

The Seven Arts — A Cultural Commentary

Reform Judaism Revisits Wouk Volpone: Portrait of a Rogue

By DR. MAURICE N. EISENDRATH (Reprinted from American Judaism)

To the mountain of condensed classics, pre-digested ideas, and Simon-simple prose that obstructs our cultural landscape, Herman Wouk has added his own everyman's short-cut to Judaism. The latest smash-hit of this "best-selling novelist and devout Jew" (to quote the blurb writers) is a personal testament of faith, a popular, admittedly partisan, and fantastically distorted exposition of Judaism as he understands it. Just before the recent holiday season, bookstores were advertising Wouk's primer of **Orthodox Judaism** as a suitable gift for "Christmas Cheer and Inspiration," a "profound, personal account of Jewish faith and culture . . . Old Testament stories, intimate revelations." Wouk, of course, did not write this hard-sell huckstering but, it must be admitted that there are elements in this volume which do lend themselves to such exploitation. Let us at least hope, therefore, that honest bookdealers uttered a strong caveat against those tantalizing "intimate revelations."

As a matter of fact, the reader no less than the gift-giver should be aware of certain caveats. In his Prologue, Wouk states, "If the book attracts attention, there will be controversy." By proclaiming at the outset his own Orthodox bias, Wouk has striven to outmaneuver Reform and Conservative critics. The Pepys of American Jewish life can always quote his disclaimer of objectivity with a sanctimonious "I-told-you-so."

The confession that he is wearing emotional and intellectual blinders is only one of the obvious ingenuities of this book. Wouk's tone and alleged sense of responsibility, or rather, his irresponsibility, are fundamental flaws. With regard to tone: he is exasperatingly self-righteous, patronizing, giggling, speciously and transparently humble. He offers his book "as a beginning" to Jews and non-Jews who don't know where to begin without him. "The literature is so vast," he writes, "it is usually so scholarly in tone, and so much of it is not in English. . . ." Does Mr. Wouk mean there are no other simple books explaining Judaism? If so, he is either ignorant or presumptuous.

Characteristic samples of his frequently offensive tone follow. On what he calls the "old-fashioned Purim festivities," he writes on p. 98: "The custom has immense vitality, and most American congregations, even Conservative and Reform, are familiar with it to some extent." And this on the bar-mitzva (p. 143): "We have made of the bar-mitzva a blazing costly jubilee . . . not too different from the American coming out party. . . . I do not see that there is anything wrong with that." [He wouldn't.]

Wouk's blanket apology for his limited knowledge and qualifications is well taken. As Arthur A. Cohen points out in his searching, scorching review of this work

(Congress Bi-Weekly, November 2, 1959), "This Is My God is characterized by a scrupulous avoidance of every theological concept which underpins the structure of Orthodox thought—revelation, the doctrine of God, the mission of Israel, the relation of Judaism to the nations, the Messiah, the end of days and the last judgment."

Instead we have such pseudo-scholarly *ex cathedra* dicta as the presumed antiquity and Mosaic origin of the yarmulke, "A bareheaded Jew at prayers or study is an anomaly, except in the Reform movement which discards this custom in principle (together with the tallis, the phylacteries, and many of the main Mosaic symbols and disciplines)." [Bold type mine.] The main Mosaic disciplines being, no doubt, according to Wouk, the phylacteries and the tallis rather than the Ten Commandments. No scholar of worth claims such ancient authority for these symbols nor for "the prayers and ceremonies" which Wouk claims go "back to Temple times" and which, just as erroneously he asserts "the Reform movement tore to bits."

So, too, scholar Wouk is smugly confident that the *m'zuzo* "tells that the house is dedicated to God's service." He insists that the "ban on musical instruments like the organ . . . led to a strong growth of Jewish vocal music." Try that as an explanation for the surging masses of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.

He ignores the lament of virtually every Orthodox rabbi by superfluously maintaining that the practice of *kashrut* is increasing; his knowledge—or lack of knowledge of geography—becomes patent when he relates that Passover occurs invariably "in the spring," blithely ignoring its observance in the fall "down under"; he pulls the rug from under the genuine Orthodox insistence that "Thus Saith the Lord" is warrant enough for obedience to His Torah by pandering to Orthodox palates with his delicious barbecued steaks (and then he talks of Reform's alleged catering to contemporary whims).

Nor does Wouk's somewhat too self-righteous disclaimer of scholarship absolve him from presenting the case of *Klal Yisroel* fairly. He voluntarily undertook to describe Judaism to ill-informed Jews and to non-Jews; it is a disservice to the One God he seeks to praise that he has chosen to denigrate fellow Jews. Reform Judaism, he writes on p. 244, came into being "to make the religion easier and more attractive in German terms." Not a word about the earnest search for intelligibility or the honest effort to shape a meaningful ritual. Not a word about the myriads redeemed from assimilation and saved for Judaism by Reform, not a word about its great seminaries, its scholarly leaders—a Holdheim, a Hirsch, a Leo Baeck. "The formulas of dissent," he writes on page 285, "make a pleasant compromise for people who want an easier life than the law asks, or who have little training and yet want a taste

of Judaism." (We understand that Mr. Wouk's life is one of unparalleled self-abnegation.) To non-Jews, the implication is inescapable that all Reform and Conservative Jews must be (1) lazy and (2) ignorant.

And what are we to make out of this statement on page 310:

"A Jew born outside these [dietary] laws, with no training in them or in the rest of Judaism, can begin most effectively to restore his identity . . . with the food laws. . . . Dropping the obvious excluded foods . . . will give him a sense of contact with Judaism. He can go on from there in study and in reconstruction of his life as occasion allows."

For Wouk, the gullet is the surest path to the Jewish soul. We find in this book praise only for Orthodoxy including the so-called renaissance of the *mikvah*—sans one word of criticism concerning the anomaly of the *agunah*, the scandals over *kashrut*, the political entanglement, in both America and Israel.

These statements are patent distortions of Judaism and the Jewish spirit. If they illustrate his bland ingenuousness, or more seriously, his irresponsibility, they are only the beginning of a series of flaws of perspective and omission. He devotes almost an entire chapter to the food laws, exactly one line to the Jewish passion for social justice. There is a full chapter entitled "Love and Marriage: and Certain Elegant Variations" and a few isolated sentences on the Prophets. His Book List (which, of course, he claims "is really not a Book List, or a bibliography . . . nor is it complete . . ." at least, this is Wouk's apology. Why, then, does he include it?) contains Frazer's *Golden Bough* but not Ginzberg's classic *Legends*; Albright and Driver, not Orinsky or other widely recognized Jewish scholars in the field; Wellhausen, Veblen, Whitehead, Nietzsche — but not the lucid and pertinent works of Milton Steinberg, Maurice Samuel, Abba Hillel Silver, Solomon Freehof, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Leo Baeck, Bernard Bamberger, Judah Goldin, to cite but a few.

I have before me half-a-dozen pages more of notes—questions on Wouk's emphases, his unsupported claims, his disparagement of the synagogue—but those I have already set down serve as caveats enough. Wouk has written a personal paean of praise, a glorification of his God, the God of his grandfather. Perhaps some will nostalgically share his sentiments. I, for one, deplore that in order to honor his God, he has found it necessary to deprecate the God revered by so many brother Jews, who, above all passing moods and modes of a cardiac and gastric nature, hear the divine behest to "do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God."

I am left with one question. Had this book been written by, say, an A. Aaron or an M. Moses, would it today be a best-seller?

Abandoning Jimmy Porter's dismal flat in the Midlands for the sensuous trappings of 17th century Venice, Manitoba Theatre Centre has translated the savage humor of yet another angry young Ben into an odd mixture of gaiety and cynicism, with John Hirsch's revival of Volpone. Too many producers seem to believe they will achieve a stylish production if they encourage their designers to emphasize the period by over-exaggerating its peculiarities and affectations, and keep their actors busy bowing and bobbing, flourishing handkerchiefs and tripping about the stage with mincing steps. The Beacon theatre's Volpone certainly abounds with the comic invention so necessary to farce; John Hirsch directs with gusto and genuine high spirits, reminiscent of his *Chou Chin Chow*, but the style of a play is not in its period fripperies but in the words, and though the most enduring quality on opening night was an eloquence on language on the part of Desmond Scott, as Mosca, Evelyne Anderson, as Lady Politick, and Glynn Morris (Volpone), the words were not always allowed to make their effect. Attention was often distracted from the dialogue — unintelligible at times — by a continual flow of comic business. Nonetheless, for its vigorous characterization, animated conduct and as a consummate study in villainy, Volpone must be esteemed memorable theatre.

— N.S.

Omna Pioneers Unique Program

Many individuals share in an unfortunate attitude toward serious music: the attitude that it must be handled with elbow-length gloves, in a rarefied cathedral atmosphere, and under the most formal conditions. This is especially true of the public concert which is so often characterized by the formidable barriers of pretentious decorum. On the other hand, workaday application of music has unexpectedly perpetuated itself in the use and abuse of "Canned" music: students study to music, workmen increase their output with it, housewives "need" it for dishwashing, and dental patients are soothed by listening to it.

That a sophisticated circle should socialize at a home concert of recorded LP music no longer excites surprise, but when a Russian Musicale is presented in an intimate salon circle, replete with a Winnipeg cellist, two teacher-pianists, and a Ukrainian soprano folksinger, one cannot but react in terms of elation. Such was the pioneering venture of Omna chapter, Pioneer Women, on March 9, when Clara Pearlman-Litvack conducted an illustrated lecture on the development of Russian music, and so refreshing was the approach that serious consideration should be given to the medium of organized music in the home.

The intimate emotional responses that arise in the presence of music are considerably hampered when they occur in the midst of a large crowd. Custom and convention have decided that we must not beat time, shout, or sigh in public, and though the music may at times inspire such impulses, good manners require that we modify them and conform to rules of thumb and of applause. So conventionalized have we become that whole-hearted responses to music in the Auditorium seldom take place. [Only recently did a subscriber mistake the finale of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D for an enthused 'encore' because Winnipeg unwittingly broke with tradition by heartily applauding Ralph Holmes between movements.]

Within the confines of the drawing room of an Omna member however, such restrictions did not apply. One was not merely involved in a spectator art. The rapport was spontaneous and immediate between the artists, lecturer, and assembled guests.

Fitting tribute was paid to Mrs. Clara Pearlman-Litvack's continuous contribution to creative musical life in the Jewish community when she was introduced as "our first lady of music." Mrs. Pearlman-Litvack is possessed of an infectious personality which, whether in her piano illustrations or in concert is alien and clever villainy is

its own reward." John Osborne may Look Back in Anger, but Winnipeg can certainly look forward to another two days of Volpone.

Show Shaping Up

With study progressing on a future sight for the growing Red River Exhibition, planning for the 1960 exhibition to be held June 24 to July 2 is running well ahead of last year, according to Robert E. Stewart, managing director. However, many contracts have to be firmed up yet, and many details

must be attended to.

Cars will be given away as attendance prizes again this year, with the added attraction of a Cadillac to be given away July 1. "We are presently negotiating with the Japanese Imperial Dancers troupe, who would put on a Japanese Spectacular as our major grandstand attraction," Mr. Stewart said. The alternative to this would be

an aquatic show.

A "calf scramble" is also slated for this year. This event has proven popular when held at other fairs. The square dance jamboree, enlarged horse show, extended 4-H show, additional livestock classes and breeds, adding to our special days program, putting more glamour into the Miss Manitoba contest, a new approach to industrial

and commercial exhibits, and many other features to which will likely be added the RCMP Ride and the RCAF Golden Hawks, and the traditional "parade", make it appear that 1960 should be the biggest year yet for the Exhibition.

While the Exhibition was unable to obtain Roy Rogers and his troupe this year, they have been promised first consideration next year.

Red Cross Aids Agadir Victims

A tent village for 2,500 survivors of the Agadir earthquake has been established by the League of Red Cross Societies as a part of its relief action in Morocco. The Red Cross village will provide food and shelter for about one-tenth of the Agadir homeless. Medical services in the village clinic will be provided by Red Cross doctors and nurses who have arrived from many nations in the past week. In charge of these teams will be a Canadian doctor, Dr. Jean J. Laurier, from Ottawa. Dr. Desmarais, from Winnipeg, is out in Morocco in a separate relief action for the rehabilitation of the paralysis victims.

Bedding, clothing, drugs and hospital supplies have been rushed out from Canada in the past two weeks. The last consignment weighed three tons. Many of the articles were made here by the ladies of the work committee. Members of the Manitoba Junior Red Cross sent 465 health kits to the child refugees from Agadir.

Unique Program

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veying some personal anecdote, permitted a full appreciation of her skill in delineating the character of Russian life and its masters. Conveying a chamber group's intimacy in place of thrust and stride, cellist Klara Benjamin executed the flooding warmth of the Rubinstein and Tchaikowsky melodies with a rich sonority and refinement. Lucy Tomarchuk's folk songs were styled in lively animation and feeling. Faulty in intonation and breathing, the soprano, nevertheless, captured the Russo-Ukrainian idiom with pervasive expressive warmth, particularly in the love-ballads.

Playing with as much grandeur and dexterity as one can expect in any recital, Ada Hershfield exploited every possibility of the modern spinet with Scriabin's Etude and Rachmaninoff's Melodies and Prelude in C# Minor, but a spinet is not a grand piano. Such defects are the occupational hazards of improvised salon performances, but one need not necessarily sacrifice technical perfection for spontaneity. —N.S.

Blue Bombers at Grey Cup Show

Kenny Ploen and Johnny Michels will be guests at the showing of the Grey Cup 1959 on Wednesday, Mar. 30, at the Legion clubroom in the upstairs hall. The show gets underway at 9 p.m., with refreshments following the picture. There will be a nominal charge at the door. The general public is invited to attend.

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