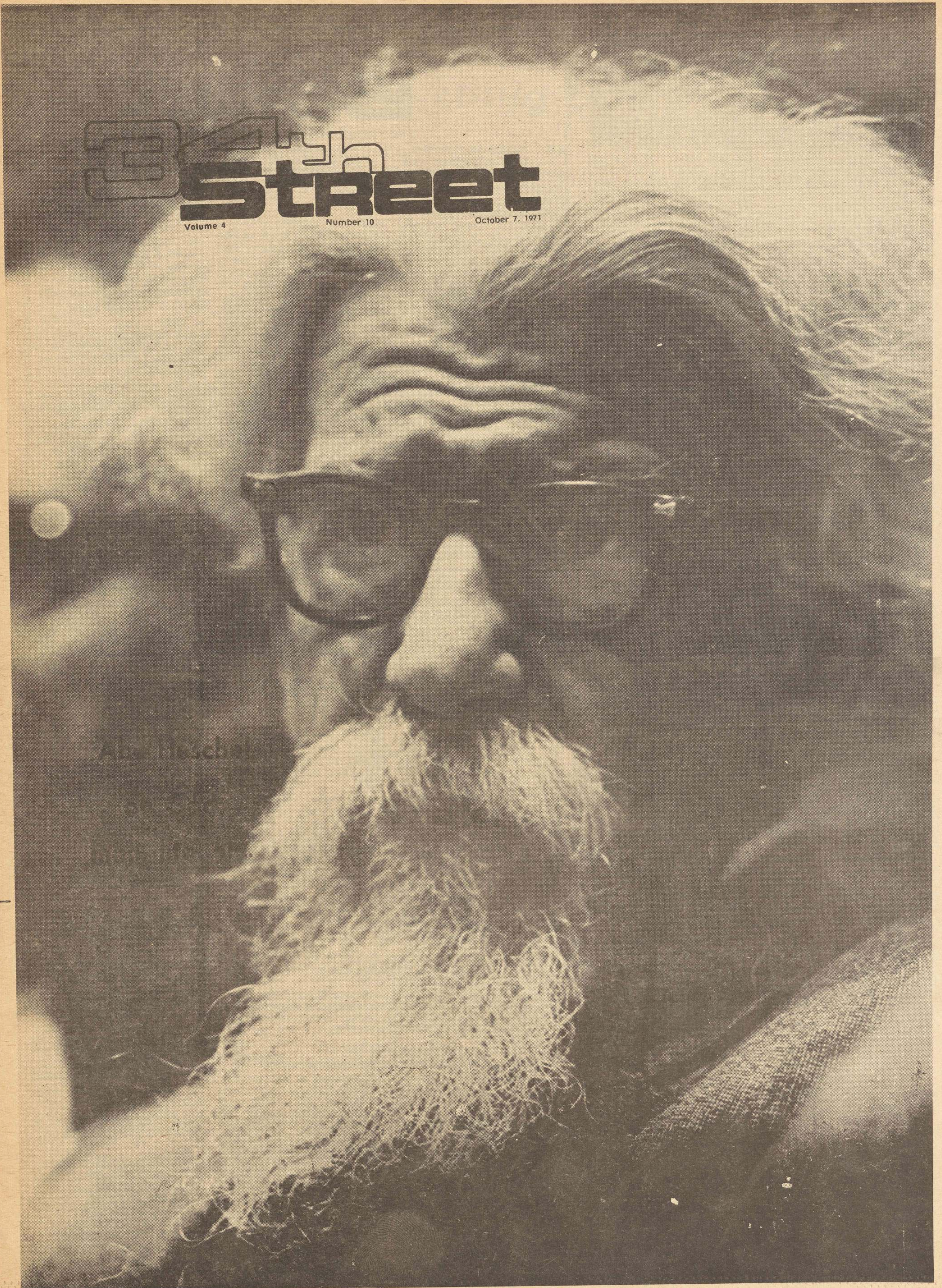
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Abe Heschel

Miracles... and a shrug of the shoulders

By Arnold Eisen

We sat in a study very suggestive of the man who had furnished it, a room of presence, of age, of character, of books. Books, no matter where on turned there were books: obscuring the four walls on shelves surrounding the door, on ancient dining room chairs that filled the room, on a tottering four-sided case I was sure could stand no longer.

Volumes of Talmud yellowed by the years, recent paperbacks that seemed intruders, magazines, newspapers, words and more words. . . and on one shelf the works of the man now asking me if I had read them.

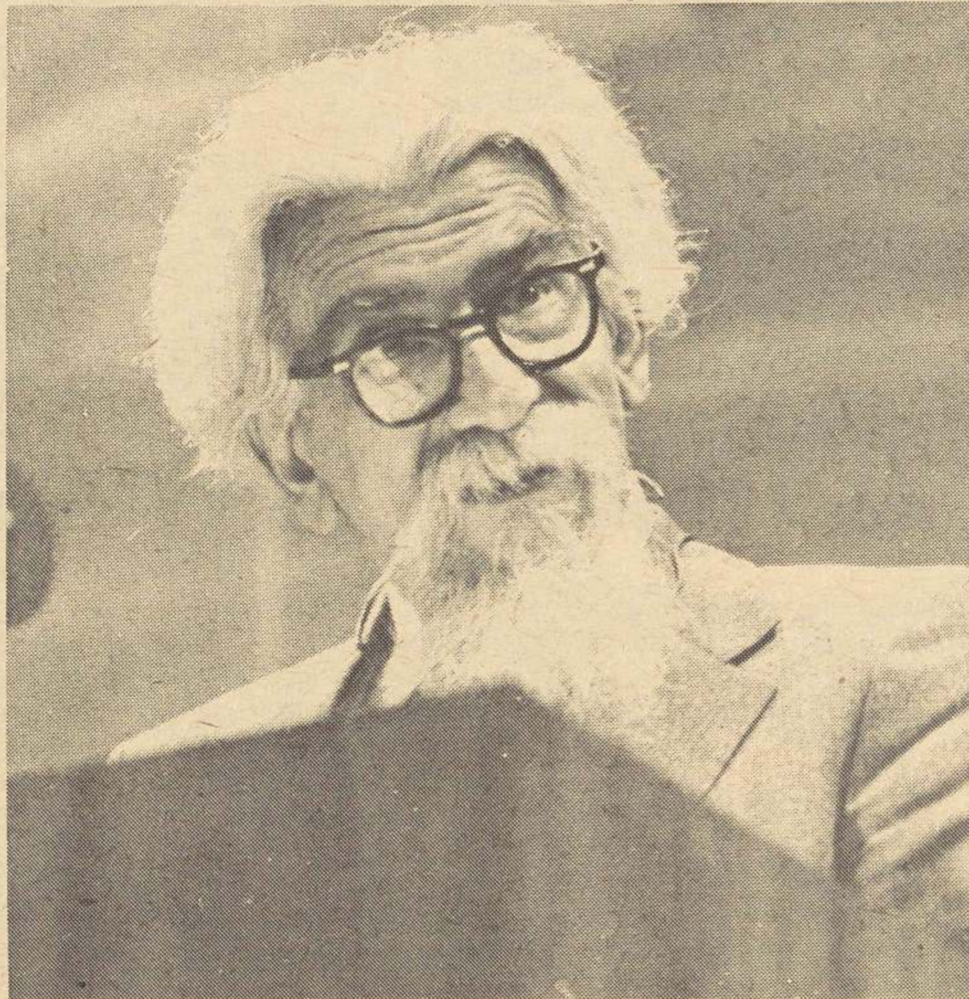
Abraham Joshua Heschel is in one sense a man of books, of the word. He is perhaps the leading Jewish theologian of our time, the author of numerous books and essays. Yet he is also a man who realizes that words are not enough: "The significance of Israel's prophets," he has written, "lies not only in what they said, but also in what they were." And when we consider who Heschel is, we immediately note that he is the co-founder of Clergymen and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, and a longtime civil rights advocate, that, at sixty-four, he is still very active in both movements.

That distinction between words and action, between what a man says and what he is, was the central question of our interview. In my mind, Heschel had created a test, by his words and the apparent greatness of his work. He had to prove somehow that he had earned that adjective "great", and to show what it meant for any man to do so. He had to prove that his opinions mattered, that, in fact, any opinions or ideas or words really mattered in a world that makes cynics of us all and considers "idealism" a term of ridicule. That was the test, of a young interviewer asking an older man whether it was worth it; that was the test, all right, and perhaps Heschel would pass.

All the preliminary signs, however, indicated that he would not. There was, first of all, the nagging doubt experienced driving up on the Turnpike: suppose Heschel's solution to runaway technology, his answer to the crisis in our universities, his theodicy after Auschwitz, were just the opinions of a man like any other. Then they were just opinions, they meant no more than those of any talk-show host, carried no more weight, and were probably just as useless. I was wasting my time.

Then, sitting in the Seminary cafeteria, there was the skeptical voice of a rabbinical student who put the question of greatness even more forcefully. We were looking at Heschel's trim figure and glowing white hair across the tables of yomulkes and tuna fish, when he told me I was indeed wasting my time. Heschel, he said, was a boring lecturer, and, besides. "Man is not Alone, 'God is Not Alone.' **God in Search of Man**, 'Man in Search of God' all it is is Heschel in search of money." And it might have been true.

Finally, there was the feeling I had staring at Heschel across his desk, in that study pervaded with antiquity. It was a feeling of arrogance and utter stupidity, the feeling that here was a wonderful old man of sixty-four



Photos by GEORGE SCHOTT

"Some people think only once in their lives and then go on repeating the same thought."

years, and who was I anyway to demand with all the chutzpa of youth that he prove his greatness to me and the world in the next sixty minutes of our lives. I was wasting his time, not mine; I was a fool.

The interview began, fortunately, with Heschel asking the questions. "What are you studying at Pennsylvania?" "With whom?" "To what shul do you belong?" "Who is the rabbi there?" He asked the questions slowly, with genuine interest, and an infinite patience that must surely be God's gift at sixty.

Every few seconds there would be a pause, as the mind that had been somewhere else returned to instruct the hands in scribbling Hebrew notes; they were promptly stuffed in brown manila envelopes, and stashed in the old wood desk. "Have you read any of my bookds?" "Which ones?" "Which did you find meaningful?"

Books, I stared at them again, and at the rest of the room's modest furnishings. Above the desk hung a single flourescent light. Beside the desk sat an old Royal typewriter. Across it was a man with a neat white beard and flowing hair, a man with eyes that could twinkle or burn with fire, and a voice that carried the listener back to the European past from which it and the man had come.

Had I found his books meaningful? Yes, I had found them meaningful, and told him so. They had meant a lot to me earlier, as ammunition: here was a leading Jewish thinker writing that "Religion declined . . . because it became irrelevent, dull, oppressive, insipid." Amen - I had found his words meaningful, and still did; his own peculiar brand of religious existentialism was very appealing. But was meaningful enough? What had his words accomplished?

It was Sunday, April 25, 1971. The day before, hundreds of thousands had marched in Washington, and still the war went on. Billy Graham would preach that day that all was right with America; beneath Heschel's window the subway surfaced for the ride to Harlem. Sure, I said quietly, your words are meaningful, and they are true, but we live in an age when words are futile, and can even be harmful. . .

Heschel stared at me for a few seconds across the folders and the books, and began to answer the afternoon's question. "I consider my entire work an instrument of education. I am displeased with the current setup, the categories we instill in children. We must change the concepts, we must begin by humanizing man. We must instill transitive concern - concern with the non-self. Our degree of being human stands in direct relation to our concern with others.

"If I am able to convince people that being human is important," he continued, "that concern for the other is part of being human, I've established a norm. A great many Americans for many years remained indifferent to the killing in Vietnam. They talk about war crimes now – Clergymen and Laymen published proof of war crimes five years ago. Why were people indifferent? – It didn't happen to them. Something terrible is happening now in East Pakistan. Hardly any notice is taken of it-it is one of the products of our dehumanization."

Heschel spoke of a student who had been contemptuous of the value of books. "We can learn only from life," he had said, and in reaction Heschel now shrugs. It is a classic Yiddish expression for "Do you know what this means? I don't know what this means. All right, so he thinks we can learn only from life ..." He continues the story: the student would go on a world tour, and learn from **experience**. Why not read books about the lands and people he would visit, Heschel had asked? The response was outrage: the suggestion was tantamount to saying that a person who can't read can't enjoy the world. Heschel pauses again, for effect and for thought.

"I owe something. I'm indebted. Do you realize how much I've received since the day I was born? Don't I have to reciprocate? Every human being owes something. Reciprocity is not given anymore - we grow up with the idea that everything belongs to us." Another pause. "I believe," he concluded, "that ideas have power, and words have power - to change people."

I wasn't convinced, I told him. So much falsehood in the world, and speaking against it is so futile. Religion is so futile...

"You doubt - that's my problem too," he replied. His "major passion" is to study and write, he said, yet sometimes he wondered whether it all was worthwhile. He wondered whether words or books could have any effect on people, and at those moments recalled that writing **The Prophets** had changed his own life, by generating an intense involvement with social issues. "The most important religious concern I have at this moment is to end the war in Vietnam", he said. "Not to engage more kosher butchers in Philadelphia...

"This problem, to live what you think, is a central problem. The problem is truthfulness - the sickness in our society is falsehood. People don't mean what they say and live what they say. God is Truth... This is the supreme commandment, this is the great problem. Man has an innate tendency to fool himself, to think he is religious, to be satisfied. Religion is an ongoing challenge. The problem is a problem of any person who has a religious aspiration. You can either give up or fight - religion is remaining in the midst of the battle. Life is a battle, I'm old enought to know that. I don't know how many times I've spoken against this war, and the war goes on. There is a tendency to become cynical. If life is lived on a battlefront, living is learning. The war in Vietnam is not a surprise to me - I'm aware of man's evil possibilities. The shock is that America did it. Life is not a picnic but a battle.

"My good friend, words count. We had 200,000 people in Washington yesterday – all the speeches delivered were not in vain. We are dealing with tremendous vested interests. The authority of four presidents is being challenged by laymen. How can you challenge four presidents? Imagine, Kennedy himself sent troops - why should they listen to me?"

Heschel then continued by attacking the problem of words vs. action from another angle. "Let me give you another example," he said. "There is something I would call the isolationism of the scholar, or the scientist – isolating the search for truth, for scientific truth, from all other concerns. Scientists and scholars who defend it - trying to keep out moral norms - are really victims of a fallacy, for in choosing their own work they had been motivated by certain moral judgements. It's rather inconsistent not to judge the course of one's work with a valuation that goes beyond the one value - scientific truth.

"When the first Americans landed on the moon," Heschel continued, "all the theologians lauded it. I may have been the only man who claimed I was unhappy about this latest triumph - to spend 30 billion dollars and vast human talent, and make the decision that it is better to let vast numbers of children starve, vast numbers of human beings be physically and spiritually destroyed in the prisons of America – that was a value decision. I see here a very tragic contradiction. In evading this contradiction scientists and scholars are committing a very serious error."

Perhaps, I said, he too was committing a serious error involving words, albeit a far different one. Heschel used words with power, and brilliance; his books were full of poetry and playful prose, of juxtaposition and metaphor. Yet he also used them to shame, to derogate, in calling people's faith "insipid, oppressive, dull," and their lives empty and meaningless. Did that not take a lot of chutzpa, I asked. Suppose the people of a synagogue like it that way? Suppose Americans like their lives as they are? Who is he to speak of inanity and mediocrity?

"It could be a serious question," Heschel conceded. He answered it slowly, as always. "I use personal terms - 'insipid' - not absolute terms. I have a right to express my opinions about a work of art. Fortunately this is a free society. The reader has a right to accept or reject my valuation.

"I think I have a right to make such a statement because I have an alternative," he continued. "I have a right to challenge people into re-thinking their position. The tragedy is that they don't rethink their position. Some people think only once in their lives and then go on repeating the same thought. Once the pattern is established they adhere to it – you can measure a person by how many times he thinks in his life."

He still hadn't answered the question. "Doesn't it take a lot of wisdom to challenge people like that?" I pressed. "You're not just saying, 'Here are two alternatives on how to spend an af-

ternoon, take mine.' You're telling people how to live."

Heschel got up slowly, paced the few feet of open space in the book-cluttered study. He thought for a moment, then responded once more.

"I have two standards. First, certain climactic moments of my own life, certain convictions and insights. Second, a tradition of wisdom which I feel has enriched me, has given me values."

He returned to the question of Vietnam, to the war and the four presidents who had supported it. Once again he asked sarcastically if he has the right to challenge four presidents. "I was once received by Mr. McNamara," he continued. "He is supposed to be a man whose mind is most extraordinary, and I'm challenging Mr. McNamara? His knowledge of the facts may be superior to my own, but I may have insights that enable me to challenge him. Nixon certainly knows more about the facts of Indochina than anybody - still I have the right to be enraged when he sends men into Cambodia. He may be pleased few American boys are being killed - only Indochinese. I am not pleased.

"Perhaps I should make clear to you - it's a piece of advice - if I have ever accomplished anything it was because I was thoroughly convinced that what I was doing was right. I have certain convictions, and a duty, not only a right, to express them, to share them with my fellow-men."

He had answered my question, so I asked another: just how would the synagogue be reformed, by whom? Again he paused, stared at me across the desk. His black-framed glasses sat hesitantly on the end of his nose, as his eyes and mouth and wrinkled forehead teamed in an indescribable gesture I will never forget. It was hope, and resignation, and joy, and pragmatic optimism, the sadness of realism, and the softness of unbounded faith.

"You know," he said quiety, "I believe in miracles."

Silence. We paused to consider what had passed, and then Heschel explained one reason for hope. "You know, I had been assured when I was a student that religion was dead and buried. When I came to America in the 40's, all I heard in conversation was that people were cynical about religion and the bible. The revival of religion as a field of study on university campuses today is one of the most significant developments. You are interested in religion" (we had talked of that, at length) "but we've been assured already that it is dead. So?" Again, a shrug of the shoulders.

Our generation, Heschel had said earlier, has one hope: that youth have "finally looked through the sham of superficial happiness and sheer acquisitiveness." Young people, he continued, are "a generation of disillusion and dissatisfaction," in contrast to an earlier generation who were contented. "Creativity begins with disillusion and discontentment... I find young people most eager to hear of a new outlook on life that is not bound to skepticism, or indifference to values, or to a desperate relativism.

"We have a generation concerned," he concluded, "but how deep is the commitment?"

For that question the man who believed in miracles could have no answer. Heschel had passed the test, but the strain was telling. He was tired; it had been ninety minutes of honesty, of commitment to meeting another person over the issues which concerned him, of answering question seriously and candidly.

"My ambition," Heschel had explained at one point, "is to spend the day writing, thinking, and reading." It did not seem a bad life after those 90 minutes, anot an evasion of responsibility, nor blind service to the word. That Harlem was only a few blocks from the Jewish Theological Seminary and Abraham Heschel brought into sharper focus the man's immense concern for people as people. And that concern seemed a sufficient indication of greatness and integrity.

"You know, I believe in miracles."

books

Plath's Apprenticepiece

Crossing the Water, by Sylvia Plath. Faber & Faber, 64 pp. $3.70

Harper & Row, 56 pp. $5.95

By M.R. Ryan

Sylvia Plath's **Crossing the Water,** whether you buy the cheaper and less inclusive British edition, or the mauve endpapered American extravaganza, will be an anticlimax if you are acquainted with **Ariel.** Reading these poems, which were written before **Ariel** but only recently collected and published, is comparable to listening to a superby pianist perform finger exercises after the **Sonata Pathetique.** One may be impressed with his dexterity, but one knows it can be put to better use.

The volume is being labelled "transitional," and historically as well as stylistically it is just that. The poems were written after those, included in Plath's first volume, **The Colossus,** and evidence the change from the studied and frequently static style of those early poems to the fluid and fiery mode of **Ariel.** **"Wuthering Heights,"** for example, the first poem in both editions of **Crossing the Water,** with its formal and almost labored diction, recalls many of the **Collossus** poems:

The horizons ring me like faggots,
Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.
Touched by a match, they might warm me,
And their fine lines singe
The air to orange
Before the distances they pin evaporate...

Other poems, "An Appearance," for example, which opens

The smile of iceboxes annihilates me.
Such blue currents in the veins of my loved one!
I hear her great heart purr..

evidence Plath's later preference for a looser, more colloquial style.

Most of the poems included in the volume are competent and well-written, if not particularly exciting. Others, most notably "Stillborn" and "The Surgeon at 2 A.M.," are not even that successful. "Stillborn," which deals with poems which "do not live," though they "grew their toes and fingers well enough," is itself a lifeless piece. And in the "Surgeon at Two A.M.," Plath's intensified search for radical imagery results in lines like "tissue in slices - a pathological salami," more laughable than shocking. One wonders whether Plath herself would have included these poems in a collection.

Crossing the Water though uneven, is an interesting collection, particularly for those already interested in the Plath legend or in the process of learning to write great poetry. It is the product of adolescence of a poetic career - the period after apprenticeship, but before the full maturity of a remarkable talent.

M.R. Ryan is currently at work on a study of the metaphysical poet Giuseppe Ombrelli.

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