

The Authentic Voice

■ *Justice Hunger and Other Stories.*
By Meyer Liben. Dial. \$4.50.

Reviewed by

Richard M. Elman

THE SOUL OF MEYER LIBEN'S FIRST collection of short fictions is the brief novella from which is derived his title; and the soul of that work is a voice. It is the voice of an intellectual, a radical, subtle, inquisitive, querulous and thoughtful, the eternal Jewish commentator. Locked in the present, it summons up the radical past, the 30's in particular, and a strange love affair between the narrator, a mildly Socialist student of history and literature who is committed only to being critical and non-committal, and a strong-willed fellow-traveler, a Gentile girl with a passion for honesty. It is one of the strengths of Mr. Liben's portrait that he does not engage in that easy

cynicism about radicalism which is, by now, the *patent royale* of the hip intellectual; and I gather that one reason why he is able to avoid such cynicism, as well as the concomitant vice of dogmatism, is because he has so successfully managed to capture the voice of thinking, and even the sense of hope.

It is "to the mysterious openness of life" that the narrator, after many doubts, will eventually dedicate himself; and it is this same openness, this sense of free discussion and profound seriousness at times, which gives the book such distinction. Our narrator is a young man who seems to carry in his head most

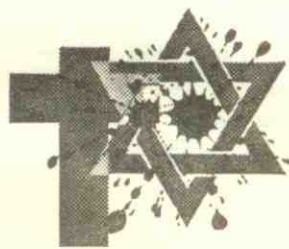
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A Christian view of antisemitism



ELDER AND YOUNGER BROTHERS

The Encounter of Jews and
Christians by A. Roy Eckardt

"There can be little serious doubt that Christendom's traditional antipathy to 'the Jews' is the major historical root of antisemitism... Here is the *crime of Christendom*." Around this theme Professor Eckardt, a Protestant theologian, boldly assesses the kinship of Israel and Christianity and suggests a restructuring of attitudes in a spirit of loving regard. With appendix on the Arab-Israeli war. \$4.95

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of the arguments of literary philosophers for and against change. Ensnared by his own dialectics, he summons up Utopia so as to dismiss the new reality of the radical, and then he is chagrined by his own intolerance. It is the Stalinist girl who turns out to be rigorous and exacting (and also more humane) but, because she has been married once before unhappily, the young Utopian finds that he shares in the bourgeois' sterile distaste for property that he cannot entirely claim as his own. To repeat, one of the triumphs of the book is its sense of discussion; it has that kind of seriousness which the discussion of young Russian intellectuals in 19th-century novels had, but it nowhere echoes such novels, plainly being a work of American experience, about New York during the 30's.

AND one reason why it is able to be so transcendent and yet so fixed in the right ways is because Mr. Liben is so engaged by the discussion himself. He is not a man who is mimicking others. Obviously, he has not yet made up his mind about who is right, and yet he is able to recognize that courage which is the product of commitment and the peculiar disguises of weakness which sometimes emerge in those who are overly fastidious; and he does this without sneering, or condescending, with the very openness which his narrator is eventually to espouse. Here, for example, is a characteristic passage:

"To make life critical! . . . Perhaps I was asking too much from myself, asking for a kind of heroism, maybe martyrdom, of which I was not capable. Was love the answer? But here was love, here was further difficulty, for love makes extreme demands, points up the insufficiencies of character, makes clearer, more shining, the ideals that you seem incapable of achieving, or even of coming to grips with in a proper way. Yes, she no doubt saw a weakness in me, a kind of shallowness, I made things easy for myself, accommodated myself to the views and attitudes of others, creating a fictitious absence of hostility and conflict. Shying away from the difficulty, the trying! Afraid to test myself! Looking away from the horrors and the suffering everywhere, or somehow containing them, to create a phony neatness, a soulless order. And if I was perhaps more critical of myself than she was of me, what difference did that make? Her criticism was more important than my own—I tolerated my insufficien-

cies, made of them a way of life, but she suffered because of them, she wanted more from me than I wanted from myself, for what I wanted of myself I did not reach, and the life that fell far short of what I wanted was the one that I tolerated, contained, half-heartedly accepted. . . .

The voice which is the soul of Mr. Liben's fine book may be every bit as authentic as that of Proust's narrator. Like Proust, but unlike so much of contemporary literature, it never quite gulls itself with its own self-indulgences. Even in its ultimate acceptance of the activist it doesn't manage to stand there boasting about its openness. Mr. Liben's book is about courage and being (and its politicized scenario is only the most varied contemporary instance of the dilemmas therein). I have a hunch that the attitudes of the intelligentsia today are the attitudes of Mr. Liben's narrator, but what they seem to lack is hope—and it is only on the basis of hope that one can begin to act.

A Mess of Pottage

■ *The Liberation of the Jew*. By Albert Memmi. Orion Press. \$4.95.

Reviewed by

Edouard Roditi

SOME YEARS AGO, I CHANCED TO READ Albert Memmi's first novel, *Pillar of Salt*. It was a barely fictionalized autobiography, an account of a young North African Jew's ambivalent reactions to his own native ghetto in Tunis as well as to the various choices which the modern world appears to offer him. In a review in *Commentary*, I pointed out to American readers its great significance as testimony coming from an important Jewish community, that of Arab North Africa, about which we knew all too little. When Memmi published his second novel, I was disappointed by its mediocrity. Instead of continuing to offer us novel insights into the psychology and folklore of the Jews of Tunisia, Memmi lost himself in trite discussions of the pros and cons of assimilation and of mixed marriages.

In recent years, Memmi has abandoned novel-writing and gained a considerable reputation in France and elsewhere as a controversial near-existentialist writer on the humiliations imposed by colonialism