If we had not long ago grown accustomed to the fact that Yiddish literature, apart from the work of I. B. Singer, remains *terra incognita* for most American and English readers, it would be a cause of some astonishment that Chaim Grade's novella *My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner* has not established itself as a minor classic of modern literature. It is both a great and a grandly representative story because it presents with tremendous dramatic force the most terrifying quandaries of our time in the special shape and with the compelling urgency that they have received from the cataclysms of twentieth-century history and particularly from the destruction of European Jewry. If we had to select a single work to stand as a paradigm of all Holocaust literature, a work of sufficient generalizing power to contain within itself not only most of the religious, philosophical, and artistic questions that the Holocaust raises but also the whole range of conflicting answers to them, we could not do better than to rely on Grade's story.¹

*My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner* is told in the first person by a character named Chaim, who seems to be the author Chaim Grade, thinly disguised for fictional purposes. In the course of describing his quarrel, or rather series of quarrels, with his former Mussarist² schoolmate Hersh Rasseyner, Chaim creates a philosophical dialogue between the elements of faith and of doubt in his own soul. In the novella, Hersh Rasseyner, who never departs from orthodoxy, speaks for religious faith, and Chaim, the former yeshiva student turned writer, for religious skepticism; but in truth the voices we hear in this dialogue are the accusing and self-accusing voices of the author himself. In fact, the mental processes underlying the story's composition are made transparent toward the end when
Chaim says to his philosophical adversary: “‘Reb Hersh... as I sat here listening to you, I sometimes thought I was listening to myself. And since it’s harder to lie to yourself than to someone else, I will answer you as though you were my own conscience. ...’”

Chaim begins his story in 1937 at a point when he had already separated himself from the Mussarists and their unworldly ways. He is giving a lecture—apparently on a literary subject, for he is derisively referred to by Hersh as a writer of “godless verses”—in Bialystok near the yeshiva in which he had been a student seven years earlier. Some of his former schoolmates, in defiance of the yeshiva’s prohibition against secular learning, attend his lecture, and others visit him secretly. But the one former schoolmate whom Chaim truly desires to see again does not appear; and that is Hersh Rasseynner. Nor is this surprising, for whereas many of the other Mussarists chafe under the severe religious discipline that binds them, Hersh thrives upon it and seems never to be tempted by the lures of secular knowledge or the pleasures of the world outside of the shtetl.

Chaim and Hersh do, however, meet unexpectedly in the street and at once discover that they already speak different languages. Chaim has so far forgotten his religious training that he unthinkingly greets Hersh with the modish “How are you?”, a question that in the yeshiva means “What is the state of your religious life?” Hersh does not lose the opportunity to remind his lapsed brother that his frivolous social use of what is still for others the most compelling of questions reveals the diminution of life that attends the lapse from piety: “‘And how are you, Chaim Vilner? My question, you see, is more important.’” Hersh then proceeds, in the middle of the street, with a sublime indifference to social decorum that shocks the assimilated narrator, to reproach Chaim for having allowed himself to be lured from a religious life into the “enlightened” world of Western Europe and to warn him that all his successes in the secular world will leave him less happy than he would have been had he remained in the yeshiva. The life of piety, he asserts, is validated by God; the life of letters by literary
critics. "‘You write godless verses and they reward you by patting you on the cheek. Now they’re stuffing you with applause as they stuff a goose with grain. But later you’ll see, when you’ve begun to go to their school, oh, won’t the worldly ones beat you! Which of you isn’t hurt by criticism? Is there one of you really so self-confident that he doesn’t go around begging for some authority’s approval? Is there one of you who’s prepared to publish his book anonymously? The big thing with you people is that your name should be seen and known. You have given up our tranquillity of spirit for what? For passions you will never be able to satisfy and for doubts you will never be able to answer, no matter how much you suffer.’"

Chaim, for his part, accuses his pious friend of the sin of pride, for there is such a thing as pride in one’s modesty and humility. Whereas Hersh alleges that the appetite for pleasure can never be satiated because it grows by what it feeds on, Chaim replies that in those people for whom pleasure and fame offer no temptation, what looks to the world like self-denial is really self-indulgence. Besides, Chaim denies that he himself has become a mere pleasure-seeker; accused of running away from the religious life, he maintains that he has actually returned to his proper home among the common people who in the shtetl were expected to support the very religious scholars (like Hersh) who deplored their worldliness and impiety.

To these arguments Hersh does not condescend to reply. But the argument has already proceeded far enough to assure the narrator of the correctness of his decision to leave the yeshiva. Or was it his decision? Ironically, he wants to believe both that the decision was the correct one and that he did not make it. "If at the time, I said to myself, I didn’t know why and where I was going, someone else thought it out for me, someone else thought it out for me, someone stronger than I. That someone else was—my generation and my environment.” It is the feeblest of faiths, and like all faiths in a generation, youthful or decrepit, it does not long survive the test of experience.

The second part of the story commences two years later,
when the generation and environment in which the emancipated Chaim had put his faith had produced, among other things, the two great revolutionary powers of the modern European world, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. It is 1939, they are carving up Eastern Europe between them, and the Soviets are in control of Vilna. “Hunger raged in the city. Every face was clouded with fear of the arrests carried out at night by NKVD agents. My heart was heavy. Once, standing in line for a ration of bread, I suddenly saw Hersh Rasseynier.” For the Soviet domination of Vilna, Hersh (now a married man) holds Chaim partly responsible. The Soviet Union had, of course, been the great, almost messianic, hope of secular progressives, and in Hersh’s view such idol-worship is the logical culmination of the sentimental idolatry of the proletariat that Chaim had expressed to him in 1937. But Chaim is as little willing to accept responsibility for the Soviet occupation of Vilna as he had been for his own departure from piety into secularism. He disavows all responsibility for secular progressivism gone wrong by telling Hersh, “‘I bear no more responsibility for all that than you do for me.’” But the analogy is imprudently chosen, for it is precisely Hersh’s point that under God every man is his brother’s keeper and that human beings are so interconnected that no one may evade responsibility for his acts: “‘You’re wrong, Chaim. I do bear responsibility for you.’ He retreated a few steps and motioned with his eyes to the Red Army soldiers, as though to say, ‘And you for them.’” Chaim’s willingness to read even in Hersh’s physical movements a reproach to himself is a reminder that although the story is written, literally and figuratively, from Chaim’s point of view, it is eminently a dialogue of the mind with itself.

The next meeting between the two men takes place on our side of the great divide of twentieth-century history, the Holocaust in which six million Jews were murdered. The scene is Paris, 1948, and the two old friends, who have by now become rather old antagonists, meet on the Métro. The narrator has spent the war years wandering across Russia,
Poland, and Western Europe; Hersh Rasseyner has been in a concentration camp in Latvia, and is now the head of a yeshiva in Salzheim, Germany. The men greet each other affectionately, and when Hersh asks Chaim “How are you?” he no longer asks in derision but in the genuine Mussarist way, out of concern for the well-being of his friend. Soon, however, Chaim senses that Hersh’s warmth flows from his assumption that no sane man, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, can believe in worldly expedients for human and social redemption. Ironically, each man virtually takes it for granted that the Holocaust has destroyed the foundations upon which the other’s life had until then been based. If Hersh assumes that anyone with eyes in his head can now see that to depend upon man-made ethical systems, works of art, and social machinery to transform the human condition is like relying on razor blades to hew down giant oak trees, then Chaim for his part assumes that no sane man can still believe in a God who presides over concentration camps and crematoria. Chaim is astounded that anyone can wring some affirmation of God’s existence out of the concentration camps; and Hersh asserts that life is for him, in the post-Holocaust world, impossible without God: “‘How could I stand it without Him in this murderous world?’”

For the debate that ensues over the relative merits of faith in God and faith in the world in a universe that has been harrowed by the Holocaust, the Paris setting is peculiarly appropriate. Paris, after all, had once been the scene of the most gigantic and conscious attempt of modern times to realize a wholly secular faith. It was in Paris that the altar was replaced by the scaffold, the priest by the executioner, the congregation by a howling mob thirsting for human blood, the crucifix that had once been worn on the breasts of the citizenry by a miniature replica of the guillotine. The Enlightenment’s dream of making man the sole idol to which he would himself bow down found its existential realization in the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror.

Hersh Rasseyner never even participated in this dream,
and so it is all the more incredible to him that his friend Chaim should continue to cling to it after the Holocaust. He looks at the statues in the niches of the walls of the Hôtel de Ville representing the great statesmen, heroes, scholars, and artists of modern France and pointedly asks his emancipated and worldly friend, " 'Who are those idols?' " From Hersh's point of view, Chaim has forsaken God only to seek objects of worship among these icons of mere human beings. In defense of these statues and of his reverence for their originals, Chaim praises the power of art to induce imaginative sympathy. He singles out from among the various statues those of poets and trots out for his benighted religious friend the apologia for literature as the great instrument of moral imagination that was first articulated by Shelley and De Quincey, then given canonical status by George Eliot. But is it good enough in the aftermath of the Holocaust? Hersh does not think so. Besides, the vaunted sympathy of artists and poets with lustful and wicked people arises from the fact that they recognize themselves in such people; hence what looks like sympathetic tolerance is only self-pity.

The Parisian setting of the argument over the meaning of the Holocaust is also used by Grade to emphasize an important difference in the personalities of the protagonists that was touched on briefly in the opening section of the story. As the argument becomes more heated, Hersh becomes more emotional and Chaim becomes—more embarrassed. A bearded Jew is shaking his finger at the sculptures of the Hôtel de Ville, and passing Parisians have begun to stop and stare. "Hersh did not so much as notice the passers-by. I felt embarrassed in the face of these Frenchmen, smiling and looking at us curiously." Apparently the vindication of God is a more engrossing activity than the vindication of literature. Later in the story, Hersh suggests that the extreme form of the worldly man's concern about what other people will think of him is the European practice of dueling. " 'Think of it! For a word they didn't like they used to fight with swords or shoot one another. To keep public opinion from sneering or a fool from
calling them coward, though they trembled at the thought of dying, they went to their death.’"

Once he has got over his embarrassment at Hersh’s shouting and gesticulating and long-beardedness, Chaim turns to the question of what, if anything, the Holocaust meant. Some of his remarks reenforce our uneasiness over the whole enterprise of trying to assign meaning to a moral debacle that defies it, for Chaim has a tendency to speak of the concentration camps as an educational “experience.” He asserts that not even the camps could change men from what they were; nevertheless “‘in the crisis men saw themselves and others undisguised.’” Hersh, for his part, wonders why Chaim should even think it worthy of remark that suffering produced neither wisdom nor sanctity in men who did not possess them before entering the camps. Man is indeed capable of transformation, he argues, but only through religion. Hersh himself, in espousing asceticism and piety, had not been following the path of least resistance but of greatest blessedness, for his lusts and obstinacies had been, he maintains, as strong as those of any man. But he had accepted, as his enlightened friend had not, the fact that there are certain human impulses that require not mere enlightenment, improving, and perfuming, but uprooting; and that rebirth is a painful process because its prerequisite is the death of the old self. Rebirth, however, can be effected only through religion. If religion cannot transform man, nothing can; worldly, human instruments—art, politics, science, philosophy—can never raise man above himself for the simple reason that they originate with man.

In the face of this argument, Chaim nevertheless clings to the rhetoric of enlightenment: “‘You can’t banish shadows with a broom, only with a lighted lamp.’” His invocation of enlightenment and its apostles enshrined in the Hôtel de Ville provokes Hersh to a long and moving discourse on the impassable gulf between knowledge and goodness, a gulf that he had grasped intellectually in his yeshiva study, but that was fully revealed to him only in the concentration camps. He recalls to Chaim that the Germans, who are
always reminding people of the fact, have produced at least as many great men worthy of niches in the Hôtel de Ville as have the French, and in the realm of moral philosophy have produced more than the French. But did those moral philosophers influence the German people to become better? Or were the philosophers themselves good men? In the concentration camps, Hersh had for the first time come in contact with men—presumably assimilated Jews—who had been trained in the great German universities, and for the first time felt the power and even majesty of secular knowledge. Yet he was not tempted by it away from piety because he concluded from what he saw in the camps that the moral philosophers of Western Europe are men who say, and do not. ‘Occasionally I found in their writings as much talent and depth as in our own Holy Books, if the two may be mentioned in one breath. But they are satisfied with talk! And I want you to believe me when I say that I concede that their poets and scientists wanted to be good. Only—only they weren’t able to. And if some did have good qualities, they were exceptions. The masses and even their wise men didn’t go any farther than fine talk. As far as talking is concerned, they talk more beautifully than we do.’” A philosophical morality, Hersh implies, looks good in fair weather, but in concentration camps sterner stuff is required.

For one schooled in the yeshiva, Hersh shows a remarkable familiarity with enlightenment principles and rhetoric. He says that the reason why the moral philosophers were incapable of becoming better in action than they were was that they were committed to the pursuit of pleasure. The pursuit of pleasure or joy or happiness has been enjoined on Western man in a variety of forms from Epicurus (and it is worthy of note that the Yiddish word for heretic is *apikoyres*, derived from Epicurean) through the Declaration of Independence (where we are pledged to “the pursuit of happiness”). But according to Hersh the most enlightened and philosophical nation in Europe failed to achieve the goodness of which it wrote so eloquently because “‘pleasure is not something that can be had by
itself, [therefore] murder arose among them—the pleasure of murder.' " The dream that worldly wisdom, as distinct from religious piety, could be a guarantee of sanctity, came to its end—or should have—in the concentration camps. "All the days of my youth I kept my eyes on the earth, without looking at the world. Then came the German. He took me by my Jewish beard, yanked my head up, and told me to look him straight in the eyes. So I had to look into his evil eyes, and into the eyes of the whole world as well. And I saw, Chaim, I saw—you know what I saw. Now I can look at all the idols and read all the forbidden impurities and contemplate all the pleasures of life, and it won't tempt me any more because now I know the true face of the world.' "

Hersh keeps referring to his own experience to reenforce his arguments, but his primary concern is the desire to secure the well-being of his friend by persuading him to forsake the world and return to the Jewish fold. This is what gives the story its dramatic force and makes it much more than a Voltairean philosophical dialogue. Feeling responsible for his secularized friend, Hersh must prove to Chaim that the world that he supposed was striving to improve itself was striving only for blood, and that it could not transform itself for good because its ethical systems were worked out by human minds, and no stream can rise higher than its source. The secular philosophers of Western Europe "trusted their reasoned assumptions as men trust the ice of a frozen river in winter. Then came Hitler and put his weight on the wisdom of the wise men of the nations. The ice of their slippery reasoning burst, and all their goodness was drowned.' " Centuries of the most highly refined hair-splitting and logic-chopping on every conceivable moral question had their conclusion in this: "there came in the West a booted ruler with a little mustache, and in the East a booted ruler with a big mustache, and both of them together struck the wise man to the ground, and he sank into the mud.' "

By this stage in the argument, Hersh is once again excited to the point where he is shouting. But now Chaim is less concerned about Parisian passersby because he has come to
understand that Hersh is shouting in order to reach that buried self of his old friend which has retreated into the depths of his subconsciousness as into an infinitely distant land. "He shouted at me as though I were a dark cellar and he was calling to someone hiding in me." Hersh's passion does not affect his fluency because, as he now reveals, he has during all the long years in the concentration camp rehearsed his argument for faith in the hope that he might be able one day to use it on his heretical friend, who is fixed in his mind's eye as the representative of secularized Jews in general.

Although Hersh's argument, like the story itself, pivots on the question of how to respond to the Holocaust, he is also trying to demonstrate that the Holocaust is only the most devilish of all the human enterprises that engage the energies of those who desert the community of God because they would become like gods themselves. The enlightened Jew, according to Hersh, separated himself from piety because he wished to distinguish himself as an individual, to be acclaimed in life and remembered after death not as a member of the Community of Israel but as a great scientist, thinker, or writer. "'You didn't violate the commandment against idolatry. Of course not! You were your own gods. You prophesied, 'Man will be a god.' So naturally he became a devil.'" Movements of religious reform, which seek to lighten the burden of the Law on the individual, are in Hersh's view as futile and unending as the pursuit of happiness; for in religious matters the lighter the burden is made, the harder is it to bear. The man who fasts twice a week does so without difficulty; the man who fasts once a year finds the task so difficult that he soon ceases to fast altogether. And here again the belief that Hersh had long entertained as to the folly of the Jew trying to assimilate himself into the nations and to become like his oppressors, was proved upon his pulses in the concentration camps:

"I lay on the earth and was trampled by the German in his hobnailed boots. Well, suppose that an angel of God had come to me then, that he had bent down and whispered into my ear, 'Hersh, in the twinkling of an eye I will turn you into the
German. I will put his coat on you and give you his murderous face; and he will be you. Say the word and the miracle will come to pass." If the angel had asked me—do you hear, Chaim?—I would not have agreed at all. Not for one minute would I have consented to be the other, the German, my torturer. I want the justice of law. . . . With the Almighty's help I could stand the German's boots on my throat, but if I had had to put on his mask, his murderous face, I would have been smothered as though I had been gassed. And when the German shouted at me, 'You are a slave of slaves,' I answered through my wounded lips, 'Thou hast chosen me.'"

To be murdered and mutilated as the member of a people chosen by God is a better, a more sanctified fate than to survive as a murderer—and certainly a better fate than to be murdered and mutilated in the act of aping the morality and the manners of one's murderer.

Hersh's final plea to his old yeshiva schoolmate is made on behalf of the six million who have been murdered. All Jews, he admits, mourn the third of their people who have been martyred, but not every Jew seems to be aware, of what must surely be true, that "it was not a third of the House of Israel that was destroyed, but a third of himself, of his body, his soul." From Hersh's point of view, every Jew living in the aftermath of the Holocaust lives with a part of his soul in the grave; and it is therefore incomprehensible to him that Chaim, who is by no means the least sensitive of Jews, should eat and sleep and laugh and dress quite as if nothing had happened, quite as if the values of the secular world in which he had placed his faith had not collapsed in ruins. For Hersh, nothing seems more luminously self-evident than that after Auschwitz nothing is left to us except God, to whom we must cry out, in desperate emulation of those who were slaughtered, "For Thy sake are we killed all the day."

When Hersh concludes his impassioned plea, the sky is growing darker and the stone figures around the Hôtel de Ville have shrunk, "as though frightened by what Hersh Rasseyner had said, and quietly burrowed deeper into the walls." Chaim, who has been relatively silent for some time apart from an occasional demurrer, now must respond to
the challenge thrown down by his quarrelsome friend. Grade has given ample opportunity to the spokesman for his anti-self to state the best case that could be made for faith in the wake of the Holocaust; and it would be hard to find a literary work that gave fuller credence to the ancient theory that a devil’s advocate must be admitted into the midst of one’s dearest convictions if they are to become sufficiently resilient to survive. Only here the devil’s advocate is the advocate of the angels and at times comes so near to speaking with the tongue of an angel that it is not easy to resist him.

That Grade does intend us finally to resist him we can hardly doubt, although the question of “intention” in literature is always a highly problematical one. If, despite Grade’s apparent intentions, we find that Hersh gets out of his creator’s control and moves us far more powerfully than does Chaim, we must remember that, as Charlotte Brontë said when she was trying to puzzle out how her sister had come to create Heathcliff, “the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself.”

Chaim is given the last word in the story, and it is a fairly lengthy last word, though not as lengthy as the argument just delivered by Chaim’s adversary. The gist of Chaim’s rebuttal may be summarized fairly briefly, for it is doctrine that is far more familiar in our age than is Hersh Rasseyner’s. As a liberal, Chaim reiterates the doctrine of nineteenth-century liberalism that doubt is not a bad thing, that intellectual heroism consists in being able to live with it, and that revealed truth, by definition, cannot be true for the individual since he has not discovered it but received it ready-made. As an enlightened Jew, Chaim takes pride in shouldering a double responsibility: toward Jewish tradition as well as toward secular culture; and he rejects the attempt of the pious to declare all the species of those who worship man rather than God fundamentally indistinguishable from one another within the vast genus of idolators. As free-willed individualist, Chaim refuses to be
lumped together with murderers, and insists that there are humane secularists and atheists as well as monstrous ones; but as sociological determinist he places the blame for his abandonment of Jewish tradition on precisians like Hersh whose rigid insistence on the narrowest path of piety drove those with more worldly inclinations into outright apostasy. "If we have abandoned Jewish tradition, it's your fault."

But the most terrifying accusation that Hersh has laid against secularized Jews is that their distraction from the Community of Israel made their suffering and their dying in the camps pointless, and that Chaim's continued separation from the Community of Israel prevents him from ascribing even a posthumous meaning to all that suffering. Chaim's indignant reply to this accusation is not, it must be admitted, very convincing. He answers that the Germans were not mistaken in taking the secularized Jews for complete Jews, and that if the world defines the Jew in this liberal and inclusive way, so too must the Master of the World. Otherwise, Hersh would have been incorrect to say that one third of the Jewish people perished in the Holocaust, for large numbers of the victims were, according to Hersh's strict definition, merely quarter-Jews or tenth-Jews, or less. "The gist of what you say... is that anyone who isn't your kind of Jew is not a Jew at all. Doesn't that mean that there were more bodies burned than Jews murdered?" Outraged as Chaim is at Hersh's attempt to assign a religious meaning to what has happened—"Even if we were devils,' he shouts, 'we couldn't have sinned enough for our just punishment to be a million murdered children.'"—it is clear that he himself is absolutely resistant to the "despairing belief that the world has no sense or meaning." Yet he refuses the religious meaning that Hersh finds in the suffering of those who believed themselves to be sanctifying the name of God because it would consign the suffering of all the others to the shadowy realm of non-meaning.

Chaim's quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner has now come to an end, and in the closing paragraphs of the story, Chaim
speaks no longer as an adversary but as a reconciler. In other words, the author himself has now directly intervened in the attempt to make peace between the two halves of himself that have been in conflict. Speaking through the mouth of his fictional creation, and speaking explicitly as a writer, he prays for a binding together of the religious and secular strands of the Jewish tradition and claims that in the very cries against God that are uttered by the secular Jewish writers there is yet concealed "a quiet prayer for the Divine Presence, or for the countenance of those destroyed in the flames, to rest on the alienated Jews." The Jewish writer who survived the Holocaust bears the same burden of suffering as does the believing Jew who communes through God with that segment of the Community of Israel and of his own soul that lies in the grave; but the writer, lacking Hersh Rasseyner's faith, can commune with his people only through the "'travail of creation.'"

Chaim Grade's *Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner* is one remarkable product of such travail. Matthew Arnold, who was deeply concerned with the meaning of "adequacy" in literature, once said that the most inadequate of all kinds of literature was "the dialogue of the mind with itself." It was inadequate for purposes of inspiriting and rejoicing readers because it dwelt on suffering which finds no vent in action and represented a "continuous state of mental distress . . . unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done." But Arnold forgot that there may be subjects that readers would be loath to see used as occasions for the exercise of art's capacity to bring joy out of suffering, and quandaries that readers do not want solved but only imagined and expressed. That is why Grade's story, which is precisely a "dialogue of the mind with itself," is able to involve us so deeply. It seems to be the perfect dramatic articulation, rather than the philosophic resolution, of doubts and difficulties that now beset all of us.

1. Chaim Grade was born in Vilna, Poland, in 1910 and spent his

2. Mussarists are an ascetic Jewish sect, to which Grade himself belonged in his youth. In biblical Hebrew _musar_ means "chastisement" and hence "instruction" as to right conduct; by extension it may be said to comprise the ascetic and devotional element of religious ethics.

3. Since surnames have no functional existence in the shtetl, a man may be identified by the place from which he comes, in this case Vilna.

4. Hersh’s acerbity on this point has a foundation in Jewish tradition. In the world of talmudic scholarship, it is the name of an author’s work and not his personal name that identifies him.

5. His marriage is not to be interpreted as a concession to the flesh except insofar as, in the shtetl, boys destined to study the Law were married early so that their needs would be satisfied and they would be able to concentrate on their books.

6. Editor’s Preface to _Wuthering Heights_. Charlotte Bronte wrote this preface to the 1850 edition of her sister’s novel.
