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In the Face of Catastrophe

Against the Apocalypse: Response to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture by David G. Roskies (Harvard University Press; Cambridge)

Reviewed by JOSEPH COHEN

Born Jewish, whatever one does or becomes, one lives with the "Jewish Question." Some Jews live with it more intimately than others. What is the Jewish question? How many answers are there to it? What are its implications in a century of consummate violence? And with what does our collective memory provide us in terms of adequate response? The Jewish Question, simply put, is this: what should the world do with its Jews whose shame it has been to bear witness throughout the ages to the world's crimes? In each age, the world's gentiles have provided their own answers which boil down to two: that the Jews should live or that the Jews should die. The latter answer has been the one most frequently heard from ancient times up to our own century which decreed the destruction of Eastern and Central European Jewry, a catastrophe so immense that previous history, except for the First World War, wherein the seeds of the Holocaust were sown, contains no parallel.

As devastating as Jewish losses were, neither czarist intransigence nor Hitler's Final Solution worked. The answer to the Jewish Question is not really up to the gentiles. Survival, even in the face of the greatest odds, must be the decision of Jews themselves. Through two-thousand years of persecution they have confirmed their will to live by taking their losses and turning them into commemorative events which confirmed Jewish values at the same time they honored the dead. It is in these literary and artistic responses to nihilism and annihilation that the past has generated its consolations for the present and provided such guarantees for the future as we are willing to believe.

The awareness of this positivism comes through repeatedly in David G. Roskies' *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Harvard University Press; \$20.00), a book that is among the most accomplished and distinguished I have encountered in recent years. Roskies is Associate Professor of Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. His work is special not only because of the breadth and thoroughness of his scholarship — his knowledge ranges across the boundaries of antiquity and modernity in theology, history, politics, art and literature — but in its being permeated by a sensitivity that turns his vast erudition into an unexpected and rewarding lyrical elegy for the lost millions of our people. Brilliantly informed, his talents in surveying the universal and particular sweeps of Jewish history, in appraising the nuances of response, moving from ancient lament to contemporary irony, satire, rage and blasphemy, in explicating stylistic formulations, and in combining biographical detail with artistic thrusts, are everywhere enhanced by a grace, charm and felicity of phrase that is truly remarkable.

Eight years in the making, and influenced by such major contemporary Jewish scholars as Dan Miron and Ruth Wisse (the author's sister), this book is not only for academics, but for every thinking person who recognizes the value of a detailed, cohesive overview of Jewish literary and artistic response to the ever-broadening catastrophes of Eastern and Central European Jewry — from the Odessa pogrom in 1871, through the Kishinev and other massacres of 1905-06 (726 pogroms recorded, no less), to the 60,000 Jews murdered in the Ukraine in 1918-19, on to the six million dead in the Holocaust.

To say so much is hardly to say enough, for *Against the Apocalypse* makes it compellingly clear that every poem and every narrative that memorializes a Jew fallen in Odessa, Kishinev, Vilna, and Warsaw, or recalls a *shtetl* leveled in the Pale, or counts the cattle cars on the way to Belsen-Belsen is, not just a literary exercise, but a political act of defiance and an insistence on Jewish continuity. Time and again this fact is brought home as Roskies sifts through the myriad writings of Jewish authors, many of whom, without knowing it, were transformed by dire circumstance into giants bestriding a smoking planet. We learn of their lives, of their days and the works of their hands and minds, their achievements and failures, political biases, literary aspirations and the chances they took.

As diverse as the catastrophes have been, so also are the responses to them, leading Roskies to categorize those responses as either apocalyptic or neoclassical (in the context of tradition). The tradition has been to accept disaster as a result of wickedness or to rail against God for indifference, using, nonetheless, a recognizable Jewish format for the protest. As the persecution became more extensive, there was an increasing temptation to succumb to apocalyptic despair. However, Roskies' purpose is to show us and the world that in every generation there arose poets and artists who, by taking a stand against the apocalypse — oftentimes in the face of personally tragic odds — gave their answer to the Jewish Question. It was that we should remember the martyred dead and insist not only on living but on living as Jews.