *Nineteenth Century French Attitudes towards the Philosophes*.

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