

Citation

Ralph Waldo Emerson Award, 1984

There are some books that grasp the reader with the first sentence and never let go. Such is the case of the book we honor this evening: Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture, by David G. Roskies. "There are said to be Moroccan Jews," the book begins, "who have kept the keys to their ancestral homes in fifteenth-century Spain and Portugal." These keys become for the author a metaphor of the memory of catastrophe in Jewish thought from the First Destruction of the Temple through the Holocaust. It is that collective memory, the book argues with a power at once scholarly and poetic, that has enabled the Jewish people to triumph over destruction and despair.

The book focuses on the "lost temple" of eastern European Jewry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period the traditional apocalyptic response to catastrophe, which combined terror, lament, and despair, was vigorously challenged by Jewish writers, artists, and intellectuals who resorted to strategies of irony, irreverence, laughter, and revenge to cope with persecution and suffering. Of these Yiddish intellectuals "against the apocalypse," Sholem Aleichem, for whom survival was "a verbal balancing act," is probably best known among gentiles. One of the merits of Roskie's book is that it introduces us to many others--Abramovitsh, Bialek, Sutzkever--not alone in this tradition but in the prophetic one as well. The two traditions came together in the Nazi ghettos and set the terms of the great debate over suffering and heroism in Jewish consciousness before, during, and after the Holocaust. The Holocaust, of course, became its own archetype of catastrophe, subjecting all the old archetypes to revision and reinterpretation; and in this sense the Holocaust did not quiet or destroy but transformed traditional patterns of response to disaster.

Against the Apocalypse is a work of deep learning, literary sensibility, and critical judgment, all remarkable in a scholar as young as David Roskies. It rises above mere scholarship, however. Written with intense self-consciousness and with what one of our number called "controlled passion," it is a work of moral and intellectual commitment as well. The book's closing lines are as moving and provocative as the first:

Thus, the great imitatio Dei of the modern period has been not the Jews' endless capacity to suffer, to be Christ figures for the world, or even their willingness to die for the sanctification of the Name. It has been their ability, in the midst and in the wake of the apocalypse, to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it; for if catastrophe is the presumption of man acting as destroyer, then the fashioning of catastrophe into a new set of tablets is the primal act of creation carried out in the image of God.