

David Roskies (ed.), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. 652 pp.

If it is paradoxical to find creative genius, even creative joy, stirring and sometimes surging in a literature of destruction, then that paradox must be grounded elementally in the human interchange between history and art. And if the Jewish people persistently exemplify this paradox, that must be because they, more than others, have been vulnerable to destructive force and given to literary response.

"What shall I take to witness for thee? What shall I liken to thee, O daughter of Jerusalem? What shall I equal to thee, that I may comfort thee, O virgin daughter of Zion? For thy breach is great like the sea, who can heal thee?" This remarkable outcry from the book of Lamentations (2:13) seems to question the virtue of metaphor vis-à-vis utter duress. Yet the very question personifies a solitary wasted city, *bat yerushalayim* and *bat ziyon*, who is "become as a widow" and "weepeth sore in the night."

This passage, then, at once challenges and endorses figurative language, the stuff of poetry, by its quintessential feminine metaphor as well as its formal modulation—incremental questions leading through varied invocations to a mixed note of expectation and despair. And add to this the virtuosic nature of Lamentations, which is composed in an alphabetic acrostic. What is more, the passage implies a further question no less radical than that of literary commensurability. Can bearing witness, can mere verbal likening, act to comfort and even to heal? Touching on the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian exile, these questions from Lamentations—partly because of their content and context, and partly because they *are* questions—stand at the source of Judaic Shoah literature.

At the near end of that tradition, in our own time, we might locate Yitzhak Katzenelson's *Song of the Murdered Jewish People* (1944), an epic (originally writ-

ten in Yiddish) with powerfully desperate recourse to Scripture. In Katzenelson's eyes, a people has perished—"Never will the voice of Torah be heard." As it happened, the poet and his son were gassed, but his manuscript survived, hidden in bottles underground.

We also have Uri Zvi Greenberg's fierce Hebrew elegy *To God in Europe* (1951): "Where are there instances of catastrophe / like this that we have suffered at their hands? / There are none—no other instances." For Greenberg, the Shoah of his own days is incomparable, in itself a new standard of comparison. Yet this very cry, David Roskies shows, is itself traditional—though God forbid it should ever be evoked again! Moreover, Greenberg's mere use of Hebrew in the reborn state of Israel offers a form of redemptive consolation.

Both these poems, along with Lamentations and scores of other writings, make up the anthology that Roskies has devotedly, scrupulously, pointedly compiled. Torah, the Prophets, Psalms, midrash, martyrs' prayers, chronicles, songs, stories, poems, proclamations, ghetto parodies, epic, archives, diaries, sermons, jokes and more poems—from its evocation of the first *hurban* and the Second Temple through Ashkenaz and Spain to revolutionary Russia, Nazi-ridden Poland, and Israel in 1948, *The Literature of Destruction* (like Roskies's earlier study, *Against the Apocalypse* [1984]) demonstrates not a lachrymose but a resilient Jewish temper, the covenant persisting through and despite its violent ruptures.

All of the hundred writings here, except Babel's Russian stories and Szlengel's Polish poems, were originally written in either Hebrew or Yiddish. This deliberate choice brings out an archetypal and allusive continuity of engagement with covenantal Judaism, promoting a body of literature, much of it translated here for the first time, that acutely deserves a wider readership.

At the same time, it is not exactly correct to claim that "Glatshiteyn and Alterman have never before rubbed shoulders in any anthology" (see *Voices Within the Ark* [1980] and *A Treasury of Jewish Poetry* [1957]), or that Singer and Agnon have not (see *The Penguin Book of Jewish Short Stories* [1979] and *Great Jewish Short Stories* [1963]). The editor might also have delved somewhat more into the question of what identifies a "Jewish" response to catastrophe. Two works that come to mind are Paul Celan's "*Todesfuge*" (1944–1945) and Primo Levi's "*Se questo è un uomo*" (January 1946)—German and Italian lyrics that are both biblically resonant and compellingly collective, and thus closer to the thrust of this anthology than Babel's fine stories that appear in it. But including even great European Jewish writers such as Celan and Levi might have distracted attention from the volume's high points—to cite just one, S. Y. Agnon's "The Sign," a luminous, elegiac prose hymn to Jewish language.

With intelligent introductions, good translations of many little-known writings, and useful glosses, David Roskies has (re)claimed a vital inheritance in this holistic, if not ultimately healing, book.

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