

For David Roskies

With warm regards,

Kathryn Hellerstein

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BOOK REVIEWS

Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture

David G. Roskies

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In his ground-breaking study, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, David G. Roskies makes available to an English-speaking audience a strain of eastern European Yiddish and Hebrew literature in its historical and literary context. He writes in such a way that the literature itself, the difficult circumstances of its composition, and the catastrophic events in response to which it was written come alive. His energetic readings of modern events and texts in relationship to the prophetic, rabbinic, and medieval archetypes which they embody, reflect, or react against, carry the reader into the mind of eastern European Jewry before and during the Nazi destruction. Roskies demonstrates that the unifying pattern of assertion and counter-assertion of collective values and beliefs by individual writers constituted an act of defiance in the face of destruction and created the possibility for a renewed covenant with the God who appeared to have deserted the Jewish people.

Against the Apocalypse is unique among the recent studies in English of Holocaust literature. Most of these, such as the discerning, informative works by Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago UP, 1980) and Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Indiana UP, 1980), address a literature written, for the most part, after the Holocaust in the languages of western Europe, rather than contemporaneous writings in the Jewish languages of Yiddish and Hebrew. Although both these critics include some discussion of literature in Yiddish and Hebrew — Ezrahi at greater length — their arguments tend not to focus on how the linguistically Jewish response to destruction and survival fits into a clearly defined Jewish textual tradition.

The only other critical work like *Against the Apocalypse* to address directly the Jewish textual traditions as models for the modern response to catastrophe is Alan Mintz's *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Columbia, 1984). Although Mintz's book covers the same periods as Roskies' (from the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE through the 1970s and 1980s), he defines a narrower scope by limiting his discussion to the Hebrew language. This, in the modern period, results in a focus on the "bystander community" of the Yishuv and the State of Israel, which, in Mintz's words, "had rejected European Jewish life" (Mintz, xii). In contrast, Roskies emphasizes the complex, multilingual cultural life of the Jews in Europe, thereby drawing our attention to what has been lost. The work of Roskies and Mintz complement each other in their differences: Mintz focuses on rhetorical strategies while Roskies is concerned with literary archetypes; Mintz presents more detailed readings of Lamentations and Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter" while Roskies covers more ground—considering movements in historiography as well as poetry, the visual arts as well as the written word, folk songs and belle lettres. In their different ways, though, both these books take on the "real task of the critic" which Roskies set forth in his 1981 review, "The Holocaust According to the Literary Critics," [*Prooftexts* 1.2 (1981): 209-216]. This task is

to chronicle the break, the point at which analogies no longer hold and the Tradition is radically altered for all time to come. . . . the complete break with the civilization destroyed.

In his review, Roskies objects to the focus on the slaughter itself, rather than on "the response to the slaughter," as Mintz puts it (Mintz, 146). In the works of literary critics, Roskies holds,

There is hardly any sense . . . of the people, of their specific historical destiny, their political aspirations and cultural idiom. We are presented instead with a disembodied Event, with Evil incarnate as refracted through language and literary convention. An Event with no past has no future. (*Prooftexts*, 215)

Roskies sets out to define a future for the Jews of eastern Europe who perished during the Hitler years by reconstructing the "fractious diversity" of the literary tradition in Yiddish and Hebrew through which these writers learned to write responses to catastrophe.

In *Against the Apocalypse*, Roskies reads the secular literatures in Hebrew and Yiddish since the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, through the ancient and medieval Jewish liturgical tradition of making catastrophic history into archetype. Through this radical jux-

taposition of liturgy and literature, Roskies argues for an ongoing dialectical Jewish response to catastrophe: the writer, whether religious or secular, conceived of the catastrophes fallen upon the Jews in terms of the divine purpose of Jewish history and used scriptural archetype simultaneously to negate and to reaffirm the connection between the Jews who had been martyred and the God who allowed it. This paradox provided the individual writer through the centuries with the means to lament the seemingly broken covenant and to reassert the collective purpose.

Roskies constructs this argument through a complexly organized presentation of texts in summary, translation, and interpretation. The book is divided into ten chapters, ordered chronologically (in terms of particular catastrophes and the generations of authors), generically, and thematically. The chapter titles indicate the themes in beautifully wrought images—"Ruined Cities of the Mind," "Broken Tablets and Flying Letters"—whose meanings become clear gradually as each chapter is read. One drawback in this arrangement is that the factual basis of the book is submerged beneath this rhetoric of images for the sake of emotional impact. As moving as the chapters are, they would be more accessible were they subtitled to specify the historical moment of each.

Within his chosen framework, Roskies brings to life the inventive energy of Yiddish and Hebrew literature. He integrates translation and summary into his argument so skillfully that the reader is made to feel familiar with little-known works. He also explicates untranslatable word-play and allusion so gracefully that the English reader "gets it." For both the general reader and the student of Jewish literature, Roskies does a service by quoting from excellent translations and providing in his endnotes a veritable compendium of necessary sources. These notes are also a valuable introduction to current scholarship on the Jewish literatures of eastern Europe. If the index included the material in the notes and if a bibliography of secondary sources were provided, the book would prove an even more effective research tool. By placing the lesser-known writers in the context of the literary giants—Sh. Abramovitch, Bialik, Sholem Aleichem—Roskies makes figures like Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, Lamed Shapiro, and Abraham Sutzkever stand forth in their own right. The only omission is any hint of women's literary voices.

Roskies establishes the archetypes in Chapter 2. Since the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem (587 BCE), Jewish literary response to catastrophe has taken two forms, both of which disassemble disaster into recognizable parts, thereby allowing it to be explained

by and to help explain the divine historical continuum. The first is the sacred archetype by which the current catastrophe is linked to an ancient archetype of destruction and, through literal recall, given sanction. The second is the dialectic of sacred parody by which the individual survivor, who, as witness to the atrocity, becomes a symbol for the collective: he voices his protest against God by mutilating a text of hope, such as a psalm. Through such radical reinterpretation of Scripture, the survivor imitates the sacrilege by interrupting the received order of the text in the same way that "the enemy, acting at the behest of God, disrupted the order of the world" (20). Faith in the covenant is thus preserved and fulfilled by the apparent subversion of that covenant. Roskies locates these paradigms in liturgical texts, including Lamentations, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, the Mosaic curses (*Tokheha*) of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in the rabbinic writings of the Tannaitic period (100-200 CE), and in the chronicles of the Cossack Revolt (1648-1649). Through masterful readings of these diverse texts, Roskies shows how the Biblical archetypes are embellished by subsequent history, and how history is absorbed into an idea of the sacred.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi argues, in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Washington UP, 1982), that after the emancipation and enlightenment of the German Jews, there was an absolute division between history and sacred text, whereby the "fallen Jews" replaced sacred text with history. In contrast, Roskies asserts that the enlightened Jews of eastern Europe blurred the distinction between the authority of history and of sacred text. For the sake of collective cultural survival, they converted history into archetypal sacred forms. Paradoxically, these moderns absorbed the liturgical impulse they most railed against. Roskies demonstrates the ability of Jewish textual tradition to absorb and convert the historicity, secularism, and rationalism that seemed to contradict it. As this argument unfolds, it is breathtaking.

Roskies elucidates this dialectical tradition of response by breaking the modern period into three major bodies of literature, each written in response to a stage in the escalating catastrophes visited upon the Jews of eastern Europe: 1) in Chapter 3, the satire of the Haskalah reformers, attacking the Jewish collective from within and defending it ambivalently against the first wave of Russian pogroms in 1881-1882; 2) in Chapters 4-6, the modernists' apocalyptic despair over the pogroms and expulsions during the first World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Ukrainian Civil War, and 3) in Chapters 7-10,

the revision of old archetypes by the writers facing annihilation in the Nazi ghettos and by survivors.

Roskies' discussion of the Haskalah writers in Chapter 3 establishes the grounds for the modern, usually secular or iconoclastic literary responses to catastrophe in terms of traditional archetypes. Through his readings of works by Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, who is a founding father of both modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, Roskies quiets the doubts of the skeptical reader who might ask whether secular rebellion against sacred forms is not simply a severing act. Abramovitsh attacked the corruption of the Jewish community in the 1860s and its pious rationalization of the violence suffered during the Odessa pogrom of 1871 by parodying sacred parody. The resulting sacrilegious parody, quoting a sacred text blasphemously in an incongruous context, shatters both the sacredness of the source and of the Jewish society which holds it sacred in order to prepare for the rebuilding of Jewish life according to enlightened ideals. Accordingly, Abramovitsh's Haskalah is a program to strengthen the Jewish community which must survive among hostile neighbors and forces. Sacrilegious parody, as Abramovitsh practiced it, was a means by which to goad his readers into recognizing the dangerous passivity of blindly accepting the divine justification of violence against Jews inherent in sacred archetypes and to urge them toward changes in beliefs and actions.

As Roskies argues in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, the writers who came after Abramovitsh more radically subverted and mocked the central archetypes of traditional faith when faced with catastrophe. Two kinds of response emerge in both poetry and prose in the terrible period between the Kishinev pogrom in 1903 and the Ukrainian Civil War in 1918-1919: the counter-liturgical and the apocalyptic. The pogrom poem in the modern voice of Chaim Nachman Bialik turns the conventions of lamenting into a call for Jewish self-defense. Roskies reads "In the City of Slaughter" as counter-liturgy to show how Bialik radicalized Abramovitsh's sacrilegious parody into "an outright rejection of divine justice" (88) as an explanation for anti-Semitic violence. In Bialik's Hebrew poems, the language of prayer and the standard poetic formulas of violence (feathers in the streets, desecrated Torah scrolls), which date to pogrom poems written after the Khmel'nitsky massacres of 1648-49, become a way "to desacralize history in God's own name" (89). Bialik's paradoxical archetype replaces God with an outraged sense of peoplehood:

For with one hand Bialik built the pogrom up into an archetype based on a support system of martyrdom, resurrection, retribution, confession, and

mourning—while with the other hand he severed the link to God and called for His abdication. (91)

The Yiddish poetry of H. Leivick and A. Leyeles follows in the counter-liturgical mode, while that of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern and Peretz Markish universalizes the sensory experience of catastrophe in apocalyptic nihilism. As the pogrom poem became “a central vehicle for subverting the tradition” (106), the modern poets intended it to establish new archetypal responses to catastrophe. However, Roskies’ analysis points out the ironic paradox of the modern pogrom poem. Inadvertently it

rehabilitated the rabbinic strategies of favoring the subjective realities to the facts, the timeless configurations to the temporal details, the sacred texts to the historical context. (108)

Roskies thus affirms that the secular writers in Hebrew and Yiddish, even when their work goes beyond blasphemy, return to the sacred archetypes and paradigms of Jewish response to catastrophe, almost despite themselves.

Roskies explains this paradox further in his discussion of the *shtetl* novella and the archetypes off of which it played, in Chapter 5:

Even though . . . the response to catastrophe no longer implied—in its use of archetypes—the same theological argument or the same redemptive faith, the old archetypes continued to resurface with new meanings attached . . . [T]he redemptive promise of revolution, followed so swiftly by the fear of total destruction, gave the old symbols a fearful new vitality. (127)

In contrast, Roskies argues in Chapter 6 that the Yiddish writer Lamed Shapiro, and the Russian Isaac Babel, emphasized the universality of the pogroms by overturning all hints of archetypes with their shocking, sensory depictions of the transforming powers of violence and the isolation of the victim. Roskies establishes here an essential connection between Shapiro and Babel, although he could have made clearer the contrast between Babel’s utter break from and Shapiro’s parodic sense of continuity with the Jewish past. (This contrast has much to do with each author’s choice of audience, for the writer in Yiddish or in Hebrew assumes a communal responsibility and attitude toward survival.) Roskies implies such a contrast by juxtaposing against this fiction the Yiddish historians’ efforts to counteract the anti-Semitic violence by recording the facts. S. Ansky in Galicia in 1915 and The Editorial Board to Collect Research Materials on the Pogroms in the Ukraine in 1919 worked at great risk and in the face of deliberate, vindictive censorship to make known what actually happened. Roskies’ juxtaposition of the fiction and heroic futility of the

ing the modern subversion. Roskies also shows how Shayevitsh and Yitzhak Katzenelson reinterpreted the ancient religious archetypes — the child Isaac and the martyr for the Sanctification of the Name (Kid-dush Hashem) — in a context in which God has been demoted and the heroes and martyrs deified. Roskies reveals how the diminished presence of God allows for the mythification of the people themselves and the fashioning of the Holocaust into its own archetype. Yet Roskies emphasizes repeatedly that the mythification posits listeners who will recognize the continuities.

In Chapter 9 and 10, Roskies presents close readings of the contrasting careers of two Yiddish poets who lived through the Holocaust and created two versions of its archetype. Roskies places Abraham Sutzkever in the dialectical tradition of the “neoclassical” or so-called “modern rabbis,” such as Sholem Aleichem and Katzenelson, who, like the actual ancient rabbis, emphasized the act of responding and telling. In contrast, he places Uri Zvi Greenberg in the lineage of the modern apocalypticists, such as Halpern and Lamed Shapiro, who, like Daniel and Ezra, universalized the catastrophe by emphasizing the destruction. Roskies’ reading of Sutzkever’s career in Chapter 9 is moving and apt, for it implies continuities between Sutzkever, whose poems made the city of Vilna into a kind of Text and “each reader a partner in poetic resurrection” (277), and Roskies’ own effort in this book to find his “ruined city of the mind” (1). Roskies sees in Sutzkever the “neoclassical impulse” which is at the core of the Jewish dialectical response to catastrophe: “the greater the catastrophe, the more its victims reshape the ancient archetypes in its wake” (258-9). From this notion of the neoclassical, Roskies clarifies his thesis. Although the Holocaust was different *in kind* from previous catastrophes, Jewish dialectical responses to it differed *only in degree*, for the artistic process had anticipated the actual destruction.

In Chapter 10, Roskies contrasts the dialectical, “neoclassical” response with the apocalypticism of the general view held of the Holocaust today. He explains more eloquently than other critics how the common names for the event — “Holocaust” in English and “*shoah*,” ruin, in Hebrew — connote an apocalyptic finality and uniqueness, whereas the Yiddish name, “*khurbm*,” destruction, suggests the unbroken chain of catastrophe endured by the Jews since the destruction of the Temple. Roskies presents the borrowed archetype of the Jewish Jesus in the Yiddish poems of Uri Zvi Greenberg as an example of an attempt by a Jew to respond to the systematic destruction of Jewish life and culture in universal, apocalyptic terms. Roskies traces the appropriation of the Crucifixion as a universal icon of Jewish suffering

historians represents him at his most subtle and powerful. He unearths for us, along with the facts of violence, the violent fact that the Russian government was committed to a "conspiracy of silence" (138) and that the Nazis completed this silencing by destroying the Yiddish archives in Vilna in 1942. It is against this silence that Roskies writes.

He also writes against an apocalyptic reading of the Holocaust. In the last third of *Against the Apocalypse*, Chapters 7-10, Roskies argues that the Holocaust marked a turning point in Jewish response to catastrophe, for that catastrophe, surpassing all previous violence against the Jews, became its own archetype. By stressing the continuities which the writers of the ghettos in Vilna, Warsaw, and Lodz themselves saw between the Holocaust and previous calamities, Roskies challenges a number of post-Holocaust, apocalyptic pieties. The central cliché holds that an instantaneous revolution in Jewish consciousness occurred at the moment of the Holocaust. Roskies argues vigorously against this misconception by asserting that the Jewish response to the Holocaust emerged from the counter-traditional response to catastrophe, which had evolved from the 1870s "with its own hallowed texts and radical authority" (207). The textual response to the destruction, by writers in the Vilna and Warsaw ghettos, parallels the overall tripartite development of Jewish dialectical response. The first stage established "sacred texts" which, in the 1940s, came to include along with Scripture, secular modern dialectical responses, so that the poetry of Bialik or Leivik was, amazingly, considered as sacred as Ezekiel or Isaiah. In the second stage, writers subjected these ancient and modern "prophetic" texts to ironic use when they seemed insufficient in the face of the current situation. Finally, the very texts of response became tools of active resistance. After the Great Deportation of 1942 emptied the ghettos, Bialik was recited as a call to arms. Roskies emphasizes the astounding commitment to the written text by the Jews incarcerated and starved in the ghettos, in his account of the "Paper Brigade," which salvaged literary treasures from the YIVO (*Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut*) library in Vilna.

In challenging our "apocalyptic tendency," which has allowed "the culture of atrocity" to obscure the continuities of Jewish culture that the Holocaust destroyed, Roskies brings to light the overwhelmingly secular nature of the ghetto writings. He establishes that the intellectual collective held a secular faith in the Book rather than a religious faith in the Covenant with God. He invents the phrase, "the midrash of the moderns" (217) to describe the poet Simke-Bunem Shayevitsh's sacred parody of Bialik's counter-liturgy, in order to show how the ghetto writers reclaimed the ancient tradition of response by subvert-

from Greenberg's early attempt in 1920 to "rescue" Jesus from the Church and its crimes against the Jews to his postwar poems of national lamentation.

As if this introduction and analysis of Greenberg's startling poems were not enough, Roskies concludes with a stunning foray into the archetypal "visual icon" of Jewish suffering. He traces the development of visual archetypes of response to catastrophe in the graphic arts. The "neoclassical" image of the *Golus* or Exile appears literally in the popularized painting by Samuel Hirszenberg (1904), which depicts the Jewish community as a wandering Holy Community after the Kishinev pogrom. In Yosl Bergner's "Destination X" (1969), the Exile is one in which the chairs, dressers, and bedsteads of the murdered six million march statically across the desert. Another archetype is the crucified Jew of the apocalyptic tradition of response. Roskies reads Ephraim Moses Lilien's "To the Martyrs of Kishinev" (1903), Marc Chagall's three remarkable Jewish Christs (1938, 1940, and 1944), and Bergner's surrealist "Pole Sitters" (1971) in brilliant progression. Finally, Roskies identifies the return to the Covenant as the quintessence of the dialectical response, in Issachar Ber Ryback's "Pogrom" (1918) and in Samuel Bak's *Landscapes of Jewish History* (1975). Roskies calls these works "countercommentary on the revelation at Sinai" (283), for each artist, responding to the pogroms or to the Holocausts, attempts to piece the Covenant together from the defiled sacred symbol of the Tablets of the Decalogue.

These visual icons, through Roskies' skillful analyses, strike the reader with the full force of his argument. There are no voices in these beautiful, disturbing images. They are mute. By arguing for the vitality of a tradition of Jewish response to catastrophe, Roskies recreates "the sacred texts" of Jewish literature in eastern Europe. Joining Yiddish and Hebrew, he gives voice to a would-be silenced culture which continues to assert its continuities. "Mak[ing] Torah out of history" (13), Roskies' book, itself a passionate, scholarly response, enables the reader, like the Jews, "to know the apocalypse, express it, mourn it, and transcend it" (310).

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